



Organisational backbone

by a COO of a global business division

One of the most remarkable experiences of my business life was how a company driving hard for market-share gain and cost-saving targets in a tough market became energized by a simple symbol and filled it with meaning in day-to-day operations.

Our backbone was conceived by a small group of leaders in an intense deep-dive. The starting point was the purpose and values, which were the extremely powerful products of an earlier creative exercise that was easy to place at the centre. Defining the top of the backbone was one of the hardest tasks. We wanted to steer clear of developing a vision in favour of something that we would definitely know we had achieved when we got there, and we settled on an ambition. The strategy, already well developed, naturally followed and flowed from our purpose and values. Next came the brand, which was defined as our reputation, fashioned by everybody. This demystified the notion of brand and distinguished it from the visual identity that many believed was what brands were all about. The final component was stories, which would illustrate everything and led to our Awards Programme, where the very best contributions were honoured at a regional and global level.

The real 'aha' moment, though, was the realization that the components linked together coherently, balancing the familiar-sounding ambition and strategy with the softer behavioural concepts of the purpose and values, and bringing it all to life through brand and stories. It has been my experience that companies respond best when they are asked to take on something which is directionally clear, simple and congruent in content but leaves space for human beings to add their own meaning. This was the case with the backbone. The symbol itself was immediately recognizable and obviously associated with strength and cohesion. There was also an explicit opportunity for everybody to contribute, particularly through the brand and stories.

When we communicated the backbone to the leadership and subsequently to the broader organization, no doubt was expressed about its significance or importance. The component parts needed explanation to bring them to life, but the notion of a backbone linking business components with softer skills was embraced almost instantly.

Evidence of this was that backbones started appearing on the front of conference agendas, on walls in meeting rooms and in offices around the world. We didn't ask anybody to do this. The backbone just became the very symbol of the change process we were embarking on. It captured our hearts and minds.

