

SOUL SURVIVORS

Stephen Malloch & Bridget Armstrong explain why you need soul - and a few signposts - to create a great business.

BUSINESS IS CHANGING. More and more there is demand for businesses to demonstrate transparency and accountability beyond financial performance.

This is most obvious in the trend for reporting the triple bottom lines of social, environmental and financial accountability, with corporate governance also being added to the mix. Investment agencies offering 'ethical investment' are on the increase. Overall, this reflects a growing awareness and concern around the sustainability of an organisation's activities in the post-Enron global warming era.

In this ever changing landscape, we are in great need of signposts to rely on. But not just any old signposts. We need signposts that can apply to the rapidly changing business environment. We need signposts that rather than giving fixed instruction - "turn left when you meet sales target X" - point towards an orientation for doing business. If we embody a particular orientation then as times and circumstances change, we too can be flexible and adapt as needed. So, how can we develop a set of 'orientation signposts' that guide our social, environmental, financial and governance responsibilities - signposts that can support us as we negotiate the sustainability of our organisations?

Peter Senge and his co-authors in the book *Presence* believe that the path to any successful undertaking is through a personal odyssey. It is not enough simply to apply formulas to a situation - this path brings frustration and stagnation in business and any other endeavour. If we apply a formulaic approach to a relationship with another human being then we will, most definitely, be caught out. How many marriages have ended because one or both partners felt they were no longer seen or heard as the other person retreated into pre-recorded responses? Business is no different - it is our relationships with our fellow employees, customers, suppliers, as well as our relationship with the decisions and challenges that is the business. Business is a process, not a thing.

If we apply a formulaic approach to our business relationships and the challenges that will inevitably arise, then, one day, the approach simply won't work because our stereotype response and the reality of the situation won't match.

The answer is finding a way of being that is flexible, responsive, fresh and very alive. We call this way of being Soul. It is important to realise we are not using Soul to denote a 'thing'. Both Soul and business are processes.

For us, Soul is an orientation to living, a way of appreciating life. Soul loves simple details and community. For Thomas Moore "Soul is ... a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance."

To convey the meaning of Soul, Figure 1 gives some examples of what we consider Soul 'symptoms'. In the right column are outcomes of living with Soul, in the left column are symptoms of living from a lack of Soul.

Close your eyes for a moment, and get a feeling for what it is like for you to be at your work - get an overall sense of it. Then rate yourself on the six scales defined by the words in the table. For example, if you can't imagine feeling more fulfilled than you are in your current work, you would give yourself a 10 for the empty/fulfilled scale. On the other hand, if when you wake up in the morning you feel dread at the prospect of yet another day at work and just want to roll over and go back to sleep for the rest of the day,

you would give yourself a 0 for the wanting to stay in bed/wanting to go to work scale.

The numbers you have written down will give you an idea to what extent your work supports you living from Soul. If you have 10s all round, then congratulations, your Soul life and your work life are perfectly congruent, and you are expressing your deepest aspirations through your work. If however the numbers are low, then it may be you would benefit from some Soul work.

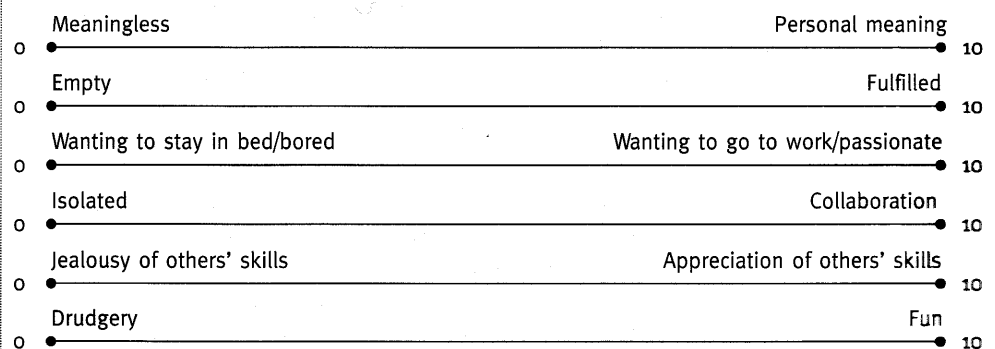
The three signposts that lead to Soul in business

There are three orientation signposts for working from Soul, and each has its foundation in ancient Buddhist wisdom.

- Everything changes - let go of the past, and change what needs to be changed
- Interbeing - be aware of the impact of your actions, and seek collaboration with companions
- Beginner's mind - let go of preconceptions, and appreciate what's in front of you

Each of the signposts consist of two parts - the first part encourages reflection, the second part encourages action. It is foolish to act if you don't know your current circumstances. And the signposts are not sequential - you don't start with the first and then progress onwards. All operate simultaneously - you can think of them as lenses through which you can view your business surroundings. You look at the landscape through each one, you note what you discover, and then you act.

