

Get Clear on Your Purpose and Outcomes And Get Results

by Robert "Jake" Jacobs

Do you recognize yourself in any of these settings?

- You're in a meeting or on a conference call, looking at your watch and wondering when it's going to end;
- Your plate is too full, you're staying late and working weekends...and the list seems to keep getting longer and longer; or
- It's hard to get people fully "signed on" for a project or initiative, even after their name has been added to the list of team members?

The solution to all of these problems is the same: get a clear purpose and outcomes. Too much time, money and energy are wasted on activities in search of a purpose or set of outcomes.

What do I mean? Let's return to the meeting or conference call when you found yourself more focused on the time than the task. Had anyone spelled out in concrete terms what success would look like, when you'd know you had done a good job and it was time to move on? If discussed, were these distilled into simple statements that had broad-based acceptance? Here are six reasons to bother with Purpose and Outcomes:

- Clarify what to include or exclude from the work you're doing. Purpose and Outcomes create "boundary conditions" so you can best focus limited resources to accomplish what you set out to achieve. Battles are waged everyday in organizations over head-count or budget allocations. "Turf-based" arguments become harder to sustain when you have objective criteria like Purpose and Outcomes to help decide where you'll get the highest Return on Investment.
- Guide what to do, whom to involve, what discussions to have, and what decisions to make. Ever feel overwhelmed by too many items on your

"To Do" list? Not sure who else should be included in discussions or even what discussions to have? A clear Purpose and set of Outcomes help you answer these questions and more. Whenever I hear clients complain about having too much on their plates, I have two reactions. Empathy...followed quickly by clarity. Having too little time is often blamed as the problem when the real culprit is not being clear enough about your Purpose and Outcomes. When you get clear on results that need to be achieved, it'll bring a sharper focus to your day, job, team and organization.

- Scale from organization, to change effort, initiative, event, meeting, and conversation. Getting clear on Purpose and Outcomes is not reserved for

the enterprise or total organization. What works well at that macro level is equally helpful in the next one-on-one talk you have with your boss or subordinate. Before I get on the phone for any call, I pause and think about what I

want to accomplish. The first two questions I ask on a call: "How much time do we have? and "What would tell you that the call we've just had was a success?" A few minutes on the front end like this save loads of time (and frustration) on the back end.

- Reduce anxiety and make it clear what you are up to. My mentor Kathie Dannemiller used to often talk about "reducing the mystery" of any work we were doing. A good thing for us. Even better for the folks we were working with. This was code for her about making our Purpose and Outcomes transparent.

- When people know what your goals are, it's a lot easier for them to help. And a lot harder for them to be forced to make up stories about your intentions – noble or otherwise. There is enough anxiety when change is afoot; no need to add to it by making people guess whether you're "with 'em" or "against 'em." Anxiety gets in the way of productivity and

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trust. It also feels lousy so people are more likely to step away from work that needs to be done instead of stepping up to do it.

- Answers the question “Why bother?” I often work with very large groups, up to several hundred people or more. The worst thing that can happen in a large group is for people to jump through hoops and do work because the facilitator in the front of the room, tells them to. I work hard with Design Teams (a microcosm of the group in the room) to plan these events and make best use of the time available. But that’s just it. We have taken our best cut at what would be worthwhile. Only the group itself knows what it really needs to do. As Barbara Bunker, another mentor of mine, was fond of saying, “Structure is helpful. It gives you something to deviate from.” Explicit Purpose and Outcomes make it easier for people to push back and get clear about what really needs to be accomplished.

One of the techniques I use to make sure I’m being clear about what we’re trying to achieve at any point in an event is to imagine someone in the back of the room with their arms folded thinking incredulously, “Why should I bother paying attention to anything you’re asking me to do?” I like to think of them as my irascible buddy. Each time I’m in front of the group, I figure it’s my job to make a clear case for why the next activity on the agenda is worth his or her time. In clearly spelling out the Purpose and Outcomes, my job is not to convince them to follow my lead. It’s to ensure they make an informed decision about whether the path I’m laying out makes sense to follow. If someone up front has not done a good job explaining why to tackle the next assignment – or it doesn’t make sense to do -- I wouldn’t do it either.

- Help you resist the seduction of diving straight into activities. The siren call of getting something done is seductive to us all. We’re busy people. There’s a lot to do. Why not get started instead of wasting all this time coming to agreement about Purpose and Outcomes? When you feel the strongest pull to get started right away is when you most need to step back and make sure you and your colleagues are clear and aligned around what you hope to accomplish. I’ve seen so many

arguments in organizations about what to do next because no one has gotten clear why to do anything in the first place. Time is short. Money is scarce. People are stretched. Too often it’s because folks are so busy getting anything done, that they end up accomplishing nothing. A clear Purpose and Outcomes will help you avoid things that are not a wise use of limited resources. Instead you’ll actually end up with a shorter “To Do” list and be more effective in accomplishing each item on it.