

The fight, the feed  
and the feeling.



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**Dear reader...** This is a collection of 30 articles I wrote and posted on LinkedIn across 2015 – 16, about leadership, strategy, sales, consulting and understanding your “why”. I hope you enjoy them, share them and (if they inspire) do something with them. Thanks for being here!

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*(Cover image – me and my girls on the river at Waikerie, 2015)*



## Tidal etchings, fresh waves and the constant sun...

For its many ups, 2015 also schooled me in a curriculum of tough but hindsight-obvious lessons.

- If you take your eyes and fingers off your proven rainmaking activities, the soil will dry quickly no matter how regularly you watered it in years gone by
- New initiatives where you're a new kid trying to get a new audience to imagine and embrace numerous logical but new ideas... is hard... takes time... causes bruising
- Hurts leave scars, but like beach sand blasted into ridges by storms, they fade, and they tell a story of patterns if you're brave enough to look closely at them
- Plucking up the resilience to weather constant tidal challenges means continually refocusing on a beautiful longer-term horizon... breathing deeply... having a frequent reset and refresh routine
- You will only give your best if you love it (and so you better inject that which you love into your professional walks every single day)
- Companions on a hike keep you sane... but they can't and won't walk for you

The sun will keep setting on your days and you get no more than are left.

The sun will keep rising to give you another vehicle, but it doesn't stay stationary in the sky, ever. So you need to embrace it. Move and bask in it when it's out in its glory, and rug up to endure the temporary chills when it's hidden behind grey.

It's timely to be philosophical come the start of a fresh 12-month canvas.

Philosophy and contemplation don't sell though.

Time to plan and implement and disciplinedly work the stuff you love and are building-to-be-world-best at. Get yourself a bit further down the beach each day towards the warm fire and steaming plate of your choosing.

'cause it ain't coming to you.

## What future for salespeople?

The crystal ball's on backorder, but if that position description fits you or your charges, it's a question you'd do well to consider deeply and plan for *today*. 25 years of doing and ten coaching folk in this shrinking-expense-accounted category (plus having a snout perpetually wedged in one of the vast city of its how-to tomes), I find that snout being assaulted with the fumes of uncertainty. From an analyst perch swing, we watch the dark clouds building over every sales team in every market paddock. Rains of growth or storms of destruction?

Here's my draft interpretation of the tea leaves;

- **They're onto us.** These customers, they know the moves, they've experienced the gamut, they're street-smarter and gadget-armed and have no time to waste indulging clumsy human attempts to part them from their shrinking budgets. The secrets you think you hold to influence others aren't.
- **They can buy better than you can sell.** Faster, more enjoyably, when it suits them, with less pressure and more transparency and wider ranging choice, and without risking offending you, and ... it's a long list.
- **Rosie the Robot has better game than you.** The pop-up ads that are spookily bang-on, the trustworthy consumer ratings at a swipe+click, the blogs and tweets and LinkedIn posts. Over-the-desk and phone chats just aren't essential anymore.
- **"But it's all about RELATIONSHIPS!"** (hear that last desperate plea at the precipice) **might have validity (but I think you're overestimating what you bring to it).** We want relationships with suppliers on terms we define, in ways that evolve to suit us, with products and processes (and yes, people) we can trust to do what we want when we want how we want it. Can *you* do that? If you can, you are possibly the only one in the world and you should ask for much, much more money.

Today and early tomorrow the prevalent communication mode is electronic. Yes it is. Look up from the screen you're reading, smile at that irony, and peruse the cubicle farm. What are your peers doing? Or your kids who are supposed to be getting ready for school? Take a look around the café at the conversations-to-smart-phone-tapping ratio (they're not using it as a phone, are they?)

Who then survives this rapid-change time at the customer interface?

- **The flog?** The soap-box spruiker, the one with a deal for YOU, the fearless promoter of wares whose silver tongue and red-hot enthusiasm sells lesser spines into submission? Snake oil is hardy stuff and its school graduates are resilient roaches. Some of their number will survive an age change, but I'll wager the pack will thin and those gigs will disappear as our ability and reasons to say no or even avoid the high pressure conversations increases in line with our electro-barriers. You might have the skills for it, but the customers build in numbers showing they don't have the stomach.
- **The old mate?** Who's called on you forever, knows your kids names, has a spare key to the building and "*things just wouldn't be the same without them*"? No, they won't. But your love for them isn't enough to justify their existence, because it won't be enough to guarantee your continued business with them. You WILL pick faster-cheaper-better-easier because you'll have to in order to compete. And it will sadden you to see them go. Start baking the farewell cake. Actually, you don't have time, buy and ship one online...

- **The techo?** Who shows up with the latest clinical papers or runs training with the team or comes a-running when you have a question? Speedy problem solving will retain value and bespoke application support earns its place at the table, but can many of these people be replaced by the search engine box or remote examine-and-fixes? Is an on-call technical concierge going to justify their salary tomorrow by commanding more of your money for call-outs (or might they be usurped by free and immediate)?

So three questions I now hear in different forms at leadership tables...

- 1 **Will my sales team even *have* a role in the next few years?**
- 2 **What new sales techniques will they need to learn to keep us all alive?**
- 3 **What will keep customers spending with us?**

My mail:

- That's up to you. Probably pretty different to the roles they've enjoyed for the last 20 years. So you better have or get people that are good with big paradigm shifts. Because *"the way we do things around here"* has never sounded hollower or scarier than it does today.
- If you're still thinking "sales techniques", I think you're standing at a decommissioned bus stop waiting for Godot. Try if you will – build better flogs who are tougher to ignore or avoid; invest in more loveable bears the clients couldn't bear to put down; train the techos to a world-class-problem-solving level and arm them with up- and cross-selling questions that'd show the 15-year old in the McDonalds uniform what-for. But as you do it, ask yourself honestly how easy this model will be to hack and then euthanise by an increasingly competitive market wanting the money you're targeting (at margins you turn your nose up at). Then ask yourself if there are other ways you could spend that money doing something customers might REALLY value.
- Here's the \$64 Million question. Trite motherhood sentiments aside, the assessment criteria manifesting in customer behaviour today (B2B, B2C, tennis ball to tennis ball) includes;
  - ...**Value** – max the life out of what you give me for my needs, wants and dreams, and do it expecting the tiniest sliver of reciprocation from me (cash, attention, effort, loyalty)
  - ...**Speed** – waiting is sooooo 2014. Go now! Anticipate and go before!
  - ...**Care** – did I feel it / can I put my finger on how you demonstrated it / was it real or pre-packaged? Love me, just me, only me, for *me*. Make me happy-cry.
  - ...**Real** – (*and for what it's worth, I think it's been the willful ignoring of this idea in days of yore that landed "sales" and its faithful servant "marketing" into this fine used-car ad-man negative stereotype pickle...*) We now endure too much data and noise coming down the pipe to be arsed trying to sift the real from the pretend. We'll just grab the things we KNOW to be genuine (authentic / trustworthy) and let the rest flow downstream. And, like the Skin Horse said to the Velveteen Rabbit, *"it takes a long time to become real (that's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or have to be carefully kept)"*. Real is shown and experienced, not explained or techniqued.

So. How you're going to keep it real, continually?

How you'll implement and live "caring"?

What you'll do to close the waiting room and flatten the corrugations slowing value delivery?

And figuring out (and delivering) what'll be valuable to me (because value is as individual as a pinky print)?

Maybe that's where you can put your sales team to work tomorrow.

## Tell the truth about your goals

My work affords me the privilege of helping business leaders and sales professionals enunciate what they're aiming to achieve and then define the steps and disciplines they'll apply to get there. Whether in 3-day workshops or 1-hour coffee chats, the process starts by trying to clarify the endgame – a goal, professional vision or core purpose – and then reverse engineers and acid-tests a plan to suit.

In defining what they want to achieve, I've found that maybe 80% of people jump quickly and comfortably into a lie. Rough numbers, but 4 out of 5 clients start by giving me BS goals. Things they think we both want to hear, or that on paper should please their bosses, or in the eyes of their market might befit a business or professional of their station. Goals that they won't reach, can't reach or have no real intention of busting their hump to get to. Unaligned or nebulous goals, or goals that are already taken care of (or will be by lunchtime). Maybe goals that simply aren't all that meaningful to them.

This disconnect isn't because they're devious or delusional. The majority start a planning process full of optimism and a genuine desire to achieve great things. Whether it's the human condition or too much coffee or a perceived need to set an ROI measure we feel will make the planning investment worthwhile, we humans seem to be remarkably bad at defining precisely what we want.

You see the problem here, right? Wrong goal leads to wrong plan. Wrong plan leads to wrong application and wrong outcomes where no-one's happy at the end. Many a new client has travelled this circuit before and is jaded about the idea of setting goals full stop. And of course if you have no goals, then hey, you don't need a plan, and it's all freeform finger painting from here. Which might work for artists or poets. Probably not going to serve *you* so well if you want to be relevant, valuable and gainfully, sustainably employed in a growth space.

The prickliest part of my gig as a coach and planning helper is holding the mirror up and asking a client if that's really their goal. Really? *Really?* How consistent is it with their makeup as a human being or collective? How likely is it based on their history, idiosyncrasies, current terrain analysis and predictable market and business evolutions? How much are they willing to forgo in the pursuit of it? When all around them drop the ball and their boss waivers and colleagues abandon the cause, will they still be sufficiently driven to make it happen? Will they miss a school concert for it? Will they let comfortable routines and relationships with non-goal-aligned clients go to make way for genuine goal-aligned activities and partnerships? So (ahem) is it *really* the goal?

I don't expect this pattern to change much – we're stubborn creatures of patterns, tremendously proficient in deceiving ourselves. Maybe you have to experience the futility of setting and planning for goals that mean little to you and then enacting the subsequent plans (which invariably fail) before you become remotely receptive to the idea of being candid with yourself (whatever the cost).

To the enlightened or disillusioned amongst you – who life has shown that real professional goals aren't "*something HR makes me do on my PDP*" or "*nice lines we can use in our advertising materials*" – here's some reinforcement...

- A good goal should make you sweat, make your pupils dilate, give you goosebumps and make your heart sing. It should be so meaningful to you that it hurts in a good way.
- It shouldn't matter a rat's backside what other people think of it. It's not their goal. It's yours.
- It's something you'll pay any manner of opportunity cost to pursue. That bruises and breaks won't deter you from. That you'll be willing to step beyond comfort zone borders on a daily basis for.
- It should be something that, when you picture yourself achieving it, means something for the future. Will be a legacy for others, or is the natural precursor for something even greater in your mind. You can see that it is part of a continuum, organic and evolving and able to be grown upon.
- It's your responsibility, 100%. Always. No matter what. And you've got to want that. Or you'll fail.

Take another look at your goals and try telling yourself the truth. 4 out of 5 of us will struggle (I am frequently in your company in that 4). But maybe, just maybe, at that moment you find yourself jotting down goals out of routine or obligation, you can let this missive be a shrill conscience voice pecking at your brain, asking you *"is this REALLY what I want to achieve?"*



## 21 tools in the modern sales pro's kitbag

We'll assume you have charm oozing out your pores and skills up the wazoo to bring to each client meeting. Think though beyond your passion, talents and training, and rifle through the big bag of professional tools you need in today's hyper-competitive and connected marketplace;

1. **Clear goals** – 3-5 for the year, 2-3 for the day, 1 for each meeting. Aligned with your business' overarching plans, Strategy, Vision and Purpose. Your true North to continually aim at.
2. **Values** – 4 or 5 core professional beliefs, modes of behaviour you need to remind yourself of as the race speeds up and the *how* gets blurry.
3. **Checklists** - questions to ask, steps to follow, reminders of fundamentals you can quickly reference, meaning you get to keep mental real estate free for client thinking.
4. **Ready reckoners** - condensed versions of technical information, for you and for sharing with clients.
5. **Client database** - the VIPs, the rising stars, the everyday contributors and the prospects you're lining up. Records, details and ambitions.
6. **Monthly call plan** - the flexible but defined skeleton of who you'll see, when and why, if you're to make the number and grow the crew. Make sure it's ambitious but honest, factoring in known downtime.
7. **Daily run sheet** - placing each and every task you've prioritised into a distinct time home on the 8 - 12 hour continuum you're about to navigate (be generous with buffer time but not wasteful).
8. **Pre-call plans** - in-advance conversation maps with a goal, questions to ask, value propositions to discuss and a call-to-action prompt.
9. **Catalogue** - your stuff, in full, priced where possible, ready for deep diving into when the client is at that point.
10. **Something special for each meeting** - because the client you're about to see isn't like every other client, and you did your homework, and you've taken an educated guess about something they might really want to have or know about that makes them go "*WOW!*"
11. **Networked colleagues list** - from within or beyond your business, the who's-who that you might need to call on or share information with a client about when their needs go beyond your specific help domains.
12. **Professional development reading material** - between meetings, over a sandwich, because a little bit each day is manageable and powerful and compounds.
13. **Business plan** - to refer to, update and keep tabs on your progress.
14. **Numbers update** - the dashboard, broken down to daily reality checks and graspable targets.
15. **Follow-up list** - knocked over every 24 hours (because you have integrity and you are a person of your word).
16. **Something to charge your batteries** - a moment, a ritual, an activity designed to deliver Oxygen and fresh perspectives and renewed verve, and because it's fun.
17. **An internal focus client for the day** - a peer you'll extend time and a hand to, to build your credit, to improve your business.
18. **Ideas!** - keep a notebook to imagine better ways, new paths and innovation you'll explore, filter and act on the concentrate of.
19. **Time set aside for planning tomorrow** - get a head start.

