



We Just Decided to Go

It's Not a Miracle

The movie *Apollo 13* opens with a gathering of astronauts at the home of Jim and Marilyn Lovell to watch the live television broadcast of an incredible event. Their fellow astronaut, Neal Armstrong, is about to become the first human being to set foot on the moon. There is a light-hearted, party atmosphere among the group. But as newsman Walter Cronkite announces the event, and we hear Armstrong's immortal words, "One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind," the mood becomes quiet, almost reverential. Even Cronkite, the veteran newsman with years of covering historic world events, seems nearly overwhelmed with the magnitude of the moment.

Shortly after the broadcast, the party breaks up and everyone goes their separate ways. Jim Lovell, who is played by Tom Hanks, is now alone with his wife Marilyn in their backyard. Looking up at the moon, Lovell says, "From now on, we live in a world where man has walked on the moon. It's not a miracle. We just decided to go."

Deciding to go is the first step on the journey to becoming a Category of One. Unfortunately, it's also the step usually not taken. Most companies never decide to go. They never make the decision to become extraordinary. The decision they make is to talk about becoming extraordinary or to have meetings about becoming extraordinary or to write mission statements about becoming extraordinary. But they never decide to go, that is, make the commitment that takes hold, becomes real, and creates a new level of success.

A Deliberate Decision

One of the common threads I've observed among extraordinary companies is that they make very deliberate decisions to go in terms of pursuing greatness. The decision can take many forms. It might be a decision that is initially made by one person, maybe the CEO of the company. It could be a group decision reached over a period of years, culminating with someone in a meeting saying, "Let's do this thing. Let's see how far we can go, how much fun we can have, how much money we can make." But at some point, most extraordinary companies make a clearly defined decision to go. It literally comes down to a moment of truth. Then, to sustain their success, they must recommit to that decision again and again.

Turning Points

Category of One companies can almost always point to a very specific time when they made a decision to go. When asked if there was a turning point for their company, I've had company CEOs tell me things like "In 2002, we were face to face with a real crisis.

That's when everything changed, and we started taking things in the right direction," or "It was at the annual company convention in 2007. One night some of us were talking at dinner about the future and what we hoped to achieve, and, all of a sudden, we just looked at each other and decided to do things differently."

Sometimes the seeds for the decision to pursue greatness are planted from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. Rather than the top people in an organization making the decision to go, their job might best be seen as creating a culture and an environment that leads everyone in the organization to see opportunities for growth and then act on them. When a major decision to go comes from the top down, then it must be thoughtfully communicated within the organization and given the chance to gain the support of the employees. Almost every extraordinary company can point to a very specific moment when the decision was made to be great. The implementation of that decision is a continuing process, but the decision itself is a very clearly defined and identifiable event.

Don't Waste a Perfectly Good Crisis

Very often, great companies become even greater when a crisis forces the decision to go. There's a tremendous sense of clarity and urgency that can come from facing disaster. It's in these moments of truth that the true Category of One company rises to the top. For extraordinary companies, a crisis can thin the herd and force the competition to find another line of work.

The historic economic meltdown of 2008 gave us an almost limitless supply of practical business lessons. Perhaps the most impactful of those lessons is that there can be tremendous value in a crisis. When taking action is just an option, it's easy to

continue having meetings about it. But when the banks stop making loans, customers are canceling orders, revenue is plummeting, and your cash flow is slowing down to a trickle, you begin to realize that more meetings aren't the answer. You have to do something and do it now.

It's been said that a recession is a reallocation of money from the scared to the bold. The reaction of many people to a crisis is to hunker down, play defense, and protect what they've got. They're scared. They're like a squirrel in the middle of the road with a fast-moving car heading straight for it. They turn left, then right, then freeze. Only the fast reflexes of the car driver can save the day. But a crisis doesn't care. It won't swerve to miss you. Survival requires action.

