

Greatness & Your Organizational Soul:

Find It, Live It, Profit

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There's a lot of talk about "great" companies these days, and growing from good to great. Can your healthcare organization or practice achieve greatness? Should you even try? If you do, where should you begin?

Greatness. We all know personally at least moments of greatness. It is those times when everything is clicking, humming along, when life is working with ease. Often, it is quite ordinary moments that somehow become extraordinary. In healthcare, we define greatness as a path or journey, which leads to two kinds of results: your mission and your money.

Can you be on the path of greatness? Yes. Should you try? It depends.

Here's why. Greatness requires unwavering commitment to at least four things: 1) you use your gifts and do what you do best, 2) something about what you do or how you do it offers a unique benefit that distinguishes you from your competition, 3) you effectively tell your "customers" why they should choose you, and 4) you deliver on your promise in ways that make you sufficient money. When you are doing these things, you are on the path of greatness.

However, in some respects it is easier to settle for mediocrity or "good." As author Jim Collins says in the business bestseller *Good to Great*, "Good is the enemy of great." We've all seen centers of excellence in hospitals and healthcare systems. What does that make everything else — centers of mediocrity? So ask yourself, are you willing to make the commitment and to pay the price? Greatness requires focus and limits, staying true to your identity so you achieve your purpose and revenue objectives. Which necessitates letting go of some things you do now, saying no when you need to and focusing again on what you do best that produces unique value to your customers and works for your bottom line.

Where Do You Start?

The path of greatness begins with your soul, which we call your identity. Yes, we believe your organization's identity is your "soul." It is who you are and why you exist. It is what makes you unique and valuable. And it is why customers — patients, payers, partners, policymakers, investors, employees, regulators, the media — should choose you. As your soul, your organizational identity is the "touchstone" that provides consistency and focus to your operations, your marketing, and all that you do. Your identity

informs business decisions about which opportunities to pursue and which to pass, identifies your optimal niche in the competitive healthcare marketplace, and guides how you balance mission and money objectives.

You build your identity through how you do business everyday and how you deliver on your promise. You brand your identity through all of your communications in order to create the right image in the minds and hearts of your many customers so they distinguish you, value you, and choose you.

What is different about identity building in the health industry? As a health organization — whether for profit or not — you are held to a higher standard. Your identity — your organizational soul — cannot just be about maximizing shareholder value, management salaries, and return on financial investment. To be certain, fiscal responsibility and profitability are absolutely essential. But your identity is also about advancing your mission — which has another bottom line — preserving and improving health. This is why you're in the business you're in, and is especially vital now, in an era of corporate scandals and shaken public confidence.

When the pendulum swings off track, either too far from "mission" towards "money" or vice-versa, there will be problems. This is where a well-considered, strategic, and distinctive identity comes into play. Like a compass, your identity tells you where to go, why, and whether you are on track or not. A strong and strategic organizational identity also provides a critical "anchor" in difficult times. In fact, it can and should transcend any particular administrator or chief executive — it need not be "reinvented" with every change in leadership. A strong and distinctive identity is a critical component of greatness.

Tackle the Tough Questions

To get on the path of greatness and go from where you are to where you want to be, ask yourself these tough questions. What business are you in? (Don't make the same mistake as the railroad industry — they thought they were in the train business and didn't realize until airlines took most of their customers that their real business was transportation.) In terms of your positioning, where are you now? Where do you want to be? What do you do best? What is your niche? Why should customers choose you?

Now approach it from a broader complete perspective: Who competes with you for funds, patients, or public attention? What makes you different from each competitor? Answers to these questions will help you find your path of greatness. In the process, you will also identify who already "owns" which niches, and where your best opportunities for success are. Also, if you are involved in merger or acquisition activity, insisting on answers from both parties about both parties

will greatly accelerate your assessment of the "fit" and the strongest common ground.

Our experience working with a variety of health organizations is that there are usually two or three major attributes that collectively make them rightfully stand out. For example, CDC's major identity attributes were 1) keeping America safer and healthier, 2) being a trusted source of health information, and 3) serving as a resource or "quarterback" for public health partners. While other organizations were also trusted sources of health information, none could lay claim to all three characteristics. However, which attribute to emphasize depends on the target audience and what they most value. For example, while keeping America safer and healthier was most important to policymakers and the general public, being a trusted source of health information was key to the media, and providing technical expertise was most critical to state health departments.

Too Important to Not Do Right

Unfortunately, many healthcare organizations don't have a unique identity and market niche. They have the potential, but instead they play the game of replication — doing what everyone else is doing. Not only is this the antithesis of a unique identity, it takes you down the well-worn road of mediocrity, far from the path of greatness. Another common mistake is dealing with the branding and communications without first struggling through the process of finding their path of greatness, figuring out their distinctive identity, and determining what niche they want to lead. The result is ineffective, muddy, "me too" messages that clutter the minds of their customers and do nothing to improve positioning, performance or profitability.

Greatness is a path on which you go from where you are to where you want to be. Like a compass, your identity guides you on that path. Every health organization — whether a private practice, a major hospital chain, a local community clinic, an insurer or provider group — has a de facto identity. It could be "everything to everybody" pablum, passively determined by your detractors or competitors, or it can be strategic, distinctive, and solid so that your performance and profitability is maximized.

Remember, greatness requires commitment. It is not the easy path and not for everyone. On the path of greatness you use your gifts and do what you do best. You "stand out" in ways that matter to your customers. You give them a reason to choose you and you deliver on your promise in ways that make you sufficient money. When you are doing these things, you are on the path of greatness. ★

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