

Getting The Business Fundamentals Right

White Paper

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First, Get The Basics Right

I have the great privilege of meeting and working with organisations large and small in both the UK and overseas, helping them with everything from marketing planning to international trade strategy. Along with colleagues, I train many of these organisations and the courses typically relate to exporting, importing, marketing planning or, some other specific aspect of their business.

Almost always – and typically over coffee or lunch – questions emerge that would best be put in the category of *Business Fundamentals*. On multiple occasions I've chatted with companies exporting to numerous regions around the world. When we drill into their challenges, inevitably they're nothing to do with international trade and everything to do with Sales not telling Finance what's been promised to the customer. Or, Production not understanding the importance of knowing exactly where components are manufactured as well as where they are bought from. Or, after sometimes months of long negotiations, Sales and Customer Services don't have a smart process for on-boarding a customer leading to an anxious customer at the very start of their relationship with a new supplier. This isn't the way to get a relationship off the ground if you want it to last for a long time and sell more of your products and services to that customer!

What emerges from these conversations is that so many organisations need to spend time focussing on getting their Business Fundamentals right. The companies that I meet are often already successful and I wouldn't meet them if they didn't believe in the value of training and developing their employees. So, they are absolutely what you'd call "good" companies. But even the good and great companies can often find ways to improve the fundamentals of how they operate their businesses. Here's a reminder of some of the basics that must not be forgotten.

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The Business Plan

Benjamin Franklin was one of the founding fathers of the United States, living in the 1700s. He was also a writer, philosopher, scientist, politician, inventor and publisher. One of his most famous quotes is that “if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail”. The concept of planning is clearly nothing new!

Lewis Carroll, author of the Alice In Wonderland books, is also quoted as saying “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there”. This doesn’t actually appear in any of the Alice In Wonderland books, but this wonderful dialog between Alice and the Cheshire Cat does appear:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where–” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“–so long as I get SOMEWHERE,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

In other words, if you keep going, whether that’s walking as Alice was, or operating a business, you will get somewhere. But if you want to get somewhere specific, you will need a plan!

Business Plans can take many forms and don’t have to be the traditional 30- or 40-page typed document. Increasingly they are a set of slides or a vision statement with bullet point goals and strategies. The format doesn’t matter so long as there is a plan and knowledge of how it will be achieved.

***...if you want to get somewhere specific,
you will need a plan!***

Why have a plan?

Once you have a plan, you also have the following:

- Knowledge of the vision of your organisation and how you will achieve that vision.
- The ability to assess new opportunities and make sure they are in line with your vision. If they're not, you can abandon them. But they might be great opportunities that you decide to explore. In that case you will be aware they are taking you on a different track and you will be going there consciously and with an understanding of the impact of exploring a new road.
- You can share your vision with your employees. It is reassuring for them to know there is an overall plan, and it helps you because it empowers them to fulfil their roles and take decisions that will move the company closer to its overall vision.
- You have a document that you can share with external advisors. This includes sources of funding such as banks and grant making bodies, but also your accountant and any other advisor that works to support your organisation. Your advisors are only as good as the information you give them so providing them with the "big picture" can only help them to serve you better.
- You have the core information when and if you need more. Often you will find that external parties such as grant funders will want information in a specific format for them. Perhaps they even provide a template (sometimes online) for you to complete. This does mean that your Business Plan might need a bit of work to fit their format but you're reformatting rather than originating which will save you time.
- And naturally your Business Plan helps you compile your budget, determine the focus for individual teams or departments and provides you with the tools to monitor your success.

*In other words, how can you know what to do
without a plan?*

Communications; communications; communications

At a relatively early stage in my career I worked for a large global corporation in the UK. They sent every employee on a two-day residential “Effective Communications” course within the first six months or so of employment. I confess that at the time I thought it was a lovely jolly to a very nice residential training centre in the country and I’m not sure how seriously I took it. But I learned valuable skills on that course that I am still using today with great regularity. Having worked at various levels of organisations and running my own business for many years, I’ve come to realise that communications – or rather, the breakdown of communications – is at the heart of a great many of the issues that managers face.

Let me restate. If there was a skill that you could give your employees that would significantly reduce the number of issues that need to be managed, wouldn’t you give it to them immediately? Helping them to communicate effectively between themselves and others such as your customers and suppliers will bring significant benefits.

Make it cultural for everyone

A culture of proactive and respectful communications creates an environment in which a great many issues don’t occur in the first place and when, or if, an issue does occur, it can often be effectively and efficiently resolved. Imagine if the Sales team had a great working relationship with Finance – fostered through good and frequent communications. By proactively and habitually sharing expectations they had set with customers things will run considerably more smoothly for Sales, Finance and, importantly, the customer.

Why do we like working with our friends, or become friends with the colleagues we get on best with? It’s because we find them easy to communicate with. Being an excellent communicator is a skill that is essential and can be learned – you need your employees to be able to communicate effectively with everyone they encounter in the workplace, not just the people they like and already get on with.

