

# Reflections

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Gerald Gay

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# Bringing “Mission” to Life: Corporate Inspiration from Indian Communities

By Karen Ayas and Philip Mirvis



Karen Ayas

What would you do to build a deep sense of purpose within your organization, enhance performance, and make a difference in the larger world? What kinds of developmental experiences would you design to accomplish all this if you had sufficient resources? In this issue's feature article we see how one company, Unilever Bestfoods, Asia, tackled those questions with the help of a team led by coauthors Karen Ayas and Philip Mirvis. Recognizing

the connection between shared personal experience and deep organizational change, they sought to build a community of leaders through a profound learning journey in India. While the specifics of this effort are beyond the reach of most organizations, Unilever's continuing experiment has changed the lives of its participants, and yielded important principles for building a purposeful and committed organization. — *Paul M. Cohen, Senior*



Philip Mirvis

**T**he idea that vision, mission, and values can guide a business and provide meaning for its members and customers is well established.<sup>1</sup> Business practitioners and theoreticians alike agree that clarifying and committing to one's own aspirations creates a strong personal sense of purpose, which in turn energizes organizations and makes them more effective in the long run. Yet, in so many cases, companies' statements of this sort merely hang on the walls of corporate offices or appear on coffee mugs and plaques. They carry no real meaning for employees, who generally don't – either individually or collectively – embody the mission or any shared aspiration to live it. As a result, “official” statements of purpose and belief are often seen as empty rhetoric.

To build a sustainable, profitable food and beverage business in Asia, Unilever Bestfoods (UBF) sought a new way to create a genuine mission and infuse it with personal values. UBF began by closely connecting the senior leaders of 17 independently operating national companies in the Asia Pacific region, and including in the strategy and operations of the regional business the next layers of country marketers, supply chain managers, and staff. Behind this was a desire to build the capacity of this entire leadership body to think and feel together, that is, to operate as a community of leaders.

As Tex Gunning, the president of Unilever Bestfoods Asia (UBFA) put it, “Community is important. It stands for a safe environment in which to share. If we as leaders start to live in denial about our fears, doubts, and anxieties, and the differences of opinions amongst ourselves, we will never get convergence; we will never get the sense of a powerful team pushing in the right direction.” That would require more than individual input, challenge, and creativity; the aim must be to cultivate and draw from collective intelligence and will.

Next, this community of leaders embarked on a series of annual journeys to different locales in the region to inform themselves about their markets, gain deeper, hands-on

understanding of local customs and consumer preferences, and inquire into their own functioning as a leadership body. Gunning, as well as other Unilever leaders, led memorable retreats into the forests, jungles, mountains, and deserts as a means to launch, calibrate, and refresh change efforts. Drawing on the practices of whole-system intervention, community building, small-group process, and individual development, these “learning journeys” were aimed to open eyes and minds, and stimulate heads and hearts.

Picture, in this instance, nearly 250 company leaders, from top corporate officers to local brand managers, spending two to three days in ashrams, spiritual centers, microenterprises,

Journey Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual and organizational development</li> <li>• Action learning principles</li> <li>• Led by senior executives</li> <li>• Individual, team, and collective work</li> <li>• Corporate citizenship through community service</li> <li>• Holistic experiences that engage mind, heart, body, and soul</li> <li>• Documented as a learning history</li> </ul>

and charities in India. They tend to the needy, offer what help they can, and wonder how swamis, selfless caregivers, and community entrepreneurs are able to accomplish so much with so few resources. In a desert campsite, for three days thereafter, they reflect on the meaning of their experiences, talk over its relevance for them, and rediscover what a true mission is – and to what a great business should aspire.

Though the experience deepened their understanding of communities they served, there was more to this experience than market research or community service. Gunning expected that as the leaders learned about the people and circumstances of the communities they visited, they would also ponder the meaning and implications

for their own leadership and business practices.

The mind-opening and heart-rending experience of being with people who dedicate their lives to service sparked the desire of Unilever’s leaders to build a business that would serve a “higher purpose” – promoting the well-being of everyday Asians and reaching out to the poorest of the poor. As we shall see, this community immersion experience helped to awaken latent aspirations and values, and gave to UBF a new and distinctive mission, and to so many, a personally relevant sense of corporate purpose.

Though these methods may be beyond the scope of some organizations, we believe that the components of the company’s learning journey (dubbed its “Journey to Greatness”), can be instructive for every organization that wants to build new leadership capacity and a better world.

This article describes in brief the learning journey of UBF Asia leaders, looks into the lessons learned from the communities visited, and considers the implications of this experience for developing a community of leaders. UBF Asia’s Journey to Greatness had started with a gathering of leaders in Guilin, China in 2003. This second leg, in India in 2004, provided new meaning and direction for efforts to transform the business.

