

Living The Great Story:
**Three Questions That Connect Us To the Work of
Our Time**

By Kathleen M. Hosfeld

As a consultant who develops growth strategies for both for-profit and non-profit organizations, I've seen how important it is to define the organization's intentions around something that transcends short-term profits and self-interested career advancement. Living what I call the great story benefits an organization several ways. It:

- Creates efficiency through clear focus and alignment resulting in faster progress and fewer wasted resources;
- Articulates a compelling foundation for brands and other marketing messages;
- Fosters productive social connections among employees who then share the same goals; and
- Establishes a positive purpose for the organization in the context of a larger, dynamic system.

I first realized the value of the "great story" more than a decade ago, in listening to my father and a colleague reminisce about their days in the aluminum industry. The electrochemical process that now turns aluminum oxide into processed metal was discovered in the late 1800s. Prior to that time, aluminum was created through a laboratory-scale process in very small amounts more valuable than gold. So precious was aluminum that Pittsburgh industrialist Henry Clay Frick had the ceiling of his then Penn Avenue mansion reception room decorated with aluminum leaf instead of gold leaf.

The mass production of aluminum changed this. My father's firm ran direct current electricity through the aluminum oxide in huge 25,000-pound steel crucibles. These "pots" of molten aluminum glowed at temperatures exceeding 650 degrees Celsius. In large "pot rooms" the magma was poured into ingots. The ingots later were extruded into various industrial forms.

After my father retired, and I had dinner with him and a colleague I had my first encounter with the power of the great story. On one of Dad's trips to the Northwest, we arranged to dine with a colleague at a breezy Pike Place Market restaurant. As the sun set over Puget Sound we pushed back from empty plates, and the two former executives became nostalgic.

"It's not the same as when we were there, Bob," his friend Clay said. "All these young guys care about is their careers. You and I, what we cared about was *aluminum*."

The reverence with which he said the word aluminum went beyond the value of excellence, beyond the pride of creating quality. Mass production of aluminum changed everything – from airplanes (once made of wood and fabric), to railcars, to building construction materials, to medical tools, to food storage. Aluminum was the metal that would carry us to the moon. The power of aluminum to create a better world was the kind of purpose that called for service beyond self-interest. It was clear in the way Clay said the word aluminum that to him it meant a brighter future for his children and grandchildren. That future was worth his dedication and creativity.

Whether we work in a for-profit or a non-profit, for government or private enterprise, the larger story of our work makes it worth the best we have to give.

Although there are for-profit examples, as I've just indicated, non-profits are leading the way today in organizing around a great story. One of my clients, Marylhurst University, a liberal arts institution in



Portland, OR, began with a great story. It was founded in 1893 by Catholic nuns, whose mission was to provide higher education to those who would not otherwise receive it. At that time, women were shut out of higher education, and thus Marylhurst became the first liberal arts college for women in the Northwest. As the definition of “underserved” has changed over time, so has Marylhurst’s focus. Today Marylhurst tailors its co-ed education to the student who must work full-time to support him or herself and family. The original mission of service, however, has not changed.

The Three Questions

In strategic planning work with clients, I’ve found that defining the organization’s purpose around something compelling to people both inside and outside the organization depends on answering three questions:

- What is the change we want to see in the world because of our work (shared vision)?
- What are the means we will use to create this change (shared means)?
- How do we want to be together as we do this work (shared values)?

Seeing the Change

When we ask the question, “What is the change we want to see in the world because of our work?” we assume that we have a degree (if small) of influence over a vast system. The question implies we’re looking for a point of leverage in the system. Another way to ask the question is “Why make a change at all? What is the need?”

Sometimes, we already know the change we want to create in the world – more home ownership, greater fuel efficiency, healthier kids, engaged citizens. We can look around us and see that others care about this same change because they too are working in their own way to address this need. This gives us a sense of who are partners, collaborators or competitors might be.

Most of us are unaccustomed to thinking about our work in terms of our impact on the world. One of my clients started with looking at the type of work his firm had been doing, the projects that people felt were most successful, to begin to determine the change he had been seeking unconsciously. Some entrepreneurs respond to this question by realizing they’ve lost track of their original goals for their business.

Creating the Change

The next question, “What are the means we will use to create this change” defines the day-to-day tasks and methods you use to achieve your goal. A technology support division of a local city government might have a goal to become an essential resource to the entire city system. But there might be many roads to get to this shared destination. Is it through superior help-desk solutions? Is it through catalyzing technology upgrades? Defining shared means is an agreement about strategy.

Clarifying “shared means” results in focus, and thus creates greater return on investment of learning and capital. It often requires sifting through what others (competitors or collaborators) are already doing, what your organization does best or most successfully. It also means listening to what customers or other constituents validate as meaningful. This validation can be purchases and customer loyalty in a for-profit venture. In a non-profit it can be expressed through grants and donations that support the work.



Being The Change

How we create the change is very often influenced by asking “How do we want to be together as we do this work?” This speaks to something very different than the values statements senior managers post on bulletin boards for everyone’s compliance. This question gets at the underlying values that reflect how we want to be treated or how we (the people) agree to treat each other in the workplace even when there’s no external reward. Creating alignment between the goals and organizational culture creates integrity; it says “we walk our talk.”

For many employees, agreements about how we want to be together can be as important as the change we want to see in the world. Positive social networks, being a valued member of a productive team, and the ability to take pride in their work create meaning for many employees that brings out their best contribution. These agreements can create stability at times when the larger strategic vision is shifting.

Respect and trust are some of the most common values people cite in terms of how they want to be together. Beyond this, however, the values can diverge according to the kind of work you do. Total Quality Management guru Edward Deming said that joy was an essential experience of work including industrial, manufacturing and assembly line work. The shared values joy or fun can create an important balance to the shared value of excellence. Imagining and creating organizational culture around shared values is a life-giving exercise.

Bringing the Vision to Reality

These three questions can be applied to both individuals and organizations. Getting clear answers and committing to a direction is not only energizing, but it also attracts new people, new resources, and other forms of energy to your work. It makes for brands that are backed by substance, strategic intent and commitment.

Clarity expands the sense of possibility and contribution people can create together for their work. It also helps the organization to choose between opportunities. Any strategic planning or marketing planning process that starts with these questions, must realize that hard work follows to prepare the organization to deliver. The answers must be translated into concrete action steps that everyone understands.

Beginning with these questions, however, leads us back to that place of the great story of our work. We’re not just telling a good story about our company and work as many corporate storytellers do. Rather we are seeing the Great Story of our time, finding our place in a story that is bigger than us, bigger than the place we work, and committing ourselves to work that is worthy of our passion and service. This is *living* a great story.



Kathleen Hosfeld is the President of Hosfeld & Associates, Inc. Since 1989, Hosfeld & Associates' marketing expertise and services have launched, grown and inspired visionary for-profit and non-profit organizations and projects. We help clients think more clearly and boldly about their goals. We provide the skills and resources clients need to implement breakthrough strategies for profitability, service, and contribution. For more information, please visit <http://www.hosfeld.com>