

## Principle #1

# Have a Clear and Appropriate Purpose

**F**ormer Medtronic CEO Bill George likes to tell a story about an exceptional worker in his cardiac pacemaker factory. Her record of quality and speed stood out even in a group of high-performing peers. When asked what drove her, she replied, “I’m not making medical devices. I’m saving lives.” Whether your business is pacemakers or yogurt or job training and placement, your workers need a reason to give their best to your enterprise. They need a reason to tolerate the inconveniences and obstacles that are part of daily work life. They need a clear and appropriate purpose.

I define *purpose* as why an organization was created, which is different from an organization’s mission. Mission, what the organization intends to do to fulfill its purpose, speaks specifically to how this organization will bring value into the world. Purpose speaks to what that value is. Different organizations, including those referred to in this book, may use different

terms for purpose and mission. The important thing isn't the specific terminology; it is the clarity with which your organization understands and practices these concepts.

This is true whether the organization is a nonprofit, a government agency, an artistic organization, or a for-profit corporation. Many people think that the main purpose of a for-profit company is to make money. I disagree. In my three decades of experience in the for-profit sector, I have observed that the best-performing organizations think of the bottom line as the result of focusing on purpose and mission, taking action based on that focus, and executing those actions well. They consider their profits an outcome rather than their reason for existence.

At General Mills, for example, some people would have said that Yoplait was in the business of manufacturing and selling yogurt. We recognized, however, that consumers wanted more nutritious, convenient, and great-tasting food. We saw ourselves as providing a delicious food choice that met their needs. As a purpose, that's not as earth-shaking as saving lives, but it provided a standard of excellence for our work that motivated employees and led to solid financial outcomes.

Why the emphasis on purpose in a book about social-purpose organizations? After all, organizations that tackle our greatest social problems already know why they exist. But the best organizations—whether for-profit or nonprofit—do more than know their purpose. They hold themselves accountable to serving that purpose in everything they do. They are more effective because they continually focus their efforts and resources on what will accomplish their purpose. They're less likely to get sidetracked. Too many organizations fall into the trap of being distracted from their original intent.

Here's how we might have strayed off course at RISE! Everyone knows that helping an unemployed person get a job is a good thing, so we could have been satisfied with getting any job for our participants. However, our purpose at RISE! is "to reduce concentrated poverty," so the bigger question is, Will this job raise this person out of poverty? Does placement equate to rising above poverty? Not if the job pays minimum wage and the person leaves after six months. A clear purpose not only sets direction, but functions as a standard against which to test all decisions and actions.

## **HOW RISE! DEVELOPED ITS PURPOSE AND MISSION**

I founded RISE! in order to combat poverty in the Twin Cities. But before I could do that, I had to learn about poverty in the United States. I discovered that when Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty in 1964, about 20 percent of the total population of the United States was living in poverty, according to the U.S. Census.<sup>1</sup> The figure dropped steadily over the next decade to about 11 percent, due largely to the extension of social security benefits to the elderly. It bounced up during the 1980s, leveled off in 2006 to between 12 and 13 percent, and steadily climbed to 15.1 percent in 2010. By the same year, the rate of poverty among black Americans had also risen to 27.4 percent, more than three times the rate for whites, with much higher figures among younger black men.<sup>2</sup>

After three decades of spending federal and private money on this issue, why had it grown worse and not better? I decided to find out.

In 1993, I visited antipoverty and job training programs in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Chicago, Indianapolis, Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York. I met with scores of people who were committed to guiding the poor toward economic self-sufficiency. I found a continuum of processes and results among the providers. At one end of the continuum were hundreds of nonprofits that provided short-term training and placement services for the poor. Their goal was to get people into jobs—any jobs. Typically these jobs paid minimum wage or just above it. These nonprofits were financed primarily by federal Jobs Partnership Training Act programs for poor adults or by welfare-to-work programs directed toward parents, who were almost always unmarried women.<sup>3</sup>

Most of these programs operated on the assumption that once people got started on the path to economic self-sufficiency, they could bootstrap themselves the rest of the way.<sup>4</sup> I found no evidence to support this conclusion in evaluations of federal programs.<sup>5</sup> In addition, little government support existed for programs that aimed to provide jobs that pay a living wage<sup>6</sup> (about twenty thousand dollars annually, plus benefits) to people with multiple barriers to success like a criminal record, low academic skills, few occupational skills, or drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>7</sup>