## Experiencing Communities in India

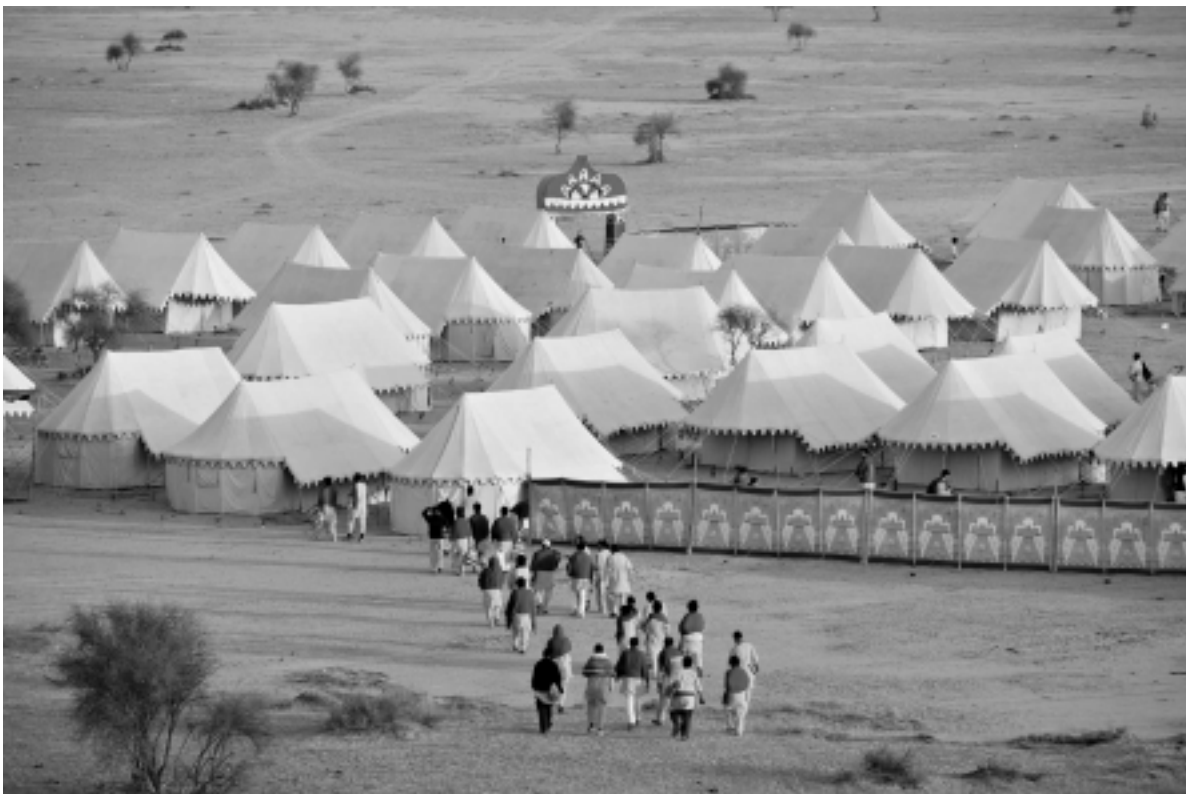
Leaders from 15 countries in the Asia Pacific region assembled in India, divided into 27 groups, and then traveled by train, bus, or car to local communities. Destination sites included Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity, the Dalai Lama’s monastery, the Sikh Golden Temple, the Brahma Kumaris Headquarters in Mt. Abu, and the Baha’i Lotus Temple, as well as cloth-spinning communes, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), and ashrams.

The travelers participated in a series of individual, team, and collective activities with ample time for solo reflection and collective dialogue, which took place amid the wonders of nature or in locales of historical, cultural, or spiritual significance. The experiences were planned to stimulate rational and emotional responses and many involved physical activity. The practice of yoga, tai-chi, and/or meditation provided complementary “soul work.”

The visits had elements of service learning – engaging people in need, helping to serve them, and learning from the outreach effort. This learning took the forms of recording observations, feelings, and insights about community practices and needs, and then talking with colleagues in informal and structured group settings during several days thereafter.

The leaders were asked to assume the role of anthropologist for the visit. They were to use their five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch – to understand what was going on in the communities and to rely on their sixth sense – intuition – to connect to the universal rhythms of human and community life. The leaders were urged to pay attention to preconceived cultural or intellectual assumptions; to be sensitive to their feelings and judgments; and to open up to what they might experience during the visit.