20. **A piece of professional art you're creating** - a place where no-one else in your space has gone yet, an article or tool or value-add you'll carve with your own hands and use to differentiate yourself.
21. **Notes of gratitude** - hand them out honestly, generously and quickly.

Others you can think of? The kitbag has a great capacity - make sure you're filling it and employing all you have in it today!



## Life, four quarters and RUOK

What if you thought about life like it was a 4-quarter game?

That each quarter was about 20 years (give or take a bit of time-on)?

That everything you get after the age of 80 is victory laps, beers in the shed, reflections, tall tales and maybe mentoring the players of the next game?

Break your life down a moment.

Quarter 1 is all about getting a feel for things – the conditions, the standard required, getting your hands on the ball, trialing, erroring, but mostly enjoying being out on the playing arena with Oxygen in your lungs and fit legs and surrounded by your mates. Passion, energy, conditioning, fun.

Quarter 2 is when stuff gets real – where a bit of the wide-eyed newbie novelty wears off, the sense of responsibility and the dawning realisation of the opportunity set in, and you put your shoulder behind it to show what you've really got. You turn the burners up and build, grunting to do it all, have it all, use that combination of strong muscles and mental resolve to be super-productive. The genesis of a half-time lead is right here before you. Work, (wo)man, work!

Quarter 3 starts with the moment you realise you just hit (and passed) 40. It's a soul-searching, question-everything character test. You become painfully aware that though the line is still aways away, all in your world is actually finite, that the clock ticks regardless, and if you want to make something of this chance, right now, you have to move, continually. You remind yourself to smell the coffee aroma as you run past the canteen (because you've seen the bitterness of regrets of past players that didn't give enough in the right way, or the waste of those that didn't get to the siren). You also become more conscious that *how* you play is a critical part of the equation. It sinks in, why this is called the Premiership Quarter. Playing through increasing aches and fatigue and still getting up again and again. Because it stopped becoming just about you and achieving record scores. Now it's also about legacy and example and the journey.

Quarter 4 is a function of what you did in the first 3. If you got your nose in front, of your goals and aspirations, then you either throw off the shackles and play with a freedom of 10-goal leaders, dishing out generous gives to those looking for a touch or a leg-up. Maybe you hold the last line of defense to preserve and protect that which you've banked. If however you find yourself behind the 8-ball, then you also get to choose. You either throw in the towel and accept your fate (beaten, cooked, looking for any positives or stewing in bitterness), or you battle. You scrape and claw and make amends and try and right to improve what you can. Because regardless, the siren is approaching.

(And if you're lucky enough to survive the game and make that post-match party, then you can do whatever the hell you like. No-one begrudges 4-quarter survivors. And you probably have the mindset that the battle is done, you can't change the result, so now it's about enjoying whatever you have around you, within you, with folk you care about, rather than fretting about those people and processes and personal limitations you spent life battling).

OK, it's far from the perfect metaphor, and the quarter length is up for debate, but wherever you're at in your journey, maybe breaking it down into zones and segments helps you reset your perspective and be OK with a few things.

Whichever quarter you're in, no matter how many corkies you're nursing or falcons you've copped, you can be grateful you're still on the playing arena.

And that means there's still time. You just have to choose to try and use it.

(And if it turns out there's not, then it really doesn't matter a hill of beans anyway.)

So stop worrying so much about it.

Maybe even help someone else remove a worry today.

(A note for RUOK day).

## The cancer of ingratitude (reverse the spread)

In my role facilitating workshops to help organisations clarify their Purpose-Vision-Values-Strategy-Plans-Disciplines continuum, there are a few prioritised behaviours (Values) I hear leaders put forward more than others. Consistency is prominent. Accountability, common. Innovativeness. Collaboration. Empowerment often gets a gurnsey. Respect, and more. Good attitudes. Valuable behaviours.

There's one though I never seem to hear. And I know it's one that, provoked, conscionable leaders would say *"oh, yeah, that's important, sure, it's a given"*. But it doesn't ever seem to make its way anywhere near the front of the line.

That behavior is **gratitude**.

Too fluffy? Bit soft for a serious business? *"Who cares, as long as we get the job done"*?

There may well be "harder" values you can comfortably argue the case for, and they're no doubt all positive, and agreed, you can't remember 29 different ones, so for focus and rallying purposes, some have to be culled.

Consider though the cancer that spreads in an organisation when gratitude doesn't see enough sun.

A team member receives a helping hand from a colleague, and doesn't think twice about taking it, and offers no thanks or feels no desire to reciprocate.

A customer that spends well is just expected to keep spending well, and just delivering to expectations is considered sufficient to keep them spending.

An employee offered an opportunity, a project, a payrise or a promotion, comes to see that as just part of the process, a right that they've earned via tenure or following the functional processes. Next.

A manager that sees the crew stay later or go beyond position descriptions to get a better outcome for the customer or business or shareholders, and says nothing other than *"well, that's the job."*

Just never saying *"That's brilliant! Thank you! I really appreciate it!"*

What happens in a culture like that?

Do great people stay?

Do efforts build?

Is there a growing willingness to keep trying harder, doing more, stretching?

Is it fun?

Or does it become a place of box ticking?

Of multi-generational attitudes of expectation and spoon-fed rights and bitter competitiveness for any meager sliver of positive acknowledgment?  
Does it inspire, or crush? Is there collaboration and harmony, or co-existence and hurt feelings?

Ingratitude spreads fast because it's a slap in the face we instinctively want to repay.  
It enlarges and metastasises and ultimately kills relationships and can-do cultures.

Grateful people are magnetic. They are generous and forthcoming with their thanks and they don't suffer the malaise of entitlement and the hostility that it breeds. They make other people bigger and inspire them to want to do more, give more, be great. They hear the words "*you're very welcome*" continually, and with those words come mutual happiness and wellbeing and souped-up reciprocal acts. And that's a culture you want to experience before you die.

Ingratitude is cancerous and will ultimately kill your collective efforts.

Gratitude though?

That's also rapid-spreading; a deeply-permeating swarm of antibodies that can start off as a single act by a single person.

If you value gratitude, you don't have to lobby your Board to put it up on the corporate statement.

Just show it today.

## A 10-point daily checklist for small business owners

- **Cash position** – are we tracking on or above the line we planned? Is today's requirement known and planned for?
- **Clients** – do we know who we're training our eyes and energies on today to achieve our trading targets?
- **Offerings of value** – is the shelf stocked, crew trained or deliverables built, ready to roll for today's clients?
- **Team** – are they focused, neatly pressed and engaged in being values and brand ambassadors of the highest order?
- **Service levels** – beyond delivering on the terms of trade, are the kid gloves on to inspire repeat and referral actions?
- **Data** – has the CRM been reviewed, research undertaken and a process implemented to unearth, capture and apply the learnings from today's interplays?
- **Current affairs** – have we adjusted our operational hemline to take into account what's happening in the world this very day?
- **Aesthetic** – do we look, sound, smell the part of the supplier our clients are hungry for?
- **Curve-balls** – when one arises (people or product related), do we have maps, contingencies and alternate routes we can go to?
- **Time** – is the day structured with a view to delivering maximum ROI, both today and for tomorrow (while not so taxing to suck all enthusiasm from it?)

Try answering those 10 questions in the first 10 minutes of each workday this week – tell me how you go! [troy@strategyroad.com.au](mailto:troy@strategyroad.com.au)

## Deciding what goes in the business basket

I think the single hardest thing to do in business is **make decisions**.

When deciding how to grow and evolve my business, I perpetually to and fro.  
Should I...

- Go recruit some fresh-faced new clients? Try to reanimate past clients? Dig deeper for greater mutual value with existing clients? Or work on a mix of all 3 (and in what proportion)?
- Stay true to a lean, proven service cohort? Roll the innovation dice to build new offerings for freshness, engagement and (maybe) greater effectiveness? Or offer a broad open-source menu full of hybrids and bespoke opportunities?
- Go with templates and technology and scale and subbies? Or hone in on concierge customisation, cuddling a concentrated cluster?

All eggs, some eggs, organic free-range eggs, forget eggs altogether and go for fried chicken.... **what goes in the basket?**

Perhaps the biggest mental conundrum I torture myself with (and I'm betting I'm not Robinson Crusoe here) – should I spend the time doing what they'd LIKE right now, or what I think they'll VALUE longer term? (These two aren't mutually exclusive, but they're not necessarily BFFs). The reason that's a conundrum is that one might get us both quick wins and cashflow, but potentially have a shorter shelf life (because what they like today may not be what they decide they like or value tomorrow). I don't want to sound high horse – being liked is a pretty effective sales strategy for a great many businesses and professionals. Satisfying the instant gratification itches of others can make you a lot of money.

The other path – focusing on what you believe will be valued regardless of and beyond the trend of the day – can also set a consultant's business up for great success (repeat work, word-of-mouth, a oracle's reputation for prescience and damn it can be satisfying). But it involves (educated) guesswork. You might get it wrong (and then you're not likeable OR valuable). And because it can be a harder sell than serving up the likeable stuff, it requires a deeper level of belief and commitment to get enough clients taking you up on it.

My homespun criteria for picking a path is this quick mental checklist;

- **Love** – do I love doing it (and well)? Will I love pushing through pain to deliver it? Will they love having me around for the process?
- **Impact** – will it deliver for the client? Will their satisfaction then deliver sufficient ROI for me?
- **Ability** – can I do justice to it? Is the client actually willing and able to put the recommendations in play (and persist with implementation)?
- **Fit** – is what I'm suggesting here a hand-in-glove fit for the culture, the people, the aspirations of this business? Are we right for *each other*?



These questions help. However I've found and observed that the best decision-making filter of all is passing the choice of two paths through the "holy trinity" that every business worth its salt should have. A **Purpose**, a **Vision** and a set of **Values**. The "why" you exist, the "what" you're trying to achieve, and the "how" you believe in going about it. Hold the two choice paths - the decision - in opposite hands, stand before the highest order triangle of your business, and be honest.

Which path slots into that triangle-shaped hole **better**?

Decide to go with that one.



## Ten questions to challenge your clients thinking

The days of sales pros earning their significant keep as walking talking product brochures are now officially **gone**.

The rep who demonstrated value by being Johnny-on-the-spot with a new clinical paper, a piece of technical knowledge to share or a nicely smoothed features and benefits list (even just popping by to “*touch base*”)... those good sales world burghers are now extinct (though some don’t yet realize it). While you were outside checking your Facebook updates, these well-intentioned-but-now-redundant travellers were deftly replaced by smart phones and Google. Brochure toting can’t command its salary anymore (as clients, we’re too busy, not interested and just have better ways to get intell how and when it suits us).

So that desperate fallback cry of “*it’s all about relationships*” – are *they* still important? Sure! But not sufficiently valuable if they’re just about enjoying time together, shooting the breeze, passing on update snippets. The relationships of value – that will persevere in the new world of “busy” – are those built on and by supplier representatives who *deeply* understand their clients needs, their goals, their challenges, and spend every moment in their clients’ service working to improve the client’s outcomes and experiences. THAT’s a relationship clients will invest in.

Understanding this paradigm shift in the complex professional sales world, researchers Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson wrote a great book called “**The Challenger Sale**” – a model based on the study of thousands of successful (and found-wanting) sales professionals in diverse industry sectors. I don’t speak for these guys and won’t steal their thunder here – if you’ve not read the book, and you’re in sales in 2016+, you simply must. [Jump on Amazon](#) and get a copy (and check out its new companion book, *The Challenger Customer*). Suffice to say, what I love about their Challenger sales concept is that it’s all about testing client assumptions, not being afraid to poke the fabric of a friendly relationship or rock the status quo in an attempt to get the client a better outcome (even if it means being a bit more assertive than you might be used to).

In working with diverse sales teams over the last 10 years, I’ve run a large number of workshops on effective and “challenging” sales questioning techniques. Groups working to define the type of questions that will get a client to widen their eyes, say “*hmmm....*” and actually THINK. Beyond open/closed questions, beyond the stock-standard to understand a client’s situation, challenging questions put people a little on edge (the “edge” being where real learning happens and decisions get tested or made). Adamson and Dixon call it creating “constructive tension”, and I’d contend it is tension you’d benefit from building if you’re to open client minds, shift purchasing habits and influence decisions.

Here are just ten of the many questions I’ve seen groups create and apply to brilliant effect when challenging customers in an effort to help them achieve their goals...