At the other end of the continuum of antipoverty program providers were community colleges, technical and trade schools, and proprietary education programs. Although they often enroll people with multiple barriers to success, the graduation rate is low: fewer than 15 percent of them earn degrees.<sup>8</sup> Without the skills to secure better-paying jobs and with limited access to training that would increase their job skills, these

disadvantaged workers remain stuck in dead-end jobs where real earnings—as well as employment levels—have been decreasing since the 1970s.

At the same time I was researching antipoverty programs, I sometimes heard people who were not working with the poor say things like, “My father came to this country with nothing, and he made it to the middle class. Why can’t they?” Underlying this statement is the question: Why do some of our American poor remain stuck in poverty while many immigrants are able to work their way up? The answer lies in the distinction between situational and generational poverty.<sup>9</sup>

Those whose poverty is related to their situation—being an immigrant or having lost a job or a spouse—have been impoverished by circumstances. They often succeed in overcoming their poverty as a result of help from family support, skills acquired in previous jobs, and personal qualities like a strong work ethic. They believe that if they work hard and make sacrifices today, their tomorrows—or their children’s tomorrows—will be brighter.

The prospects are quite different for some groups of poor Americans, when two or more generations have lived in poverty. A culture can emerge that typically produces a damaged sense of self-worth combined with a feeling of entitlement: *I’m a powerless victim. Someone else is responsible for my situation and owes me.* Most harmful of all is the sense of hopelessness that accompanies this mind-set: *If there’s no hope, why take action?* But those who don’t take determined action to rise above poverty won’t do so.

In developing our purpose and mission, it became clear that we had to address generational poverty and come up with

something that produces better results than those that existed at the time.

## **RISE!'S PURPOSE AND MISSION —AND HOW THEY HELP US SUCCEED**

At RISE! we put a lot of time and energy into deciding what our purpose and our mission should be. The effort paid off by making us more effective at achieving our outcomes.

We define our purpose as reducing concentrated poverty and our mission as providing employers with skilled workers, primarily men of color who were once poverty stricken. Our purpose focuses on concentrated poverty. Generational poverty thrives in concentrated, economically depressed, mostly urban neighborhoods. This concentrated poverty is less amenable to change and more damaging to our society than poverty in general. Children who are raised in such an environment of high unemployment, high crime, housing decay, and hopelessness have a hard time escaping poverty. Therefore, improvements in concentrated poverty have the potential to bring great benefits.

Our mission focuses on employers as our customers because employers supply the jobs. They set the standards for

### **RISE!'s Purpose and Mission**

**Purpose:** To reduce concentrated poverty

**Mission:** To provide employers with skilled workers, primarily men of color

the job market in which we place individuals. Our success or failure as an organization depends on our ability to meet their needs. Our mission also focuses on job training for men of color, although we enroll people of both sexes and all races. Why? Impoverished minorities have represented an increasing proportion of the Twin Cities population—4 to 8 percent in the 1980s when we were developing RISE!, a number that was projected to double in each of the next two decades.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the Twin Cities have the dubious distinction of having an unusually high gap in unemployment rates between blacks and whites.<sup>11</sup> In 2010, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, it was the worst in the nation.<sup>12</sup> Impoverished men are underserved because programs designed to get people off welfare serve custodial parents who are primarily women. At the same time, these men have great potential to help their families break the cycle of generational poverty by becoming role models and contributing to the family income as resident parents or through child support payments, to name just a few ways. Federal and state policy (and spending) doesn't squarely address the great leverage that these men can have in reducing the long-standing poverty of these families.

Because we are dedicated to breaking the cycle of poverty, we target jobs that start above the poverty line—jobs that pay no less than twenty thousand dollars a year plus benefits. In addition, our training is geared toward preparing our graduates to succeed at jobs that not only pay a living wage but provide benefits and offer prospects for advancement. In other words, RISE! is not a quick fix for the problems of poverty. We're committed to long-term solutions. Training that enables

a person to obtain a job but not keep it and grow doesn't serve the interests of that individual or society.