Many were surprised at what they saw, finding some aspects dispiriting and others delightful. Said one, “Looking at the Sikh community, I cannot overstate the power of common values. People can simply work together in perfect harmony without a formal organization.” Said another, who visited the Mother Teresa center, “The sisters and volunteers really inspired me with their humility, selflessness, courage, and mostly their faith. The energy they have to serve the poor, the disabled, [and] the ‘left-over’ really touched me and honestly I cried during the visit.” Most connected deeply with people they met who were contributing what they could to humanity. One participant offered:



**The  
UBF Asia  
campsite  
in Jaisalmer.**

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You go into their place and it is full of really sick and dying people, but the atmosphere is not that of misery but of joy and love. [My coworker] and I were told to massage some people who were just flesh and bones. And this volunteer who had been there for 14 years, a guy called Andy, came to us and said, 'Look, this is how you've got to do it. It improves their blood circulation and bedsores. But most importantly, it's the human touch, that they've missed for years, that you give them.' So there's so much love and affection in that place. And you just get sucked in, and start doing things that you thought were impossible for you to do.

Certainly the leaders deepened their understanding and appreciation of what it takes to live in community: "We had the experience of visiting Mother Teresa's missionary sisters in Kolkata. They didn't have a vision, I felt. They had a mission. And their mission was something that they, each and every nun, could achieve on that day, which is really to give love, to really give love to the most unwanted, the most downtrodden individual whom they just take off the streets."

***I struggled with the rest of my group to see the link between those communities and our business-driven environment.***

Understanding and appreciation, in turn, provoked broader considerations: "A new challenge arose for me. How could I be worried about my job and 'how much tea we sold last week' when thinking of all those that are

giving their lives to care for people for whom life seems to have been so unfair. This was a gap I could not bridge and I struggled with the rest of my group to see the link between those communities and our business-driven environment."

The 200 leaders concluded that, to bridge this gap, they would have to revise their mission and corporate purpose.

## **Rediscovering the UBFA Mission**

The result of the business leaders' collective inquiry was a shared aspiration to make their work more meaningful and more relevant to the communities they serve in Asia. Said one, "I started getting the feeling that my work need not be confined to producing and selling as efficiently as possible but has a higher purpose of community service to the people of Asia. Maybe I can call it [a shift] from a mercenary to a missionary view [of our business]." Said another, "In the context of the larger things in the world, I feel I can do a more fulfilling job – something bold that I will be proud of, something that has the humanity that I have valued."

Ongoing dialogue brought participants closer to the conclusion that organizations have to be driven by their missions rather than by numbers and processes. "We should be able to serve the larger community by being relevant for them – not by just being providers of products," said one. "How else can organizations like Brahma Kumaris and the Missionaries of Charity be managed without systems, procedures, and controls, and yet handle millions of dollars effectively?"

The leaders also talked about what kind of organization they would need to fulfill this aspiration: one in which people would be willing, in effect, to "volunteer" their time and talents. One person asked, "What can I contribute to society, and have I fulfilled my duty to



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**A joyful start to the day in the desert of Rajasthan.**

humankind?” She then answered her own query: “We could all work toward leaving a legacy that transcends the borders and barriers of culture, religion, or race.”

An imperative emerged: the leaders needed to put flesh onto these caring aspirations and translate them into a mission and a way of life that would emphasize the healthful, nourishing aspects of food. Consider one of their statements:

We want to be responsible partners, with the people of Asia, to provide health, vitality, and the development of children and families through better food and beverage. We can do this by earning the trust of people everywhere [through] having authentic standards for what is right food. We can do this by being at the leading edge of nutrition science and technology. We need to be actively involved in communities [and] to understand all their needs, especially the needs of the economically underprivileged and children. We need to do so with humility, truth, and authenticity. That means we have to do what we say.

Another added, “With tremendous power and privilege comes responsibility. Our new mission, whatever the semantics of it may finally be, will allow our work to have more impact. Our lives will take a route closer to the missions of those we have visited here in India.”

## **Building a Leadership Community**

Community building among the top leaders of UBF Asia had started during the 2003 gathering in Guilin, China. They shared stories of the influence of “mom and dad” and talked deeply with one another about their personal and business lives. This fellowship seemed to carry over to the gathering in India:

UBF Asia  
leaders in  
dialogue.



Gerald Gay

I feel very close to the UBFA group. There was some weird sense of bonding that developed even though I didn't know more than half of the people. I really can't explain it well but it was a sense of oneness or being together. It is strange because I felt this even when we weren't talking. It was a nice feeling. For the first time I experienced it outside my family. Maybe this is what we call community feeling.

For the majority of leaders the biggest change since Guilin was moving clearly and significantly toward becoming a community, or "family," as they referred to it. Said the Indian senior leader, "From [being] professionals doing what we thought was our functional responsibility we have become a team, and the entire team today works as a family." Added another, "We began dialogue meetings to communicate to everybody in the business, very transparently, what we intended to do. Every quarter we personally met with young managers to debate, dialogue, and discuss every issue in the business – whether that meant brands, or people, or our own customer. There is now clarity. We believe that we have progressed quite significantly in all our leading brands, as proven by the recent launch, which we are all quite proud of."

