

Super-Objectives

A Special Report

TRUE NORTH BUSINESS



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BUSINESS

Is it Purpose or Mission?



Have you ever spent quite a bit of time researching a subject only to come away scratching your head—even more confused than before? Were you frustrated? Boy, I'm glad that I'm not the only one feeling that way.

Back in the early 1990s, I was searching out the answer to an important question for our company. I was asking myself, **“Why do we exist?”**

What I found was confusing. The problem was that I found people interchanging the terms *purpose* and *mission* in writings. Some sources would use mission to describe purpose while others might use the word purpose to describe their mission. Were purpose and mission the same, or different?

Of course, this was well before Google's search engine, so I had to thumb through physical copies of books and articles to try to figure out what the difference was between these two terms.

And I came away still not understanding the difference between a *purpose* and a *mission*.

I even asked my good friend and mentor, Jim Lundy, to help explain purpose and mission. I felt sure Jim would know. His first book was adopted by more than a hundred



colleges and universities. His next two books were best-sellers, and his management consulting firms clients included 3M, General Mills, American Express, and...the Albert Companies.

To my surprise, Jim just shrugged his shoulders as though he did not know either.

Why Do We Exist?



So, I had to just “draw a line in the sand” and declare that we were going to use the word *purpose* to describe **“why we exist.”**

I believe Jim Collins gives the best definition of *purpose* in his book, *Built to Last*: “The organization’s fundamental reasons for existence beyond just making money.”

Okay, I now understood what a *purpose* was. How about *mission*?

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines a *mission* statement as “a formal summary of the aims and values of a company, organization, or individual.”

Wikipedia defines a *mission* statement as “a short statement of an organization’s purpose, identifying the goal of its operations: what kind of product or service it provides, its primary customers or market, and its geographical region of operation.”

WOW! After all these years, I still feel confused and frustrated reading those definitions. Did you notice the Wikipedia definition interchanged the terms *purpose* and *mission* in the same sentence?

In practice, I found that many businesses seem to use the terms *purpose* and *mission* interchangeably, while nonprofits seem to use the term *mission*. Even so, I have found many of the *mission* or purpose statements are...

- Too long and wordy, so that people cannot remember what it says or means
- Too generic, trying to be all things to all people
- Too technical

Even more confusion – and more frustration!



My Recommendation



As before, I feel that I need to “draw a line in the sand” to eliminate ambiguity between the terms *purpose* and *mission*, and create three terms: *purpose*, *mission*, and *super-objectives* (more on that later).

I recommend the leader of a **business** identify...

- A) A *purpose* (using Collins’ definition on the previous page)
- B) And one or more *super-objectives*, which are the bridge between...
 - 1) your *core values*, *purpose*, and *vision*, and
 - 2) your *strategies*, *tactics*, and *goals*.

I recommend the leader of a **nonprofit** identify their *mission*, as that term seems well established in that sector.

Regardless of whether you use super-objectives or a *mission* statement, the best ones have the following qualities:

- **Clear** – Anyone can understand it.
- **Concise** – It is short and can be said in one breath.

- **Compelling** – It makes people want to say it again because it is delightful to hear. It includes the words, “Every day....”
- **Catalytic** – Rather than just define what you successfully do, it encourages people to “act,” and it is achievable.
- **Contextual** – Ensure that the mission statement is simply stated and answers the key question, “What do I want to accomplish—every day?”

When a leader of either a business or nonprofit chooses to use the term super-objectives or a *mission* statement, I recommend that they:

- Are quantifiable: It must be measurable once it is practiced.
- Also have a *purpose* that states *why* they exist.

What Do You Want to Accomplish—Every Day?



**“Words might tell a story,
but actions tell the truth.”**

—John Maxwell

Now, let’s get back to *super-objectives*.

One day in the early 2000s, on a long bicycle ride, I found myself asking, “**At the end of the day, what do we want to accomplish in our business?** And could it be stated simply, so that our people could easily understand and remember it?”

I realized that bottom line, we wanted to accomplish only two things every day:

- 1) Delight customers
- 2) Increase operating profits

I called these our *super-objectives*, because they became the two high-level, overarching objectives for our business. They provided...

- The everyday expectations in our business that describe **what we want to accomplish**.
- The bridge between our...
 - 1) *core values, purpose, and vision*, and
 - 2) our *strategies, tactics, and goals*—our drive for results.

I did not find any other company that used the term *super-objectives*. It appears to be unique to the Albert Companies, and it became one of our True North Leadership Essentials.

Even though in our company, every employee had an individually assigned role and responsibility, all our employees had the same *super-objectives*. Every day our people clearly understood what they were to accomplish.

Super-Objectives in the Theater



Recently, a colleague told me that *super-objective* is a known term—in the theater.



Wikibooks has defined a *super-objective* in the theater as...

- A character's broad overall objective that stays consistent throughout the play.
- What helps the actor solidify the motivations behind the character's actions and emotions. Some examples might be "I need love" or "I need to have power."

In the theatre, each character has a different super-objective, but in an organization, everyone has the same super-objective(s). Nevertheless, in both contexts, super-objectives define a broad overarching objective for the people involved.

Just like *core values*, *purpose*, and *vision* apply to both organizations and individuals, *super-objectives* do too. Individuals can ask themselves how well they did on their *super-objectives*, just like the company can.

Forty-Plus Years of Leadership



With over 40 years leading my company, I have found our employees wanted to know, “Do you care enough about me as a person to explain what is expected of me in my role and responsibilities?” But here’s the kicker: this is only possible if you, as the leader, communicate these expectations clearly, concisely, and consistently.

They, like me, do not want confusion and ambiguity in the workplace.

Once everyone understood without any doubt...

- **Who are we?** – Our *core values*
- **Why do we exist?** – Our *purpose*
- **Where are we going?** – Our *vision*
- **What do we want to accomplish... every day?** – Our *super-objectives*

...and once we applied the process of **effective leadership** and lived out the four truths listed above, we saw extraordinary results beyond our imagination. And you can too!

