

metaview

We are asked as CEOs to give an overall perspective on our businesses, whether for analysts, bankers, vendors, customers, directors, stockholders, regulators, or even as responses to inquiries by business acquaintances or friends. We are the go-to persons for the broadest perspective, the “metaview.”

This perspective is in stark contrast to what we depend on from our associates in business. We expect from them the narrower perspective— sales, marketing, production, finance, administration, personnel or technology. In fact, some of us get stuck in whichever of these perspectives we “grew up” in, and fail to realize our full potential as CEOs, clinging nostalgically to the familiar and never reaching the meta-view which is rightfully ours. The possibilities for growth of our businesses become limited by our dependence upon or dogged adherence to the known.

What empowers us to be comfortable with taking the metaview?

Elementary knowledge of the disciplines we supervise. We can't be experts in all aspects of our businesses, but we need to have enough knowledge for effective supervision and articulation. That means that our associates or consultants need to be able to convey to us in clear, non-technical terms the metrics or the qualities necessary to judge the performance of the part of the business for which they are responsible. It helps if they can also balance advocacy for their discipline with a sense of the direction and dynamic equilibrium necessary for growth of the enterprise. Narrow defense of turf or deliberate obfuscation to shield a fiefdom is not just counterproductive. It can lead to disaster.

Development of our own metrics. In my first CEO position, I headed a 150 restaurant group in Texas, I had six to eight ratios or numbers which I checked, some weekly, some monthly. I felt they told me enough about trends in the business that, coupled with weekly staff meetings and individual officer follow-ups, I got a good picture of where we were and where we were headed. Checking with other CEOs in a CEO Club to which I belonged, I found

that all used similar systems to keep “on top” of their businesses.

Anticipate industry and economic trends. Participation in industry studies, attendance at industry conventions, and access to concise interpretations of major economic trends all yield important data to you as CEO. It is then your job to sift through this material to pick out those trends most likely to impact your business positively and negatively, and communicate your observations to your team.

Stimulate the best strategic thinking from your executive group. While the world looks to you for the metaview, the metaview is the product of open dialogue with your entire team. Challenge and counter-challenge produce the friction needed to polish the metaview. Contention within a collegial atmosphere serves you well here.

This is the point at which many CEOs stop, and they do a creditable job. A few go beyond by asking the question, how will my company survive, serve and prosper, not just for the length of the strategic plan or two strategic plans, but beyond my years as CEO or my physical lifetime. Will our industry be here in ten, fifteen, twenty years? How will we reinvent ourselves? How will we create the niche that we will fill twenty years from now?

About twenty-five years ago it was my privilege to be a member of the strategic planning team at Universal Foods, a Fortune 500 company headquartered in Milwaukee. Universal's divisions processed and distributed cheese, yeast, onion, garlic, chili peppers, pretzels and soft drinks in the United States. Our CEO raised the question of what business we were really in. He persisted in the face of strong opposition, including mine, to a conclusion that our true business was the technologically differentiated ingredient business. Over the next fifteen years,

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Universal divested all of its food processing and distribution businesses, while acquiring, innovating and expanding domestic and foreign flavor, color and fragrance businesses. It finally changed its name because “food” no longer fit its category. Its return on invested capital skyrocketed as price increases in its new non-commodity businesses were more easily absorbed by its customers. Today it operates in thirty countries, selling products in one hundred fifty nations, and two-thirds of its workforce are citizens of countries other than the United States.

Jim Collins pays tribute to such CEOs in *Built To Last*. He describes them as those whose metaview encompasses time as well as space, extending beyond their lifetimes. They are true visionaries.

I would submit that there is a level of visionary leadership even more encompassing. Recently, Anne and I watched again the PBS video of the tenth anniversary performance in London of *Les Miserables*. In the finale, the seventeen actors who have played main character Jean Val Jean sing phrases in their native languages in serial fashion. Such an inspiration!

Think of the producers and financiers of

this show, and the vision they had that literally quickened and inspired the collective spirit of freedom across the planet.

Or think of the financial backers of the Internet, whose vision has toppled and continues to weaken the hold of autocracies across the world. Or think of the founders of the micro-banks in Africa and Asia whose minute investments in tiny businesses have allowed countless men and women to rise above subsistence and begin to enjoy the first fruits of their entrepreneurship.

These visionaries are those whose metaview goes beyond time and space to the eternal concerns of the human spirit— freedom to grow, to prosper, to be fulfilled, to accomplish one's destiny, to fully live and be fully alive.

So, how open are you to metaview? Breathe, and then expand yourself as big as you can. Continue on. Limitlessness is the goal. Has the sun passed your shoulder yet? Get as big as you can. What's the view from here— of yourself, your business, your mission and vision, your part in destiny?

Metaviews enlarge our vision. And they can become one with the energy which is enlightening, ennobling and quickening. From this view, we take part in the action and passion of our time, and of all time.

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