SunFlower Model®

Rob Rvan's Secret Sauce for Success

*This book is dedicated to the memory of Gordon and Betty Moore —
two of the world's greatest entrepreneurs. Gordon for his pioneer work
at Intel making double the amount of information cram onto a silicon
chip every 18 months (Moore's Law) and Betty, who mentored Terry, for
her pioneer work in how to get the best result for your philantrophy
dollars. I was at Intel's Engineer of the Year in 1982 for authoring the
IEEE Specification for the Ethernet. At that point in my life Gordon was
my boss's boss's boss's boss. We were privileged to become friends with
Gordon and Betty in the last 20 years of their lives. Every generation of
entrepreneurs stands on the last generations shoulders. We stood on
their shoulders, as we hope our readers, the next generation will stand
on ours. Rob & Terry Ryan*

The Sunflower Model®: The Secret Sauce to Rob Ryan's Success

Introduction

I consider myself an American to the core — a place where a dream can become reality. But that only happens if you are willing to live up to the core values that make it possible. Individual freedom comes with individual responsibility. Free enterprise only succeeds when paired with initiative, drive, determination, sacrifice, industriousness, and personal accountability.

I believe this because I have lived it. My dreams became my reality. Now, I want to help you do the same.

Building your own business is a dream for many people. Yet, far too often, it stays just that — a dream.

When I was at an entrepreneurial celebration at Cornell University, I attended a session on starting your own business. The room was packed. I asked, "How many of you here today want to become entrepreneurs?" Nearly every hand in the room shot up. It was clear that almost everyone there wanted to build their own company. Then I asked, "So, why don't you?"

The answers fell into two main categories. Some said, "I don't have an idea." Others said, "I have an idea, but I'm not confident it will work or that it is compelling."

That moment stuck with me.

What keeps talented, capable people from identifying creative, compelling business ideas? What keeps those same people from having the confidence to set those ideas in motion and build thriving businesses?

I wrote this book to answer those questions — and to show you a simple step by step method to turn the dream of building or transforming your own business into reality.

Over the past 40 years, working with people from Main Street to Wall Street, I have seen firsthand that many people have an inner desire to create something of their own. I believe that deep down, in almost every heart, there is a piece of entrepreneurial DNA.

For some, it emerges early — like the kid with a handwritten sign at a lemonade stand on the corner. For others, it surfaces later, after years of working for someone else and hearing that inner voice whisper that there is something more you can do. For others still -- like me -- it comes through necessity, after losing a job and being forced to strike out on their own.

Wherever you are on that spectrum, I want to help you tap into your internal entrepreneur. I want to awaken and encourage that entrepreneurial energy inside you. I want to give you the ability and confidence to try.

That kind of confidence doesn't come from blind faith. It comes from learning and applying a disciplined set of principles and practices — principles I've developed, tested, and applied to companies of all sizes, from scrappy startups to multi-billion-dollar

enterprises. In this book, I'll share those principles with you in simple, easy to follow steps.

If you practice The SunFlower Model ® we lay out here, you will be on your way to creating your own successful company.

Go for it!

Chapter 1: The Successful Company

A successful entrepreneur devotes their efforts to something greater than themselves. They worry about developing and building the best innovative products and services. Success follows.

This book is about how individuals and organizations, new or old, can rethink and transform themselves to thrive, compete, and reach their fullest potential. It aims to introduce you to a fresh way of thinking; a renewed perspective on yourself and your opportunities; an innovative approach to designing your future; and a new, distributed style of leadership that taps into the knowledge and abilities of your entire team. I will teach you how to transform your endeavors into successful outcomes.

Successful businesses can profoundly impact individual lives and entire communities. Well-managed companies with effective entrepreneurial leaders can have transformative effects and positively influence individuals and communities, similar to mentors and influential individuals who inspire us. My belief is based on personal experience.

Consider the many ways that well-run, successful companies can drive positive transformations. Products originating from the unique strengths of successful businesses can change the world. These innovations can become essential global technologies, such as my company, Ascend Communications' foundational contributions to the internet, or products like the iPhone, which revolutionize how we communicate, work, learn, play, connect, and listen to music. Locally, products and services from successful companies significantly improve the quality of life and foster the community's economy.

As they grow, successful businesses stimulate an ecosystem of economic activity around them. Businesses such as dry cleaners, restaurants, day care centers, and transportation services frequently develop around thriving organizations. These changes contribute to community transformations and generate revenue across all sectors, spurring further economic and social development.

As sustainable economic entities, successful businesses create new jobs and provide essential resources to employees and their families, enabling personal transformations, resulting in improved education, enhanced living standards, strengthened families, and vibrant communities.

One metaphor is to view a successful company as a river cutting through an arid desert valley. Wherever it flows, the river brings life and activity. It nourishes the soil, enabling growth in trees, vegetation, and wildlife, even in the harshest environments.

For me, the potential of a company to significantly impact lives became clear five years after founding Ascend Communications. I had a set of experiences that revealed to me how profoundly successful companies could impact individuals and communities. At that time, Ascend had grown from scratch to over two billion dollars in revenue and had recently completed a successful initial public offering. My wife Terry and I often dined at one of our favorite restaurants, Bridges Restaurant & Bar in Danville, California. Towards the end of 1995, as we arrived, the valet noticed my license plate—ASCEND1

—and asked if I was associated with Ascend Communications. When I told him I was the CEO, the young man, who was no older than 21, enthusiastically explained that his early investment in Ascend had allowed him to launch his own business, providing valet services to multiple high-end local restaurants. His story highlighted the reach and positive impact our company had on individuals' lives.