Consciousness of our purpose reinforces our long-term perspective. The world is always changing; this includes the types of skills and employees needed, the kinds of participants who come to us at RISE!, the requirements of funders, and the economic and political climate. When something does change, focusing on our purpose enables us to adjust our course without losing our sense of direction.

A clearly defined mission operationalizes an organization's purpose. It says, "Here's what we do," and, by implication, "Here's what we don't do." A clear mission helps ensure that people have clear goals and don't get sidetracked, wasting valuable resources in the process. The success of any organization depends on using that mission to guide your actions.

In our early days, for example, we considered operating a facility to house men in the program who were homeless, since a lack of safe and secure housing is a primary reason for dropping out of the program prematurely. Our research revealed that operating a housing facility would require additional capital, risks, and skills that we didn't possess. It also identified other competent organizations already providing these services, and so we decided that operating such a facility wasn't central to our mission. Furthermore, we could address the problem by developing relationships with independent housing providers, which we did. As a result, we remained focused on the areas where we had skills and were building a competitive advantage while avoiding a direction that would have diverted our attention and resources.



## **THE ALL-IMPORTANT ALIGNMENT OF PURPOSE, MISSION, AND PROGRAMS**

When purpose guides mission and mission determines programming, you have a beneficial chain that makes any enterprise, business or social, more effective. With the organization headed in a clear direction, people make better decisions and use resources more wisely. The organization is more productive.

In the case of RISE! our mission states that we serve employers by providing skilled workers, so our programming must meet employers' needs. To develop our curriculum, we solicit input from employers as well as from adult education experts and other human development experts.

Based on that input, we provide extensive training and development to prepare participants for jobs in two primary areas: operations (materials handling, warehousing, manufacturing, and machine operations) and office support (customer service, clerical work, financial services, and call centers). That training covers not only occupational skills but also remedial academic subjects, such as computer training, math, reading, speaking, and writing.

To accomplish our purpose and mission, we have discovered, we also must provide training in personal accountability and empowerment, two of the proven principles that are essential for success in the world of work. Including this training separates our approach from virtually all other poverty and training programs.

A new cycle of classes begins every ten weeks. On average, the program takes thirteen months to complete, although

some participants take less than six months and others up to two years to graduate. The difference depends on what competencies and barriers they enter with and what obstacles arise along the way. For example, some have had to drop out to attend to family emergencies and have returned later.

Our purpose gives us a long-term perspective, so our program reflects that. Unlike many other programs, our commitment is not time dependent. In exchange for participants' dedication, hard work, and mastery, we guarantee that we will work with them as long as it takes—whatever they need to develop marketable skills, use those skills to get a job, and stay on the job for at least one year. As long as a person is showing up on time, doing the work, and moving toward full employment, we continue to invest in him or her. Our program is designed to prepare participants for their long-term commitment to their new jobs and more productive lives.

## **WHEN MISSION MET REALITY AT COMMON GROUND**

An organization's purpose is a steady and unwavering statement of its intention. Its mission and strategies, however, may need to change—or be rethought—as it encounters a world that behaves differently from what its leaders anticipated. Common Ground's purpose is and always has been to “end homelessness,” but when its original mission and strategies hit a stumbling block, the organization managed to rethink and alter its approach.

One of its first triumphs occurred in the early 1990s when it finished converting the historic Times Square Hotel in New York City into 652 supportive housing apartments for

tenants who were low income, formerly homeless, or living with HIV/AIDS, or some combination of these. Supportive housing incorporates services that address tenants' mental and physical health issues, helps them pursue jobs and education, and otherwise moves them toward stable and productive lives.

Common Ground saw its role in ending homelessness as providing exemplary housing for the people it thinks of as "the most vulnerable among us." It had what founder and president Rosanne Haggerty calls "a housing mission."

Then came the great letdown—and the great aha!—that moved Common Ground from focusing solely on developing housing to ultimately creating a national organization to spearhead today's 100,000 Homes campaign.