Hard times bring out the motivational slogans. One of the most popular slogans in times of recession is "Recession? What recession? I refuse to participate in the recession." I understand the idea behind that line of thinking. The problem is that if you don't recognize the existence of a recession, you'll likely miss the extraordinary opportunity it presents. Not participating in a recession means that it's business as usual. But it's most definitely not business as usual. Everything's different, and you have to take advantage of the changes. You should not only participate in a recession but do it with the pedal to the medal. Don't pretend that it doesn't exist—use it.

In January 2009, I was working with a company at their World Leadership Conference. Six hundred of the top leaders of this company had gathered to plot their course of action in the face of a monumental economic downturn. The company was, fortunately, in a position of strength, with a strong balance sheet, talented employees, and great products. They were, however, not the leader in many of their markets.

One of the division presidents made an impassioned plea to the attendees. “This recession won’t last forever,” he said. “We can’t make the mistake of letting it pass us by. We can’t find ourselves waking up one day having let this incredible opportunity slip away. Please don’t waste a perfectly good crisis!”

When the Lead Changes Hands

Marathon runners and long-distance bicycle racers will tell you that the moments of greatest opportunity are found in the uphill stages of the race. It’s during the uphill parts of the course that leads are most often either extended or lost.

It’s the same in business. The uphill stages are when the strong and the bold overtake the vulnerable. When’s the best time to take market share from your competition? Surely not when the market is easy. The best time to overtake your competition or to extend your lead is when the market is tough. In tough times customers move toward strength and leadership. A crisis can be the time that you actually accelerate your business plan and make a decisive move.

If your competitors are pulling back and cutting budgets, then this may be the time to do everything you can to connect with customers—not just your customers, but their customers, as well. Think about what customers need right now. What is their response to a down economy? How can you help them create opportunity? Customers are hurting, and you have the opportunity to help stop the pain. Help them save money. Help them create their own new customers. Help them be more effective.

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, my industry was decimated. Most of my work takes place at

corporate events. In the months following 9/11, few companies were willing to put their employees on planes to fly to meetings. The market for guys like me made a shrinking sound that could be heard across the land. I knew that this was no time to curl up in a fetal position and wait for things to blow over and get back to normal. Instead of pulling back, I pulled out all the stops.

I called to mind the words of the owner of the real estate company where I worked in 1980, when the prime lending rate soared to over 20 percent. It was devastating to the real estate business. And yet my perception of that crisis changed 180 degrees when the owner said, “Sometimes this business gets too easy. People get in it that don’t know what they’re doing because anybody can do it. Well, just anybody can’t do it in a market like this. What’s happening now is that God is giving our competition the opportunity to find another line of work. It’s our job to help them in that effort.”

Inspired by my memory of our success in 1980 by adopting an aggressive strategy, my strategy in 2002 consisted of two major courses of action. I repositioned myself in the market by dramatically improving the strength of my value proposition, and I got face to face with as many potential clients as possible. While many of my competitors were looking for ways to save every nickel and dime possible, I was looking for ways to capture every big contract possible. The result was that, in a time of absolute crisis for my industry, 2002 was the biggest revenue year I had ever had up to that point.

Moments of Truth

Larry Keener, CEO of Palm Harbor Homes, one of the nation’s largest producers of manufactured homes, says that they have

had two critical moments of truth in the company's 24-year history. The first occurred in the late 1980s when the industry was experiencing a cyclical downturn. "Downturns are wonderful validators of core strategies," Keener says.

"What we learned during the 1980s moment of truth was twofold. First, that just hiring good people would not produce high-quality homes, satisfied customers, and high associate retention. We needed a well-defined quality system supported with broad-based training consistent with our mission. The system we installed was a customized version of Philip Crosby's Quality Improvements Process (QIP). It has become our 'religion' and nearly a universal answer to any 'how' questions of performance improvement."

Palm Harbor also discovered, during the 1980s downturn, that their independent retailers, as a group, did not share the company's vision or commitment. As a result, their efforts were only as effective as their least effective retailer. To control their future and the integrity of their brand, they got into the retail business.

