Knowing + Doing = Being

Know+Do publishes monthly think papers for its subscribers and clients highlighting different issues that promote the philosophy of ‘knowing+doing=being’. Our approach is: if you cannot define where you want to BE, how can you KNOW your plans are correct and what you are DOING will help you reach your goal? This is the first paper of our third series covering ‘Effective Strategies’.

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Purpose, Process and Payoff
Think Paper No 1. Series 3: Effective Strategies

Welcome to the third series of our popular Think Papers. The papers have been designed to capture our company values including sharing and simplicity. We aim to take topical areas of knowledge and share our thoughts and experiences of these in an accessible way.

Operating in academia for over 15 years, I was struck by the way in which academics could sometimes overcomplicate the simplest of subjects. In fairness, we also came across this in many other sectors as jargon, technical models, and obscure language seem to dominate. An ever increasing array of management tools and technical software applications leaves even the most educated bewildered and lost at times. Regularly our work involves undertaking strategic reviews and we increasingly found ourselves encountering boards and senior managers who were struggling to make sense of where they were and where they wanted to be. At the other end of the spectrum we were also supporting new project managers and workers who had little experience of project planning and were struggling to put all the pieces together to make sense of a whole project.

To help people to get a clear focus we started to share a very simple formula that we had personally used for years to focus our attention and understanding of a particular project or undertaking. Known as the ‘3 Ps’ it stood for Purpose, Process and Payoff. These are presented as 3 questions:

- What’s the purpose?
- What’s the process?
- What’s the payoff?

These fundamental questions can be applied in many different situations within the work environment or individually. For example you could use them to help think through planning a team meeting:

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What’s the purpose of the meeting? This might contain several sub-questions such as:
- Are we clear about the aim of the meeting?
- Who are we inviting and why – what’s the purpose of them being there?

Once a clear purpose has been established then the next question is What’s the process for the meeting? Again this might contain several sub-questions such as:
- What’s the best format i.e. face-to-face, conference call, or a mixture of both? This in turn will likely determine the venue and any necessary resources.
- Is there an agenda for the meeting?
- How much time is needed to cover what’s needed?
- Are people expected to have done some pre-work prior to meeting?
- Do people have defined roles or input to the meeting?
- Do we have system in place to help people ensure that meetings are productive?
- How do we measure efficiency?

What’s the payoff? The payoff refers partly to being clear about the ultimate aim of the meeting. It’s the benefit statement and does not always equate as a direct financial payoff but it could provide other returns such as greater knowledge, new partnerships or a solution to a problem. Likely questions could be:
- What would a successful outcome be?
- How could we measure success?
- What’s the likely Return On Investment (ROI) from the meeting?

Any payoff has to be offset against the cost of the meeting; remembering that even in-house meetings have costs attached to them.
- What’s the cost of all the people’s time around the table? This also needs to be balanced against the fact that if they’re at the meeting they are not doing something else. What’s the value of their attendance?
- What other costs are associated with the meeting e.g. travel, room hire, refreshments, time to prepare, etc.?

Purpose, Process and Payoff provide a simple framework that can be worked through quickly to focus people’s attention on the need and aim for the meeting. We have also used this as a line of questioning when we are invited to a meeting. Unfortunately, we never cease to be amazed at how many times people are unable to answer these fundamental questions.

In today’s more challenging and cost conscious marketplace we believe that the 3 P’s can be adopted to provide clarity before committing precious resources, in order to ensure that a suitable ROI is made on any resource investment. It has been our experience, and those of plenty of case studies we have reviewed, that these sort of fundamental processes make the difference between a profitable sustainable company and those no longer trading.
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The formula can be applied at different levels within a business and the following diagram provides an idea of how to apply it at different levels across an organisation. With the recent shake up in markets and whole scale transfer of people and knowledge across industries experience shows us that working through this diagram is a useful exercise to undertake as it provides a good overview of the current understanding across the business. It also allows individuals to get beyond the detail of the latest strategic plan and take them to a meta-level of thinking that is much more fundamental. We have been surprised at how many organisations have not had clarity of purpose across their boards or management teams. When pushed to write down what their purpose is there have been many variants between individuals, which when translated into action, would manifest in different ways and produce different outcomes. Or in other words, if the purposes are not aligned then the processes chosen may be very different, which in turn produces different payoffs.

We would suggest using separate sheets of A4 paper for each element above and then putting them back together as an overall map. Slight deviations in one area can change the emphasis in another and sometimes this isn’t spotted until a project is completed. This overview provides an easy way for people to go above the detail and take a snapshot of where they are and if they are potentially heading off course. The continuing scale of change and turmoil in markets requires checking in a bit more often than previously. We see this as like taking a compass sighting to check we are where we think we are. Many times our journeys are not straight as the crow flies but rather we meander and have to react to obstacles that pop up. Being clear about where you are going means you can use a map and compass to help guide you on the best course to your destination.
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The constant pressure many organisations have found themselves under since the global crash in 2009 and the consequent change to business patterns and forecasts across all sectors means that it’s been very easy to lose sight of an organisation’s core purpose. Many defaulted to pure survival, and indeed that might have been a short-term imperative, but a continued focus on that will not necessarily grow the business and make it thriving, plus it’s very draining. The 3P’s formula provides a simple way to re-engage in dialogue and test how people view the different areas of the organisation.

Another important aspect within this has been the lack of rigour attached to formal processes and any associated performance measures. The old adage of, “If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always got,” actually no longer rings true because the speed of change makes it virtually impossible to keep doing what you’ve always done anyway. Many people are relying on old systems and have not challenged or stress tested their systems to see whether they are better more efficient ways of doing a task nowadays. “We’re too busy doing!” is the normal reply – but here’s the nub of it, it’s not the strongest that survive but the most adaptable. In terms of process, many organisations require a better process of review and overview of their current business model and how well it’s working. A balance needs striking between working on and in the business.

With a clear purpose and good processes, the payoff should be easier to comprehend. However, there can be many associated payoffs aside from the main goal. Undertaking a project may provide a level of profit but it could also help develop a new method of working that could be tested; it could expand your reach into different marketplaces; develop new partnerships and so on – in other words it could provide multiple benefits. How many of these are understood, reviewed and can be evidenced within your business? This approach helps to introduce the concept of a more clearly defined ROI against resources committed.

These elements will be covered in the next accompanying Think Papers as we drill further into each of the three distinct elements of Purpose, Process, and Payoff.

Finally, at an individual level as we move forward into a new year you could apply the formula to yourself. What is your purpose over the next 12 months? Think about the different areas of your life in work, home, family, health and so forth. What processes do you have in place to ensure that something happens? If it’s a promotion at work you are aiming for, how are you going about ensuring that you’re in line for this? If it’s paying down some of your debts, what is your strategy? If each of these was achieved, what would the payoff be for you and your immediate circle of friends, family or colleagues? Using this simple but powerful model can help to decide whether you just get through the next 12 months or dictate what you get from investing in the next 12 months. Either way you’ll still be a year older but you could also be healthier, wealthier and wiser with a clearer purpose. The choice is yours – what will you Know+Do?

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