What are the elements of building a leadership community? And how does a learning journey contribute? UBF Asia's experience suggests four cornerstones of the building of such communities.

### **1. Self-Knowledge and Commitment**

The process starts with what Chris Argyris (1982) calls psychological commitment, which is born of self-knowledge and the free choice to band with others. Many corporate programs cultivate a leader's self-awareness through, for instance, personality tests, 360-degree feedback, coaching, and myriad forms of experiential learning. Personal reflection on one's life course and the sharing of life stories with others also serves this purpose and helps to build a sense of common humanity among a group of leaders (Mirvis and Ayas 2003). This journey to India opened up new vistas of human experience and provided a personal window for UBF's leaders to see themselves afresh, as is manifest in this individual's comments:

This fantastic experience made me stop and think about who I am and the purpose of my existence. I had a few impressions about myself which I thought were reality, and I saw them being shattered. . . . I commented to myself that I should move on from intellectualizing about what I should be doing to actually practicing. Because only then, I believe, will I get better, become a better human being.

When we went into communities, and saw the kinds of devotion, dedication, and selfless service that they were providing, to be honest, for a while I was a little uncomfortable. In seeing how they're committed to training the blind people, how they were committed to . . . building hospitals and training centers and all that, a feeling of guilt and discomfort arose: am I doing something wrong that I'm not able to commit myself to such selfless service?

## **2. Group Dialogue**

To build community and foster learning, leaders must have the capacity to talk openly and deeply with one another – regardless of communication constraints wrought by power and politics. In China, the UBF Asia leaders' first experiences with thinking and talking together through dialogue were mixed, at best. In India, by comparison, the leaders strove to speak authentically, build on comments, challenge gracefully, and help new thoughts and intentions to emerge. Said one, "Last year it was hard; it was painful to talk so openly as we were so new to each other. This year, it was great to see that words just poured out from everyone. We are starting to see the connections with each other." The process was maturing to the point of collective thinking. "When we talk about building this community, we are very serious about it," added another, "so it takes time for us to progress, to make it happen."

What helped open communication to emerge so strongly? More time together and familiarity were factors, no doubt. So were practice with dialogue, experience in sharing personal stories and expressing vulnerability, and a degree of psychological safety established from past encounters. Furthermore, some of the norms of building community in a circle – speaking personally, listening thoughtfully, raising difficult issues, and talking from the heart – while originally "foreign" to these Asian leaders, were proving agreeable (see Mirvis 2002).

Another factor was, in our view, the subject matter of the journey. Said one leader, "I rank the Indian outbreak as the most experientially enriching trip I have ever taken. It has brought about in me an increased awareness into the purpose and virtuous values of life. From the rich dialogues and sharing we had, I also got a much deeper understanding of the meaning of community and the journey. I feel that we, the UBF Asia community, are well on our way."

## **3. Inquiry into Purpose**

Also essential to building community – and an implicit goal of the UBF experience – is what Peter Vail (1996) calls its "purposing," or establishing the mission and vision. There was deep reflection and conversation about applying the experiences and insights of the visit to India to the mission of UBF Asia. Consider these reflections:

Connecting with poverty in India reminds us that UBF, as a member in Asia, has strong social responsibility. We need to build our business success while taking [on] our social responsibilities. [We must help to protect the environment, help to relieve poverty. . . at the same time, these actions will help our business grow.

If you believe that creating community awareness can make this a better world then you will do it whole-heartedly without even thinking about what's in it for you. This changes the paradigm of thinking that we are selling to consumers. Instead we are serving our communities.

***To build community and foster learning, leaders must have the capacity to talk openly and deeply with one another. . . .***



I was struggling with the concept of community in a business corporation such as ours, but the layers unpeeled slowly over the days. It is a very powerful thought and I am still trying to soak it in. I saw a deeper meaning of life in all this. The real-life community program in the beginning really touched me as I saw voluntary work, devotion, sacrifice, purity, truth, understanding, belonging, affiliation, caring, working together in a responsible and dedicated fashion like a family, a sense of fulfillment, and so on. While family is central to me in personal life, similar core thoughts need to be internalized and become a way of life in work life.

I think a great community really happens when there is complete clarity of purpose.

Certainly there was difficulty in coming to terms with a mission so consequential. Some people spoke of risks – “a heavy burden of responsibility” and “fear of not living up to expectations.” Others mentioned doubts – “too idealistic, no connection to reality,” and still others, competing expectations: “We are obsessed by numbers and we are paid to maximize them. This is clear and will always be the case.” There was, importantly, space in the circle to express these doubts and challenge prevailing sentiments. True community, in M. Scott Peck’s (1993) formulation, is born of inclusiveness and comes into being as a group transcends differences. John Gardner (1995) terms this “wholeness incorporating diversity.”