- “**Why?**” – ...do you do it that way? ...do you think or believe that? ...do you want that? ...would that get you a better outcome than this other way? ...not? “*Why?*” It’s just 3 letters, and it’s maybe the scariest question that the majority of sales reps are afraid to ask their customers (“*but they’ll think I’m impudent!*”) If you’re working to break forces of habit, or get a client to reflect on the limitations of a particular practice, why *not* ask “*Why?*”

- **“Would you explain to me.....?”** – a variation of *why*, when asked nicely, an explanation question provokes a client to mentally and then verbally walk through the rationale of their perspective. It’s a method to both better understand the client’s worldview, and for them to hear any holes or dated aspects to their thinking as they hear the words leave their mouth. More effective than you telling them how to suck eggs, the explanation question can open the conversation up by exposing assumptions, redundancies and biases to the sunlight.
- **“What do you *believe*....?”** The word *believe* immediately gets a client thinking about their opinion and why they think that way. It triggers either a justification of their position (including an explanation, which you want to understand if you have any hope of shifting their position), or it opens them up to the idea that what they’d been touting as fact might actually have alternatives.
- **“Have you experienced....?”** With emphasis on the word *you*. This question exposes opinions parroted from their conversations with competitors or what they read in the paper, and provokes introspection of their *own* experiences. It’s particularly effective when a client is throwing up objections based on broad generalisations or grapevine stories.
- **“What is MOST important here...?”** A question to understand the key driving force behind a client’s decision or activity pattern, it also serves as an effective means to expose and quarantine red herrings or minor objections.
- **“What is your hierarchy / order of priorities here.....?”** An expansion of the “*what’s MOST important?*” question, not only does it get a client to determine what they most want, need or believe, but it exposes their breadth of understanding of priorities (so look for the gaps or the out-of-whack emphasis opportunities).
- **“What do you mean?”** A Socratic clarification question, this asks a client to dig deeper than the sound-byte level of response they might have just given you. It asks them to flesh out their question / perspective, thereby building your understanding and forcing them to work through in their own mind just what they *do* mean.
- **“If you do this, what’s most likely to happen? And then?”** Also from Socrates, this consequence question (and taking it one step further down the consequence cascade) can be used to test a client’s understanding of what would happen given a particular course of action or inaction. Many will deliver a quick fire answer to the first part of the question – the second part can really challenge more deeply.
- **“What are your alternatives?”** Not designed to paint a client into a corner, this is a coaching-style question that can be applied when a client feels their actions are limited or are espousing an “only way”. It’s a wonderful precipitator of collaboration, if you’re ready to and knowledgeable about how you can help them understand or develop alternative pathways.
- **“When do you want to....?”** The timeframe question. Make a decision. Start enjoying the benefits. Stop the pain. Build a gap between yourselves and your competitors. It asks a client to challenge and clarify in their own mind just how important or otherwise an action might be.

For some of your sales crew, these “challenging” questions will be a doddle. For others, they stretch their comfort zone and need practice, role-playing, support and reinforcement. They need to be delivered at the appropriate time in the appropriate way with the appropriate client. Because they *are* more provocative than softer questions, if delivered inappropriately, they come with a higher risk. But they consistently deliver a greater reward for both the askers and the clients, particularly in complex sales scenarios. They precipitate deeper client engagement in a deeper level of thinking and conversation. They test assumptions and biases and soft spots. They provoke a client to challenge their own paradigms (and hey, that’s why they agreed to make time to see you, right?). They challenge the idea that a sales professional has to be all yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir. Value, *real* partnership value, comes from shaking the cage if that shaking can and will help the client.

2016+'s clients in complex sales environments (which a great many B2B spaces are) want unique perspectives. They want someone that makes them think differently, consider alternates, tests the rigor of their activities.... as long as it is done in a genuine effort to help the clients improve their situation and achieve their goals.

Show you give a damn, that you want to help, and don't shy away from asking the challenging questions. Your clients need you to, and it carries significantly more value than toting a brochure.

**Why?**

## A simple view of leadership

Join me at the fireside and consider how we frequently and overly romanticise this word, **leadership**.

We hold up 14 habits of effective leaders, we espouse the character traits of great leaders across history, we talk about styles that engage, disciplines that affect and write celebratory books on poster children of the word. And because “leadership” is something everyone today seems to aspire to, we study widely and stare navelly, trying to interpret the lint to figure out what it really means and how we can do it well.

For what it's worth, my take, like that other simple-thinking shrimp-boat-leader Forrest, is a pretty simple one.

Leadership's just two things.

Going first.

And having one or more follow you.

How to do it, and well? What constitutes great, inspiring, mighty leadership?

Trying to enunciate that is like using a multiple choice answer set to capture the essence of a rich life biography.

So much of it is the art side of human behavior, the pioneering side of science.

It's so damn situation dependent (what's needed here, on this terrain, in this wind, with this chariot?)

So human dependent (both on the one going first and those setting to follow).

So aspiration dependent (who you want following, where and to what end).

And sure, the memorable ones leave tracks, and sure, the concept benefits from rigorous study and frameworks and heuristics (because, done well, it changes things). But it's not a single tangible model. It's an infinite spectrum.

As to who gets to judge what “great leadership” actually is or looks like?

This court is recognising just two people.

The one *doing* the leading (did they get where they set out to go? Is there a Pied Piper line of the ones they wanted to follow coming up the sled tracks?)

And the ones *bringing up the rear* (did they start, complete and rate the trip?)

Everyone else buying the books? Just faces outside the shop window alongside you and I, peering through the grime, making guesses and judgments on engagement and effectiveness without knowing the nuances.

*Really* want to know what great leadership is?

Two suggestions.

**Go follow someone** who inspires you and who your gut tells you might be heading somewhere you'd really love to go. Let 'em lead, watch 'em closely.

Or **have a go yourself** at being the one up front, defining a frontier, finding the cojones and the right set of crampons to start the trek. Then **take a step**. You'll know soon enough if what you're doing is "great" (just look behind you).



## The consultant's hangout in Maslow's loft (and the ticket price to stay there)

You see consultants come and go. They kickstart their practices via a redundancy package sufficient to cleave them from the corporate bosom, or they hit a finally-bubbled-over level of self-belief in their ability or idea, or they just yield to their yearning to cast off the shackles of the org chart. They register the ABN, draw the logo, draft the plan and start having a lotta coffee with a lotta people. Some strike early wins, some grind it out in the dust, and some get sucked into the Lamson tubes of their first client, playing the part of surrogate employee. All however get the chance to move to the front of the queue outside Maslow's loft – the highest level on the esteemed Psychologist's Triangular Treehouse (*“oh, the views from up here, Abe!”*)

[Maslow's Hierarchy](#) postulates that the highest order of human needs is “self-actualisation” – the realisation or fulfillment of one's talent or potential. Where you can exercise your creativity muscles, be spontaneous in thought and deed, and leverage your superpowers to solve problems and develop innovations. An enlightened place indeed. A pretty cool professional loft to hang out in. It's what many a self-employed consultant craves, why they took the leap to leave the crowd, hang the shingle and forgo the other stuff.

Forgo the other stuff.

That's the rub. The other stuff. That's the reason many a promising consultant departs self-employment not long after they arrive. It's a sirens call of craving that can only be fed on the other four levels of Maslow's Mental Mansion. The sleep, for one thing, found on level 1 (a door marked “Physiological needs”). Every consultant is intimately familiar with the piece of ceiling above their bed at 3am. Then there's the sense of security, the promise of consistent cashflow to fund the mortgage and school fees that an employment contract offers (no matter how temporarily). That's level 2 “Safety” stuff that sometimes looks far, far away from the loft.

On Level 3 is the “Love and belonging” that comes with teams, of others in your tribe, with shared senses of purpose and equivalent amounts of skin in the game and 5pm Friday drinks by the photocopier. The deinstitutionalised lone wolf consultant had to cut those ties to go it alone – the kabana and cheese birthday gatherings something of a misty eyed memory for many.

Just below the loft, playing loud music that pulses up through the floorboards, intermittently disturbing the Zen meditations of the fertile minded navel gazers parked on comfy cushions, are the “Esteem” enjoyers. Brimming with confidence, recognised for their contributions, respected by those they seek it from. These Level 4 partiers are the next likely candidates for a visit to the loft. Heck, they don't need to seek consultancy out to spend time on Level 5 – there's a whole wing dedicated to those that can actualize themselves inside the institutions. They truly are the talented.

But the consultant's hangout on Level 5? To get there faster (or at least tell ourselves that's where we're spending more of our days), there's a ticket price. It's expensive. It means less time on Levels 1 to 4. Less sleep and shallower breathing as the adrenaline needed to keep all the balls in the air by yourself keeps you on edge (not helped by all the coffee). A lessened sense of security as you scramble after the holy grail of scale, all the while working piece by piece to pay the bills

(“*I did not buy myself a job. I did not buy myself a job.*”) Fewer friends – connected-by-company-chromosome friends – to follow or lead or collaborate and celebrate with (there's no-one around you compelled to kiss your consultant's ring). And while the level 4 esteem club is just one flight down and a haunt not unfamiliar to you, even the sensation of accomplishment that comes with positional power and a team of mignons paid to help you stay perky and primed... it's not yours. Confidence is yours to find alone rather than roll forward on a set of tyres continually pumped by a corporately compensated in-crowd.

Consulting – being the paid outsider whose expertise, support and value is bolstered by the very nature of being an outsider – can be really lonely.

To keep in touch with the other four levels of your psycho pentaplex (and hey, you better, because the loft crashes to the ground if the other 4 needs aren't met), here's a few non-psychotherapist tips from experience;

- **Level 1** – look after yourself. Be kind to your body. Go to bed. Drink more water. Show your partner and family you love them, and be brave enough to lean on them when you need to. It *is* tough and you *will* slip, but breathe deeper, find something that helps you recalibrate (gardens, sport, writing long-winded blog posts...). Take care of the foundation needs you have as a person (much more important than the consultancy).
- **Level 2** – seek out a portion of your work / income from someone that mightn't fit the dream basket (but is regular, honest and covers the electricity bill). While scale is a difficult rainbow to chase, there are undoubtedly small things you can do regularly that will keep the spiders out of your coffers, and as long as you're not pouring yourself into the compromise work 40+ hours a week, then be OK with the compromise. Everyone has to make it. Even you, smarty pants.
- **Level 3** - surround yourself with others. Your consultancy might require time-consuming solo efforts, but your business will benefit from daily interaction with others that get it. Networking groups, continued coffee sessions, co-working spaces... find ways to stay connected to a team of your own making, no matter how loose or mobile it might be.
- **Level 4** – in a lonely office, in the wee small hours, when you're doubting your abilities and knowledge and questioning if you have the intestinal fortitude to keep going down this path less travelled, take a quick look in the mirror (turn on the laptop photobooth camera if you're sans mirror). That head before you is doing something remarkable. The consultancy it is running would have crumbled to ash without the smarts and efforts that head has served up. It's imperfect, but it's achieved stuff. And when the sun rises tomorrow, it's good enough to go achieve some more. Think about a great piece of client feedback, or a win you know you helped achieve, or a bill your solo efforts paid. Let that small flickering memory be enough to feed your esteem hopper.

It's up to you to decide whether the ticket price to spend more time on Level 5 is worth it. If you decide it is (and I hope you do), just remember you still have the stub to get you back into the other levels, and you can't be a stranger there.

(Oh, and while on **Level 5**? Please don't forget to do what it is you came here to do. Create. Fix. Design. Progress.

It really is a very cool loft.)



## Filter your idea beyond the beer coaster

A green recycling client has a big machine with a series of graduated filters that sifts waste material, sorting the unwanted from the finer valuable output. Stage 1 filters take out chunky contaminants, Stage 2 isolates the smaller pebbles, and so on.

Consider the filters that sieve beginning businesses and aspiring performers into the couldabeen buckets.

Stage 1 filters are the Imagining – can you picture a superior or novel solution to a vexing problem? Is that kernel of an idea, a hint that the old way could give way to a better way, or an inkling that your bushel-covered talent could change the world, sufficiently motivating to want to move on it? 11.6%\* of the population just don't have these ideas, or they're not enamouring enough to the aspirant to keep them front of mind longer than it takes to finish the latte. (\* completely made-up numbers, but I don't think it's large. Ideas, the easy bit.)

Stage 2 filters sort the immobile from the first movements. The starting bit. Taking a thought and physically sketching it on the back of the beer coaster. Calling the meeting with a potential collaborator. Whiteboarding and bullet-pointing and dropping \$5 on Fiverr to get the V1.0 logo drawn. The first real acid test, the moment you say *"I'm actually doing this"*. This filter takes out a bigger wedge of the crowd (28.4%?), but technology and a cultural revolution celebrating entrepreneurial startup-ism and a generation with more self-belief than mine possessed is pulling that number down. Still, a whack of the best ideas won't see daylight beyond this filter to reach...

Stage 3 filters, all about the graft work to realize the opportunity. The mesh in this filter is designed to drop the easily bruised, the fragile ego-d, the risk fearers and the quickly worn down out the poop chute and onto a forgiving pile of woodchips, not unscathed, but better for the abrasions (smiling with learns and the *"they can't take that away from me"* legacy of having had a go). Different folk and different scenarios travel across this filter at different speeds, from weeks to years and decades. It's a filter full of frustration, fatigue and false starts. It's the incessance of the journey that triggers much drop-out. This is where the lion's share (42.59% to be precise) depart, leaving just that small handful to enter...

Stage 4 filters, where you try to navigate the early days of Kindergarten-level success and begin the transition to something growable, durable and sustainable. The beauty of the journey across the first three filters means if you made it this far, you're probably a bit of a hard arse and this final sifting doesn't scare you much. Don't be fooled though, there's still plenty of ways you can hit the rejects pile. If you've not thought the plan through beyond iteration 1, if you've banked on certain market conditions that are being reshaped by change winds, if the skill pool evolved while you were in the machine, even if you've just completely spent yourself getting to that first finish line (you know there's many, many more ahead, right?) The tenure on filter 3 actually becomes a security blanket for some, their new norm, so they try going back there, reinventing, before giving stage 4 a chance. Because, as appealing as it seemed with that beer coaster in hand, the imagined nirvana beyond stage 4 actually looks kinda scary.