"We started out as housing developers," says Haggerty. "Our innovation was doing supportive housing at a much larger scale [than had been done before], serving a mixed-income group, incorporating job creation and training." She continues:

After we'd done the Times Square project, we continued to see the same people on the street who lived there before we did the project. This wasn't supposed to happen. We wondered why we hadn't reached them. Outreach teams working with the homeless on the street told us that these individuals refused their help and were choosing to be homeless. We foolishly believed that.

[Then one day] we got a call from a local hospital. An elderly woman had named us as her next of kin and wanted to move to the Times Square Hotel. She turned out to be one of the people we'd seen on the street for

years. We broke all our rules and found a way to move her right away into the building.

When she moved in, we asked her why she hadn't wanted to move into our building before. And she told us, "Nobody asked me. People asked me if I wanted to go to a shelter or stay on the street. Nobody ever asked me if I wanted help finding my own place."

That was the great aha! We then sent two interns out to talk to the people living on the street. We were stunned by what we learned. No one had been offered help with housing. What these individuals wanted was a home; they didn't want to be in shelters because they felt frightened or dehumanized there. Yet there was no system to connect them with anything but shelter.

That was the beginning of what became the "Street to Home Program," a process for moving the most vulnerable homeless directly into homes and systematically reducing street homelessness. We learned that you have to ask a lot more questions and look at people's actual experience of homelessness. In fact, for most people who are homeless, it's a very short-term experience and they find their own way out of it. We learned that we needed to focus on those who got stuck in homelessness and help them through the process of finding a home. That was a revelation to us and the field.

Common Ground's purpose—to end homelessness—was as strong as ever. But what it had learned led it to refine its mission. To have greater impact on the problem as a whole, Common Ground began to prioritize its efforts toward the long-term homeless. But who were these people who spent years, and even decades, living on urban streets?

Haggerty and her colleagues became familiar with the public health work of James O’Connell and Stephen Hwang, physicians who had studied the causes of death among homeless people. People living on the street often die young—in their forties and fifties—from a combination of physical and mental problems. They do get medical care in emergency rooms, but that’s expensive, and continuing care is a problem. Most have nowhere safe to store their medications, no refrigerator to preserve insulin or other drugs, and often limited ability to get to follow-up visits with a physician.

“If you want to solve a public health problem, you have to figure out who’s most vulnerable, to understand degrees of severity,” says Haggerty. “We realized that a public health approach should be applied to homelessness, and to begin to solve this problem we needed to know who specifically was in the worst health. And to use housing as a critical intervention.” With O’Connell, Hwang, and other collaborators, Common Ground developed a “vulnerability index” that ranks the homeless by health risk and prioritizes them for housing.

Common Ground still develops and manages supportive housing, because, notes Haggerty, “There is still a shortage of affordable and supportive housing.” Tenants succeed in their buildings, which have a retention rate of between 85 and 90 percent.

But, Haggerty continues, “it’s been very interesting. In the first twenty years, with our housing-focused mission, we assisted over forty-five hundred people in overcoming homelessness. But we knew that truly working to end homelessness would require a new way of working, which is why Community

Solutions was formed. In the past eighteen months, we have organized partners throughout the country to adopt the tools and processes that reduce street homelessness.” In July 2010, Community Solutions launched the 100,000 Homes campaign, a partnership of organizations in more than ninety communities working collectively to place 100,000 of the most vulnerable, chronically homeless people into permanent supportive housing by 2013. As of July 2011, over 10,000 had been housed, on track to meet that deadline. Clearly introducing a new strategy and organization to focus first on the homeless person and then on the housing appears promising.

All nonprofits can learn from the Common Ground/Community Solutions experience. You hold steady to your purpose. But just as important, you need to maintain flexibility when it comes to mission, strategy, and tactics. Common Ground kept expanding its understanding of the problem it was addressing and the environment it operated in. It used that knowledge to adjust its mission, strategy, and tactics and even to spin off a new organization to become more effective, by an order of magnitude, at serving their purpose.

## **COMMUNICATING YOUR PURPOSE TO EACH GROUP OF STAKEHOLDERS**

The purpose and mission of an organization must be communicated clearly, frequently, and in specific ways to each stakeholder. Why take the trouble to convey this message to all stakeholders rather than just customers or participants? Stakeholders who clearly understand your purpose and mission are better able to support it. They give you better feedback on

the effectiveness of your efforts. They are more willing to work through difficulties. You are able to develop a stronger, long-term relationship with your stakeholders, and they become partners in serving your purpose as a result.