On subsequent visits to the restaurant, this valet prominently displayed my car, making the license plate visible. Ascend's shares had risen 721% in 1995. Many locals had invested when our company went public, because the manager of a popular local gas station knew us and talked it up to his customers. Frequently, patrons approached us after dinner to share remarkable stories of Ascend's impact on their lives. Investments in Ascend helped families send children to college, facilitated entrepreneurial ventures, funded weddings, and secured retirement plans. These interactions demonstrated the broad impact a profitable well-run company can have.

From these conversations, I realized that successful companies, could indeed have an extraordinary positive influence, much like individuals known for their integrity and courage.

I acknowledge that not all organizations operate successfully or ethically. Numerous instances of corporate wrongdoing and exorbitant executive compensation in struggling organizations illustrate this. But, those entrepreneurs who transform their innovative ideas into thriving companies and constantly reinvent themselves to stay relevant, will create enduring value for all stakeholders. These successful entrepreneurs are the individuals who courageously take risks and build vibrant businesses whether on Main Street or Silicon Valley.

While leading Ascend, I developed disciplined processes instrumental in the company's success. I have since refined and taught these processes to hundreds of entrepreneurs worldwide, guiding companies at various stages toward success. This book presents these proven processes, collectively known as the Sunflower Model®. It provides clear and practical guidance, enabling any organization—large or small, for profit or non-profit—to define or reinvent itself effectively. The Sunflower Model® can benefit any group, offering confidence in their future direction.

Whether you aspire to launch your own business, struggle to grow a small enterprise, face challenges in a non-profit, seek new career directions, or manage an established company facing stagnation or competition, the structured steps of the Sunflower Model® will guide you toward sustained, meaningful success.

Let's get to it!

Effective Leadership

Simply stated, no company can achieve sustained success without effective leadership. The direction and performance of an organization are directly influenced by its leadership. As a mentor and coach, I pay close attention to the leaders guiding the

companies we mentor. I seek specific leadership qualities and characteristics. While I firmly believe that the Sunflower Model® is beneficial to any organization, I recognize that transformational outcomes occur through a combination of effective leadership traits and disciplined adherence to the Sunflower Process.

Before presenting the Sunflower Model®, I want to highlight several entrepreneurial and leadership qualities crucial for achieving meaningful outcomes. I view these leadership traits as foundational skills. Like any skill, these traits can be developed over time with dedication and discipline. Although numerous important entrepreneurial traits exist, we've identified seven leadership qualities that we believe best position leaders for success when paired with the Sunflower Model® If you have developed these innate qualities, we can teach you the rest.

Effective Leaders Have Grit

More than any other leadership trait, grit stands out as critical for successful leadership. Webster's dictionary defines grit as "firmness of mind or spirit; unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger." For us, grit simply means persistence, never giving up.

Numerous studies have explored correlations between intellect or cognitive ability and success, but fewer have focused on grit as a predictor of achievement. Researchers from the Universities of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and the United States Military Academy at West Point conducted a significant study on this topic. Published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology in 2007, the study titled "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals" concluded, "We suggest that one personal quality is shared by the most prominent leaders in every field: grit. We define grit as perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; their advantage is stamina—the gritty individual stays the course."

Josh Linkner, a successful entrepreneur and Forbes contributor, emphasized grit in his article "The Single Biggest Factor VCs Look For In Startup Founders." Citing the aforementioned study, Linkner affirmed that, from a venture capitalist's perspective, grit is the most crucial trait for entrepreneurs. He posed essential questions to assess one's level of grit:

"Do you take personal responsibility instead of blaming others? Do you set clear goals and exhibit determination? Do you exude self-confidence about overcoming challenges? Entrepreneurship inherently involves numerous obstacles, regardless of intelligence, wealth, or networking abilities. Because of the hurdles you'll face, having grit is indispensable."

Here are concepts from Linkner's article to help assess your grit level:

• A clear goal

• Determination despite others' doubts

• Confidence in overcoming challenges

• Humility about the difficulty of the journey

• Persistence despite fear

• Patience for small details that obscure the path

• Ethical integrity

• Flexibility when faced with obstacles

• Ability to connect and collaborate with others

• Willingness to accept help

• Appreciation for each step of the journey

• Respect for others' perseverance

• Loyalty without compromising relationships

• Inner strength guiding you toward your goal

Entrepreneurship involves risk-taking, overcoming setbacks, and venturing into unknown territories, all of which require courage, resilience, and determination. In short, entrepreneurship demands grit.

Effective Leaders Have Grit

Ask yourself: Do I possess the resilience and perseverance required to overcome setbacks and adversity in pursuit of my goals? Do I have grit?

Effective Leaders Exhibit Unwavering Integrity

In today's business landscape, where corporate misconduct has become increasingly common, integrity remains essential for sustainable success. Effective leaders adhere to long-established principles of good business practices, personal conduct, and ethical standards. They understand that their character reflects their behavior both publicly and privately. These leaders never resort to dishonesty or exploitation to achieve success. They embrace the principle, "Doing well by doing good" prioritizing integrity over ego or financial gain. Trust is utterly essential for to capitalism work.