"These two decisions were outside the mainstream of our industry," Keener says. "They both required enormous investments and patience. However, today our ability to control our processes within defined quality tolerances and our ability to uniformly deliver to every customer the value and quality they want, is our greatest separator versus our competitors."

Forced to Expand Our Definition

The second decision that made a difference for Palm Harbor Homes was prompted by a crisis caused by the good economic times of the 1990s. "That moment of truth concerned

retail home financing,” Keener says. “Our industry is cyclical, and the cycles are driven by retail financing. During the good times of the 1990s, independent industry finance sources bought too deeply into the weaker-credit customer pool. As a result, defaults have soared, lenders have failed, and others have retrenched. There was a dearth of outside lenders to our industry.”

Demand for Palm Harbor’s homes remained high throughout the cycle because of brand-building advertising and their ever-expanding customer referral pool of prospective new homeowners. Yet, their sales were constrained to the same degree as the rest of the industry from the lending excesses created by others.

“We knew that our commitment to become ‘legendary’ and to be ‘an extraordinary company in an ordinary industry’ was dependent on our ability to provide credit to creditworthy buyers,” Keener says. “We have started a mortgage bank. It’s the first in-house mortgage bank in the industry, and we will have a full-fledged consumer lending company soon. Our philosophy is that if a customer deserves credit, they deserve a Palm Harbor home; and, if they deserve credit, Palm Harbor should provide that credit to them.”

Palm Harbor’s moments of truth when they decided to go were spawned by industry crises. They were forced to expand their definition of themselves and their commitments. “We have had to evolve and expand our span of control to keep our commitment to our customers and ourselves,” Keener says. “We have always wanted to be a great company. Circumstances keep redefining the requirements of ‘great.’ We view these circumstances as opportunities to separate ourselves from the competition.”

Go Big or Go Home

Quill is a subsidiary of Staples, Inc., and is a leading direct marketer of office supplies. In the mid-1980s, the three original owners of Quill realized that the business had grown beyond them. They wanted Quill to sustain its history of growth, exceptional customer service, and operational excellence, and they knew that doing so would require taking the company to the next level of performance. A decision was made to bring in three experienced executives from outside the company. This was Quill's specific moment in time that changed everything about their future. From that point, the company was able to challenge its old ways and become more aggressive. They stopped doing initiatives and tasks only in a linear fashion.

The second moment of decision came when Staples, Inc. purchased Quill. A mandate came from the new corporate parent to grow the business faster. Larry Morse, president of Quill, describes the decision-making process. "Our whole senior management team met off-site for two days and decided that we needed to become a high-performance organization in every way possible," Morse says. "We committed ourselves to driving for excellence in everything we did, especially in the area of customer service, and that became our mantra. In fact, we came out of that meeting with a slogan that depicted our new approach to business, 'Go big or go home.'" This off-site meeting was Quill's second critical turning point.

In both cases, the decision to go was made by senior leadership teams. In the first case, the owners did a lot of soul searching together and decided that they were not going to hang up the "gone fishing" sign, but rather ignite their company to reach new levels of growth and success.

The senior leaders were imbued in the Quill culture, and that group was anxious to put their mark on the company and drive for success. While the chief executive rallied this group, it was easy to get them to take the plunge.

Most companies never get beyond the talking stage of the decision to go. Even though they think they've committed to doing something different and significant, what they've really done is just commit to talk about doing something different and significant. Quill's commitments included much more than just talk. They developed five strategic imperatives that provided the framework for their planning:

1. Maximize our customer base.
2. Develop a contact and relationship model that enables Quill to sell and service more effectively.
3. Deliver and promote the best service and value in the industry.
4. Drive toward deeper product and market penetration.
5. Achieve operational excellence in everything we do.

Quill didn't just talk about taking the company to a new level of performance. They made the decision, then immediately began to implement changes in how they did virtually everything. That's the difference between companies that go and those that don't. The decision to go is followed by immediate and significant action. There's a clear signal being sent within the company that there's something big going on here, and it's made real by action. A vision without execution is just an hallucination.