Communicating purpose and mission is an essential and ongoing task that requires understanding the perceptions and misperceptions that each group is likely to have—and the ways in which they receive information best.

Nonprofits take on big challenges. We can use all the help we can get. Hone your message to the needs of each group of stakeholders. Find ways to reinforce that message on an ongoing basis. When you need stakeholder support, they will know why you're important, they'll believe in you, and they'll be there.

Here's how we hone and communicate our message at RISE!

## **Participants**

To help participants understand our mission, we reinforce it from the first day of their probationary period in the program through to the end of their first year of employment. Mission finds its way into every written communication: our handbook, written agreement with participants, and training materials. We design our physical environment to be as businesslike as possible to communicate the professional approach that our mission implies. Teachers, trainers, and coaches convey the message in personal and group communications. (Coaches are staff members who teach, mentor, and troubleshoot, working one-on-one with participants to help them succeed at RISE! and in their first job after graduation.)

We hold a celebration every ten weeks where we recognize participants' accomplishments in achieving our mission. We present a ring to each graduate who has been on the job for one year. These celebrations also help our staff and volunteers to recharge their batteries and renew their sense of accomplishment and purpose.

The media we use to communicate with our other stakeholders are fairly typical—personal meetings, e-mail blasts, annual reports, quarterly letters. But we tailor our message carefully—to address each group's understanding and possible misunderstanding.

### **Customer Companies**

To help customer companies, we have found that we need to address confusion about the business approach we take toward alleviating poverty. For those who think of RISE! as a job training and placement organization alone, we clarify that we are an antipoverty organization. We help our customer companies understand that we view training and placement as solutions for alleviating poverty—our reason for being. This does not mean, however, that our standards for skilled employees are compromised by our purpose. A key part of alleviating poverty is to provide fully qualified employees who keep their jobs and progress in their work lives.

### **Contributors and Funders**

We help contributors and funders understand our purpose and mission—especially those who challenge our focus on training



men of color. Our message to contributors is that we do accept all races, genders, and ethnicities; however, our priority is on men of color because of the enormous leverage they can have in alleviating generational poverty. As responsible wage-earning men in communities where children know few such men, they can be powerful role models. They also provide income toward raising their children, which can lift a family above the poverty line, something a single parent working at minimum wage often can't accomplish. And they are underserved by both private and government-sponsored programs because of the governmental focus on reducing welfare rather than alleviating poverty.

## **Staff**

To help our staff understand our purpose and mission, we give them ongoing opportunities to encounter them. We have company meetings where our purpose and mission are explained, discussed, and sometimes challenged. Both are prominent in our employee handbook. Most important, we operationalize purpose and mission through our programming, and we articulate to employees how we have done so.

At RISE! I speak with every new employee. I want them to understand our mission and principles intellectually, of course. But I also want them to experience the passion with which our organization was founded. This communication process is particularly important because each person brings different expectations and experiences from his or her background in social services, business, or education.

## STAYING FINANCIALLY SECURE WHILE HOLDING TRUE TO YOUR MISSION

Maintaining the integrity of your mission can be quite a challenge when funders are providing funds for initiatives that are related to your mission but really don't support it. Some nonprofits chase such monetary support because they believe it's the only way they can survive. That's a bad idea, but it's tempting.

When I spoke to Felipe Vergara, cofounder of Lumni, which funds higher education costs through private capital, he had just completed a round of funding and was aware of how difficult staying true to your mission can be. Vergara explained, "When you are beginning an organization, there is a tyranny in the scarcity of cash. The principles are in the mind and the heart of the leader. But you need to pay salaries at the end of the month. Cash difficulties are a huge distortion sometimes."<sup>13</sup>

The key is to avoid offering a jumble of unrelated programs that reflect the interests of your funding sources rather than your own purpose and mission. Organizations that get too far off course never reach the critical mass that enables them to make a difference in any one area. They ultimately lose sight of their purpose. This is why so many organizations don't do as much good as they might and why some close down.