No conveyer belt fast-tracking ideas, but 2 filter tips.

- Know they're there for a reason, these filters, and if the vision is compelling enough to you, you really won't benefit from trying to avoid them.
- Know that the queue to get back on the start of the conveyer belt always has room for first timers, and even more room for returners who've felt the filter's shaking power before.

Just take a ticket that says "stage 1", even if it's "again" for the 42nd time.



## Nerve fibres, team meetings and why coaching eats training courses for breakfast

We know that the biggest obstacle to us being more successful, or happier, or richer, is us. Not the boss or the hard start in life or the economy or your schooling. It's you. Me. That's a known. Accept it or live a victim's life.

One of the biggest "us" blocks is our almost universal lack of appetite for pushing through the no-persons-land of unsexy chaffing toil. You know the zone. It sits plum between the excitement of what-if goal dreaming (which, nurtured, gives rise to energised pursuits of the novel), and the attainment of something of real meaning to us (the glory, the sensation, the book deals). We all know (no matter how impressive our Ostrich impersonations) that between goal setting and goal attainment lays a hot rocky white metal road of work we have to battle along. Because it's undulating and twisting, we usually have no honest idea of how long it'll take and we often (mostly) have to plod alone. In the summer sun. Eating flies. And sometimes we get to the end and find it's dead.

We quit because it's hard and we know it'll stay hard.

Enter the [Gate Theory of Pain](#).

A couple of smart roosters named Wall and Melzack proposed it back in the 60's, and without getting all neurosciency, Gate Theory explains why you rub your forehead to stop the hurt when you accidentally smack it on the TV set in the aisle of the airplane (OK, old airplane, but you've been there). When something's triggered your small pain fibres to fire up, one way of stopping the pain is to activate the adjacent larger pressure / vibration fibres to "close the pain gate", essentially turning the pain signal off. It's why you shake your hand violently or even suck your thumb after hitting it with a hammer, or grab your elbow when you bump your funny bone. It has a proven effect beyond the psychological.

Back to your success.

If we know that we're going to feel pain on that long lonely white metal road between "*I bet I could...*" and "*YEAH!*", and our history shows us that our distaste for that painful slog is (nine times out of ten) going to be our undoing (lack of application, indulging distractions, getting sidetracked, quitting), *then* why not recruit the larger nerve fibres to help turn the hurt signal off? That might work, right?

So... what are our larger nerve fibres?

Who can you, errr, rub, activate, to dull or distract you from the pain of effort?

- **Your peers** – collaborative meetings aren't always a waste of time (even when the output looks thin). The act of working together with an aligned bunch, helping each other walk and talk across the tundra, can be effective in reducing the pain of the graft. Company rubbed negates lone misery.
- **Your clients** – their gratitude and smiling eyes as they see you put in effort in their service is a nice way of turning off pain signals. Even if they're not fawning over you, time alongside them, working across roads together, is at least a good distraction.

- **Your business plan** – rub it and read it daily, reconnect constantly with why you’re pushing along the road. It’s not the complete answer and it sucks at pumping your tyres up (not much of a talker, old business plan), but its clarity and conviction helps when you're questioning your mettle.
- **Your mentor or coach** – we don’t all give massages, but most of us are pretty happy to walk alongside you, make the journey more enjoyable, keep you focused and help you put the pain back in its box, subservient to the much more pleasurable imaginings of your desired outcomes.

The more I see and experience, the more fervently I fly a flag for a simple but deepening viewpoint on attaining professional success (whatever that means to you).

It is less about “more new theories” or “more training courses”.

It is so much more about “keep your pain in check and keep journeying across that white metal road”. Implement. Apply. Do. Persist. Push. Focus. Again.

Training courses are nice for mints and temporarily plugging excuse holes in the CV and helping you start your first steps along the white metal road.

If however you know your bigger success barrier has less to do with "starting" and everything to do with "constantly stopping"... If *you know* the best thing you could do to get you to that imagined endpoint is find a way to push through when the blisters start screaming and your desire to throw in the towel gets overwhelming?

Get yourself a walking mate or 12.

Like a banged funny bone, you’ll be less likely to succumb to the predictable pain if you find someone to help you rub it. Metaphorically speaking.

## Organic bonds, parallel circuits and faith in your decisions

Coffee with a friend and valued business influence yesterday, we discussed the fracturing of many markets into three dominant groups;

- Online businesses replacing their ancestral physical stores
- Big box scale monsters sucking up the customers of small-to-middling providers like krill to baleen
- Bespoke uber-niche artisanal outposts (with designer beards) designed for narrow but deeply loved cohorts

Our take was that if you're an old school general merch provider in an otherwise unremarkable locale with generically-pressured commodity offerings and little to differentiate you in price, prestige or people stakes (don't rose-colour your differentiators), then business is tough and trending towards closure. The world increasingly favours the ease of e-click ordering, the Bunnings one-stop peace-of-mind scale model (with sausage sizzle), and the little out-of-the-way laneway coolness of the tribal boutique.

So – which one (or hybrid) of those evolutionary options should sing loudest from the strategic pathway choices inked on your boardroom whiteboard this year? Here are three camera angles that might help you decide.

Start by donning the labcoat and thinking of your business in **organic chemistry terms**.

Consider how this entity, this business of yours, has lived and grown from a concept or small fry to the position it occupies today. Think about the different bonds that formed over time between decision and action atoms, that have grown and shaped the business molecule you have this moment.

- What kind of things stand out about the subset of relationships you forged that resulted in more, better relationships (versus the ones that terminated in tears or dead ends)?
- How about the services that gave rise to better service models (versus those that proved short-lived distractions)?
- How about the training that led to a new growth path, or the products that extended and evolved, or the problems you sought to resolve that exposed *other* problems you've since evolved to deal with?

Think of your business as a living, expanding and contracting continuum of decisions, actions and learnings.

- What does the storyline tell you about what's been a lucrative fit?
- What patterns are evident when you consider the multitude of dead-ends the business encountered?
- What can you learn about the dots that stayed joined or grew and the dots that faded or stayed lonely?

- What does the petrie dish of unique, only-you-have-'em collection of talents, experiences and connections say about what you can likely morph into and offer the changing world?
- What then is the logical, attractive, next-organic-bond fit for your little business molecule?

Consider the next organic step you might employ to test the equation.

While we're in high-school science mode, join me at the electronics bench for a second perspective on your business and consider the difference between **series and parallel circuits**. Series circuits are like standing domino lines. One action gives rise to the next gives rise to the next. Like the old fashioned Christmas tree lights – fine when all is working nicely. All falls in a heap when one globe blows or one domino is removed. Very focused but inherently risky. All or none.

Think then - what are the all-eggs-in-on-basket series circuit risks in *your* business right now?

- The linchpin individual that you'll be lost without?
- The process that all others hinge upon?
- The product or customer group or point-of-difference that, removed, exposes you like a snail without its shell?

Now imagine that tiniest lick of salt that you know lays ahead in the hyper competitive world. That imaging of painful life without the shell should be your frothy catalyst to jump-start any latent bias-for-action you might have been sitting on. Think through what new shell, shells or thermal layers of under-shell you're going to need to get cracking on this very week to avoid becoming a bubbling mess when the salt really rains down.

These alternate shells are the parallel circuit paths you're going to need to develop if you're to circumvent the catastrophe of a series circuit failure.

- What could you craft as an alternative productive process, a other-value-delivery vehicle, alongside your crucial node to mitigate the risk of blinkered focus?
- What are the logical expansion or diversification opportunities that fit with the changing market demands that might buffer you from the impact of primary channel collapse?
- Who, how or with what might you engage to spread your coverage and make you less susceptible to a single otherwise-knock-out punch?

The attraction of series circuits is powerful laser focus, but in the fast changing marketplace, the merits of mitigating against total system collapse by spreading the load and developing alternate channels is just a bright thing to do.

Two muddly metaphors to help you think through your business evolution.

But what about the *data* to underpin the choices? What evidence points to the *right* path?

To the third and final concept I'd encourage you to mull over... **faith.**

It might sound an odd (hopefully not offensive) topic to bring into a strategic business thinking space, but bear with my areligious musings and consider. If Wikipedia is in the ballpark, there are some 6.2 Billion people on the planet that identify with a particular brand of faith. That means 86+% of all humanity believe in something they (by the very definition of "faith") don't feel the need to be able to see nor empirically know for certain to make their most important life choices in line with. They have little more than *conviction*. The majority of faithful aren't hamstrung by "*can't measure it so can't manage it*" dogma fences we ring the business world with. There's no "*show me the irrefutable data to drive my decision-making*" roadblocks to taking faithful action. There's just faith. Visceral belief without cranial proof. Holding something as a truth when it is metrically immeasurable.

Crazy ostrich concept and behaviour if displayed in the business world.  
Seemingly the norm for the bulk of humanity and their biggest life decisions.

I take you down this precarious sidetrack to provoke *your* areligious contemplation. If indeed 7/8ths of the world choose to carry out their most important life activities in line with little more than internal conviction that it's holistically *the right thing to do* by their belief system...

... is it always essential to wait for a peer-reviewed published proof train or a tiny evidence-validated part of a probably-unfathomable bigger picture data set before taking a bold step forward in business?

If you're still here and it's your cogs I hear creaking, let me lubricate and consolidate by pulling these strands together as a **single strategic question.**

As you mentally navigate the next steps to evolve your business in line with what the world demonstrates it now favours...

As you consider the organic foundations you've grown upon and what the logical next carbon chains for growth should be ...

As you think about the risks you shoulder in the series circuits of your business and start imagining the catastrophe-offset paths you can carve out in parallel...

**... is there room to have a little faith in your own business decision making?**

In other words, are you willing to back your judgments *without* absolute certainty in the outcome (just because you *believe* it's the right way to go?)

(Be clear - anti-data is foolhardy. Flying blind by choice, denying research merit or cosseting yourself from the evidence clues in business is criminal. My encouragement is for you to consider counterbalancing the need for well-informed choice with an appreciation that the data we elect to build into our business decision-making is often unwittingly unbalanced, *always* grossly incomplete and so often a substitute for actually *thinking*. So maybe there's a role for having some faith in the paths you'll select and in your own ability to traverse them. In doing that, you're backing yourself. THAT's a bet I'd encourage you to place (then you're forced to reverse engineer your ability like no man's business...)

It's **your** cliff to leap from, this business strategy decision moment, not mine.

Don't let me push or pull you (I hope though I'm poking you to think and move).

You can wait for another analyst to publish their narrow-but-irrefutable findings before making a call.

Or maybe you can back yourself in and have a little informed-but-uncertain faith in your only-ever-partially-informed calls.

Either way, **make a call.**

Kick out the chocks and let the wheels gain traction.

The world's not waiting for you to pick a strategy.

Stagnation just attracts spiders.

**Move your bum.**



## Surrendering a staunch position

Are you a heel-digger-inner?

When you've publicly declared your position on a professional matter, will you defend it hard, in the face of opposing perspectives, even when you can see threads of merit in them?

If you are and you do, fear not, you're hardly Robinson Crusoe.

It's a professional primate condition to be territorial about our ideas, our viewpoints and conclusions. The longer they're held and the more we invested in forming them, the tougher it is to shift us from them. It's an impressive sustained barrage of voices, emotion and logic needed to get us raising a white flag and moving cap-in-hand to a new, not-our-first-choice platform. Because it sucks and bruises and erodes confidence. We really don't like enforced change, especially when it means admitting being wrrrrr .... (it's a hard word to spit out).

While it arguably took Woolworths a while longer than many commentators deemed smart to put the public kiss of death on its big box hardware business Masters, hats off to the makers of the call. A somewhat bigger business than yours or mine, more coin dropped than we could ever imagine dropping on a venture, and their shareholders are now saluting them for the call of "cull the doomed". Bunnings smile. Wesfarmers smirk. Woolworths can now imagine a different application of that pile-o-cash in line with a better fit strategy.

The tough-to-stomach reality - if it's wrong, it's wrong, no matter how much time, energy, cash, bods or ego you whacked into the plan. Forget crystallising sunk costs; making the big call to surrender a previously-staunchly-believed-in position means admitting the wrrr... bit. That's harder. But it's why they pay you the big bucks. Or why they will if you can.

Determining the difference between a futile path and one that just needs sharper crampons and resilience to persist across? That's a blurry line I don't know has a definitive criteria set, beyond fit with Purpose, Vision and Values, and a purpose-built assessment of best-guesses about the market of tomorrow, today. But when you've read the smoke signals? Established that you're past a fulcrum of no good return, where extra X will never realise proportionately greater Y?

Give up the ground.

Surrender the staunch position.

Wash down the acrid taste of cancellation with the imagining of the newfound freedom to pursue new, grippier paths as the futile disappears to memory.

A call on a proactive new direction is wonderful.

But having the wherewithal to neuter that without ability to contribute to an aligned prosperous future is the hard work of the really brave leader.

Develop a 2016+ strategic or business plan equal in progressing the likely and condemning the redundant.

### 3 ideas for professional progress

Gym instructors.

Iditarod.

And bifocals.

Ever worked with a **gym instructor**? The one that says *“it’s not the first 8 reps, it’s the last 2 that get the results!”* The fatiguing and micro tearing of muscle fibres that enlarge on healing. Then they say to you *“Go stretch! Lengthen those muscles! Feel that deep stretch burn for future flexibility (but don’t go too far too fast!)”* Break scar tissue and move that cramping lactate on.