A Dangerous Assumption

Some might say, “But it goes without saying that everyone in our company wants us to be the best! Of course we all want to be great.” Well, it doesn’t go without saying. And even if they are saying it, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they believe it, or even that they want it. There are many companies that mistakenly assume that all employees not only want to be the best, but, more important, are willing to do what it takes in terms of commitment, change, and hard work to make it happen. This is often a false and sometimes a dangerous assumption.

There are many people out there, maybe even most of the people out there, who don’t aspire to greatness. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to live your life simply doing a good job. Some people want to be in the parade. Some people want to lead the parade. And some people just want to watch the parade go by. Of course there are also people who live, as Thoreau said, “lives of quiet desperation.” These people are in survival mode, quite possibly through no fault of their own. Achieving greatness is the furthest thing from their minds. They just want to make it through the day.

I’m a fairly high achiever, but I must admit that there have been times when I thought I would scream or even do bodily harm to someone if I heard one more motivational speaker talk about following my bliss or finding passion in my work. Sometimes I just didn’t feel like scrambling up the ladder of success. I just wanted to claw my way to the middle and stay there for a while. But to reach my potential, I realized that I had to come to that moment-of-clarity decision. I had to decide to go.

Many of the same dynamics apply whether you're talking about achieving the very personal aspirations of an individual or the goals of a multinational corporation. In either case, nothing of substance will take place without commitment. On a personal level, I'm embarrassed to admit that I was a cigarette smoker for many years. Although I knew that I had the will power and ability to quit smoking, the fact was that I didn't really want to. I would set a goal of stopping smoking and stick with it for a few weeks, but ultimately I ended up right back where I started at about a pack of cigarettes a day. The one reason I continued to fail was that I had made the intellectual decision to stop smoking, but not the gut decision.

Companies do the same thing. I once did some consulting work with a bank that claimed it wanted to increase sales in its national accounts division. What they did was double the number of calls that each sales representative was required to make each week, thinking that this would double the sales. The very predictable result of this ridiculous strategy was that as the quantity of calls increased, the quality of each call suffered tremendously, and sales actually fell.

I advised the bank to work on reducing the number of calls they were making, but put more time into the research and preparation for each call, thus dramatically increasing the closing ratio. But this would have required more change and more work than they were willing to undertake. So ultimately they got what they really wanted the most, which was just more activity and the appearance of improvement.

We Get What We Want the Most

You may be wondering what I mean by saying they got what they wanted the most, when what they "said" they wanted was

increased sales. Talk is cheap. Actions speak louder than words. I'm rolling out the clichés because they are true in this case. It's like people saying that they want to lose weight then ordering the triple cheeseburger with bacon instead of the salad. What they wanted more than to lose weight was to eat the cheeseburger. It's not rocket science here. We get what we want the most.

Take the bank I was just talking about. They said they wanted increased sales, but they weren't willing to do the research and planning necessary to make that happen. It was just too hard, and they weren't willing to go there. What they really wanted the most was to talk about increasing sales, but in reality increasing activity was the easy way out. It would give the appearance of striving for success without having to do all the heavy lifting involved in preparation and research.

I've seen a thousand versions of the same story over the years from all kinds of companies. They say, "We want to have the best people in the world," but they won't invest in training or better hiring practices. They say, "We want our people to take responsibility," but they don't give them any real decision-making authority and they second-guess everything their people do. They say, "We want teamwork," but they do nothing to improve communication between departments. What they really want is the status quo with slogans. Or they want different results while doing exactly the same things they've always done, which some say is the definition of insanity. They should summon up the courage to just admit that they want to talk a good game instead of playing one.

We Don't Want to Go

There's a wonderful scene in the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* where Butch and Sundance are sitting on the

balcony of the local house of ill repute, watching the sheriff in the street below. The sheriff, who thinks that the outlaws are on the run and far away, is trying valiantly, with all of the inspirational, motivational, and oratorical skills at his command, to raise a posse to track down Butch and Sundance and bring them to justice.