Leaders who value integrity are willing to work diligently rather than take shortcuts. They prioritize ethical conduct and consistently align their actions with their core values,

regardless of external pressures or shifting societal norms. Integrity guides their decisions, ensuring honesty and fairness in all business dealings.

Effective leaders demonstrate unwavering integrity.

Ask yourself: Am I consistently honest and fair in my business interactions? Do I resist cutting corners or overlooking unethical behaviors? Do I embody integrity in everything I say and do?

Effective Leaders Are Laser-Focused

Once committed to specific strategic priorities, effective leaders remain highly focused and dedicated to achieving defined outcomes. They ignore distractions, external opinions, and fleeting trends, understanding that their focused attention is a valuable asset demanding optimal returns.

This intense focus fosters clear direction and purpose within the organization, inspiring team members to act decisively and cohesively. A leader's clear and unwavering commitment creates an environment of confidence and unity.

Driven and purposeful leaders naturally attract talented individuals, maintaining engagement and motivation throughout the organization. They avoid distractions commonly known as Shiny Object Syndrome (S.O.S.), concentrating on a single, clearly defined strategic priority. Effective leaders maintain laser-sharp focus.

Ask yourself: How dedicated and focused am I on my objectives?

Effective Leaders Are Contrarian

Several years ago, my wife, Terry and I visited Glacier National Park in Montana. Excited about hiking, I consulted a park ranger about popular trails. Upon learning which trails attracted the most visitors, I opted instead for less frequented paths. I prefer not to follow the crowd.

True leaders seek paths less traveled. They possess the courage, confidence, and insight to explore new and unconventional routes. Often viewed as unrealistic, these leaders challenge prevailing assumptions, thinking creatively and strategically about future opportunities. The phrase "no one can possibly do that" is music to their ears.

Such leaders do not act contrarian merely for argument's sake; rather, they strategically assess their direction, deliberately choosing innovative paths. The Sunflower Model® facilitates this contrarian mindset, providing a framework to identify unique opportunities distinct from competitors. Successful entrepreneurs do not start "me too" companies

trying to compete with large established businesses when they have no differentiation creating added value. This just positions them under the elephant's foot. Effective leaders embrace contrarian thinking and avoid simply following the crowd.

Ask yourself: Am I comfortable challenging conventional wisdom? Do others consider my approach unconventional or daring?

Effective Leaders Simplify Complexity

As businesses grow, they naturally become more complex due to shifting competitive dynamics, regulatory changes, and evolving internal processes. Managing this complexity effectively is crucial. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. famously valued achieving "simplicity on the other side of complexity." Effective leaders strive for clear direction and simplicity.

These leaders have the unique ability to break down intricate issues to their fundamental components, enabling decisive and confident decision-making. By simplifying complex situations, they position their organizations to move swiftly and efficiently in pursuit of their strategic objectives.

Effective Leaders Simplify Complexity

Successful leaders recognize that true clarity often exists beyond complexity. They see situations clearly and distinctly, avoiding indecision and ambiguity. Where others see overwhelming complexity, effective leaders distill situations to their essential elements. This capability enables decisive action.

Ask yourself: Can I effectively cut through complexity to identify the essential elements clearly and decisively?

Effective Leaders Delay Immediate Gratification

Successful leaders can maintain long-term focus without being distracted by short-term gains or immediate rewards. Research has shown that the ability to delay immediate gratification in pursuit of larger future goals is a strong indicator of eventual success. For instance, a famous psychological study demonstrated that five year old children who could delay eating a marshmallow for a short period in exchange for an additional one, tended to achieve greater success later in life. Effective leaders remain steadfast, focusing on ultimate objectives rather than immediate benefits.

Ask yourself: Am I able to remain patient and maintain a long-term perspective, or do I seek immediate rewards?

Effective Leadership Through Strategic Vision

The Scope Method To 'Scope Out' broadly describes one's capacity for observation, perception, and purposeful action. Derived from the Italian word 'scopo,' meaning purpose or goal, the concept encompasses three distinct yet interconnected skills: telescoping, microscoping, and kaleidoscoping.

Telescoping

Telescoping involves looking forward into the future and backward into the past to provide context and establish a strategic vision. Effective entrepreneurs possess the ability to envision possibilities clearly, anticipate future developments, and strategically position their organizations accordingly. This forward-looking capability is critical for identifying and leveraging future opportunities, as well as understanding competitive threats.

Microscoping

Effective leaders also possess the ability to 'microscope,' focusing on fine details to identify underlying patterns, trends, and causal relationships within their organizations. Using disciplined analytical approaches, they methodically examine relevant data to inform decisions and strategic directions. Microscoping requires patience and diligence, traits developed and honed through systematic processes like the Sunflower Model®

Kaleidoscoping

The third component, kaleidoscoping, is about creativity and innovation. Similar to how a kaleidoscope generates constantly evolving, vibrant patterns, effective leaders creatively apply insights gained from telescoping and microscoping. This creative synthesis enables them to develop innovative solutions, identify new opportunities, and continually redefine and invigorate their organizations. Kaleidoscoping is a powerful tool facilitated and enhanced by structured processes such as the Sunflower Model®

Collectively, telescoping, microscoping, and kaleidoscoping represent critical strategic skills, collectively termed Scope, that allow effective leaders to envision future possibilities, analyze current realities in detail, and creatively reposition their organizations. Successful entrepreneurs thoroughly scope out and learn about the industry where they propose to build a business.

