

Successful leaders not only know their organizations' missions, visions, and values, but they also encourage all people to determine their own individual purposes.

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# The Power of a Reference Marker as a **LEADERSHIP STRATEGY**

Stephen K. Hacker

Three-month summer jobs can be packed with life-long lessons. As an engineering student at Tulane University, I was fortunate to land a summer job as a road survey technician with the Florida Department of Transportation. With new work boots and clothes and equipped with an orange vest and minimal safety training, I was deemed ready and handed over to a seasoned survey crew.



We went to different highway construction sites, taking survey measurements and road core samples primarily as quality control evaluations of contractor work. A key learning in my introduction to surveying was the importance of a reference marker. This was a point in the visible range where all of our measurements would be referenced—a base orientation point. Whether embedded in a rock, nailed to the highway, or found in another permanent spot, this reference marker was critical to our survey work, determining the validity of other position measures. As a new kid on the crew, my first role was to periodically go to this reference marker with a surveying rod while the surveyor would “shoot” the point with a transit. Surveying has changed quite a bit from the early 1970s when I was working this job. The introduction of laser- and GPS-based survey equipment has affected the process, but the concept of a reference marker still exists.

In the case of organizations, much has been done worldwide in the last 40-plus years to establish organizational missions, visions, and values. These documents provide organizational reference points. In the past, it was rare to see mission statements posted throughout organizations or explicit sets of values adopted, taught, and referenced. Consumers know that these written declarations can be abused—sometimes thrust on the public for purposes of advertising and organizational promotion.

Overall, however, this movement has been positive in helping to establish ethical expectations (values) and aiding in workforce alignment (mission and vision). On the other hand, we have seen many incidents where the stated mission, vision, and values didn't seem to line up with behaviors. A cursory review of daily headlines discloses auto ignition switch and air bag problems, contaminated food products, purposely misstated financials, oil spills, dangerous products, and huge service outages based upon misrepresentations. The root cause in many of these incidents can be attributed to failure

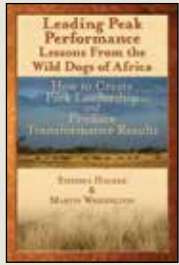
to consult, understand, or adhere to the involved organizations' reference markers.

Although modern organizations have generally adopted these reference markers, the individuals within the organizations mostly fail to have done so. Research conducted by Nick Craig and Scott Snook uncovered that fewer than 20 percent of organizational leaders have a strong sense of their individual purpose, and even fewer can distill their purpose into a concrete statement.<sup>1</sup> This is an interesting finding that bears consideration. Although the leaders can recite the mission, vision, and values of their organizations, the vast majority do not have a set of established reference markers themselves.

The answer to this peculiarity might be explained in the changing nature of work itself. As the pace of change has accelerated and society has increased in complexity, organizations have become much different animals than in the past. Where once leadership was primarily about managing (optimizing established systems), more and more it has become about truly leading (reengineering and re-creating organizations to meet rapidly changing demands). Where once the semi-conscious leader could perform successfully by applying strong mental skills and a hint of emotional intelligence, leading today's organization requires creative spirit, the ability to engage others in tackling change, and an abundance of self-awareness.

To take it a step further, these leadership requirements are being driven throughout the whole organization. Just as self-management was the cry of the 1970s and '80s, leadership is fast becoming an entry ticket to the workforce. If we subscribe to the idea that “the organization's most valuable asset is its people” (an expression which is itself devaluing), then it would be strange to have the people foundation of the organization not understanding their individual purposes clearly. If the individuals don't have a keen sense of where they are going in life or what their non-negotiable values are, the organization is placed in a parental stance.

## Leading Peak Performance: Lessons From the Wild Dogs of Africa



**Authors:** Stephen Hacker and Marvin Washington

**Abstract:** Organizations continue to undergo rapid, intense change, and the revolution currently underway calls for more than broad participation by organizational members.

A marked shift in leadership approach is required—a shift to pack leadership. The current models addressing leadership tend to focus on the energy and will of the organization’s leader. It’s true that strong leadership by the head of an organization is desired, but the demands of sweeping social, economic, and performance-cultural changes have moved the leadership focus throughout organizations. This book outlines an effective leadership approach to create

places of spirit and meaning. Using the wild dogs of Africa as a metaphor, a new and emerging leadership style is explored. Leaders take on the characteristics of a pack of wild dogs. Individual leaders of wild dog-type organizations have a strong sense of self-mastery coupled with humility. They seek out enlivened spirits in the workplace, guiding the organization to a co-created vision. The authors also provide a collection of wild dog case studies at the end of some of the chapters to show how the concepts of pack leadership operate in a variety of organizational and team settings.