Figure 1



Everything changes

Everything is in a state of change. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is beyond change. Typically, when faced with some uncomfortable fact, a person may be heard to say: "But I can't change that"; "We've always done it like this"; "Everyone else does it like this"; "But that person's been in that position in the company for years"; "But I can't start doing that". We hang on to the past because it is comfortable.

But so often this attitude denies reality (and this is intimately tied in with the third signpost). Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, collected data on 'great companies.' A great company has the ability to confront the facts and then do what is needed to follow the vision of what it can do best in the world. Sometimes, the uncomfortable fact might be that you are in the wrong line of work, it does not nurture your Soul, and it is time to change.

Interbeing

'Interbeing' is a word invented by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Everything we think, feel, say and do is intimately bound up with everything else. Every act a business carries out, every sale, every board room decision has repercussions far beyond the confines of the company. It makes good business sense to explore what these repercussions may be, for unforeseen consequences may come back to haunt you.

This signpost applies especially to social and environmental accountability. It also applies to the way those in positions of authority conduct themselves in relation to others. A habit of thinking "I can do it all by myself" and "I will hold the vision and everyone else will follow me" is a very exclusive way of managing, with little appreciation of others' skills.

In *Good to Great* it was found that leaders in great companies showed personal humility, ambition for the company, and absolute commitment to finding the right people. Once they had found the right people, and had listened to and debated with these people, they decided the company's direction. This signpost points towards the importance of collaboration, discussion of the facts, argument, and then an answer emerges. The word 'companion' literally means "one who breaks bread with another". We seek out people for our business with whom we enjoy spending time; they are not necessarily friends (though they might become friends), but we find their presence stimulating, they push us to be better at what we love doing, and we enjoy being around them.

Beginner's mind

'Beginner's mind' is a phrase from Zen; it points towards freshness, aliveness and a curiosity that we

bring to an activity. We look at a tree in a manner that does not compare it to other trees, that does not classify the tree as tall or short – we simply appreciate the tree as it is. So often we don't see what is in front of us because we are conditioned to see in just one way. Magic tricks are based on this principle – because we look in a particular way we don't see the 'trick'. As soon as we discover the means through which the trick is achieved, we can't avoid seeing it, and the illusion is lost. We have learnt to look differently.



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In business, we don't want illusion; we need to be able to see clearly. We need to let go of our preconceptions of how we think our business is, and look with fresh eyes. Remember the comment at the start of this article about relationships that wither due to a partner feeling unseen and unheard? One person is no longer actually seeing the other person in front of them, but instead is seeing a concept of the person, which is based on past experience, not present reality. The same is true in business. Are you seeing a concept of your business, based in the past, or the present reality?

It is much easier to truly see what is in front of us when we bring an attitude of appreciation. If we bring fear or arrogance, we are much more likely to see what we want to see, rather than what is. Appreciation brings openness. If we can bring appreciation to the data that suggests our business is declining, rather than fear or denial, we are much more likely to see the opportunities that could arise from the situation, rather than pretend nothing is happening.

People at Enron knew hugely irregular accounting practices were taking place, and presumably knew this couldn't be sustained indefinitely, yet these continued till the company eventually collapsed. How could this be? It was due to an inability to use any of the signposts. If the leaders of Enron had, just for a moment, appreciated what was actually taking place, let go of their habitual ways of doing things and their preconceptions, become aware of the potential

impact of their actions on themselves, their employees and investors, sought collaboration with those who could have helped them to change course, and then changed what needed to be changed, then maybe, just maybe, Enron would still be here today.

Where do I begin?

Working from a sense of Soul is not just something to make you feel good. It makes good business sense. Working from Soul will positively affect the triple bottom line. If you are working in an area you feel passionate about, if you love your work and those you work with, it makes intuitive sense that you are already in a great place to succeed. You won't need to talk yourself into getting out of bed in the morning to go to the office because you have to. You will be waking up with a sense of eagerness to engage once more in a livelihood that makes you feel more alive and which is realising your larger vision for your life, and is contributing positively to society.

If you were to get up, go outside, and take a walk, could you cultivate Beginner's Mind and simply take time to appreciate your surroundings – the trees, people, sky, the breeze against your face?

Now, can you bring that same sense of appreciation to your work? Notice what surrounds you and what is going on. Then consider: do you enjoy your surroundings at work? If not, what's stopping you from changing them? Are there people in your company who you've been thinking aren't really in the right part of the company, or who you believe aren't suited to be employed in your company? Are there people you've met who you think would be really great for your company? What's stopping you from changing what needs to be changed? Is your work having a negative impact on your physical or mental health? Is your business having a negative impact on your employees, society or environment? Again, what stops you from changing what needs to be changed? Through discussion with business companions and with business coaches working from the principles laid out here, you can discover what is getting in your way, and start creating a great business that feeds and expresses your Soul.

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