Parallel Streams: On Survival, Capability, and the Tyranny of Urgency

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One of the more curious examples of irony in business is that companies are often most in need of strategic thinking at precisely the moment they believe they have the least time for it.

There is nothing particularly unusual about this. Pressure has always had a habit of changing the conversation. Targets begin to feel increasingly difficult to achieve, forecasts trend in the wrong direction and priorities begin to shift.

Questions that felt important a month earlier are quietly moved aside. There will be time for those discussions later. For now, there is a more immediate problem to solve.

How do we achieve the number?

It is a perfectly reasonable question, and one that every business eventually finds itself asking. Businesses have always lived with pressure and, in all likelihood, always will. There is nothing inherently wrong with urgency, nor should there be. Ambition, after all, has never been a particularly comfortable companion.

What interests me is not the question itself, but what happens next.

In my experience, people begin to spend their time thinking about different things. Conversations that once concerned markets, customers and differentiation become increasingly focused on shorter time horizons. “How do we become successful?” gradually becomes “How do we get through the next few months?”

The distinction is subtle, but I suspect it matters more than most of us would care to admit.

There is a tendency to assume that urgency is temporary—experience suggests otherwise—and businesses, much like people, have a habit of becoming what they repeatedly practice.

There are few things more dangerous than becoming exceptionally good at surviving.

After all, survival has very little interest in tomorrow. It concerns itself almost exclusively with today.

Perhaps this explains why some businesses find themselves caught in a cycle of perpetual urgency. Targets change, pressure remains and, despite everyone’s best efforts, remarkably little changes from one year to the next.

This is not an argument against targets, nor is it an argument against ambition. Businesses need both. It is simply an observation.

The longer I think about it, the more I find myself returning to the same question.

How?

“How do we achieve our number?” is a perfectly reasonable place to begin, but I have become increasingly convinced that it is an incomplete question.

A more useful question might be:

“What mechanisms increase our probability of repeatedly achieving our number?”

The difference is significant. The former concerns itself almost exclusively with outcomes. The latter concerns itself with capability.

Revenue and margin contribution have been remarkably consistent ambitions for as long as businesses have existed. In that respect, very little has changed. What changes, in my experience, is the route businesses choose to take to get there.

It is tempting to believe that success is simply a consequence of effort. The logic is appealing. Work harder, move faster and, eventually, the numbers will take care of themselves.

Experience suggests it is rarely that simple.

There is no shortage of hard-working people in business. Most care deeply about what they do and spend more time thinking about work than they would probably care to admit. Yet effort, whilst necessary, has never felt sufficient to explain why some businesses seem to compound success while others continually find themselves rebuilding.

The businesses that interest me most are often those that possess an unusual degree of clarity. They understand who they are, what they do and, perhaps most importantly, why any of it matters.

There is a confidence that comes from that kind of understanding. Customers feel it. Partners feel it. Employees do too. It is difficult to create confidence externally when it does not exist internally.

Increasingly, I have become less convinced that businesses are particularly good at hiding what they believe about themselves.

Confidence, it seems, has a habit of communicating itself whether we intend it to or not.

Perhaps this explains why businesses that repeatedly outperform their peers tend to demonstrate a number of remarkably similar characteristics. They possess clear positioning, consistent messaging and an ability to articulate the value they create. They understand their markets, learn from previous experience and continually refine the mechanisms by which they operate.

Conversely, businesses that struggle often attempt to compensate through increased activity. More meetings become a substitute for better meetings. More partners become a substitute for better partners. More opportunities become a substitute for higher quality opportunities.

This creates the illusion of progress while obscuring a more fundamental question:

Are we becoming more effective?

Every successful business possesses an operating system, whether intentionally designed or developed through experience. It influences how decisions are made, how markets are approached and how success is measured. The purpose of any operating system is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to improve the probability of success while creating a mechanism for continuous improvement.

Businesses that learn faster than their competitors ultimately develop an advantage that is remarkably difficult to replicate.

This, perhaps, is where trust becomes particularly interesting.

Commercial relationships have always been built upon trust. Customers do not purchase products in isolation; they purchase confidence in outcomes. Similarly, partners do not merely act as routes to market. They become extensions of reputation.

Every recommendation carries with it an implicit statement:

“I believe this business will do what it says it is going to do.”

Trust, therefore, is not a by-product of commercial success. It is one of its principal inputs.

While products may become commoditized, trust remains remarkably resistant to disruption.

It strikes me that every business is attempting to do two things at once.

The first is obvious. It needs to survive.

The second is less obvious. It needs to become.

The challenge facing leadership is not selecting one over the other. It is maintaining both simultaneously.

Businesses that optimize exclusively for survival frequently find themselves repeating the same challenges year after year. Businesses that optimize exclusively for evolution often fail to survive long enough to realize their ambitions.

Leadership, therefore, is the ability to manage the tension between the two.

Perhaps this is why the most effective businesses share a common characteristic. They are learning businesses.

They consistently ask themselves:

Why did we win?

Why did we lose?

What should we repeat?

What should we stop doing?

What have we learned?

Learning is often perceived as a luxury during periods of pressure. In reality, it is one of the few mechanisms capable of reducing future pressure.

Commercial businesses do not fail solely because they lack talent, products or opportunity. More frequently, they become trapped by the immediacy of their own objectives.

The challenge is not choosing between today and tomorrow - it is recognizing that tomorrow is built through the decisions made today. Yesterday doesn’t know it has passed and tomorrow doesn’t know it is coming.

Revenue is an outcome; Capability is the mechanism and Trust is the multiplier.