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To thrive in our transformational time, therefore, we must invest first in better defining our individual reference markers. We must capture our life purpose in writing, along with our five-year vision and our top one to three values as well as how those values will be operationalized. Table 1 provides some helpful tips to aid us in generating our first draft, which doesn’t need to be perfect, and can be thought of as version 1.0.

Spelling out our specific reference markers in writing may be difficult, but it provides the key to increasing self-awareness and subsequently leadership performance. A notable quote generally attributed to Mark Twain speaks plainly, “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” Unfortunately it is up to each of us to determine the answer; we have to do the heavy lifting—unless we acquiesce to organizational cultism.

Viktor Frankl shares this charge to the individual in his seminal book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

“Ultimately man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked ... each man is questioned by life and he can answer to life by answering for his own life, to life he can only respond by being responsible.”<sup>2</sup> Frankl acquired much of his insight as a result of his experience as a prisoner in Auschwitz and other concentration camps during World War II. This experience informed his assertion that the “will to meaning” is the most basic motivation for humans, and from this premise, Frankl’s psychological theory of logotherapy—a highly directive existential psychotherapy that emphasizes the importance of meaning in the patient’s life especially as gained through spiritual values—was articulated.

I recently toured the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp Memorial located just outside of Berlin, Germany. Built in 1936, it was the first new camp constructed and served as a model camp for training. The buildings just outside the actual camp were where many young men learned how

**Table 1: Clarifying Our Reference Markers**

Component	Description	Inquiry Questions
Life purpose	Life purpose, like the mission of an organization, is our individual purpose for being on the planet. In short, it is the short statement of why we believe we are here—our reason for being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is my unique purpose for being? A place to start answering this question is by considering personal gifts and the most loved endeavors. Where do I see my work giving meaning?</li> <li>• When am I at my best, doing the work I love, driven by passion?</li> <li>• Where do I take pride in my contributions? Where do I seek mastery?</li> <li>• What is my calling?</li> </ul>
Five-year vision	A vision gives us a picture of ourselves that we “live into”—our desired future. It includes all the aspects of our lives—work, health, family, finances, relationships, community, hobby, learning, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As I imagine myself five years from now, how old am I? How am I engaged in life?</li> <li>• When I imagine a perfect day in my life five years from now and look at the details, where am I living? Who am I seeing and to whom am I talking?</li> <li>• What is the work I am doing? How am I accomplishing my work? With whom am I interacting? What happens at the end of the day? What am I accomplishing?</li> <li>• What do my financials look like? Where do I live? In what shape is my body? Who are the people in my circle of friends? Who is in my family?</li> </ul>
Values and operating principles	<p>Values and operating principles guide life’s decisions—big and small. They are the foundation of personal integrity.</p> <p>Core values are defined by us for ourselves; they need no rational or external justification. Core values are not likely to sway with trends and fads of the day.</p> <p>Operating principles are the observable practices and behavioral manifestations of our values—in others words, how we and others will know if we are living our values.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• List some of my key core values and one to three of their corresponding operating principles.</li> <li>• What is the source of those values? What does practice of those values create?</li> </ul>

to adopt the ruthless Nazi guard practices—the ways of oppression and death. My thoughts went to the process of indoctrination of human beings to perform unnatural barbarism. Of course, strong organizational doctrine was used. I asked myself a key question during the visit, “What was the role of individual doctrine?” My ruminations led me to the thoughts espoused in this article.

Much good work is created today. High-quality products, services, and experiences can be found easily, but there are also ethical lapses evidenced by disgraceful behaviors. Although some organizations are front and center, individuals are at the foundation of the organization’s ultimate performance and reputation. Reference markers serve as tremendous aids to the organization, but they also are essential for individuals. We each need to establish our reference markers, and then as leaders, we need to go beyond espousing our organizations’ missions, visions, and values. We need to help others step into a deeper inquiry concerning their reference markers.

## References

1. Nick Craig and Scott Snook, “From Purpose to Impact,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2014, pp. 104-111.
2. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Beacon Press, 1992, p 113.



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