#### **4. Bringing Mission to Life**

Passion. Purpose. Community. Fine words and uplifting sentiments, but a vibrant community must then transform intention into a way of life. In sharing their final thoughts and feelings on the challenge, some participants found the prospect energizing. Said one, “I am excited with the idea of creating something magical and I am committed – realizing full-well the newfound meaning of this word community – to making this happen.” And another, “We now need actions, not words. I will be a missionary for our mission. I’ll actively ‘preach and convert,’ in the very positive sense of those two words, everybody in Unilever.”

***This mission cannot coexist with bad business performance or in the absence of immediate action to bring it alive.***

Others were more daunted: “What still concerns me is how I will make this transition with my own selfish interests – career growth, financial security, being in the ‘good books’ of my bosses, saying the politically acceptable things, taking shortcuts, putting myself ahead of others, etc.” Or, as another remarked, “This mission cannot coexist with bad business performance or in the absence of immediate action to bring it alive.”

Will this community of leaders be able to deliver on the promise of their mission? The jury is out and will be for a while. A shared aspiration and declaration of intent are not enough to bring the mission alive. Truly caring for the needy in Asia abounds with difficulties. It will take tough business decisions that might threaten the core business. In the case of giant multinational corporations, moreover, their sheer size and presence can be a threat to local enterprises and can impede investment in local communities (Korten 1995).

Even so, UBF Asia has begun making major investments in children’s nutrition, to enhance their mental and physical performance, and by reaching out to the poorest of the poor with inexpensive foods and community-based distribution systems (see Prahalad and Hammond 2002). The power of intent – a noble mission – and the belief that you genuinely want to live



Philip Mirvis

**Unilever  
managers  
with Tibetan  
monks in  
Dharamshala.**

by that intent are clearly demonstrated in the case of the children's nutrition effort. Says the project leader:

We couldn't do this project from the existing business system. The moment we defined the mission, the world opened up. We found out that there are billionaires who want to donate millions to help us bring products to enhance mental and physical performance of the poorest kids; that in India there are many communities that would distribute our products for free to the communities that they serve; and that research institutes would dedicate researchers to help us solve the technological problems.

UBF Asia is also partnering with development agencies and working with local companies to enlarge its community of leaders and expand its definition of itself as a socially responsible company:

With the kind of community and mission-driven approach that we have in UBF Asia, it is possible for us to make a difference to our society and still be in business. And it is important for us to be in business because that that is the only way we will continue to make a difference to society.

Take tea, for instance. The corporate contribution to society might be as subtle as communicating the goodness of tea and bringing health, well-being, and enjoyment benefits through new offerings. But it might also be about decreasing iron and vitamin deficiencies in the population, providing herbal extracts that boost immunity, adding exciting flavors that make it more attractive to kids, or making the right kind of tea available to the masses. "It is not only about providing wellness through the tea," explained the head of India Beverages. "It's also thinking about what else we can do for the Indian household and doing all of that through a brand which genuinely cares for its people and the community. We can connect emotionally with Indian society by sponsoring festivals and important occasions, and addressing key family aspirations and concerns, like good education and well-being.

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## Key Lessons from UBF Asia Leaders

Unilever Bestfoods Asia's experience in India suggests nine principles that other leaders and organizations can apply to their structured learning journeys. Participants described those principles as follows:

### **Being open and nonjudgmental**

"Within minutes I'd gone into judging people without even realizing that that's what I was doing. I found out that all along I had actually been judging the Hare Krishna group as being the hippies or the lost souls. What I learned is, actually, I am the lost soul. So I think not passing judgment is what I have to learn."

### **Seeing and understanding for yourself**

"The visit to Dharamshala emotionally moved me. I saw how deeply integrated Buddhist philosophy is in their lives. I have never seen such a deep level of a religion in action with such passion. As a Buddhist myself, I realized how I have never questioned the philosophy so deeply. I realized how serene my life would be if I really made it a part of life and that of my family as well."

### **Doing what you believe in**

"I went to the Krishna Temple in Bombay, started by a 70-year-old man. It taught me that if you really believe in something, it's never too late to start. At the age of 70, this man sailed to the U.S. on a free ticket on a merchant ship, with the objective that, [because] there's so much richness in Indian Vedic literature, he must translate it and make the world benefit from it. He pursued his mission of making people find a purpose in life, especially those who feel a spiritual hollowness in their lives. From then on, until the age of 84 – some 15 years – he traveled the world 14 times, translated thousands of Indian Sanskrit books into English, and created 350 temples now across the world, and nearly a million devotees."