Stressing and stretching yourself beyond the comfort zone isn’t just advice for taut abs or diamond calves. It’s for professionals that want to grow beyond *their* perceived-safe places. Pushing a little harder, stretching a little further, adding a little extra uncomfortable weight to the learning or activity or discipline bar each week or month. Mindful not to go too hard too fast (because all that gets you is sprains, breaks and an enthusiasm barrier you condition yourself to not want to climb). Acclimatising yourself bit by bit to a more challenging norm (and in the process, moving your comfort zone along a line to "more valuable").

Then there’s **Iditarod**. The 1,000 mile bobsled race across Alaska each year, powered by some of the most loved and hardest working puppies around. Think about that team of huskies and their driver scooting across the ice.

Who’s **leading**?

The dog at the front, setting the pace?

Or the driver at the back, calling the shots and steering the sled?

What about the second dog in line, touching a nose to the backside of his/her frontrunning mate to ensure they keeps cracking, then easing back and sending the message that a pace is unsustainable?

It’s a wonderful demonstration of the truism that **anyone can lead, from any position**. It’s merely about being first to send a message, being first to direct the flow, being first to put your hand up or nose out or trigger a pace change or pull the attention of the pack to an alternate path. Demanding a difference by going first. A business card title is absolutely no limitation to choosing leadership behaviours and attitudes. That’s empowering, and it’s a no-excuse-for-passenger mirror.

**Bifocals**. Not just for ageing eyes – a critical (metaphoric) accessory for the strategic leader and performer. An all-in-one means to shift vision quickly from the far horizon to the small print on the page beneath your nose.

Through the long-distance lens, keeping an ever-vigilant eye on the farthest reaches of the market and customer-preference landscape (even imagining what's happening over the hills). It's a strategic practice designed to ensure you see the smoke signals as early as possible and don't disappear into your own navel, risking sepia-toned redundancy when change winds shift the terrain around you while you were toiling on the daily knitting.

Then, shifting your eyes from the big picture down to that daily tactical stuff (because it's *that* stuff, the granular, the gritty, that builds and builds the foundation for you to stay alive and even have a shot at grabbing the impending breezes of tomorrow). Moving, block by block. Details, done, right, again. Look up. Look down. Look up. Look down. Know that you have a natural bias for one or the other, so your virtual bifocals might need to be reminder tools or meeting rituals or featured in your business plan, or indeed a mate that pokes you to look up or down regularly.

Thicken and tone your professional muscles with effort and stretching, bit by bit, to move your strength and flexibility up a notch (easy but, don't bust a foofer valve).

Pick "leadership" as a gait, regardless where you are in the pack, regardless who stands before or behind you. There's plenty of other bobsleds trying to overtake you on the ice, so you really can't wait for others to lead alone.

And frame your professional face with bifocals this year, recognising the importance of continually vacillating between long-term envisioning and short-term detailed activity. It's this bouncing eye movement that builds firm but flexible foundations, strong and smart enough to accommodate changing terrain.



## A loose thread on the hem

Is delivering a “**great customer experience**” important to your organisation’s health and future prosperity?

To make that call, ask yourself “*will it (whatever GreatCustomerExperience is and means) keep me / us in the mix of the frontrunners, even help me / us nose ahead as the pace and pack keeps upping?*”

If “yes” (and that is the correct answer), then consider;

- Are you super-duper clear about who your customers are?
- Are you genuinely on top of who influences these folk and their pre-, post- and intra-experience perceptions of your service level?
- Do you understand key moments they make judgment calls on their experience with you (from that first faint whisper on the breeze where they became vaguely aware of your existence, to the moment they physically interface with your brand, to the carpark / mouse click moment, right through their spaghetti strand of interplay with all you do, and to the resonant memory left in their head as they move on with their life)?

In a 7.4 Billion folk world, why not be open-minded about questions one and two? Might it be better to err on the side of viewing more people as customers and influencers versus exposing your investments to the consequences of blinkering? That then means viewing staff and suppliers... heck, the entire community... the same way. **As customers you want to give a great experience.**

3 ideas...

- If someone – **anyone** - ever initiates an interaction with you (*asks a question, waves, sends you a note, smiles, likes a post, makes eye contact, sits in your waiting room, approaches your desk, offers a comment or suggestion, gives you a mechanism to learn something new, creates or contributes or just leads by example in a way that might help you*) – then **a.** be human enough to acknowledge them, **b.** be smart enough to reciprocate in some way, and **c.** realise that you haven’t even hit “positive customer experience” territory yet (*you’re merely coming from behind that leader to get yourself up to the equivalence line from which you might elect to launch an in-front service experience*). Take it on the chin that stum silence, hiding in shadows, averting your eyes (then peeping like Tom while pretending they can’t see you deriving an unreturned upside from their efforts) is about as far away from delivering a good customer experience as you can be. People want their existence and efforts (no matter how meager) acknowledged. No positive customer experience can ever be delivered when you don’t choose to start with that bedrock.
- Think “easy”. Make it easy. Be easy. Feel easy. Put easy first. If we spend so much of our professional lives stepping outside our comfort zones, will we not love any experience that delivers comfortable ease, like a warm bowl of Nanna’s chicken soup on a grim winter’s day? And to be clear, we’re not talking easy for *you*. It’s easy for **them**.

- Just choose to go **one bit better per day**. It's an infinite journey to "great", and rather than letting it do your head in, take just one customer-experience-delivery improvement step each sunrise. **Start today**. If you need an idea, replying to every non-spam email with an acknowledgment is good. Thanking your teachers (be they your boss, staff, client, supplier or just randoms on the street you got a brainwave from) is also good.

This reflective surface was cast by a tiny experience with a coffee shop last week - you've known the scenario a thousand times. The ubiquitous story of a supplier that worked hard and invested big to try creating a customer, that empowered one staff member in one moment with one procedure designed to make *their* business more efficient... and in doing so, they just took their eye off the customer experience puck. It was nothing but a single loose thread dangling from an otherwise impressive hem. And it caught on an edge... and unraveled the experience. Such a waste for all.

To end, I see you nodding or shaking your head... *"can't get good service these days... how rude..."*. Rather than shared frustration or whattyagunnado shrugging being your takehome here, I hope it challenges you to remember we (almighty empowered customer experience judges) are all rock possessors living in glass houses. I poke you to be brave enough to take a really close look in the mirror in bright sunlight. Can you see the loose threads dangling from your professional game around delivering great customer experiences?

See it in the sunlight – it's there – and tie it off today.

You said "a great customer experience" was important to you.  
Prove it.

## Happy customers

Seven thoughts on a customer-centric culture...

- There's perhaps a more customer-centric way to speak than "customer-centric". Helpful. All about happy customers. We fix things fast. Easy to deal with. Peace-of-mind. As comforting as a warm bowl of chicken soup. You find the term to suit your customers, but "customer-centric" lives in boardrooms (not always very customer-centric spaces).
- On creating one, it's a bit like the argument of nature vs nurture impacting how your kids will turn out. When it comes to delighting customers, I think there's a mix of how much can be policy-mandated and structurally-supported, and how much comes down to individual choice and common sense. Build for the first, hire for the second. Comply and evolve with the first; clearly expect and reward the second. Both matter.
- That said, the term "culture" implies "organic". Growing, from one act into two, from one enactor into more. So seed acts are vital (who'll do it?), and then continually looking for ways to run the inoculation loop across the agar of your activity petrie dish to get these positive colonies growing right across your business is the role of the customer-obsessed leader.
- If it's not demonstrated to internal customers from the apex of the hierarchy, it'll invariably fall short at the external customer coalface. It's got to be an all-pervasive non-negotiable attitude of "*they're ALL customers*" and one that is role-modeled by the C-suite / best paid in the building if it's to develop as a cultural norm.
- No matter how much time, money and sweat you put into crafting the system and driving initiatives to evolve it, you never get to be the ultimate judges of it. That's for others. So building a hotline to those judges – the recipients and their influencers - and inspiring their constant candor to help you understand and improve evermore had better be part of your plan.
- It is a bar in perpetual motion (North), influenced by so many others in so many spaces, trying, succeeding, failing and innovating. So to know where the standard is at and where it's heading requires your broad scanning, lots of irons in lots of fires and lots of fingers on pulses. It's anti-introspective in the first instance, bravely taking your eyes off of that which you think you control and instead peering out into the big diverse world. Then it's about coming back to your knitting and looking really closely at every playing surface and articulating joint of your business to see where you can most readily apply the learns the world just flashed at you.
- It is magnetic. Which means it's polarising. Some will love your swag. Other's won't like the taste of your brand of coffee one little bit. That's OK. Not everyone will be a customer (tough paradox – treat everyone like a customer, knowing they never will be). Developing ever-greater clarity about who you exist to serve, want to serve, loooove to serve, moment by moment... that can be a religion you devote yourself and your team to if you're looking for tomorrow's handsome payday.

Thoughts only - what you do to act on them is where the upside lives.

## Creators, Aggregators, Pollinators (and Defecators)

If you can create, **create**.

If it's in your make-up, and you have basic tools and imagination and a little talent, then build, draw, invent, craft, sing, write, sculpt and say "tah da!" Risk the laughter, or echoing silence; the embarrassment of imperfect or the frightened wrath of the didn't-get-its. You did something brand spanking new, that might be improved, that might scaffold a future epic.

If you can't create, or fear those pitfalls known to creators, then **aggregate**. Collect, concentrate, collage, sift, piece together, interpret, compound and deliver your value through being a thoughtful network hub. Source the array, blend the beans, extract the oil, wrap it up and place it on the counter.

If aggregation is too hard or counter to your Purpose, then **pollinate**. Share, catalyse, encourage, promote, inspire, work the crowd, spread the fruit and communicate. Be the bee that takes the bloom to others and ensures continued growth. Not all are imaginers, not all are dot joiners, but all can be supportive of the team. All can spruik and appreciate and spark the next round of blossoms.

You know what **defecators** do. Consume and expel. It's pure luck a tiny unpoisoned portion of their waste can be used by the industrious to fertilise more and better. They didn't intend it. Don't be those stinkers.

Creating, aggregating and pollinating are essential functions in any business. Hire them, keep them, deploy them where their efforts will pay for all.

But if you *can* create?

Please create.

## Purpose-pipping competitors

Are your competitors those currently working to snaffle your market or wallet share? Or are they those trying to fulfill your Purpose better than you?

In the competitor analysis segment of a strategy workshop, it's pretty common for groups to adopt the default position of "*our competitors are those grabbing what we rightfully believe to be our cash (or those emerging to)*". While understandable, it's a short and narrow perspective on competition. "*If we can focus on outpacing those whose annoying revenue-diluting efforts are threatening our survival, then we'll be right Jack.*" Maybe.

What if you thought about competition a little differently?

Say your Purpose as a business is "**Innovative Widgets that solve Problem X for Client Group Y**". As you develop your strategy to fulfill this Purpose, you're thinking about your competition as alternate X-issue-fixing widget makers or sellers in that same space also vying for the attentions of your Y-shaped target clients. As you look closely at this ecosystem of predators you've been battling for food, you'll invariably argue how innovative they are being, or how well they're solving the problem, or even minor divergences in your target customer groups. But overall your beat-the-competitor strategy might well focus on those you know and who are somewhat like you.

Now imagine three other businesses.

The first is aiming intensely at "**Innovative Widgets**". They're not necessarily working in your space where the Y clients are, but they *are* innovating some damn clever widgets, and it's becoming apparent that some of those widgets may just have an application in solving Problem X. And if that's the case, there are some folk in Y town that might be interested...

The second business is pedaling furiously to "**Solve Problem X**", though not necessarily *for* Client Group Y and not necessarily *via* Innovative Widgets. They're working on service offerings, or synergistic partnerships, or translocating and combining disparate solutions from other spaces, just to rid the world of the damn plague that is X. And when they stumble across them on Instagram, who do you think is going to want to talk to this business?

The third is laser-focused on "**Client Group Y**". They're don't have to be about innovative widgets (generic commodities that tick a box might be just fine by them). They're not super-focused on Problem X either. They are first and last customer-centric. Their job, as they've defined it, is to get *so close to* and become *so valuable to* Client Group Y (via whatever vehicles) that they become powerful partners and deep influencers of all the client's choices (including where they go for their widgets or how they set about dealing with Problem X).

Through the short-term cash-focused competitor lens, none of these 3 businesses might make it onto your butchers paper labeled "competitors". If all you're focusing on is "*who's raiding our piggy bank today*", you could very easily dismiss them, maybe never even imagine them. And I'll admit, it's not always easy to figure out who they are or could be. But if you elect go to the heart of your Purpose? If you work hard to imagine who is trying to fulfill such a Purpose (or its component parts) BETTER than you, in different ways to you, for different folk or in different spaces to you?



Well, it's *there* you may find who's *really* worth your attention in years ahead. And that can have a massive influence on the strategic priorities you define.

By no means dismiss those grinding for your current market share. They are competitors. You want to beat them.

But don't ignore those, fields apart as they may be, aiming to pip you to your Purpose. Scan for them, look across fences, dig deeper in odd-shaped burrows and imagine wider. There, on the horizon, the glimmer....

Because if someone, tomorrow, fulfills your Purpose better than you?

Then you better get yourself another Purpose.

(Because you just became redundant.)

### 3 business problems. Squash them.

**Problem** – lots of cashflow-focused, striving-for-acute-pain-removal, short-term thinking going on in your business, giving rise to kneejerk or default activities, giving rise to lots of busy, angsty, fruitless circlework in the BandS dustbowl (a place of ripped cummerbunds and no great long term outcomes).