Ask yourself: Am I capable of seeing the bigger picture, closely analyzing critical details, and creatively synthesizing information to pursue innovative opportunities?

Conclusion

I firmly believe you can embody these essential leadership qualities. Collectively, these traits offer a window into a leader's character, shaping their perspective and ability to recognize opportunities where others see obstacles. By learning and applying the

Sunflower Process, you will adopt new ways of thinking and viewing opportunities, empowering you to lead your organization toward lasting success. If you have the traits I listed above, we can teach you the rest. Lets get started.

Chapter 2: The Sunflower Model®

Virtually all businesses, whether high-tech or low-tech, large or small, must answer some foundational questions: How do we generate revenue? How do we continually reinvent ourselves to remain relevant? What products or services should we focus on delivering? The Sunflower model® is designed to help answer these questions. It provides a structured and tangible framework for thinking about and modeling your business. This process helps move a concept from a dream to an idea, from an idea to a tested hypothesis, and from that hypothesis to a viable product or service targeted at specific customers, ultimately contributing to sustainable revenue growth.

The Sunflower Model® brings together the intuitive and the analytical; the imaginative and the practical; the aspirational and the executable. It is iterative, principle-based, and adaptable to a wide range of business and personal contexts. Because it's grounded in universal principles, the Sunflower Model® is just as effective for a new startup as it is for a multinational corporation or a nonprofit organization. It also offers a clear approach for crafting competitive strategies and achieving measurable goals. At its core, it helps you identify your unique strengths, find the markets that recognize and reward those strengths, and collaborate with your customers to design offerings that win market share.

Each step in the Sunflower Model® is crafted to guide entrepreneurs and business leaders through a series of proven disciplines and exercises, designed to enhance clarity, build momentum, and accelerate success.

To illustrate how the Sunflower Model® works in practice, this chapter presents a step-by-step introduction to the entire process. These steps are interwoven with the story of Ascend Communications, the company I co-founded. The success of Ascend became the foundation for what would later evolve into the Sunflower Model®

By reflecting on Ascend's remarkable journey, from five founders and a few million dollars in revenue in 1989, to more than 4,200 employees and several billion dollars in sales by 1999, I was able to reverse-engineer the strategic decisions that drove our growth and distill them into a repeatable, disciplined process.

This chapter offers a high-level overview of the Sunflower Model® as it was applied at Ascend, showing how each step contributed to our trajectory. In the chapters that follow, we'll dive deeper into each individual step, guiding you through the process of developing and refining your own Sunflower, tailored to your unique strengths, challenges, and opportunities.

We begin with understanding the importance of identifying your core competency, this is the foundation of your Sunflower. From there, you'll explore the ways your core can be leveraged, represented metaphorically as the petals of your Sunflower. Next, you'll use your core and petals to develop strategic decision criteria. After that, we'll explore how to validate your ideas through a concept called the Walkabout. And finally, we'll guide you through the process of executing your Sunflower plan to create lasting, strategic impact.

Step 1: Focusing on Core Competencies – The Center of the Sunflower

Every entrepreneur and business leader experiences pivotal moments; defining insights that dramatically alter how we understand ourselves, our work, and our organizations. For me, the foundation of the Sunflower Model® traces back to one such moment in the early 1990s, when I found myself snowbound in the High Sierra Mountains. At the time, I was CEO of Ascend Communications, a company facing serious challenges. The firm had raised $3 million in venture capital to develop a product for high-speed data access via ISDN lines. However, the market rollout of ISDN services by telecom companies lagged two years behind expectations. The driving forces had shifted. ISDN was not being supported by the telephone industry as promised. The stem holding up our SunFlower had collapsed, leaving Ascend in a precarious financial position. Although the company had pivoting into videoconferencing, it was a small market in the early '90's so the board was seriously considering selling the company.

While snowed in at my mountain cabin, I read a landmark Harvard Business Review article titled "The Core Competence of the Corporation" by C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel. This influential piece introduced a new way of thinking about business strategy: instead of defining a company by its products or market segments, it advised leaders to define it by its core competencies. These are the unique skills, technologies, or capabilities that underlie a company's ability to deliver value. If identified, nurtured, and strategically leveraged, core competencies provide the roots of lasting competitive advantage.

The article cited Honda as a compelling example. Though Honda operates in a range of industries, cars, motorcycles, lawnmowers, generators, they all stem from a singular core competency: small engine design and manufacturing. From a product-level view, these may seem disconnected. But from a competency perspective, there is strategic coherence.

This was a transformative insight. I began to shift my thinking away from product categories and toward the underlying capabilities of Ascend. Scribbled in the margin of the article, I wrote: "What are Ascend's real core competencies?" I began examining the company's collective knowledge, technical expertise, and operational strengths. Ascend had developed products for ISDN and videoconferencing, but those were simply manifestations of something deeper. What we truly excelled at was sending data over dial-up digital phone lines, the common thread in everything we had built was "how to dial."

That realization became the turning point. I identified Ascend's core competency as "dial-up networking" or the ability to build scalable, any-to-any dial-up networks. With that focus, my co-founders and I regrouped and began to rethink the strategy entirely. That meeting marked the beginning of what would become the SunFlower Model®.