### **Unconditional giving**

"I became aware of the power of unconditional love and giving at Prayas, a house for underprivileged children. When we started feeding the children during lunch, they were extremely reluctant. In fact, the officials at Prayas told us that these children are normally poor eaters! Traditionally, these children used to stand in a queue with their plates and food was given to them one by

one. We made a difference – we made the children sit on the floor and personally served food to them with a lot of love and caring (reflected in our talking and touching them). Suddenly we saw the surge of emotions, children opening out and asking for more – so much so that we couldn't believe our eyes and had to bring several rounds of servings. The power of love and affection: I was totally unaware of, so far, in life."

### **Service to others**

"As a human being, I derive the highest degree of joy and satisfaction when I do something that makes others around me happy."

### **Sense of belonging**

"Money is not the biggest motivator, but a sense of belonging, a purpose beyond numbers is a bigger motivator. This realization hit me with a lot of force at Ashadaan, the community I visited, and got reinforced throughout the journey."

### **Organizing around purpose**

"I was astounded by the workings of those places – everybody radiating the same energy and happiness, no one giving instructions, but yet, everything working!"

### **Common goals**

"We are not a religious group. But UBFA's success relies on people . . . we need people who hold the same belief toward our business, who fully commit to make our business a success, [and] who can consistently drive through hard work."

### **Taking responsibility**

"Reflecting [on] my role in our company, I hold the responsibility, as a manager, to help company strategy formation, and [be] actively involved in the implementation of company strategy. We shall avoid the 'working for the boss' mentality. We shall not take the 'wait and see' approach. We shall not be followers. Together with my team members, we shall consistently drive the implementation of company strategy."

## Sustaining a Community of Leaders

It is uncertain whether UBF Asia's community of leaders will be sustained. No doubt its continuity of membership will be challenged by personnel moves and turnover; and its constancy of purpose by competitive pressures, business conditions, and the sheer enormity of its newly discovered mission. To the extent that a community of leaders takes on a life of its own, practices of self-management and self-organization are posited to emerge (Kofman and Senge 1993). And, in the community-building vernacular, the community organizes in line with an "unseen" order that is both generative and healing. This transcendental state goes by many names. Spiritualists liken it to a state of grace (Peck 1993); a recent research study gives it the prosaic label of "group magic" (Levi 2003); and learning theorists describe it as "presencing" (Senge et al. 2004). On these matters, one of the Asian leaders reflected, "I realize that words like 'emotions,' 'feelings,' [or] 'moods' may not sound businesslike. However, once used in their best and sincere form, [they] have real consequences for getting work done. I began to understand that building a resonant culture, one where all of us can bring out the best in us, would bring us to greatness."

Throughout the journey to India, the leaders looked afresh at their intentions and asked: "What is a truly great company?" One insight was clear: a great company has a noble mission.

We met the principal of the Ramakrishna College. He quoted from Jim Collins's *Good to Great*. A monk talking about Collins's 'greatness' concepts! It took us a lot of time to really recover [from] that shock and listen to him. But you could see his aura. He said, 'Look, whether as an individual or as a corporation . . . 90% of our energy is wasted in building an image which is not our real self. If that energy is actually spent in exploring your own uniqueness – which you all have, the greatness that is there inside you – you will be really on a journey to greatness. Otherwise you're just wasting your time. That's the real lesson of [the] greatness concept that you've been reading in the books.' It was really something that I have not been able to get over since then. Every time I sit with myself, alone, his words keep ringing in my ears.

Frankly, there was no "master plan" to make mission the centerpiece of this gathering in India. But as eyes opened and leaders saw a larger web of relationships in which business played a vital part, the necessity of doing so emerged.

If we go back to the communities that we served – Mother Teresa's ashram – I don't think any of the sisters ever says to herself 'I won't meet the commitment of feeding the sick and the dying today. At our recent major product launch, we managed to meet that level of commitment because we were able to share and communicate a purpose which was compelling for the entire beverages business in India. Only when we have a purpose and we have commitment to disciplined action do we feel that we'll truly show commitment and accountability.

Does it go too far to suggest that the UBF Asia leaders saw a new world "seeking to emerge?" The president concluded the journey with these reassuring reflections on their time together:

I'm very glad the conversations we had were not about top line and bottom line, not about margins, not about cost cutting, not about central charges. I'm glad that the conversation was about caring and sharing.

We genuinely want to be concerned for people and want to help them. I think once we get this right the rest will come into place. The profits will be there because we are just heading in the right direction. Once we are focused on bringing value to this world and we know that we are not self-centered, but people centered, a lot of things will fall into place, because a lot of things we do will be driven by that passion.

