

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

## Being In Business

*What it takes to move a business to the next level.*

Once upon a time, a few grade-schoolers from the neighborhood set up a lemonade stand and began serving customers. As they counted out their earnings of \$7.50, one aspiring entrepreneurs asked her mom, “Do I have a real business?”

My bet is that nearly all of us at some point during our childhood started an enterprise. Our desire to experience pride of ownership and to feel a sense of autonomy and purpose was brought to the surface and put into action. In these maiden voyages of free enterprise, several lifelong lessons are available:

- Never despise small beginnings, for they are the rootstock that gives rise to our growth and development.
- The only way to know is to go.
- If your venture serves at least one customer, you are in business, and thus have a responsibility to serve that customer with excellence.
- Ownership is a powerful experience.

In the evaluation of enterprises that have endured the highs and lows of market cycles, unexpected challenges, competition and the generally chaotic nature of commerce, the childhood lessons still apply. The foundation of these businesses is built on truths that apply regardless of the product, scope or maturity. The load-bearing

element is having clarity of purpose and mission. Purpose and mission across businesses differ widely based on the goals and values of the organization’s leadership. They may even shift as the organization and those who lead it, grow and adapt.

We discover purpose by going beyond outcomes such as profit, number of units sold, and average sale price to ask the question that reveals the core and underlying reasons that provoke and stimulate us to act, sustain the effort and find meaning. The very phrase “being in business” begs us to bring the fullness of our being to our work — not to be defined by what we do, but rather to define what we do by who we are.

While acknowledging competitors and models of excellence, leaders of lasting enterprises do not fall prey to the trap of comparison. Envy undermines purpose and values.

Sustained success comes from a deep desire to serve a specified set of customers by offering solutions that improve their experience. Focus on the customer is critical to staying on mission without being detoured by an excessive focus on competitors.

Leaders of these sustained success business models diligently protect their values and organizational culture and never subjugate these elements to financial gain. There are deals that shouldn’t be made; customers that ought to be served by

others; and opportunities that while attractive, are not a good fit.

Our tendency is to get caught up in metrics that lead us into behaviors and mindsets that lead us away from the purposeful and intentional nature that comes with “being in business” to the transactional nature of “doing business.”

Examples include a focus on growth of an enterprise without examination of the tradeoffs and consequences, allowing “good enough” thinking to erode integrity and trust, or becoming so obsessed with the business that our relationships and character are damaged as a result.

Just as there are seasons of life for people, enterprises also experience seasons. There are seasons of beginning, growth, loss, transition, handing off and completion. The changing nature of the seasons requires adaptability, intentionality, and awareness of changing conditions as central elements to sustain success and fulfillment.

Being in business is an experience that allows us to bring heart, mind, body and spirit to our work; to find joy in the use of our gifts for a purpose larger than ourselves; and to rediscover daily the lessons of the lemonade stand. **A**

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