Focusing on Ascend's core competencies was a foundational shift. It changed how we positioned the business and ultimately helped drive the company's rapid ascent, culminating in one of the largest technology acquisitions in U.S. history, when Lucent Technologies acquired Ascend for $24 billion in 1999.

This is the first and most foundational step in the SunFlower Model®: discovering and defining your true core competencies, the center of the SunFlower. Whether you're an individual, a startup, or a large organization, clarifying what you do best will shape everything else you do. It becomes the focal point for product development, market targeting, and strategic growth.

As you work through the Sunflower Model® you will perform this same exercise. In upcoming chapters, we'll guide you through a structured and proven method to help you identify and articulate your core competencies. Though it may sound simple, I have found that doing this exercise well will dramatically shift how you perceive and grow your business.

How does one discover their core? This step in the Sunflower Model® process is about more than simply making a list of what you're good at; it's about uncovering the unique, valuable, and leverageable capabilities that differentiate you and form the center of your Sunflower. Done well, this process can transform how you see yourself or your organization, and open doors to opportunities you might never have imagined.

Think of mining your core competencies as peeling back the layers of an onion, or better yet, as uncovering the granite rock at the center of a field. Each layer you strip away reveals something closer to the essence of what makes you unique and valuable. And once you strike that bedrock, you've found the strategic DNA upon which everything else will grow.

Step 2: The Power of Leverage – The Petals of the Sunflower

Once your core competencies are clearly defined—the center of your Sunflower—it's time to explore how those competencies can be leveraged outward into the marketplace. This is the second step in the Sunflower Model®, where the power of leverage transforms internal strengths into external opportunities.

In our Sunflower metaphor, the petals represent all the possible applications, products, services, markets, and industries that naturally extend from your core competencies. This step is about identifying how your strengths can be applied in new and potentially high-growth directions. It requires open-minded exploration and structured brainstorming to uncover hidden revenue opportunities.

The Role of Leverage

The essence of this step is leverage, the ability to multiply value from a single competency. Strategic leverage allows a business to take a proven capability and redeploy it in new ways that increase impact, efficiency, and return. Rather than reinventing the wheel for every product or market, you are innovating from your strengths.

Effective leverage is not about chasing unrelated ideas or opportunities. It is about discovering the "fit" between what you do best and where that excellence solves problems in adjacent or underserved markets. The stronger your core, the more powerful and expansive your petals can become.

Brainstorming Petal Opportunities: SunStorming

To begin identifying your petals, ask:

- What other markets could benefit from our unique competency?
- What customer problems could we solve using this skill?
- In what ways can this core capability be repackaged or reapplied?
- Are there industry verticals, customer types, or distribution models we haven't explored?
- What emerging trends make our competency more valuable today than before?

Keep your brainstorming unrestricted initially. This is about expanding your field of vision and capturing every possibility that aligns with your core. Later steps will help you sort, prioritize, and validate.

When I looked at Ascend's core competency as 'dial-up networking hardware and software' (any-to-any) and began to consider where the competency of dialing was important, I saw several possible petals or new markets.

Those potential applications included:

- **Internet Infrastructure** – Building equipment for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) who needed high-performance dial-up technology for consumer internet access.
- **Remote Access** – Providing corporations with the infrastructure to transmit data between headquarters and remote branches.
- **Telecommuting** – Enabling secure dial-up connectivity for employees working from home.
- **Video Conferencing** – Facilitating simultaneous audio and visual communications across distances using dial-up protocols.

These new opportunities hadn't previously come into focus because the team had been defining themselves by their current products, not by their transferable capabilities. Once they shifted their mindset from a product-centric to a competency-centric view, the landscape of potential applications expanded dramatically.

Moving from Possibility to Priority

Once you have a broad list of possible petals, your next move is to filter and evaluate. Not all opportunities are equal, and not every petal is worth pursuing. You'll begin narrowing options using a set of clear criteria, market size, competition, time to money, alignment with core, and so on, during Step 3 of the process.

At Ascend, this process of discovery and leverage was a turning point. With only one more strategic pivot left before investor confidence ran out, it was critical to choose the right petal. The success that followed ultimately stemmed from correctly identifying a core competency and strategically applying it in a high-growth market.

Step 3: Refining Your Sunflower – Getting Decisive & Aligning the Team

Making wise decisions with limited information, often under pressure and amid uncertainty, is at the heart of successful entrepreneurship. It requires a disciplined process that increases the probability of outcomes. In many ways, both life and business can be viewed as a continuous sequence of choice points. These decisions, when strung together, shape the trajectory of your business and determine its future, much like a geometric line composed of a series of interconnected points.

Unfortunately, in many organizations, the process for making critical strategic decisions is flawed. It often excludes meaningful input from the team, stifles creativity, and becomes dominated by the loudest voice in the room or, worse, a controlling leader. The result is a lack of alignment and buy-in from those responsible for execution.

The Sunflower Model® offers an antidote to this dysfunction through a structured, collaborative, and criteria-driven approach to decision-making. It acknowledges that most businesses, after identifying their core competencies, have multiple petal options, products, services, or markets, they could pursue. But not all petals are equal. Which petal offers the greatest leverage? Which one aligns best with your strengths and market demands? How do you avoid making decisions based on personal bias or instinct alone? And how do you get your team aligned and invested in the outcome?

The answer lies in a process we call **SunForming**.