We must also remember that learning to communicate effectively is more than what is said. It’s also learning about what means of communication should be used. Email, for example, is quick and efficient and very useful if you can’t speak in person or reach someone on the phone. But there are significant limitations to email communications and exactly what *not* to use if the issue is complicated or there are tensions. Knowing when to pick up the phone or meet in person is a very important skill.

***Get your teams communicating brilliantly and it’s
amazing how much time of yours it will free up!***

Companies need to communicate too

Hopefully you have a good range of ways to communicate with your customers via your website, customer services and marketing activities. But do you also have a programme of internal communications in place? Even small companies need to communicate to their teams positively and regularly. Don't ever let your employees feel that they only hear bad news such as targets missed, colleagues leaving, or problems with products or services.

Make sure you proactively communicate the things they need to hear like the vision; but also, the good news about new customer wins or product launches. They will want to know about news for their area and others, so keep them informed. Just as your external marketing communications work towards your customers forming a positive view of your company, so your internal communications impact the view your employees have.

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Change Management

“The only thing that is constant is change” is the famous quote from Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher. It’s as true in business as it is in life and, in truth, we want it that way in business. Businesses don’t stand still, they either go forward or go backwards. If a business stands still, the market, their customers and their competitors – and frequently, all three – continue to go forward so the business effectively goes backwards.

So, we want change. We want new customers; we want new and more effective ways of doing the same thing; we want new markets; we want new employees and we want new opportunities. But change can be challenging. Lots of people have seen companies make important changes that are a disaster and, from time to time, we watch public bodies do the same under the scrutiny of the media and public opinion.

Change isn’t easy but it’s essential to the future success of any business. There are valuable and proven models for change that can be learned and will maximise the success of change in a business and help employees through changing times. Some employees love change – I worked for many years for a company that re-organised every year. Some were very unsettled by the uncertainty, but most embraced the exciting opportunities on offer. That’s probably to be expected – if you couldn’t handle the perceived uncertainty, you didn’t hang around too long.

Relish change

We almost always recognise the *need* for change – I bet all your employees could point out something that could be done better, be better, work better. But let’s now learn how to embrace change and get excited by the possibilities it offers. We should be looking for opportunities to change, and not be fazed by the practicalities of doing something differently but rather, be looking forward to the sense of achievement at the end. It’s possible to learn the stages of successful change and crucially, what happens that causes change to fail.

There are tools that can even be used diagnostically. Imagine you have a team that’s anxious about a new system coming their way. Using the tools that are available you can learn that this might be founded in fears that they won’t know how it works or be able to use it as easily as the system they have today. Knowing their concern is about their skills with the new system, you can reassure them with support, instruction and training. Remove their anxiety and they can happily move on to the next step in achieving the change that’s needed. Equip your organisation to manage change as effectively as they can – employees will cope with the uncertainty more readily and you’ll reap the rewards you are seeking to achieve more quickly.

***It’s possible to learn the stages of successful change
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Get the Processes right – every time!

Written processes are for the software developers and engineers, right? No, they are for every aspect of a business. I have a background in technology and in manufacturing and still spend a lot of my time in that world, so I have met a lot of software developers, engineers and production managers. They generally think logically and understand the value of processes and the value of writing it down. Every area of business needs to do the same.

And just because the engineers or developers (if you have them) are great at documenting the processes inherent in each of the products they build; it doesn't mean they have the same commitment to process management elsewhere. But they should.

Process management is more than pretty flowcharts. It's about truly understanding how an aspect of the business works, capturing that in written form, obtaining agreement from everyone involved, and reviewing it from time to time. Let's take each of those in turn.

Write it down

Before you can write a process, you must know what it is. That's logical, isn't it? Well, yes, it's logical but it turns out it's not that easy in practice. Pick almost any area of the business and chat to someone who's worked there for a while. Ask them *exactly* what they do so that you can write it down without any ambiguity whatsoever. It's much harder than you think. Frequently while working with companies on process management it becomes apparent that different people do the same task in different ways without valid reason, or people don't know for sure what happens in the next step so accidentally pass things on to the wrong place or person. The process of writing a process is often extremely insightful for companies!

Write it down or at least record it somewhere. I'm not a fan of excessive amounts of paper so by all means capture it electronically but make sure it's captured and dated and can easily be referred to whenever needed. "Tribal knowledge" is information that is known within a tribe but often unknown outside of it. In an organisation it is the know-how of your people and teams. Everything ticks along nicely when your people and teams are there to get things done. But what happens during holidays or sickness? Is it easy to book a courier if the receptionist is out?

It should be possible for anyone (suitably qualified), and certainly managers, to carry out each and every process in their area. It might take them longer to complete an unfamiliar task, but there should be a way to find out how to complete it and that is most effectively achieved by consulting the relevant process in the "process handbook" or "process library". That could be a notice pinned on the wall, a physical file in the office, or a directory of processes stored electronically. Just make sure it's accessible whenever needed.