**Solution** – setting, planning and observantly weaving towards a real, meaningful, longer term Vision; understanding and continually communicating a deeper sense of Purpose to the crew, an alignment beacon, an empowering choice filter for all; counterbalancing the do-it-now with bite size, daily, by-function payments on a clear desired tomorrow.

**Problem** – a sales team decreasing in their impact on a number you and your masters want to keep pushing north (but sadly it appears you're approaching the asymptotes of).

**Solution** – shoot your sacred cow thinking about how a sales force should roll (history is history) and roll your sleeves up to understand and deal with the need for blurred lines across tech nous, marketing, door knockers, client co-planning, provocation and the digital world. Get deeper, more serious and more challenging of your thinking about the clients that will determine your fate beyond 2016. Think austerity-level hard about efficiencies (working capital) as much as pumping up revenue tyres (profit is the real hand full of hearts). Partner up for horsepower where you once tried to go solo. Recruit better (training, managing and coaching simply can't replace Jedi recruiting).

**Problem** – a noisier world, a world full of incessant bleating broadcast opinions (err....) and armies of content providers making it impossible for your brand of wise to be heard (let alone understood, let alone cared about, let alone engaged with, let alone by the folk you're aiming for).

**Solution** – decide on a strategy. Wide or deep, intense or airy, with a select few or a gross many. And know why. Look hard at the scales hosting “what those folk might value” and “what I can and want to do exceptionally well” on opposite ends. Reconcile the fact the fulcrum is never in the middle and happy equilibrium is a temporary concept, and then get down, deeper and down in the disciplined work needed to get your voice popping above the surface for some, just occasionally, for their betterment. Be OK with that new reality, and commit to getting great at it (for it matters).

Imperfect solutions. No other kind.

## **Sing the team song.**

There's a reason they get you to sing the national anthem aloud in school each week. So you remember it. So you think about it. So it percolates through your neural plumbing, influencing your feelings and decision making. So you're one of us. Patriotism through repetition and reflection.

When you sing the song after your footy team wins, it's a team demonstrating and remembering it shares a common DNA. The carousing is spirit-arousing, it's cause-galvanizing, it's a celebration and a battery charger all in one, fodder to get you to the next steeple you're chasing.

Saying the words aloud – the important words, the common words, the group words – is powerfully effective.

The most important words in your biz?

Your Purpose.

Your Vision.

Your Values.

Your Strategic Priorities.

Your USP / UVP's / stuff you just do better than anyone else.

And "customer / client".

Don't just let these words lay idle in the ink on your strategic plan, property of the Board, useful only in the Boardroom at Board-prescribed intervals.

Don't trot them out purely at performance reviews or to book-end stump speeches to the gathered.

Get them out, on the breeze, from your tongue, **every chance you get**.

With the crew, with clients, with collaborators, with the face in the mirror.

Sing the team song.

Remember who and where and why you're choosing this path, this team.

You picked this flagpole, this flag, this bunch of co-saluters.

Sing it loud, for them, with them.

## The merits of discomfort (and 7 uncomfortable ideas)

We're neurally wired to move from a place of chaos to a place of calm. When something hurts, we mobilise forces to stop it, repair it, take away the pain. When there's a stone in our shoe, we're inclined to sort it out, quickly, because the discomfort isn't something we enjoy tolerating. When we're hungry, we seek out tucker. To move from imbalance to homeostasis. From aggravation to placation. **Discomfort makes us move.** And when it comes to strategy, movement's a good thing.

Like the frog in the slowly warming pot, our days operating head-down bum-up within our business won't always alert us to the impending dangers, the "disruptive" forces that might be about to shirtfront us. We might smell the faintest traces of smoke, but while we're toiling with focus in an otherwise comfortable pattern, the alarm that signals the shark in the water doesn't always ring until it's too late.

Why not then **deliberately bring some discomfort into your business?** Gift your organisation's future the upside of provocation, of a rib poke to awaken you to the forces marching to Helms Deep?

### For your next planning workshop or strategy conversation...

- Move the point-of-difference conversation beyond thoughts on "our current competitors" and confront the reality that tomorrow, it's *everyone* that can (and wants to) take your customers away (so where and how might we fit in the new landscape of those trying to woo our amours?)
- Have the team study or present on broader forces, trends, innovations or terrain changes than those you think have immediate impact on your business (even those you can't yet see the connection with).
- Stop talking about your Purpose, your Vision, your Values, as soft words in a picture frame on the wall that you're quietly embarrassed to give much air time to. Lead the way on being OK with these being your religion, your tattoos (and ones you're going to talk about and showcase, frequently, because they are the only reason you're doing what you're doing)
- Get into a physical space that is the antithesis of the space you did your last workshop in (same ol' whiteboard perpetuates same ol' thought paradigms). Make it a little uncomfortable. "On edge" is valuable.
- Focus on the things that will get the dump button. New ideas might flow, but working through the wolf pack of comfort actions you'll cull? Uncomfortable.
- Diarise a proportionate amount of time immediately after the "*what we'll do*" session (same day? next day?) to have the team "*get going on doing it*". No waltzing straight back into comfort zones. No retreating. Baking the cake then starting to eat it immediately. Making the Velveteen Rabbit real.
- Bring in an agitator. Someone that will make the crew a bit uneasy, take them to mental places they don't necessarily love (but will help them challenge any sacred bovines in your business, get synapses firing and catalyse movement). Doesn't need to be a consultant – could be a customer, an anti-customer, a competitor, a supplier, an other-department head, the cleaner. Just not someone who'll feed them more of the party line they hear each day.

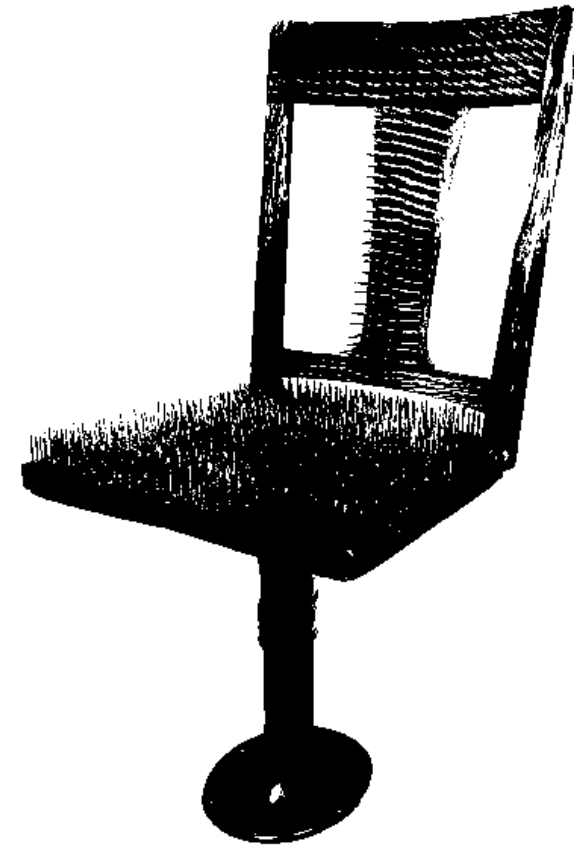
We fight disruption, both as suppliers and consumers, because the pace of change makes us uncomfortable. But it's that very discomfort that makes us move. That's why disruption gets so many votes. Because mobile folk are easier and more likely to get on a new bus than stationary in-the-groove folk.

Want your team disrupting, moving, engaging with new ways, improved models, with better strategy for tomorrow?

**Make them uncomfortable.**

If you don't, the market will.

And the market doesn't love them like you do.



## The Pygmalion effect in business planning

If you've ever had your tyres pumped up by a coach or boss and then gone on to perform better as a result, you've experienced this. [The Pygmalion effect](#), named after a mythical Greek sculptor, is about higher expectations leading to better performance. Telling yourself (or being told) you can do this – run faster, jump higher, sell more, achieve bigger things, shine on the stage – and then using those new expectations / perceptions to drive the heightened level of output. Self-fulfilling prophecies; increasing your self-belief and upping your game accordingly.

Is it real? Studies struggle to prove it, but I think it's a pretty good heuristic to live by. And I think you've probably experienced it yourself when supporters, or naivety, or ego, have bumped your levels of self-belief up, and lo, you rose to the challenge.

This effect has a parasitic twin brother. [The Golem effect](#) is where lowering expectations results in lower levels of performance. The teacher or parent that told you that you'd amount to nothing. The boss that didn't think you could get the deal over the line or the team under control. The negative self talk that you vindicate with cruddy work.

To wrap it in the motivation meme, *"if you think you can, you can, and if you think you can't, you're also right."*

I see a lot of people dancing with the Golem effect in their strategy conversations.

*"We've never been great at penetrating this market sector, so let's not expect too much here."*

*"The competition is really strong in this area - we don't have what it takes to take more than this share from them."*

*"Our clients have never embraced this service, so we won't put too much pressure on better results this year."*

These challenges are no doubt real and there may not be actual or easy ways to overcome them, but I do see a lot of default fatalistic attitudes play out far too early and far too deeply in the strategy conversation. Tiredness, defeatedness, no stomach for the mental and physical work needed to overcome the doubts and fears maybe. A tough place to recover from; a tough mindset to grow from.

Go to the other place a moment. Pygmalion planning conversations.

*"There's an opportunity here, and while no doubt it's above the level we've been operating at, I think we've got what it takes to smash it."*

*"These clients want more from a supplier, and I reckon we can lift to be what they're looking for; we can go that extra mile and deliver on their expectations."*

*"Our people have the talent, discipline and hunger to go 20% better in the next 12-months – we can and will be that leading team."*

Deluded ra-ra Tony Robbins style self-talk with no basis in reality?

Well, I think it certainly will be if you approach it from a Golem perspective.

You'll need to be mindful of your optimism bias – a condition where you've been swallowing too much of your own bathwater and have gone a bit Kanye in the head. And be clear that it - higher performance based on higher expectations - is probably not going to happen without more research, deeper planning and a whole lot of gut-busting effort.

But the idea of asking more of yourself, believing more in yourself and expecting a better outcome? Setting yourself up to be a potential beneficiary of the Pygmalion effect?

Isn't that a breakfast you want the team eating Monday mornings?

You won't ever know if the Pygmalion effect has played out until you see the result and it's actually better than you might have previously expected. Even then, you might explain it away with other reasons.

Frankly, I don't think it matters.

The life, the culture and team environment where you expect more from yourself, where you back yourself in, where leaders encourage and believe in the crew to get the bigger, better, bolder outcomes?

That's a place to be.

That's a life.

When you're putting your strategy together, ask yourself a simple question.

Pygmalion, or Golem?

Which one do you want working for your strategy – your growth map?

## Pressure testing your plan for real

Coming up with cockle-warming words, exciting ideas and bullish commitments in a planning workshop is critical.

It's equally critical to **pressure test** them. Take them to stress positions and see if they're going to hold up.

Consider these **thirty planning facets** and a pressure-testing closed question I think you benefit from sealing each within.

- 1 **Purpose** – imagine a new lucrative opportunity presenting itself... magnetic (but, in the sober light of day, you see it's really not going to help you fulfill your core purpose, your *why*)... will you likely drop, or shelve, some other less lucrative (but more purposeful) act to pursue the shiny gold? (*Yes? Then your Purpose isn't real.*)
- 2 **Vision** - if a chance to occupy an alternative gold-medal position or achieve a gutsy goal turns up... but it's not actually contributing to your Vision... would you take it? (*Yes? Then your Vision ain't real either.*)
- 3 **Values** – when you see a team member – the highest paid one even – behaving in a way that's not consistent with your Values, will you call them on it... show them the door because of it? Will you turn away a sales rockstar candidate you KNOW could make you buckets of cash... if they don't roll on the same Values lines as you? (*No? Un-real.*)
- 4 **Priorities** – are these, your small handful of collective energy focal points, ranking head and shoulders above others when you consider the trifecta scorecard of “*our ability*”, “*their impact*” and “*purposefulness?*”
- 5 **Preferred paths** – if one of yours turns out to be blocked and you're forced to consider the alternate route, does Plan B actually look a bit faster / easier / pointed more directly at your Vision?
- 6 **Appetite for risk** – if the work you've imagined yourself doing takes 3 times longer to deliver a result... or costs 5 times more... or fails on the first 9 tries... will you still want to pursue it for the potential payoff?
- 7 **Strengths** – are they really discernably different from your closest competitor... when viewed from the eyes of your average customer?
- 8 **Weaknesses** – if the magic wand was waved and the weaknesses list was brought up to scratch (at least to the level of a decent competitor)... is there simply NOTHING else standing between you and market domination?
- 9 **Opportunities** – can you begin chasing them, starting today, with the resourcing you have, and be confident they'll deliver you to your Vision peak in a reasonable timeframe?
- 10 **Threats** – if this list is negated, are there zero more external barriers to you smacking this outta the park?
- 11 **Resources** – if we gave your resourcing to a better leader, a smarter team, a harder-working outfit, could they achieve the goals you've set with what's already in your bag (or even with less?)
- 12 **Alignment** – could *everyone* in the organisation take a cursory look at your Purpose, Vision and Values, then explain how their role (and how they carry it out) is positively contributing to their attainment / embodiment?
- 13 **Plans** – could Joe Blow off the street be brought in here right now, read your plan and broadly know how to deliver the results you're targeting?
- 14 **Commitments** – if the whole team catches Mad Cow Disease tomorrow and you have to bring in a temp force, are you still prepared to deliver that which you've promised?



