

# Business Secrets of the Trappist Monks

## By August Turak

### The Economic Miracle of Mepkin Abbey

- Mepkin Abbey, located in South Carolina, is a sanctuary for 25 or so Trappist monks living a life of contemplative prayer according to the arduous Rule of St. Benedict.
- Rule of St. Benedict – calls monks to manual labor as an essential aspect of the monastic experience coupled with a commitment to an overarching mission of service and selflessness.
- The Trappist monks are known for operating a successful portfolio of businesses wherever they are located throughout the world.
- The monks have discovered an amazing business secret: it is in our own self-interest to forget our self-interest.

### What We All Really Want

- Ultimately what we really want in life is to be transformed from selfishness to selflessness.
- How do we know that is true? Because throughout recorded history, crossing many different cultures, there is a recurring story of the hero who is transformed from selfishness to selflessness.
- This transformation of the hero is found in stories down through the millennia. This is not a storyline that Hollywood created.
- There are usually six phases to the Hero's Journey and typically they are found in this order:
  1. **The Call** – the invitation to abandon the beaten path in exchange for adventure and ultimately, self-transcendence.
  2. **Resistance to the Call** – the soul searching struggle before taking the "leap" into the unknown.
  3. **The Desert** – the intense personal struggle. This stage may last for years. There are no shortcuts around this stage. This is the toughest part of the Hero's Journey.
  4. **The Great Trial** – the hero is tempted to use his newly acquired power for selfish gain rather than selfless purposes.
  5. **Death & Rebirth** – marks the transformation of the hero where he realizes he can go no further under his own power but surrenders to something that is a higher, worthier purpose.
  6. **Return to Help Others** – renunciation of the old self and modeling of the new self for the benefit of others.

## **The End of Selfishness**

- Talent is not in short supply. Passion is.
- Leadership is not about getting things done; it is providing a mission worth doing in the first place.
- A mission worth doing and properly articulated, galvanizes ordinary people in achieving extraordinary results.
- A permanent transformation of self is ultimately what we want, a transformation from selfishness to selflessness.
- While it may seem we want an easy life of self-indulgence and immediate gratification, if we were honest with ourselves we would have to admit that we are most satisfied when we are selflessly sacrificing for something eminently worthwhile.
- What we really want is a mission so good, pure and mission-critical that we would selflessly "lose ourselves" in it and "give ourselves away" to it passionately, utterly, spontaneously, and without reservation.

## **Goat Rodeos and the Transformational Organization**

- Goat rodeo – slang for the opportunity to be transformed by serving with extraordinary effort for a higher mission or calling.
- The Consciously Transformational Organization – has three things in common:
  1. A high, overarching mission worthy of being selflessly served
  2. Personal transformation as part of the mission
  3. A methodology for bringing transformation about

## **Mission**

- The first step toward building a consciously transformational organization is having a high, overarching mission worthy of being served.
- Most businesses fall short of their potential because their mission is too small.
- Some believe lofty mission statements are meaningless fluff. Yet there is no mission more lofty, soft and abstract than serving God by serving others.
- The real problem is that executives tasked with infusing mission into execution lack the commitment and imagination it takes to make it happen.
- Aim Past the Target – instead of setting goals focus on building a culture that only emerges from the peer pressure of a communal team working toward a common mission.

- Charity is not something the monks practice part time for some future merit in the afterlife. It is who they are, and the driving force behind everything they do.
- A worthy mission statement should consider the following principles:
  1. Creating a spiritual community – meaning that personal growth, honesty, integrity and selflessly putting people first were more important than making money.
  2. With high expectations – meaning our goals should be higher than those who simply are in it for the money.
  3. With compassion – meaning we help employees get over the bar without lowering the bar.
  4. Putting community first with people willing to sacrifice for the good of the community.
  5. Keeping promises through a management system that formalizes accountability. Creating a goal setting culture that eschews “I’ll try” in favor of “I’ll do.”
  6. Open communication – meaning having all those awkward business conversations discussed out in the open.
  7. Honesty – no hidden agenda masking selfish motivations.
  8. Where compromise and conflict resolution is essential – where turf wars are not allowed.
  9. Embrace a “back against the wall” mentality – a delicate balance between inspiration and desperation.