At Ascend, I faced this challenge. My team had identified multiple possible core competencies: ISDN, Bandwidth on Demand, and Digital Dialing, with "digital" emerging as the unifying thread. But we lacked the time and resources to pursue every possibility. They needed to refine their list, focus their efforts, and align the team on a clear direction.

To do this, I developed a decision-making matrix. My team and I began by identifying a set of decision criteria and building a simple scoring framework. Each row of the matrix represented a criterion, while each column represented a core competency or petal. Team members independently rated the same criteria for each option on a scale from 1 to 10. These scores were then discussed and reconciled to reach consensus.

This process brought direction, logic, and alignment to what might otherwise have been a subjective debate. It also ensured that everyone on the team had a voice, and a stake in the outcome. When one person's score was out of line with the majority, that person was asked what they knew (that maybe the rest did not) that caused them to score it so differently. After hearing the answer, other team members sometimes changed their initial scores too.

The criteria used for evaluating **core competencies** included:

- **Uniqueness/Differentiation** – How rare or defensible is this competency? How long did it take to build?

- **Leverage** – Can this competency be applied across multiple markets, products, or industries?

- **Customer Value** – How valuable is this competency from the perspective of your customer (not just internally)?

- **Complexity** – How difficult would it be for a competitor to replicate this skill or capability?

- **Driving Forces** – How aligned is this competency with external trends, technologies, or industry shifts?

The criteria for evaluating **petal options** (products, services, or markets) included:

- **Customer Value Equation** – How much does this offering help your customer save time, reduce cost, or improve outcomes?

- **Leverage** – To what extent does this petal draw upon your core competency? (Ideally, it should be a majority.)

- **Time to Revenue** – How quickly can this opportunity begin generating income?

- **Market Size & Growth** – What is the total addressable market and how fast is it growing?

- **Ease of Entry** – How difficult is it to enter this market and gain meaningful traction?

- **Competitive Landscape** – How crowded is this space? Are there barriers to entry or opportunities for clear differentiation?

- **Strategic Fit** – Does this petal align with your long-term vision and values?

You and members of your team may see other criteria to add to this list. These criteria form the basis of the SunFlower Model® Matrix discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Through this evaluative process, my and I team at Ascend were able to make strategic, informed decisions with confidence. More importantly, the team became unified in their direction. By turning fuzzy discussions into a quantitative framework, they brought structure to creativity and cut through complexity.

SunForming is the bridge between brainstorming and execution. It ensures that your petals are not only imaginative but also actionable. When done correctly, it transforms guesswork into strategy, individual opinion into team alignment, and vision into shared purpose.

Last, we'll take those prioritized petals into the real world and pressure-test them with live feedback from a process we call the Walkabout.

Step 4: Validating Your Sunflower – The Power of the Customer Walkabout and Collaboration

A hypothesis, by definition, is provisional. It's just a well-informed guess that still needs to be tested and proven. The exercises in Steps 1 through 3 of the Sunflower Model®: identifying core competencies, brainstorming potential petals, and using a criteria matrix to prioritize options, they don't give you a final answer. What they give you is a focused hypothesis about where your business can grow. Step 4 is where you stress-test that hypothesis by going directly to your customers.

For me, entrepreneurship has always been about managing risk, and one of the most effective ways I've found to reduce risk is to validate ideas with real customer feedback. This step isn't about building a product and hoping it works. It's about having collaborative conversations early, before you've invested too much to make sure the direction, you're pursuing actually meets a real-world demand.

At Ascend, our hypothesis was that the Internet infrastructure market might be the best petal to grow from our core competency in dial-up digital networking. To test that, we pulled a national directory of Internet Service Providers, organized by city and state. That gave us a starting point—a way to reach the right people. I wasn't interested in guessing. I wanted to *know*. So, we developed a structured set of discovery questions and committed to a series of face-to-face interviews. Each potential customer was asked the same questions to make sure we compared apples to apples.

These weren't sales calls. They were learning sessions. Every member of our leadership team made time to schedule meetings whenever they traveled, sometimes squeezing in two or three in a single trip. Our objective was simple: find the real pain points we were uniquely equipped to solve.

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That first month, we conducted more than 80 of these customer conversations. Most didn't lead anywhere actionable, but I knew that if we stayed persistent, we'd eventually find someone who could validate our assumptions. That someone turned out to be Marty, the head of an ISP in the Washington, D.C. area.

Marty was sharp and deeply knowledgeable. He didn't waste time on small talk, he got right into the realities of his business. Through our questions, I learned just how fragile the early Internet business model really was. Onboarding a single customer cost him about $1,000, but competitive pricing and regulation capped subscriptions at $30 a month. It was unsustainable.

To survive, ISPs like Marty's were overselling their infrastructure, sometimes by a factor of 30 or even 50 customers per port. It was like running a gym with 1,000 members but only 8 treadmills. Gyms assume not everyone shows up at once. But on the Internet, everyone did.

The technical side was just as bad. ISPs were piecing together systems using incompatible hardware protocols, creating fragile, expensive, hard-to-manage networks, like trying to run a multilingual call center with only one staff member per language, never knowing which language you'd need next.

Then came the breakthrough.

Marty leaned forward and asked me the key question:
"Can you fix this? Can you help us solve these pain points?"

He laid out exactly what he needed: a box that could increase port availability, support any protocol at any speed, and reduce costs significantly. Sitting there with my engineer Jeanette, I looked over at her. We didn't even have to speak. Our answer was clear:
"Yes. We can solve this."