- 15 **Opportunity costs** – do you fully understand the pain, the hunger pangs, you’re going to experience saying no to the “other things” you have to give up in order to be myopic?
- 16 **Will** – do you want it, collectively want it, enough to cancel Christmas to get it?
- 17 **Skill** – with no additional road maps, no extra headcount and no more training, has today’s team got the know-how and wherewithal to implement your key plan elements and hit the targets?
- 18 **Leadership** – are your highest-paid all ready and raring to go *first*, to tread into the unknown before your competitors do it (even if NO competitors follow you) in order to find the new, the better, the more valuable?
- 19 **Agility** – If we said “*scrap Plan A that you’ve all invested so much time and energy in these past months and years*”... will you, today, if that's what the market demands?
- 20 **Innovativeness** – are you, this very moment, actively working to break and boldly reimagine at least half of the “*way we’ve done things around here*” products, services, positions, systems or processes in your organisation?
- 21 **Relevance** – if everything you sell got binned today, would the market go into chaotic uproar, meltdown, because no longer do they have something unique and valuable and deeply preferred available to them?
- 22 **Ownership** – are the team looking and behaving like their jobs are on the line (and their superannuation balances) if they don’t take the wheel and drive that which has their initials next to it on the plan?
- 23 **Research** – would 100 monkeys at 100 keyboards (OK, 3 great analysts on their laptops) spending 3 days deep-diving into opportunities and consumer drivers and pathway options potentially deliver to you a different set of conclusions to those you’ve already reached?
- 24 **Competition** – have you designed this strategy beyond just your current cohort of competitors, and actually considered *anyone* trying to take attention, eyeballs, time, wallet share and love away from your target market of tomorrow?
- 25 **Org structure** – forget history, convenience, office layout... if this organisation was being built anew to fulfill your Purpose, starting TODAY, would you change the org chart?
- 26 **Succession** – if the five most important people in the business were pushed under a bus today, are you ready to proceed, albeit with trainer wheels on, to continue your progress up Vision Mountain?
- 27 **Clarity** – could you go around the table and get every one of the key people to describe who you are as a business, why you exist, where you’re going and the priority paths you’re travelling to get there... and get a consistent, coherent set of answers?
- 28 **Unity** – does anyone in the room make you nervous... give you the sense that you just can’t trust what they’re going to communicate to the greater team, or to the market?
- 29 **Activity** – can everyone in the room walk out with the 1-pager right now and know precisely what they and their team need to get cracking on this very day to progress us along the chosen roads?
- 30 **Next steps** – has every strategic priority been drilled down to a single next step – an act, at a time, with an owner, that will be the first step in a journey of miles?

The nice words in the plan are nice. Vital.  
The pressure test makes sure they’re **real**.

(PS Want to know what **real** means? Margery Williams summed it up better than anyone in her children's classic *The Velveteen Rabbit*. For the sentimentalists, and for those *really* wanting to know about authenticity, here's the passage...)

*"The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.*

*"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"*

*"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."*

*"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.*

*"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."*

*"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"*

*"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."*

*"I suppose you are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.*

*"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."*

Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, 1922.

## The practice of practice

They're called Medical *practices*. Dental *practices*. Legal *practices*. Accounting *practices*.  
Not perfects. Not guaranteed. Not one-off unique artistries. Practices.

In crafting strategy and plans with clients, we hit moments where it's necessary, diligent, to rehearse. To simulate, role-play, drill, litmus test, whatever you elect to call it. **To practice**. To run through precisely how the clever theory might look, sound or play out once it comes off the paper and into 3D.

It's daunting, practicing before others (especially wise, connected-to-your-purpose others). In role play city, you have to take off the mask of the postulator, remove the clever concept crown, nude up and stride starkers before the in crowd to demonstrate that it – the idea – can indeed work in practice. First cuts are invariably bumpy (least they should be if you're really testing your mettle and the boundaries). The most confident of souls can be reduced to umm'ers and err'ers. It's always got a tense, uncomfortable feel about it.

It's still worth doing.

Why?

- **Bruised egos heal faster than fluffed unrehearsed vital conversations.** Be it a simulated sales call or a partnership approach or a performance management discussion, if it's vital to the attainment of your goals, then isn't it better to get it train-wreck wrong in the safe (but scary) pit of the internal conversation with supportive peers (rather than out there, in the street, on the big stage, with the lions, where it's do or die)?
- **Practice offline can be bettered.** Draft 1 morphs into draft 2. Draft 2 can be polished to draft 3. Draft 3 might nearly be there (just needs an extra dose of this or a slicing out of that). But rolling out the first attempt in the cauldron of the real? Nowhere to go if it's not bang-on.
- **Automaticity.** Developing ease and familiarity and confidence in dealing with scenarios, be they good, bad, left, right, highly likely or that's-really-random. Practice simulates all kinds of twists and turns that (were you exposed to them for the first time in the big game you'd fall over with wide eyes) instead give you a sense of calm that radiates *"I've done this. I've got this."*
- **Practice shows up and out.** Even in the understated performances. It most visibly shows up in its absence. And absent practice looks ugly.
- **It's what professionals do.**

Practice starts with the goal, then the reality check of how far you are from it and what you're going to do to have to get to it. It takes in the mapping and imagining and what-iffing and right-turning. Then it needs a little scripting (not over baked, but a framework, a structure to begin from). Then it needs (ahem) **doing**. Trying. Aloud. Standing up. Physical motion and interaction (even if it's with a mirror, in your car, 3 minutes before the meeting). Mentally putting yourself into an imagined scene, with bit players and props and your best guessing of what's happening in the atmosphere around. And **doing**. Then phewing. Then reviewing. Then re-doing. Then keep doing.

I know you don't like it. Few do.  
Do you want what it can help you achieve?  
The long term up over the short term urghh?

**Are you a professional?**

Then?

Again.

*practice*  
makes *better*

## The fight, the feed and the feeling

Have you seen “*River Monsters*”, the TV show featuring Jeremy Wade? A bloke trekking the world to unwrap mysteries surrounding people going missing on waterways, and the role “monster fish” have in these bedtime horror stories. He’s got a great flair for the dramatic, and if you love fishing, he catches some remarkable primordial-looking beasts, from catfish as big as men to tiger fish with teeth like ice picks.

Anyway, watching it the other night, Wade made this comment;

***“There’s an old fishing saying...  
you don’t catch anything unless you have a line in the water”.***

In other words, you’ve got to be in it to win it. Spectators can’t take home chocolates. Gretzky’s quote about missing all shots not taken. Then he said words to the effect of;

***But I’d rather spend an hour or two finding the right spot before dropping a line in. You can fish in the wrong spot for 8 hours and catch nothing. Or you can spend 2 hours motoring around to find the right spot and catch what you came out for in under an hour.***

In other words, the time invested in good preparation is more than made up for in efficiency and effectiveness gains when implementing your plan.

Both tremendous reminders relevant to every professional in every walk, agreed?  
But there’s a third thing here Wade didn’t touch on.

### **Not everyone fishes to catch fish.**

Not everyone *wants* the river monster. Not everyone is out there to hook the prize.

The sales people and business drivers in the room laugh at this idea. “*Why on earth go onto the river in the first place with fishing kit if you’re not intent on getting the outcome?*”

Well, it’s not that people don’t want *an* outcome. It’s just that fish aren’t the *only* outcome.

Why do *I* fish? Peace. Tranquility. Bonding. Conversation. Losing yourself in a process. An excuse to think. De-stress. Sometimes a fish on the end of the line interrupts the real reason for being there. (*Which is serendipitous, because I stink at the catching bit.*)

Fair enough, there aren’t many that would bother putting the line in the water without hoping for at least a few tugs on the trace. But the hook-up or haul-in is not the prime motive of every angler.

Some want the **fight**. The frenetic action, the whiz and whir of reels, the sensation of battle and being alive and a chance to win.

Some want the **feed**. The outcomes, by whatever process necessary, to give them nutrients or satiety or to provide for others.

But some?

Some just want the **feeling**. The moments, the mateship, the mental calm or monotony and whatever it does for their souls.

I share these soft-eyed spooling sentiments on a Friday afternoon in this, my 99th LinkedIn Post, for a simple reason.

If you, organisational leader, are in the process of setting, recalibrating or re-burleying your strategy, and you're not perfectly clear on your sloop's **why** – your Purpose, your reason for getting out there in the elements and casting away - then I submit that you are a better-than-even chance to pick the wrong long-term paths. You might chart a course that looks lovely to onlookers, but history says you will start feeling the cold faster, wanting to give in quicker, adopt an approach that's ultimately unsatisfying, and attract the wrong kinda crew to join you in the boat. A boat that's ultimately heading away from the spots you actually want to spend time in.

That *why*? That motivation and thing that drives your being on the water? That underpins all the big choices? It's just not something you can borrow from others just because you admire their success. It's in the mirror, in the DNA, in your make-up. Learning to accept that *your* why and the why of others might be (fishing) poles apart? That's the real challenge.

Challenge - accept it.

It's your game to play.

Your why to fulfill.

Your decisions to make and live with.

Your strategy to underpin it.

**Tight lines.** May you be brave enough to fish with your Purpose in mind.

## Leaders believe in a construct

Strategy is **the practice of picking a cause for your desired effect**. Correlating what you decide you want with what your research and best guesses have you think will make it a reality.

Right off the bat, two big things can go wrong.

You don't *have* a clear or honest desired effect. (Fuzzy goal, lack of direction.)

Or you don't have clarity about or faith in what will *cause it*. (No plan, poor plan.)

Because there are no absolutes in this lottery of business success (vote rigging, card counting and dice loading, sure, but never guarantees), a lot of strategic decision making... well, ALL of it... has to be done with a measure of faith.

Of a belief in something, even if it isn't ever provably real.

In strategic planning, most of us aren't in the business of engineering sky scrapers – a precision materials and physics-underpinned process to deliver a structure that can withstand anticipated forces. Though even if we *were*, we'd still be dealing with Rumsfeld's unknowable unknowns, and we're still never guaranteed a building that won't ever fall over.

The most precise of all professional endeavours are as plagued by assumptions, allowances for error and a need for redundancy weaved into the roadmap as the more generalist process of determining an organisation's way forward. The surgeons get it wrong, the accountants get it wrong, the astronauts get it wrong, Einstein's theories have holes in them, and the world shows us daily that it's never all 1's and 0's. So it's clearly unreasonable to expect *your* strategic plan for your perfectly-imperfect organisation in an infinitely unfathomable market to inspire spine-steeling confidence based on facts and formulae alone. Because, given enough time and tribulations, a great many of those facts *will* falter. A great many will, at some point, be proven fallible. Proving fallibility, incorrections, is where so many folk spend their days. That's easy peasy. But the facts? To prove *the facts* are irrevocably correct? That's lifetime(s) work (if it's even possible). So confidence can't just come from the facts. Because the facts... so often aren't.

**Belief**, then, in something that (because it's effectively unprovable) may not be real, has to have a place in strategic planning. Not religious belief (that's a personal call). Not uninformed belief (that's just dangerous). But belief in a construct that will support your persistent energies and maintained focus, all the while having the potential to one day be exposed as an Emperor's Cloak. Some examples of the kind of constructs you can put your belief in;

- **A Purpose** – a meaningful, clearly articulated rationale for keeping your entity running in the face of challenges. An upside-for-others legacy impact that you really believe in trying to effect. The deepest why-we-work bedrock.
- **A Vision** – a neon mountain-top magnetic aspiration worthy of your working together. A self-defined thing you decide is worth fighting for.
- **A set of Values** – operating principles, modes of behavior, ways to be.

- **Your people** – backing the progressors of your ponycart to carry the burden and do the right work; keeping your eyes trained on the beneficiaries of what you do because you believe in what *they're* trying to do or be.
- **Your selected vehicle** – the delivery mechanism, the UVP, the way you've strung the org chart together.
- **Yourself** – your ability to weather, to reimagine, to lead and deliver on what others won't. Believing in your ego.
- **Patterns** – predicting the likely future based on the curves and trendlines and the opportunities appearing in the hollows
- **Processes** – structures and maps and operating systems that fit, that have been tested and can be followed or driven

Any or all of these might be imperfect, unprovable, maybe even (ultimately) wrong.

But **you've got to go anyway, don't you?** You've got to move.

You can't have certainty – it's not there. To move without it?

It takes belief in *something*.

The question is then - what do you believe in *enough* to let it inspire you, support you, fill your days with joy (even though it might not be real)?

What belief will underpin your strategic decision making, mapping and movement in 2017?

Strategic leadership needs belief.

Get over “perfect” and “knowable”.

Run with “**smart belief**”.



## What becomes of phrenologists?

Where do they go?

The days-gone-by boffins that felt the bumps on your bonce to tell you your character and mental capacity?

How about the flat planet mappers?

The witch burners? The exorcists?

The guy that predicted a global market for maybe a dozen computers?

What happened to those folk that swallowed or fed us some bathwater of the day as unchangeable, inarguable doctrine?

Deep believers in a belief, at a time, whose time passes?

Where do they go?

Maybe there are modern day equivalents. Maybe some fear a needle-autism correlation or that carbs are the devil's work. Maybe some get newspaper columns to point at a cool day or seasonal rains as categorical disproof of what's happening with the weather longer term. Maybe some sit on Cricket Boards. Maybe they're the obvious, easily-ridiculed ones.

