

The heart and soul of a social enterprise . . .

How will you be remembered?

That question is much on my mind these days. I've just returned from celebrating my 50th high school reunion in Minneapolis . . . and I spent nearly a week in August tramping around cemetery plots in southern Minnesota.

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The atmosphere and conversation at reunions change as the years pass. At our fifth, it was still all about *us* (especially those of us still angling for dates with our classmates!). By the time of our 26th (don't ask), we were all staring at a roomful of near-strangers and braggi . . . um . . . chatting about our careers and kids. During the 40th, grandkids were sneaking into the conversation and retirement plans were in the air. By then, most of us seemed comfortable in our skins and weren't trying to "prove" anything anymore.

As I prepared to leave for the 50th, I received an e-mail from one of my classmates. She'd been attempting to track everybody down and invite them to the three events we'd planned over a long weekend. There were only 57 students in our class and as I read down the list she sent me, two words jumped off the page: "Deceased" (eight people). "Missing" (five others). And I wondered: How are those 13 people remembered? Is it the way they'd hoped?

Ten years ago I sent a questionnaire to all the members of the class and circulated the answers before we actually got together. One of the questions was this: "If heaven exists, what would you like God to say to you when you reach the pearly gates?" I loved some of the mischievous replies:

- "Come in. I wasn't expecting you."
- "All your loved ones are waiting for you at the library, it's right by the boat docks, and there's an open bar."
- "Oops! My mistake! You're here too early, your suite isn't ready yet. I'll have to send you back."
- "Well, done." (*Note the careful placement of the comma!*)
- "Your classmates have all been expecting you."

But there were more serious responses as well:

- “You made a difference.”
- “You’ve done the best you can. Welcome.”
- “You fought the fight, enjoyed your journey and made a difference for those you left behind.”
- “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”

Now, ten years later, we’re all in our late 60s and I know each of us pauses now and then to wonder how we’ll be remembered. It’s not something we talk about beyond the usual bromides. But I know we all wonder . . .

Staring at gravestones in southern Minnesota brought me pause as well. “Loving Father.” “Beloved Son.” “Mom.” Except for an occasional quote from a poem or a religious text, the words almost always came back to family . . . and I was there as my wife traced through four generations of her own . . .

All of which leads me to a question I pose to my social enterprise friends: “How do you want *your* company to be remembered?” And, by extension, “How do *you* want to be remembered?”

The answer, I believe, lies in the three or four core values that will always guide your company’s daily activities and long-term plans -- and give you a solid foundation when faced with difficult ethical and business decisions. As Jim Collins and Jerry Porras put it in their seminal book *Built to Last*, they are “your essential and enduring tenets, not to be compromised for financial gain or short-term expediency.”

My friend Ronnie Brooks taught me about core values 30 years ago. She’d spend days with nonprofits and private sector companies helping them sort through their value systems. Along the way, she devised six criteria to identify a *genuine* core value:

- You choose it freely, from *bona fide* alternatives -- it’s not forced on you by others
- You act on it *all* the time
- It applies *everywhere* in your work
- You do it despite the consequences
- It lasts over time
- And it gives you pride

For example:

- ***From a center serving people with autism:*** “We believe the individual with autism is first and foremost a *person*.”
- ***From a community arts organization:*** “For many people, the liberating power of the arts is separated from daily life, and the potential of the arts to address social issues is unrealized: *We believe participation in the arts is fundamental to the life of every individual and community.*”

- ***From a social enterprise whose direct labor force consists primarily of people who are disabled or disadvantaged:*** “We believe individuals with mental, physical, economic or educational disadvantages *are* capable of holding real jobs, *should* receive competitive wages, and *deserve* opportunities for career advancement and profit-sharing.”
- ***From a social enterprise supplying American volunteers to assist NGOs throughout the developing world:*** “We believe in cross-cultural sensitivity. We will *always* honor local customs and celebrate individual differences.”

Core values can be the heart and soul of any social enterprise, but only if they become firmly embedded in the company’s daily operations. Here are five steps to make that happen:

- Define them *before* you do anything else
- Build core value benchmarks into *all* your operations and strategies (and make sure they can be quantified and measured -- otherwise you’re just blowing hot air)
- Appoint a senior-level ombudsperson to make sure you remain true to your vision, mission and core values on a daily basis (if you don’t, everybody will assume everybody else is paying enough attention and they’ll all be surprised when something ugly crawls out from under the rug)
- Which employees are the first to know if a gap begins growing between what you say you stand for and what your company is actually doing? It’s not the senior executives -- it’s your line employees, the people closest to your customers. Smart CEOs take a random batch of employees to lunch every month or so: It’s a time for the CEOs to listen, not preach; a time for employees to tell them if the company is truly walking the walk or just talking the talk.
- Conduct an annual social audit at the same time you compile your financial reports. Measure your performance against the core value benchmarks you built into your operations and strategies -- and then trumpet your story to the world.

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So what do you stand for? What are the three or four values you will never violate -- no matter what? How will your social enterprise be remembered?

Too often, social enterprises (and other small businesses) wait too long to focus on what they truly value -- and by that time their actions in the marketplace, their treatment of employees, and their involvement with local communities have already defined them. If you want to be remembered in a certain way 30 years from now, you need to begin acting that way today . . . and a set of core values shared by everybody in your company is a good place to start.