### Endnote

- 1 As set forth in *The Fifth Discipline*, these attributes provide a set of governing ideas: vision is the “what” – the picture of the future we seek to create; mission is the “why” – the organization’s answer to why we exist; and values are the “how” – how we act to achieve our vision.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Philip Mirvis** is an organizational psychologist whose research and private consulting centers on large-scale organizational change and the impact of company life on people. The author of eight books, he has taught at Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China and the London Business School and is adjunct faculty for the University of Michigan's Graduate School of Business.

**[pmirv@aol.com](mailto:pmirv@aol.com)**

**Karen Ayas** is a founding partner of the Ripples Group, a management consulting practice specializing in growth strategies and change management. She is on the faculty of Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, and adjunct faculty at Babson College. The author of several books including *To the Desert and Back* with Phil Mirvis, she is on the Board of Trustees of the Society for Organizational Learning and is coeditor-in-chief of *Reflections*.

**[karen@ripplesgroup.com](mailto:karen@ripplesgroup.com)**

## Commentary

By *Tex Gunning*



Tex Gunning

In our journey to grow our business from “average” to “good” to “great” we have learned something very simple. Average leaders take care of themselves and their families. Good leaders take care of themselves, their families, and others. Great leaders do all that and more. They also want to make a better world.

Likewise, average companies take care of themselves and *their* families – their direct stakeholders, such as employees, directors, shareholders, and suppliers. Good companies take care of not only their direct stakeholders, but also others in the community. And great companies not only take care of their stakeholders and others, but also want to change the world, to leave something behind that is better than the world that they found.

To serve humanity we don’t have to work for NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) or nonprofit organizations. We can be much more effective and create a much larger impact through our work in Unilever and UBF Asia. If our intent is not limited to taking care of our stakeholders, but extends to having a positive impact on Asia and the world, then we can live out our personal meanings in life through our business.

Large companies provide a vehicle for action. If our business decides – and it is a choice – that its mission is to make a difference in the physical, nutritional, or economic well-being of Asians, then we all become volunteers. Paid volunteers. And when we are guided by a common mission, we need many fewer policies to direct our work. Half of our policies, training, and values

statements would become irrelevant if we lived out the same values everywhere we operate.

How do we carry through our intention to have a positive impact on the world? What all these communities teach us is that we must continuously practice self-knowledge and self-awareness, so that we can see in new ways and learn to suppress our negative reactions. Through meditation – whether yoga, or individual or collective reflection – each of us can keep the mind sharp and ask: am I doing the right thing or not? Doing community service reminds us about our own humanity and what we really enjoy doing: caring and giving to others. These tools can help us assess whether we are living the virtuous life each of us authentically desires.

I do believe what has been the biggest insight for me: that meaningful businesses, with meaningful intent, provide meaning for the employees that join them. With this idea, we are heading in the right direction. Once we get this foundation right, we can then talk about social responsibility, which is not one of the things a company does “on the side.” It is a process of learning to connect with the community to care genuinely for people.

After our community service experiences in India, people generally felt a strong desire for an organization that would be far more sensitive to communities. However, to become that, we also need a growing organization that is financially sound. I do not see that as a contradiction: it is quite possible for us to have an organization that

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is socially responsible; sensitive to people, communities, and consumers; and able, at the same time, to generate enough wealth to have sustainable growth. It all depends on our own mindset.

Closing the big gap between our current reality and our future vision starts with our intent. Once that is clearly established, we then find ways to achieve the vision. For instance, we have a kids' vitality project that delivers products that help children enhance their mental and physical performance. We wanted to bring the project to the poorest-of-the-poor regions. From the existing business system we couldn't do that profitably. But the moment we defined the mission, the world opened up. As Karen Ayas and Phil Mirvis noted in the article, we suddenly discovered astonishing resources: millions of dollars in donations, no-cost community distribution networks, and institutional researchers available to us for solving technology problems.

If you can create a business that does meaningful work, you will get better productivity, clearer thinking, and more alignment. You will create, at the same time, a congruent company culture based on meaningful virtues and values. People who serve that business will be sharper, more committed, and more purpose-driven than other businesspeople. Such an enterprise appeals to universal human needs and encourages us to be more truthful and to check continuously to see whether we are on the right path. The new generations of leaders must redefine the purpose and the meaning of business.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Tex Gunning** joined Unilever in 1982. He held a variety of director and chairman positions prior to his appointment in 2001 as business group president of the new Unilever Bestfoods, Asia.



## Commentary

*By Peter M. Senge*



Peter M. Senge

This article should become a point of reference for everyone engaged in the challenge of fostering genuine mission and purposefulness in organizations – not because it has all the answers, or even answers many of the profound questions it raises, but because it does a great job of placing mission building, or “purposing,” in context. This brief article can dissolve some of the pervasive, destructive, and long-standing confusion about the nature of mission in business. Ayas and Mirvis make this possible not by saying anything new, but by saying something real.