But maybe they can be more insidious than that.

Maybe they can sit at boardroom tables and demand holding the line on a classical deep groove how-we-roll-here strategy in a market teetering on a vertex of redundancy if change winds aren't appreciated. (*"It was good enough for my mentor..."*)

Perhaps they can live in your marketing department, mandating that only tightly controlled and committee vetted comms hit the ether, and that social platforms should be treated like a hole-in-the-glass bank teller window.

Maybe they can be the manager that focuses on an old-school activity number as an uncorrelatable proxy for a valuable outcome, or demand of you an outcome that you're dispossessed of the ability to meaningfully impact in the timeframe you're measured within.

Maybe they can even be in the chair next to you, telling you that *"in this business, we have to..."* and *"our clients insist that..."* and *"the way we do things here is..."*.

I love science because science starts with an observation, then an idea, then experimentation, then rigorous repeated reproductions for reliability. Never (fool)proof – that's what phrenologists believe in. But reliability. That's preceded by the more imaginative spur. The inkling of an idea that a particular belief of a particular time might too pass if you can expose, imagine a more reliable alternate future.

Experimentation – that loose, slightly disheveled-looking Siamese Twin of method and controls – is the starting point that gets us off flat planets and onto round globes. Moves us from head lumps to cutting-edge clinical diagnostics. Takes us forward.

Any fool can drink the bathwater of the day. A great many can reproduce by rote the accepted rhetoric. And the pack can always placate its fears by following the conga line along well-worn paths.

But if you are beginning to fear that your business or boardroom table is in danger of becoming a bazaar of banal thinking, deciding and planning behaviours? If you're worried there's a touch of phrenology creeping into your house; a comfortable acceptance of the shag-pile carpet culture, that's beginning to bridge to a resistance to new ideas or brighter (if prickly) thinking. If it's scaring you that maybe one morning, when you open the door to get some air, the market and world will have moved while you guys were knitting?

Then, Galileo, you stand before the choice.

Accept your lot and swallow the ageing master stock. It's not necessarily bad...today.

Or you could walk away.

Or maybe you risk being pigeonholed a heretic. Maybe you decide to take the staid group-think by the mutton chops and shake it like a maraca. Challenge the paradigms. Introduce the pink ball idea to the men in pin stripes. Present an alternative, contribute a fresh piece, imagine the opposite and describe what riding on the other side of the berm just might do for you, just where it could take you.

Don't replicate yet. Don't follow again. Imagine, test something new first.

We used to believe head bumps and Dr Schmoo with his oil of snake were a gospel answer.

We're glad someone had the courage to challenge them.

What can you challenge and experiment with in 2017+?

## Healthy work rituals

You've heard the apocryphal quote from Management Consultant Peter Drucker, "**Culture eats Strategy for breakfast**". In other words, a strong culture will outperform a decent strategy any weekday. Good team with good vibe > good plan.

The difficulty within this idea, one that bamboozles many a bright leader and driver of business growth, is that culture by its very definition is organic, whereas strategy is determined by a series of binary choices. So the first just kind of "happens" – it grows, evolves, bubbles out of the soup stock, manifests from magical mixings on the crowded petrie dish of organisational influences (people, place, zeitgeist, star alignment etc). The other one though – strategy - can be selected and set by the humans at the helm. Strategy is seemingly easier to define, easier to measure, and in our strategic planning processes, we dip our lids to culture by trying to ensure any strategy is cognisant of, aligned with and supportive of the more productive (or aspirational) aspects of whatever we think our culture is.

*"Culture selection"* though?

Tricky business.

There is no shortage of management consultants or shelves of post-hoc literature to help you try to improve your culture, or help you build a culture of success, or a culture of high achievement, or customer excellence, or better donuts. With the right pulls on the right levers, some extrinsic, inorganic forces can certainly influence a culture for the better. History continually points out that these pokes from outside are rarely a sustainable match for that which either evolves from, or (for fuzzily understood or unpredicted internal reasons) rapidly catches fire within the core of the organisation. So we can meddle with culture from the periphery. But when a cultural force originates or is guided from inside, there's good evidence to suggest it stands a better chance of sticking (and thus perhaps succeeding).

"People" is the logical starting point for cultural change. You see the word "culture" frequently appearing next to "people" in our 21st Century rebranding of the HR function. "People and Culture Manager" is a valuable org chart box in most medium to large entities today. Responsibility descriptions vary, however a basic checklist includes things like recruiting stars, exiting the non-critical, performance management, dispute resolution, internal PR stuff, processes and compliance stuff aplenty, reward and recognition programs, professional development and making sure the training, trade display and celebratory events tick the right boxes. Essential, impactful functions that, when done well, play gutsy roles in the organisation's culture. These vital position descriptions should also be invited, active participants in the broader strategy conversation (not the least of which because, without the "people" piece we entrust these professionals with, we kind of have no-one to put said strategy into play).

But culture doesn't end with the fundamental people wrangling activities. It's even more complicated than hiring, firing, training, deploying, managing and rewarding well. It's got a heap to do with leadership (another article in itself). It can be massively affected by legacy pieces; cultural artifacts left behind by folk gone long ago. It's subject to the sum total of human moods within (and touching) the organisation (that might be affected by stuff well outside the organisational domain). And, despite the best internal scaffolding, when it's not rock-solid-sure of itself, culture can nosedive overnight and bottom out for the longest of times

(rendering its old mate Strategy somewhat toothless). It's a tricky beast, culture. It's why it gets talked about from 35,000 feet as one of those "we'll fix it, yes we can!" non-core-promise things (before the conversation rapidly returns to strategic decision making). And that's perfectly OK (for if strategy IS to be culture's breakfast of champions, it too needs to be well selected, really healthy and easily digested). But stump speech placatory statements and generic corner office platitudes do not a strong culture make.

Let's assume a couple of *ifs* a moment.

**IF** you aren't in a position (or don't want) to change your leader or leadership approach right now...

**IF** you've got bods in your business that, for whatever reason, aren't going anywhere soon...

**IF** you've landed on a strategy that you're largely confident can deliver the results you're after (Purpose fulfillment, Vision realisation, Values embodiment, Goal attainment)...

and

**IF** you're concerned that there's something marginally amiss in your culture... something not quite as supportive or empowering or energising as the kind of culture you think you'd benefit from to get you up the hill...

### **What can you do?**

Well, before trotting in a hired gun, you can start by thinking about your **rituals**.

(err, yer wot?)

**Rituals are repeated, ordered activities linked to a belief system.** They are things we do periodically, conducted in a relatively consistent manner, that "we" (that's us-internal-we, inside the business) believe in the importance of.

Rituals can belong to an individual or a community. While rituals originate in and are commonly associated with religion (think taking Communion or facing Mecca), they are also a part of our everyday lives in professional, social and educational settings.

You recognise them quickly in athletes.

The team song after a victory.

The player that wears "lucky jocks".

The 2 practice swings on the tee box.

The shaking your legs and arms before starting a run.

The kissing of the helmet when you make a century or touching the national flag as you head out to bat.

Holding a hand over your heart during the anthem.

Performing the Haka.

Kissing your neckchain and pointing to the sky if you're a Jamaican sprinter.

Chanting mantras in your head.

These are rituals – repeated practices – performed for reasons that can be anything from practical (like getting your eye in before striking the ball) to a little superstitious (pulling your socks up before kicking at goal).

Rituals can be ceremonies, social conventions, disciplines, gatherings or systematic processes. They can be designed to inspire, align, remind or even suppress. They can empower and lubricate progress, they can band brothers and sisters, they can be grist for “grit”, they can be an integral part of your differentiated value proposition, or they can even anchor a group to the dark ages.

What about **rituals in the workplace?**

Take a close look and you see they are everywhere.

Standard monthly meeting agendas.

Monday morning team huddles.

Your routine setup process when you hang your coat, grab your coffee and turn your computer on each morning.

Friday afternoon drinks.

The welcome speech given to new apprentices.

The pattern of a conversation you repeatedly enter into with a certain colleague.

The way you greet customers at the counter.

Quarterly strategic planning meetings.

How the comms grapevine works when a big deal lands.

Pre-call planning and psyching yourself up in the car.

Reflecting as a team on the Purpose / Vision / Values / Mission statement.

Rolling out a new internal corporate theme each year (“*2017 – it’s GO TIME!*”)

How you celebrate staff birthdays, anniversaries, onboardings, departures.

Pattern stuff.

Things you don’t always think about too deeply...

... you just do it because (here come the words...)

**“It’s the way we do things around here.”**

Ahh... a sentence that fills change managers and the disruptively-minded with horror. A old-school anchor to the past. A cop out. A resistance default.

Yes, it certainly can be. Rituals can be outdated. Lazy comfort zones. Unproductive. Even counter to your Purpose, your Vision, even your Values.

But that sentence, that way-we-do-things mindset, doesn’t have to be negative.

Rituals – things you do and have done repeatedly because you believe in them for a reason - can also be powerful behavioural and bravery enablers. Reinforcers of all that's proven or imagined good, that's deeply held within your business or your own psyche. They can embolden, catalyse, liberate, even alleviate stress or disappointment. They can educate, they can connect and bond and they can nurture the esprit des corp. Way-we-do-things-here shouldn't be blind, but it's not always negative.

Rituals, for better or worse, have a big impact on your organisation's culture. And because it's an internally driven impact (you conduct the rituals, not outsiders), it's something you can potentially alter immediately and, well, maybe for free.

But you need to know what you're looking for.

Start with a few ways you can break rituals down – here are some;

- Personal rituals vs Group rituals
- Public rituals vs Private rituals
- Ceremonial rituals vs Practical rituals
- Traditional rituals vs Evolving rituals
- Customer-focused rituals vs Staff-focused rituals
- Bottom-up rituals vs Top-down rituals
- Experience rituals vs Endeavour rituals
- “Word” rituals vs “Deed” rituals (*ie talkfests versus hands-on activities*)
- Past-connecting rituals vs Future-imagining rituals
- Granular work rituals vs Higher order aspiration rituals
- Organic rituals vs Engineered rituals

A good starting point to figure out what *your* current rituals might be would be to ask yourself;

**“What do I seem to do in my role, over and over, habitually, because it's “*the way we / I do things around here*”?”**

That can be from the moment you wake up, to the moment you're in the car, to meeting clients, to moving around your office, to patterns within group meetings / collaborations. What's “ritualised” in your behavior?

(*Pause a moment to clarify the distinction between “rituals” and “operating processes”.* There's plenty of overlap (lots of your rituals might involve implementing certain processes), but I think a good rule of thumb is, in the quest to deliver on your commitments, “*rituals are things we choose to do*” while “*operating processes are rules we have to follow*”. If *processes* are the fuel that powers your operational engine, then *rituals* are the fuel additives, the extra Oxygen intakes, the pumping of the gas pedal or pulling out the choke before whacking it into drive. You *might* survive without rituals. The car might even go forward. You just happen to believe it goes a whole lot better with them.)

Rituals in the workplace, of groups and of individuals, are an essential character trait of any successful entity. The key questions are;

- Given what you're trying to achieve and what you believe in, are these the right rituals?
- Are they (still) effective?
- Are they likely to be in the future?
- Can they be improved (or replaced, or buttressed, by an even better ritual)?
- Vitally, are you still intensely committed to your belief that underpins the ritual (do you know why you believe this, and should you test it?)

I think it helps to think about 4 dimensions of a ritual - **moments, activities, places** and **people**.

Examples of workplace ritual **moments**...

- Ever Friday at 5pm...
- The first thing Monday morning...
- Quarterly...
- Yearly...
- Before every sales call...
- Each time this particular event happens (new hire, anniversary, big sale made...)

Examples of workplace ritual **activities**...

- team drinks, tender loss debriefs, seasonal sales campaigns...
- morning huddles, all-in briefings, planning updates, pump-up events...
- innovation round tables, strategy review sessions, CEO stump speeches, internal newsletter columns...
- educational retreats, annual theme launches, budget hand-downs, scheduled performance reviews...
- CRM analysis, pre-call planning, client handshakes and air kisses, offering a rapport-building comment in a new client meeting (*"how about that Federer?"*)...

Examples of workplace ritual **places**...

- In the meeting room
- On the whiteboard
- At the water cooler
- At your desk
- In the car parked outside the client premises
- Down the road at the local
- Knee to knee in the chief's office

### Examples of workplace ritual **people**...

- The entire team
- The boss and me
- The client and me
- My section of the team
- Me and some industry collaborators
- The suppliers and me
- Just me

In a dynamic business world where disruptive change is talked about daily, rituals are useful to anchor us to something with deeper footings, something consistent, something bigger than us, when everything starts feeling a bit unfixed, random, confusing.

**For business leaders and serious professionals**, as you take steps into the whirling sandstorms buffeting your 2017 marketplace, consider the merits of reviewing, even auditing, your rituals (both personal and team).

- Are they still right?
- Are they aligned with your vision for today and tomorrow (affixed to something you believed in yesterday?)
- Are others as engaged as you in carrying them out right, for best effect?
- Have you acid-tested them against alternatives in the light of this new year?
- Can you see yourself doing them justice this year and beyond?

Rituals can be an invaluable strategic, even purpose-propelling ally, or they can be redundant millstones blocking your best efforts.

**Why not take some time to think about and audit your rituals before the year gets any older?**





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