### **Selflessness and Community**

- What motivates people to maximum performance? Is it recognition? Is it financial rewards? Is it quotas? No the key to maximum performance results from the peer pressure of a community working toward a common mission.
- Wrong thinking: Most people believe the purpose of community is to serve the individual.
- Counterintuitive thinking: The purpose of the individual is to serve the community.
- We are actually happiest and most satisfied when we are sacrificing for something bigger than ourselves. One of those things worth sacrificing for is community.
- Living selflessly is not natural, and its benefits are often not obvious. If they were everyone would be selfless.

### **Excellence for the Sake of Excellence**

- The more we sacrifice for a goal or a mission, the more passionate we become about that goal or mission.
- The secret of the monks' success is that their personal, organizational and business lives are all subsets of their one, high, overarching mission of service and selflessness.
- Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not a choice but a habit."
- Inculcating a value like excellence requires:
  1. Using symbolism to inspire and set vision
  2. Never lecturing. Instead be the example for others to follow.
  3. Continually focusing on the goal
  4. Following up – you get what you inspect, not what you expect
  5. Taking risks
  6. Shattering assumptions that limit your thinking of what is possible
  7. Changing things incrementally – get small wins along the way
  8. Caring about people – don't use them as an end to achieving the goal
  9. Putting the mission first – the good of the whole, ahead of your own selfish agenda

### **Ethical Standards, or Why Good Things Happen for Good People**

- Ethical behavior is something that pays off in the long run. It is often ethical expediency and instant gratification that leads us to take ethical shortcuts.
- The concept of detachment:
  1. Keeps our circumstances in the right perspective. For example, we can become so identified with our job that if threatened we react with the kind of fear that is only appropriate to life threatening situations.
  2. If you want to be ethical, you must be detached. You cultivate detachment by rooting yourself in something bigger than yourself and your personal concerns.

### **Being Faithful**

- The monks' success relies on faithfully behaving in ways that may not seem entirely rational.

- It means faithfully living out the mission regardless of where it leads and how scary things get.

### **The Power of Trust**

- Trust is everything.
- Trust is the most powerful tool that a leader can have and that trust is directly proportional to selflessness.
- Trust is not a scarce resource but it is a fragile asset. Once squandered it may be impossible to regain.
- How to get and maintain trust:
  1. Become trustworthy – like attracts like. Be a person that others can trust.
  2. Keep your promises, large and small.
  3. Keep promises to yourself – closely related to willpower and self-control.
  4. Under commit and over deliver.
  5. Be willing to make promises - those who don't make any promises get a reputation not only for unreliability but for being indecisive as well.
  6. Protect your personal brand – Everything you do or don't do affects your brand, and in the long run your reputation is your most valuable asset.
  7. Eradicate ambiguity – ambiguity causes conflicts and many “he said, she said” types of arguments.
  8. Institutionalize promise keeping – write promises down and review regularly with all parties concerned.
  9. Never make people ask – nothing builds trust more than anticipating your obligations and delivering on them without being asked. A debt repaid before it is asked reaps a huge dividend in trust.
  10. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Get in the habit of sending status reports on your promises.
  11. Aim past the target. Trust is not a business strategy or tactic; it is the natural by-product of living for a higher purpose.

### **Self-knowledge and Authenticity**

- Great leaders are authentic and it is a by-product of self-knowledge.

- Get acquainted with yourself by seeking new challenges that take you out of your comfort zone. The pressure produced by new challenges doesn't build character, it reveals it.
- Find or form a community that is dedicated to achieving authenticity.
- Reading, introspection, and even coaching are valuable, but they are no substitute for getting into the action and finding out who you really are.
- Self-knowledge is essential for making great business decisions.

### **Living the Life**

- The first step in living the life is making the commitment.
- Commitment may begin with a single decision, but there is all the difference in the world making a commitment and becoming committed.
- Commitment is a dynamic process, an endless feedback loop that deepens and becomes more perfect over time. Commitment feeds on itself in a virtuous cycle spiraling ever upward.
- Apply the lens of the Hero's Journey to all aspects of your life, and this will help sort out what is of ultimate importance from all the background noise and distractions that cloud your judgment.
- If the monks of Mepkin Abbey have inspired you then the most important commitment you can make is finding – or creating – a community dedicated to putting these monastic principles into practice.