Share it

If you're going to have a successful process, everyone involved needs to know about it. That's logical too, isn't it? If you don't tell Sales what their responsibility is when they hand over a new client to Customer Services, they won't know. So, guess what, they won't do it! Ideally, you'd get everyone involved in the process to write the process so that it reflects reality and they are happy

with the part they play in it. If that's just too onerous because of complexity or the number of people involved then, at a bare minimum, everyone involved must sign off on the process.

Uncommunicated processes – the ones you build but don't tell anyone about – are never successful. Imposed processes can also fail because they may not consider the reality that those involved know about. They also miss the opportunity for those that carry out tasks on a day to day basis to suggest improved ways of working. Practical limitations mean that involving the entire shipping team of ten people to define the process of packing an order is probably not going to be effective. But at least one person deeply familiar with the task should be involved to ensure the process is comprehensive and works in practice. Then the team manager has the role of ensuring everyone in the team knows the process and is committed to following it.

Review time

Capturing the process isn't the end of the task. Processes should be reviewed with sensible regularity to ensure they are still the best possible way to accomplish a task. A great way to do this is to have a standing instruction that the process must be followed each and every time and if that can't happen, someone records why so the process can be reviewed. The frequency of this naturally varies depending on the process. It's also very common for a new process to be refined a few times before it's finalised because once it's in operation, things can emerge that weren't considered at the start. In an environment that ships multiple orders to customers daily, finalising the process for packing and shipping will easily happen within a few short days. However, in a company with small numbers of customers and long sales lead times who only acquire a handful of new customers a year, the on-boarding process might take months to fine tune. Deciding on the frequency of review of a process is a balance between allowing sensible time for it to be in regular use but not so much time that minor adaptations slowly creep in so that the process is no longer recognisable when compared to reality.

Some processes are different

It would be remiss not to acknowledge that there are times when processes must be dictated. The obvious that come to mind are in the areas of health and safety or emergency procedures. Everyone would agree that it's not good use of time to convene a committee to decide what steps should be taken to evacuate a building in the event of a fire. Common sense and recognised practice must prevail. But isn't it interesting that organisations must have such procedures in place for events that rarely if ever – hopefully – take place but don't apply the same discipline to the activities that their employees undertake daily? These daily activities are the ones that drive a business forward, generate more sales, ensure customer satisfaction and lead to more revenue, profits and success. Definitely things for a business to take as seriously as what to do in an emergency.

Commit to getting the basics right

Getting the basics right takes time and, most importantly, commitment. It takes a management team that first and foremost understand how important it is. With that understanding it requires coaching and training to ensure that everyone understands the importance of the basics and the part they personally play in getting it right. And there are considerable benefits to having a solid foundation of robust business fundamentals which paves the way for growth. In 1962 John F Kennedy famously said, “The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.” The time to get the fundamentals right is now! We have training courses, we provide coaching and sometimes these are the actions that although at first glance appear to be covering basics, which they are, provide positive and significant impact to an organisation.

I’m sometimes asked if it’s ever too early to engage with a company and help them in these areas. The answer is a resounding “no”. Build for scale and growth from the very start – your first product, customer, employee, service, supplier will not be the last for most companies. Have the long-term view in sight from the outset and it will help you grow more quickly in the future.

For the organisations that get this right, it becomes a cultural norm. Employees expect a company meeting to hear about progress to date and learn about the vision for the coming year. People automatically put down their keyboards and pick up the phone to colleagues when that’s the most effective way to resolve an issue. Better still, where it’s possible to do so, they walk round to their colleagues’ desk! Teams embrace the challenge of change with gusto and are enthusiastic about implementing the next new thing. And day-to-day activities take place predictably and calmly without missing a beat during holidays or other absences.

We’d all like to work in that environment, wouldn’t we?

About the writer

Frances Fawcett has worked both within, and with, large global corporations and small businesses and frequently internationally.

After almost two decades with IT companies including Borland International, Canon (UK) and Microsoft Corporation, she spent a number of years providing marketing consultancy and global programme management to a variety of small and large companies. This included global management of a licensing programme for Microsoft Corporation.

For almost 10 years, she co-owned a small manufacturing business in the South West of the UK that designed and produced products sold all over the world. From their team of around 20 employees they developed their own product lines and produced products under a global license. This led to her joining the team working to deliver the Somerset Manufacturers Group and participating in the South West Peninsula Manufacturers' Network.

Having always had a keen interest in personal development, Frances is now providing coaching, training and support services to business owners, directors and managers in any of her areas of expertise. These include general business management (including Business Fundamentals), international trade, licensing, marketing, project and programme management and, leadership skills.

Professionally Frances is a member of the Institute of Leadership and Management, and a Fellow of the Institute of Training and Occupational Learning and her areas of expertise and interest spill over into her personal life where she is a volunteer Scout Leader holding local and county roles including that of County Leadership and Management Trainer.



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