

# Crystal Clear or Cracked, Foggy Mirror

By Leanne Hoagland-Smith, M.S.

**M**ost of us have internal mirrors that over time have become cracked and foggy. Our self-images are distorted. We know we should get a new mirror, but we may think the problem is merely a minor crack or a tad bit of fogginess—so we continue to use it.

Now take this image of a cracked and foggy mirror and apply it to your own SMB. Are you seeing things as they really are, or as you think they are?

What happens to your business results when you continue to use the defective mirror as a clarity tool? Maybe you are suddenly recognizing why your SMB is experiencing issues ranging from stagnant growth to disengaged employees. This initial recognition is the beginning of clarity:

you have begun to wipe the murk from your own thinking.

Clarity is essential in today's faster-than-light marketplace. Lack of clarity may lead you to perceive something falsely. The stakes are high: this lack of clarity may lead you, as the SMB owner, or your entire executive team—not to mention all your employees—toward poor or even catastrophic decisions.

To gain clarity requires action. It begins with the verb *clarify*. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, “to clarify” means to “make (something) easier to understand.” Pretty simple definition, isn't it?

This simple definition then leads to a more complex twofold question: “How do I make something easier to

understand, and in what realm do I do that?” Part of the answer to the first question of “How do I do make something easier?” returns to the February *NBIZ Magazine* article “Doctor Doom or Doctor Intentional.”

Once you've gained clarity, assessing your business will give you information that will further clarify the picture. Assessments take time, but they make clarification much easier for everyone to understand.

To answer the above twofold question requires that you return to your written strategic plan. With any luck, it isn't stuffed into a drawer somewhere or shoved between some books on your bookcase.

The purpose of any strategic plan is to clarify your SMB position within the marketplace. A well-researched strategic plan goes beyond vision, values, and mission statements. This plan digs deep into marketplace differentiation, competitive advantage, and overall operations flow. One of the best answers you will learn is to this question: “How easy is it to do business (both externally and internally) with my SMB?”

Many SMB owners have never invested the time required to construct a thorough and well-documented strategic plan. Additionally, quite a few who have taken the time to develop a written plan then fail to review it on a regular basis. What a tragic waste that sets the stage for business failure!

President Dwight Eisenhower said, “Plans are worthless; planning is everything.” The value of a strategic plan is planning. From that planning evolves incredible clarity.

From a 30,000-foot perspective, a strategic plan looks to five key areas, according to Jay R. Galbraith, author of *Designing Organizations: An Executive Briefing on Strategy, Structure and Processes*. These areas are Strategy,



Structure, Process and Lateral Capability, Reward System, and People Processes. Lack of clarity in any of these five areas results in confusion, which leads to friction, which creates gridlock, which promotes internal competition and produces low performance.

If you don't believe clarity is essential, reread the previous sentence. Then ask yourself this question: "Is there confusion, friction, gridlock, internal competition, and low performance in my SMB?"

As to the second part of the initial twofold question—"In what realm do I make something easier to understand (clarify something)"—the answer is integrated into every decision, every action. The "where" of clarity is deeply intentional.

Decision making requires crystal-clear clarity as to why that decision is even being considered. Even when decisions must be made quickly, you as the leader should have ongoing clarity regarding what is happening in your SMB and your marketplace. Being an entrepreneur or SMB is not a 9-to-5 job. It requires extra hours and a commitment to being ahead of the curve.

Probably the best decisions are those made with exceptional clarity. Of course, exceptional clarity requires having invested the time to ensure that all the necessary data, facts, information, and knowledge are present.

Decision making is also a process. Many decisions lack clarity because they are the results of preexisting attitudes and habits. The human brain trends toward the status quo because making a different decision requires additional energy. Since the human brain is wired to store energy for fight-or-flight moments, it is easier to retreat to past attitudes and habits than to forge forward.

Adopting a goal-setting attitude and habit supports clarity within the decision-making process. The plan, whether a strategic business plan or your own personal development plan, provides the solid foundation from which to make crystal-clear decisions.

We make a decision because a problem exists. Identifying the real problem and not the symptom posing as a problem is the first step. The next step is to decide whether we want to solve that problem.

Deciding to solve the problem is

a separate process wherein we classify the problem as important or not important. Through further reflection, we gather and analyze information.

Next, we develop alternative solutions, because there's more than one way to skin a metaphorical cat. Each solution may require further clarification through evaluation of that solution.

Beyond strategic planning and decision making, another reason why so many SMB owners, entrepreneurs, and executives fail to clarify their businesses and ultimately their actions is because of this excuse: "I don't have time." But, as one of my business coaches and mentors has often said, "If you don't have the time to do it right, when will you have the time to do it over?"

Operating from a seat-of-the-pants perspective is far more prevalent than many care to admit. Reactive behavior that focuses on yesterday and today has become the prime directive instead of proactive behavior that looks to tomorrow.

The "I don't have time" excuse can be traced back to attitudes and habits reinforced by the absence of a strategic plan and poor decision making. When I ask, "Do you waste 12 minutes a work day?" the answer 99.9 percent of the time is "Yes."

Twelve minutes a day equals one hour a week and translates into 52 hours a year. So time is really not a problem. Imagine what any individual could do by being intentional with his or her time!

The ability to clarify also suggests an internal awareness of one's own motivation. Why do people do what they do? Why do I do what I do? Many models exist in answer to this question, from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to Deci & Ryan's Theory of Self-Determination.

Spranger and Allport researched human motivation and constructed a values assessment that helps individuals clarify what motivates them. When clarity is achieved, behaviors can be adjusted to keep internal motivators functioning—and, just as importantly, to keep these motivators working together instead of working against one another.

Finally, clarification requires courage to challenge the status quo, to take a leap of faith. Being a risk taker is not something most people put on their

Top 10 list of things they want to be. However, if you fear what you might see in the mirror, then that cracked and foggy looking glass becomes your own security blanket, your comfort zone.

A crystal-clear mirror allows us to see our own self-image, as well as the image of our SMB. If your SMB is facing challenges, whether from the competition or from your own employees, maybe now is the time to seek clarity—to buy a new mirror and throw that cracked and foggy one into the trash where it belongs. **N**

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**NBIZ**  
magazine

APR 2016

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Website	nbizmag.com
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