As he implores the group of townspeople to join him in this quest for justice, his audience just stares at him, obviously not moved one bit to saddle up and put themselves in harm's way. They just listen and stare. They might be cowardly, but at least they are painfully honest in their lack of commitment.

Nobody's playing any games or displaying any false bravado. They don't want to go. And they're not pretending that they do. What this means to the sheriff, the would-be leader of this posse that just won't become a reality, is that at least he knows where he stands. Better to find out in town than out on the range when they're far from home. Don't saddle up and charge ahead if you're just kidding around.

Let's Have a Pep Rally!

We are a society that loves parades, pep rallies, and celebrations. The same holds true in business. We love to set lofty goals and celebrate what we hope will become reality, but we've not been willing to make the required commitment to change.

Everybody talks a good game. Every company gives lip service to taking performance up a notch and being the best that they can be. We pick a theme for the next company meeting: Riding the Waves of Change! . . . Dominate the Market! . . . Total Customer Satisfaction! . . . The Success Zone! . . . The Power of One! . . . The Power of the Team! . . . The Power of

Partners! . . . (how about The Power of Slogans!) . . . Achieving Excellence! . . . Breaking Down Barriers! . . . Thinking Outside the Box! . . . Setting the Sails for Success! . . . Creating Excellence! . . . or, that perennial favorite, Exceeding Our Customers' Expectations!

In planning that next big meeting, we do everything we think we're supposed to do. We fly everyone to a great hotel in Cancun or Hilton Head or some other appropriately sunny beach location. The company executives make rousing speeches about vision and mission and celebrating our successes while looking ahead to further heights of greatness. The experiential training consultants facilitate team-building exercises on the beach, which consist of breaking into teams and figuring out ways to make a functional raft out of the odd assortment of materials we've been given to work with. We have breakout sessions on new products and systems. After every meal, there's a motivational speaker who gives us an inspirational message about being your best no matter what the odds are against you, and the importance of throwing that one starfish back into the ocean. There's the awards dinner and dance with the oldies band and, quite possibly, the mass hysterical group dance performance of "YMCA." How could it be any better?

Then, on the last day, there's the closing general session. The big finish. The session that will send us back into the world riding a motivational tidal wave of epic proportions. The president of the company gives a speech that invariably begins with "Well, we've had an incredible three days here, but there's much more to do." The final mountain-climbing, obstacle-overcoming motivational speaker gives a barn-burner of a chest-thumping speech and whips the room into a frenzy of thunderous and wildly cheering employees as the sound

system blares Tina Turner singing “Simply the Best” at warp volume, while photos of smiling, thumbs-up employees in various poses at their work stations and in their cubicles are projected onto the giant screens on either side of the stage. The motivation is palpable. It’s in the very air that we breathe. We foam and froth, and the room comes dangerously close to spontaneous combustion. We join hands and sway in giddy unison to the sounds of Queen’s “We Are the Champions.” And then we go home.

Back at the office we cover our walls with attitude-boosting posters featuring glorious color photographs of eagles soaring above the clouds, snow-topped mountain summits, and teams (in which there are no I’s) crossing the finish line in sweat-drenched celebrations of victory and dreams come true. In our homes, we tape personal success affirmations to the bathroom mirror and read them every morning before we listen to the motivational tapes in the car on the way to work. Surely we are doing everything necessary to scale the summits of success.

What Happened?

Six months later, people stare into their affirmation-covered bathroom mirrors and companies look at their less-than-hoped-for numbers and they wonder what went wrong. The goal of truly taking performance to a new level wasn’t reached. The eagle didn’t soar to the mountaintop. Maybe your competition turned out to be simply the best, and you’re still second. And what’s often most deeply frustrating in these situations is that the failure to achieve these goals happens to companies who seemingly have everything going for them, including great people, sound business strategies, and excellent products.

So what happened? With all the best-laid plans and all the spine-tingling motivational cheerleading, they never took the critically important first step. They never decided to go. Not really. They just talked about going.