First, mission is personal and immediate. It is not lofty or abstract. It is not even, ironically, about the future. Purposefulness is intrinsic to the present moment, when I am aware that what I am doing is truly meaningful. I can feel connected to a larger or shared purpose only when I have some clarity about my personal purpose, or “who I am and the purpose of my existence,” as one of the UBF Asia (UBFA) members expresses it.

Second, mission is active and concrete. Although a sense of purpose connects our present actions to a desired future, the moment we try to understand it conceptually, it disappears into an ocean of abstract symbols and “warm, fuzzy feelings.” This is the inherent problem with all statements of mission or purpose. Simply put, mission is not a statement. Its power cannot be held in symbols or captured by words. Mission is an imperative that we feel “from the inside out.” It manifests in actions that we feel we must do, despite whatever uncertainties or difficulties might accompany them.

Third, mission is what connects us, both to one another and to the larger world. Undoubtedly, one reason most pragmatic institutions (such as business) shy away from working seriously to develop real mission is that they fear building genuine community. I expect that many businesspeople will think that the very personal comments attributed to UBFA members in this article are inappropriate for business. They are too revealing. They are too emotional. They make participants appear too vulnerable and too human. Being connected is not comfortable. Seeing “a deeper meaning of life,” as another UBFA member says, implies that our sense of meaning before the current moment was not very deep and may, in fact, have been shallow. Do businesses really want to open themselves up to such soul searching? It’s a lot more comfortable not to care, and to ensure that employees stay focused on meeting quarterly goals.

Fourth, and perhaps most radical, mission requires making direct contact with the outside world in ways that are alien to most of us. The “learning journeys” that groups like UBFA in Unilever are starting to take sound innocent enough – until you do one. I’ve spoken with many people who have found them to be genuinely life changing. There is no substitute for firsthand experience in “sensing” reality – setting our rational intellect aside and directly experiencing the world in which we are conducting our business. People are not numbers and serving people means knowing them directly. It means understanding their life circumstances, because it is within those circumstances that a

business might make some actual contribution. An organization's mission expresses its place in the larger world and how it intends to contribute.

Years ago I discovered that one of the World Bank's most effective programs began with Washington, D.C.-based bank members simply spending a week in a village in a place such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, or Guatemala. Prior to that, the bank's members did all sorts of things to "help" people living there, but the members did not know the villagers. They did not know their resourcefulness or the ways in which they were helping themselves under difficult circumstances. They did not know their stories and songs. They did not know their fears. As one World Bank executive put it, "I had to come to terms personally with the reality of poverty." Who can read the account of the UBFA manager massaging the sick and dying people at the Mother Theresa center and not understand that without this contact there can be little real mission to help India?

There are many reasons why the ideas expressed in this article conflict with mainstream management practice, but none is more important than the deep belief that the real purpose of business is to make money. Despite the eloquence of mission and value statements, most people in most organizations experience mission as something far different from what Ayas and Mirvis describe. Most people experience business, as Arie de Geus puts it, as a machine for producing money.<sup>1</sup> What are people to make of this gap between reality and rhetoric? Ideally, the gap can motivate a genuine aspiration to grow a more responsible business. Unfortunately, it more often generates deep cynicism. When

managers whose real purpose is to make money trumpet mission and values statements, it simply reinforces people's view that all the lofty rhetoric is really just a strategy to manipulate them into working harder.

None of this implies that UBFA does not itself face these very dilemmas. As part of a large multinational business apparatus, it is more familiar with numbers than with purpose. It reports financial results to investment analysts like all other public corporations do. For every senior or middle manager who has begun to internalize a larger mission, there are undoubtedly several others who still wonder "what this has to do with the business."

But there is no doubt that, like a few of their multinational corporate counterparts, Unilever is serious about change. It is engaging with a major multinational nongovernmental organization (NGO) to do an independent assessment of the social impact of its food business in southern Asia, and is creating partnerships with several other corporations, NGOs, and local and national governments to make global agricultural food chains more sustainable. Ayas and Mirvis talk a bit about both the conflicts and some of the shifts in strategy and operations in "bringing mission to life" in UBFA's business practices. But this is a story of beginnings rather than endings, of developing a genuine sense of orientation rather than plans and delivered results. It's an important story because, as the adage goes, "if we do not know where we are headed, almost any destination will do."

#### Endnote

- 1 A. P. De Geus, *The Living Company* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Peter M. Senge** is a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and the founding chair of SoL. A renowned pioneer in management innovation, Peter is the author of the widely acclaimed *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Doubleday/Currency 1990).

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David Mahaffey

Publications Assistant

*Reflections: The SoL Journal*

25 First Street, Suite 414

Cambridge, MA 02141 USA

(1)617.300.9515 (phone)

(1)617.354.2093 (fax)

E-mail: [reflections@solonline.org](mailto:reflections@solonline.org)

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