Then I asked Marty what it would be worth to him if we succeeded. He described his current cost structure. Then I did something I've done many times: I asked him for a purchase order, not because we had a product yet, but because we needed something concrete to show our board that this was real. I promised him we wouldn't cash the check until we delivered, and he accepted the prototype. But that commitment would prove to our stakeholders that we were heading in the right direction.

He wrote the check.

In that moment, our hypothesis became a validated opportunity. The walkabout worked. The Sunflower Model® had led us straight to a customer-aligned solution that directly leveraged our core competency.

It's worth noting here: Ascend's original focus had been videoconferencing. But when we put all our options through the Sunflower Model®, evaluating and testing them, videoconferencing ranked fourth out of four. It would have been easy, even comfortable, to go back to the familiar. But I trusted the process. I trusted what we'd learned in the field.

We didn't launch by guessing. We launched by listening. Our walkabout with more than 100 ISPs led us to a partner who validated the need and proved the market opportunity. The rebirth of Ascend didn't begin in a lab. It began in a conversation.

Key Principles from Step 4:

- **Validate, don't assume.** Even the best internal analysis must be tested through real-world feedback.

- **Walkabout is critical.** Social media and digital surveys can offer insights, but they don't replace the power of face-to-face conversations.

- **Listen more than you speak.** You're not selling at this stage. You're learning about needs, frustrations, and unmet demand.

- **Look for pain points.** Pain is the best predictor of purchase. If you can solve a real, costly pain point, customers will listen.

- **Prototype partnerships.** Asking for early commitments even before the product exists can create the momentum you need to build something meaningful.

Step 5: Executing Your Sunflower – The Power of Strategies and Goals

Even the most inspired thinking, the most thoroughly vetted Sunflower, is ultimately meaningless without execution. Execution is where ideas meet reality. It is where momentum is built, value is created, and progress is measured. To turn vision into results, I have learned you need two essential drivers: stratagem and goals.

Most business literature will tell you that execution begins with setting measurable strategic and operating objectives, and then selecting strategies to achieve them. But in the Sunflower Model®, I take a different approach. I start with stratagem.

Why? Because stratagems tilt the table. They represent your unfair advantages, your creative, unconventional, even disruptive ways to gain ground. Unlike traditional strategy, which is often linear and predictable, stratagems are about surprise, asymmetry, and leverage. They are deeply informed by your core competencies. When you apply them thoughtfully, they redefine what is possible. The best opportunities are the ones no one else sees yet. They allow you to sidewind in before potential competitors know you are there. The worst are "me too" strategies that jump on the bandwagon without any differentiation from competitors. When those competitors are large and well established companies, I call that positioning your business under the elephant's foot.

I have always understood the power of stratagem. Over the years, I have seen that true, sustainable advantage does not come from playing by the rules better than everyone else, it comes from changing the rules. That is what real stratagem does, it creates an uneven playing field, one where you can run faster because you are running downhill.

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Once you have established a set of stratagems rooted in your Sunflower's core, you can revisit your objectives, not to lower them, but to raise them. When you know you are entering the market with a distinct, defensible edge, your confidence to pursue bold, aggressive goals increases dramatically. You do not just hope to be the best. You build toward it with purpose.

So what does it mean to be "the best at what you do"? It is not just a vague aspiration. It needs to be defined with <u>measurable criteria:</u> market share, customer retention, profitability, cost of customer acquisition, time-to-market, or any other KPI that aligns with your Sunflower. You define it. Then you pursue it relentlessly.

Key Principles of Execution

- Strategies are not stratagems. Most companies have strategies. Few have stratagem, the secret ingredient that gives you a true edge.

- Core competencies inform stratagems. Your unique strengths are the engine for creative advantage. Start there.

- Stratagems inform goals. With real leverage and an uneven playing field, your goals should stretch higher.

- Measurable goals define execution. What gets measured gets managed. Execution without clarity is just motion without progress.

The final step of the Sunflower Model® is not just about doing. It is about doing the right things, for the right reasons, in the right way. You have identified your core. You have explored and prioritized petals. You have validated your direction through real customer feedback. Now it is time to make it real, strategically, creatively, and relentlessly.

The Sunflower Model®– Ideation, Critical Decision Making, and Validation

At the foundation of the Sunflower Model® is a fundamental shift in perspective. I have learned that successful companies are best understood not by the products or services they offer, but by the core competencies that make those offerings possible. While products and services are critical to a company's market presence and value proposition, they should not define the boundaries of the business. Instead, a company's identity, and its long-term opportunity, should center around a growing portfolio of skills, capabilities, and competitive advantages.

I have seen firsthand that these core competencies are the true engine of innovation and adaptability. When clearly defined, they unlock entirely new ways of thinking about a business and its future potential. Unfortunately, many organizations struggle to articulate their core competencies with clarity. Even well-established companies often default to describing what they sell rather than what they know or do uniquely well. Yet it is these

deeply embedded strengths that provide the leverage to scale, evolve, and outperform in the marketplace.

In the metaphor of the Sunflower, these competencies form the center of the flower, the steady core around which new growth occurs. Once this center is clearly defined, it becomes the launchpad for ideation. The next step is to brainstorm all the possible ways those competencies can be applied to generate value. Each potential product, service, market, or application that meaningfully draws from the core becomes a petal of the Sunflower, a tangible representation of opportunity.

