

YOU ARE YOUR MISSION

by Jeremy Leggett



Founder and chairman of Solarcentury and SolarAid, and author of *The Carbon War and Half Gone* jeremyleggett.net

WITH GLOBAL SOCIETY RECOVERING FROM THE CREDIT CRUNCH, AND FACING A CLIMATE-CHANGE CRISIS, COMPANIES AND NON-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS ALIKE MUST RECAST THEIR RAISON D'ETRE

All organisations should have a vision rooted in a stated purpose, and core values by which that purpose is to be pursued. Discuss.' So might an MBA exam question read at the end of a marketing course.

And in the case of companies, in the second decade of the 21st century, woe betide them if their purpose is simply to maximise shareholder value. In the face of the world's growing crop of mega-problems, companies will have to play a major role – alongside non-profit organisations of all kinds – if we are to hold society together. At some point it becomes impossible to do decent business on a dying planet.

Let me explain what I mean, beginning with my own organisations, Solarcentury and SolarAid. Solarcentury's purpose has been to make as big a difference as we can in fighting climate change. Our products – solar rooftiles and suchlike – lead in their own right, displacing as they do coal-fired electricity. More than this, we have built the culture of the company around our purpose. The staff live it, the clients experience it and our sometimes spiky brand projects it.

A purpose is only one part of a vision. The other components are the core values the purpose is rooted in – usually three – and the mission the organisation sets itself: what it aims to achieve, and in what time frame.

AFTER MUCH CONFERRING, SOLARCENTURY CHOSE POSITIVITY, COURAGE AND THE desire to lead by example. The company's leaders have tried to apply these values consciously ever since. Positivity runs through almost all our messaging. Courage might be applicable to our decision to include among our investors a big energy company and Silicon Valley venture capitalists. (Others would call this stupidity. But we reasoned that we could only grow large enough to make the 'big difference' contained in our purpose with 'catapult partners' such as these.)

Desire to lead by example is clear from our corporate record. In 2008 we were the only renewable-energy company to win a *Sunday Times* 100 Best Small Companies to Work For award. From over 800 companies, we came second in the 'Giving Something Back' category. Our 'giving something back' focuses on SolarAid, a charity born in 2006 with a donation of 5% of Solarcentury's first operating profits, and for which around a quarter of Solarcentury staff volunteer.

SolarAid's purpose is to help people in the developing world lift themselves out of poverty using solar energy, and to combat climate change in the process. We now have active programmes in Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Kenya, where young people are trained to become solar entrepreneurs, assembling and selling solar lighting devices. Their businesses allow these entrepreneurs to embark on

the journey out of poverty; the solar lights they sell mean that their customers can read at night, improving education and so bringing poverty alleviation on a wider level. The lights displace kerosene lanterns, reducing surprising amounts of greenhouse gas. We design products for our entrepreneurs using our partners, including key staff from the product-development unit at Solarcentury working as volunteers in their spare time.

Based on all this, in 2009 Solarcentury and SolarAid won the Best Business and Small Charity Award at the UK National Fundraising Awards, and CSR Project of the Year at the *Charity Times* Awards.

Why am I boasting so shamelessly about all this?

I DO SO AS A FORM OF PROTEST. FEW COMPANIES HAVE A VISION THAT EXTENDS much beyond enriching investors in the short term, or getting people into shops to buy 'stuff', whether they need it or not. Hardly surprising, when we consider the vision of other key elements of society.

Consider what the current vision of a typical government might look like, were it to be written down anywhere.

Its purpose would surely be simply to maximise economic growth. We see this everywhere, from 'its-the-economy-stupid' politics to precipitate deficit-cutting.

Yet what is it that we are growing in our economies, even if they are working? A sick human on expensive medicine undergoing a messy divorce is a very productive entity when it comes to growing gross national product. A 'successful' fishing industry boosts GNP even as it helps push global fish stocks towards disastrous depletion. A 'successful' coal industry boosts GNP even as it fuels global warming. A 'successful' bank boosts GNP when it sucks up short-term profit in the socially useless casino of

complex-derivatives trading, priming global markets for catastrophic failure. None of these 'successful' growth machines are required to account for their downsides on a global balance sheet: the food shortages, the floods, the wildfires, the unemployment.

The point is this: to the extent that most institutions of commerce and governance in modern capitalism have a purpose, it is short-term enrichment at the expense of any chance of long-term prosperity. Growing numbers of business leaders – and workers – appreciate this, and realise that we are cogs in a suicidally dysfunctional machine. We have growing opportunities to air our perspectives, in columns such as this one and even in comment pieces in the *Financial Times*, and – since the credit-crunch fiasco – we are now not always routinely labelled as 'anti-capitalist' when we do so.

Many people are working on a coherent alternative view, from the New Economics Foundation through the burgeoning cooperative movement to the Transition Towns Network and beyond. While we are formulating it, it is important to light candles for hope along the way. The creation of new companies and non-profit organisations trying to do things in new ways is an inspiring way to light such candles. But they need a stated purpose, consistent with the long-term sustainability end game – not the short-term rush for enrichment in a system that follows hopelessly incomplete accounting rules. ■

GROWING NUMBERS OF BUSINESS LEADERS – AND WORKERS – APPRECIATE THAT WE ARE COGS IN A SUICIDALLY DYSFUNCTIONAL MACHINE