At RISE! maintaining the integrity of our mission proved to be more challenging than we anticipated. Millions of federal dollars were readily available for welfare-to-work initiatives, short-term training, and working with higher-functioning dis-

located workers, but much less was (and is) available for longer-term training for people with criminal records, low skill levels, and multiple personal issues. I'll admit we were tempted to go after the easier money—though in the end we didn't because that would have meant not being true to our mission. This isn't to say that supplementary ventures inevitably subvert an organization's purpose. Many nonprofits successfully generate funds from leveraging their intellectual property.

As a board member of American Public Media/Minnesota Public Radio, I was privileged to participate in one of the best of these ventures—a highly successful, revenue-producing initiative that began accidentally. Founded in 1967, Minnesota Public Radio (MPR; and its parent company, American Public Media) began as a single classical music radio station and has grown into the largest regional public radio network in the country: a forty-two-station network serving virtually all of Minnesota, parts of surrounding states, and stations in Los Angeles and Miami. It also syndicates nationally shows that it produces, like *Marketplace*, *Speaking of Faith*, and *A Prairie Home Companion*. With an impressive list of awards, it has grown into an influential national presence.

One of the reasons for MPR's remarkable growth has been its ability to convert its know-how into money-raising ventures that have generated support for its mission-driven activities. MPR's purpose (which it calls its mission) is "to enrich the mind and nourish the spirit, thereby assisting our audiences to enhance their lives, expand perspectives and strengthen their communities." It does this by creating and broadcasting news, entertainment, and music programming. In the process, it creates a great deal of intellectual property, including the

program that first brought it national attention, *A Prairie Home Companion*, a radio variety show hosted by Garrison Keillor that is broadcast in the United States and internationally by public radio stations and the Internet.

In the early days of *A Prairie Home Companion*, long before it became a national hit, Keillor promised during a broadcast to send a Powdermilk Biscuit poster to anyone who asked for one. (Powdermilk Biscuits is a fictional sponsor of the program, and its catchy little jingle is sung during every show.) I suspect MPR was testing how many listeners were paying close attention. Expecting only a handful of requests, the show's staff was overwhelmed, and dismayed, when thousands of requests poured in. To fulfill all of the requests could have meant financial ruin for the station. Thinking quickly, MPR decided to honor every request and, in hopes of defraying the cost, to include with each poster an order form for T-shirts, coffee mugs, and other *Prairie Home* paraphernalia.

Again, the response far exceeded expectations. It had to develop a major mail order business to meet the demand—a wonderful thing that ultimately led to even more problems. The revenue from selling the merchandise not only threatened the station's tax-exempt status as a nonprofit, it also overwhelmed the governance capabilities of its board. So MPR's parent organization formed Rivertown Trading Company and its holding company, Greenspring Corporation, a separate, for-profit corporation with its own board to oversee the station's business enterprises. Some members of the board were common to both organizations to ensure MPR's interests were served, but the majority of directors were chosen for their business acumen alone. This enabled the MPR board to focus

on its mission and purpose while its for-profit board focused on running a business. I was a member of both. No longer were MPR board meetings concerned with inventory risks, for example, a subject better left to its for-profit. Over the years, Greenspring (through its Rivertown Trading Company subsidiary) provided tens of millions of dollars to MPR for its operating and capital needs. MPR later sold Rivertown Trading for more than \$120 million and used the money to boost its endowment and to fund additional projects.

So by using business ingenuity and leveraging its intellectual property, MPR was able to stay true to its mission, finance its growth, and remain financially secure. MPR has become the most successful and largest regional public radio organization in the country, as well as a pioneer in Internet media.

I looked for ways in which we at RISE! could also leverage our intellectual property. It was clear that the empowerment program we had developed could be valuable to others in the business, nonprofit, and education worlds. Such a venture would offset the costs of running our core program and increase our base of customer contacts. And the more feedback we received from these other groups, the more we could improve the training.