Answer the Tough Questions

But wait! Surely they decided to go! Why else would they have taken the time and trouble to put up the posters and play the music and have the meetings and tape all those affirmations to their bathroom mirrors? Because they were willing to do the easy stuff. The hard stuff is reaching deep down inside and looking honestly into your soul and asking, “Do we really want to do this, and are we willing to change how we’ve done it up to now?”

I give many speeches about building brands and competitive strategies, which means that I go to a lot of corporate conventions and meetings. Believe me, you can’t predict the probable success of a company based on the look or sound of its meetings. Quite often, it’s the quietly determined companies who don’t make much noise that are the ones who actually walk the talk. Enthusiasm isn’t necessarily loud.

That’s not to say that big budget meetings can’t help produce big results. They can. Sometimes what’s needed to create momentum and enthusiasm is a good dose of fun, show business, and motivation. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with the big company meeting at the big resort hotel. It’s just that for it to produce something worthwhile, it must be accompanied by the commitment to make something happen.

In my presentations, I confront companies with some simple yet very tough questions about their stated goals: “Do you

really mean this?” “How far are you willing to take this thing?” “What’s your tolerance for chaos?” “How scared are you able to be and still function?” “Are you willing to let go of everything that works in order to get to where you say you want to go?” “Who are you?” “What do you really stand for?” “When it comes right down to it, what’s really important around here?” “When you say that your intention is to be the best in the business or to achieve true excellence or to take your business to the next level, are you serious, or are you really just kidding around?”

There are very serious ramifications involved if the answer is “Yes, we’re serious.” The reality may be that you and your company just may not be willing to do what it takes to achieve greatness. Which is fine. Just be clear on what you’re committing to if you say, “We mean it. Let’s go.” It’s much better not to kid yourselves and freely choose to pretty much stay where you are. The reality may be that you have spent years as a company fighting your way to the middle of the pack, and now you just want to rest for a while. No problem. Of course, the inherent danger in that strategy is that there’s really no such thing as holding your position. You’re either gaining ground or losing ground.

But better to be honestly mediocre and try to stay where you are with a sense of contentment than be unrealistically ambitious about what is yet to be and never get there because you never really wanted to go in the first place. It’s demoralizing to any group of people to say year after year that this is the year that we go to the mountaintop, when all that ever happens is we just keep on doing what we’ve been doing with a new set of posters on the walls.

Believe Then Become

Making the decision to go means that you start with an idea and do what's necessary to make the idea a reality. This means that you have to lead with the belief and then follow with action. One without the other won't work. You can't just "believe" your way to becoming extraordinary. You also can't take action that isn't driven by a belief shared within the organization. Action without the foundation of a shared belief usually lacks the power to sustain itself for the amount of time necessary to accomplish something significant.

"We started to tell people that both the employees and the company were the best over and over again until the employees began to believe it," says Larry Morse of Quill. "We highlighted successes and positive comments every time we could so that people would embrace this behavior and action naturally. We began to build a team spirit and purpose toward making Quill the best. Our top-level executives started to build everything around the idea of becoming a high-performance organization and began planning what it would take."

At Quill, they painted a picture of what success would look like for everyone and then began putting the pieces in place. They developed a new and simplified vision statement and then drove home the fact that leadership was the way they were going to bring themselves to the level where they wanted to be. "First," Morse said, "we developed the model of the ideal leader at Quill, which we called The Quill Leadership Model, and then taught leadership up and down the organization. Many things were done for effect—for example, putting our logo on everything that moves in order to build team spirit. We focused everyone on one strategic principle: 'We take better care

of our customers than anyone else.’ To drive it home even further, we created the very ‘prestigious’ Quill Leadership Institute. As a result, people believe they are the best, they know where we need to go, and they are developing the tools to get there.”

CST—Taking It to the Next Level

CST is a professional services company doing business commercially and for the federal government, with a focus primarily on information technology and engineering services. Their government customers fall into two categories: Department of Defense, including the Army, Navy, Air Force, Army Reserve, National Guard, and Corps of Engineers; and civilian agencies, including the Department of Agriculture, Treasury Department, Health and Human Services, Department of Labor, NASA, and Department of Interior.