I was convinced that we could market our empowerment curriculum without getting sidetracked from our purpose. Our board had its doubts. Some members thought that the effort would divert resources and management attention from our primary objectives. Others were concerned that it would require investment spending we couldn't afford. Still others worried about a potential conflict for resources. For these

good reasons, we decided to start small. We created the Empowerment Institute, a specific group within RISE! that is managed separately so that RISE! can focus on its mission. The Empowerment Institute earns revenue to support RISE!'s mission by marketing our empowerment training to customers in markets outside those RISE! is dedicated to serving. Institute staff conduct training and also do train-the-trainer sessions using a curriculum we designed to take our content to participants outside our program. Our first customers were in the corporate and social services sectors, and we continue to work with clients there. More recently we've been working in education. Colleges and universities have an acute need to improve retention and graduation rates, especially among students who are the first generation of their family to attend. Our empowerment training is helping students deal with stress and continue their education while improving the educational institution's revenue (since students who continue their studies continue to pay tuition). In public middle schools, our empowerment training is giving students with behavior and emotional disorders the skills to attend mainstream classes. Corrections programs are using our empowerment training to improve reentry and recidivism among former convicts. The list of empowerment applications goes on and on. (You'll read more about the Empowerment Institute in Chapter Five.)

As we hoped, the Empowerment Institute has increased our revenues and extended our contacts for our core business. It has also served to confirm the value of our empowered approach to solving difficult issues in schools, universities, prisons, and other organizations. Seeking new sources of revenue by exploiting intellectual capital is often tempting, and

it can certainly be a worthwhile venture that contributes to financial stability. However, you need to be careful to organize, resource, and govern these activities so that they do not interfere with your purpose and mission. Otherwise you risk jeopardizing your organization's very reason for being.

## **A SENSE OF PURPOSE IS ESSENTIAL FOR HUMAN SURVIVAL**

How important is purpose, really? Many of us have worked in places where purpose is just an inspirational slogan on the wall that people rarely even glance at. Is that really so bad? If we step out of the realm of organization life and into one of the darkest times of world history, we learn that human beings need purpose. It's as elemental as food or water. A wise leader respects that human need and responds to it.

I find great insight in the work of Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl contemplates what made survivors of concentration camps like himself different from many of those who perished under Nazi barbarism.<sup>14</sup> It wasn't physical strength, age, or even health that determined who lived or died, the distinguished Austrian psychiatrist wrote. Many who were weaker, older, and sickly survived when others did not. Frankl concluded that survivors were distinguished by their ability to envision a future for themselves despite their suffering. They believed there was purpose to their lives then and in the future. They did not surrender to despair.

It may seem counterintuitive for an older person to be able to envision a future better than a younger one, but that

is exactly the point. People of all ages and conditions can choose to live a life dedicated to purpose. The survivors were literally living proof of Friedrich Nietzsche's maxim, "He who has a why to live for can bear any how."<sup>15</sup>

Most of us will never go through anything like the horror that Frankl experienced, but the lesson is clear: as people and organizations go through triumphs and tragedies, they are more likely to thrive if they are focused on a clear and appropriate purpose.

For exemplary organizations, mission and strategy, and goals and tactics, are open to adjustment based on changing conditions and ongoing learning. Purpose is not. It is the guiding force and moral compass that keeps us focused on our true north. It is inviolate.

## **QUESTIONS TO HELP YOUR ORGANIZATION BECOME MORE PURPOSE DRIVEN**

- Does your organization have a clearly articulated purpose that motivates people to do their best?
- Does your mission articulate specifically how your organization serves your purpose?
- How do you communicate your purpose and mission? Exactly what do you say, and where do you say it? What do you communicate with your behavior? (Your actions are more important than anything that you hang on the wall or put in an employee handbook.)
- What are the specific barriers to communication for each group of stakeholders? How could you tailor the message—and the way you communicate that message—to best reach each group?



- Are the services or products you provide in alignment with your purpose and mission? Is there some enterprise or activity that doesn't fit but nonetheless has become part of your organization's work? This could be the result of legacy decisions, financial reasons, decisions made in crisis mode, or deliberate, well-thought-out choices. Are the reasons currently compelling enough to continue pursuing that activity, or are you diverting precious resources that could be spent on achieving your mission?
- Should you adjust your organization's approach to serving your purpose in light of new information or changing circumstances? Could you become more effective by shifting your focus, as Common Ground did? How has your understanding of the issues you address become more clear and accurate? What actions does this suggest?