When CST reached the level of 1,000 employees, they went through an evaluation of where they were and where they wanted to go. This growth threshold was their critical turning point. They wanted to move into doing much bigger contracts, and that meant taking the company to the next level. CST president Bobby Bradley says, “You’re either growing or you’re dying. You’ve got to continue to grow. If you want to be successful, that’s the bottom line. Once you get to 1,000, you’ve got to look at who you are. Some of the things that got you to 1,000 may not be the same things that get you to the next level.”

Remember that old saying: What got you there will seldom keep you there (much less take you to the next level).

CST decided to look at everything, including business development, communications, training, and building the management team for this next level effort. They also determined that

they needed to undertake a rebranding process. That was the immediate mission.

Communicating the Vision

Like Quill, CST did much more than just roll out the decision at a big pep rally and then go back to business as usual. They followed up with ongoing communication about the new CST brand and what it meant to everyone in the company. Donna Bell, corporate communications manager, says, “We made it a big deal. We did a big presentation. We were excited about it. People are going to be interested if they see you’re excited. We did have a formal brand rollout process—but it was very personal. We didn’t just send out a flashy flyer, although we did start with that. We had our own ‘show and tell’ mission. We tried to see as many employees as we could face to face. Also, we’re keeping it going. Little by little, we’re communicating our new vision, and our employees are embracing it as we go. So it wasn’t just ‘here’s the new brand, now everybody back to work.’ We’re talking about a new way of doing business.” Bobby Bradley adds, “You get buy-in by being genuine. So that people can trust you and believe in what you say. They have to believe that what you’re saying is real and not just fluff.”

The Quiet Radical

Sometimes a whisper is much more powerful than a shout. Sometimes taking the time to sit quietly, listen, think, and then discuss will result in much more powerful decisions than the same amount of time spent cheerleading. The quiet gathering is often where the most radical decision making takes place.

I have had the pleasure of working with the Consumer Products Division of Georgia Pacific on a number of occasions. What impresses me most about this organization is the willingness to look at new and even radical ideas in the interest of sparking creative approaches to constant change and improvement.

Everything at their meetings, from the speakers on the agenda to the very setup of the meeting room itself, sets the tone that there is going to be creative thinking taking place. They often bring in outside speakers who present cutting-edge ideas designed to sweep the cobwebs of stale thinking out of everyone's minds. The general session meeting room is not set up in the traditional classroom or theater style, but instead with a comfortable executive chair and a small side table for each and every participant. The entire atmosphere is one that says, "we mean business." And yet there is an undercurrent of quiet enthusiasm and a vibe of excitement that make the entire event extremely positive for all the participants.

Mike Burandt, president, North American Consumer Products for Georgia Pacific, makes it clear to each of his employees that they are to challenge old ideas, provoke thought, and invite innovation. His consistent message is that everyone's job is to look at the company and find a better way to do everything. Mike likes to say that he's looking for crazy ideas, because only ideas that are considered crazy today will be powerful enough to become tomorrow's standards for winning in the marketplace.

Decisions that lead to significant and lasting change in an organization almost always require boldness and courage. Mike Burandt and his team work to create an environment that supports people making courageous decisions.

This isn't change for the sake of change. It certainly isn't change for the sake of following some new business fad or

because yet another management guru has written a bestseller. It is change in order to find a better way to do what they do, because there's always a better way. This Georgia Pacific leadership group is always looking to surprise itself with innovative ideas and is committed to the decision to follow through. They don't have meetings to talk about greatness. They have meetings to create it.

Talking about It versus Doing It

Some companies think that just because they're having a meeting with the theme "Taking It to the Next Level" means that they're actually doing it. Having a meeting means you're talking about doing it. And the first thing you should talk about is whether or not you truly want to do whatever it is you're saying you want to do. You should look into each other's eyes and ask, "Do we really want to do this? Really?"

Greatness is a decision. It must be chosen. And making that choice is a defining moment in the life of a Category of One company. These defining moments often require courage and audacity, and they ultimately involve looking someone straight in the eye and saying something along the lines of "I'm in. Are you?"

Greatness seldom begins because the meeting planning committee picked the right theme or motivational speaker. Greatness begins when people take a deep breath and say, "Well then, let's throw out the way we've been doing it and get on with doing it the way we say we want to do it."

That's where the courage and audacity come in, in that willingness to let go of what used to work in order to clear the space for what will work next. It's one thing to take a vow of

progress in a hotel meeting room with 1,000 co-workers in the throes of a motivational feeding frenzy. It's quite another to get back to the office and begin the courageous work of executing strategies that will help ensure that what was talked about and cheered for back in the convention hotel in Cancun will ultimately become reality here in the real world.

Clear Out the Space

Creating processes for change will initially mean throwing old things out more than putting new things in place. You have to clear out the space for new ideas to move in. You have to look at your business with new eyes. The decision to go can mean looking at everything you do and simply asking the question "Does this still make sense?"

Once a gut-level commitment to go is made, everything changes. If everything doesn't change, then you probably haven't made the commitment. Category of One companies don't tweak, adjust, and tinker. They burn down assumptions and tear apart the way they've always done things. When you commit to becoming extraordinary, things may seem to be in chaos for a while. If you find your company is undertaking a calm, orderly, well-organized transition with the hope of becoming extraordinary, chances are pretty good that you're not making any transition at all. You're just rearranging the furniture. Once you get beyond rearranging furniture, and truly decide to throw the furniture out and move to a new house, then you'll find out who's along for the ride.

This is the part of deciding to go that far too often gets neglected or even ignored completely. The assumption is made that, of course, everyone here is gung ho to do the things that

are being talked about and that it's one for all and all for one. We've all come out of meetings in which decisions were made that, to have any chance of succeeding at all, would require a total team commitment. And yet there are people supposedly a part of that team that everyone knew in their hearts were not committed at all to the decision. They may have even been seriously opposed to it.

That's not to say that a vote has to be taken on every move that a company makes. But it just makes sense that for a company to do extraordinary things and reach new levels of success, at some point, the people involved have to make a commitment. At one time or another each of us has probably been a member of a team that has chosen a course of action with which we disagreed. But most of us have also had the experience of making a total commitment to that course of action, even though we would have preferred another way.

An Hour? A Year? Forever?

Exactly how long does it take to get an entire organization to make the decision to go? Depending on how big the organization is, how well you communicate, the strength of leadership, and many other factors, the answer might be an hour, a week, a year, or never. There are many different scenarios for achieving team commitment, any one of which could apply to your organization.

The size of your organization is a major factor in determining how quickly you can achieve that critical mass of commitment necessary to make things begin to happen. A business made up of just a few people can sometimes, though not often, make a significant decision over a pizza in under an hour.

Five thousand people will take a little more time. In a perfect world, you'd eventually get a 100 percent commitment from everyone. Everyone in the organization would join the decision to go. The bigger you are, the less likely that's ever going to happen.

You Never Really Get There

For Quill, it became an ongoing process. Larry Morse said, "We got in front of employees and repeated our vision over and over again. Communication is the single most important thing we have done. And we backed it up with our training, leadership model, and the establishment of specific goals for the organization. We have rewarded positive behavior and celebrated the successes every step of the way—lots of cake and pizza."

Ultimately, the decision to go becomes a never-ending process for the simple reason that you never get there. The second you achieve success in the marketplace, the marketplace changes, and you have to decide how to win in the new reality. Success is a moving target that causes a very positive version of permanent dissatisfaction. It is a form of dissatisfaction that feels good because you are driven by the fuel of knowing you can do better. It doesn't mean that you don't celebrate your victories. Of course you do. But you also don't rest on yesterday's accomplishments. That's not where the fun is. The fun is in what's next.