This ideation process invites broad thinking, but it also demands strategic discipline. Not every idea will be viable, and not every opportunity will be worth pursuing. That is where critical decision making enters the picture. By applying a clear set of evaluation criteria, such as alignment with core competencies, market demand, differentiation, and scalability, you can narrow your focus and prioritize the ideas with the greatest potential.

Finally, validation ensures the Sunflower Model® stays grounded in reality. The strongest ideas are not just internally exciting, they resonate with real customers. Through early-stage conversations, discovery interviews, and prototype testing, I have confirmed time and again whether a chosen petal represents a true opportunity worth investing in.

The Sunflower Model® is not just about dreaming up new ideas. It is about translating core strengths into action, using a structured approach of exploration, evaluation, and validation. It reframes the business not as a single product story, but as a platform for continual innovation and growth.

The *Sunflower Model®* applies to companies, teams, and even individuals. It works whether you are running a billion-dollar business or simply wondering what to do next in your own life.

Let me tell you about Chris.

On the Big Island of Hawaii, there is a beach I return to again and again — a quiet crescent of sand with warm surf and my favorite shaded spot beneath a coconut palm. Over the years, I've gotten to know many of the lifeguards who work there, but one in particular stands out: Chris.

Chris is in his early thirties, the kind of person who radiates kindness and community spirit. He spends his free time coaching kids' rugby, and he always seems to be in motion — helping, guiding, and watching over others. At some point, he noticed me limping up the hill to my usual spot, a limp I'd prefer not to explain. Without saying a word, he started a quiet tradition: finding a beach chair and carrying it up the hill for me. I didn't ask. He just did it.

That small act of kindness sparked a friendship. We began swimming together — I swam, and he accompanied me on his lifeguard board. On his days off, we'd go sailing or kayaking. I used a Hobie Adventure Island, which I could sail or pedal, while he paddled alongside in a kayak.

One quiet afternoon, as the beach emptied and the tourists drifted off to dinner, we sat under my usual palm tree and talked about life. I asked him what he wanted to do long-term. He told me he wanted to start a company — but like so many would-be entrepreneurs, he didn't know where to begin.

That was the perfect moment to apply the *Sunflower Model®*.

I began with the most important question:
"Chris, what do you think you're good at? What's your strength?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I mean… I've been doing this lifeguarding thing for a while."

"Okay," I said. "Let's assume your strength has something to do with water."

He nodded. "Yeah, that sounds right."

We wrote it down as his initial core competency: **Water Things**.

I pressed further. "What do you observe out here every day — aside from the pretty women?"

He laughed, then thought about it. "I see a lot of people cutting their feet on rocks and coral. Kids come running up bleeding from sea urchins all the time."

"So that's a common problem?"

"Oh yeah. Super common. Stepping on shells, getting barbs in your feet. Sometimes people climb on the rocks and slip — it's always their feet."

"And what about drownings or near-drownings?" I asked.

"Not really," he said. "Most people just overestimate their ability. Worst-case, we get someone with a heart issue. But foot injuries? Constant."

"Okay," I said. "Let's refine your core. It's not just water — it's **Water Safety**."

Chris nodded slowly. "Okay… but where's this going?"

I looked down at my feet, and that was when the light bulb went off.

"Look at my feet," I said.

He glanced down and saw the Vibram FiveFinger booties I was wearing — barefoot-style water shoes that gripped well but didn't keep sand out or support the ankle.

"What if," I said, "you took the concept behind these but made something better — designed specifically for the beach conditions you see every day?"

Chris leaned forward. I continued:

"Imagine a beach bootie with:

- A high-top design to keep out sand,
- A no-slip, no-skid bottom for climbing slippery rocks,
- A zipper for easy access,
- And a cool Hawaiian design — something fun, functional, and totally local."

Chris smiled. "Yeah… that would actually work. I could add some Hawaiian style to it."

"You're in business," I said. "Start with a sketch — make a schematic."

The Product

A few months later, Chris had done it. He designed a prototype, found a contract manufacturer, and produced 100 pairs. When I returned to the Big Island the following year, he was selling them.

Chris still had a lot to learn about running a business — especially marketing and sales — but he had done something most people never do. He turned his real-world knowledge into a tangible product. The *Sunflower Model®* had revealed a hidden opportunity by drawing directly from his lived experience, his strengths, and his environment.

Chris is still on his journey. But he is no longer standing at the lifeguard tower wondering what's next. He is paddling forward, and the horizon is wide open.

Chapter 3: Core Competencies – The Center of Your Sunflower

Your core competencies are your competitive advantage. They are the hard-won skills, knowledge, relationships, and processes that others find hard to replicate, and they should inform every decision you make about where to focus, what to build, and which markets to serve.

Defining them with clarity also helps you avoid what I call "product identity theft," the common mistake of defining yourself by your current products or services instead of by the unique capabilities that make those products possible. When you fall into that trap, you limit your ability to adapt, innovate, and grow.

Why It Matters

For me, identifying an organization's core competencies is a process of thoughtful reduction. It means cutting through complexity to uncover the irreducible strengths, those unique, foundational capabilities that enable the delivery of your product or service and set you apart from competitors. This is not a theoretical exercise; it is a practical strategic one.

I approach this step much like the Socratic method, asking a guided series of questions designed to prompt critical thinking, reveal insights, and bring clarity. The goal is to distill your business's advantages into a concise set—usually five to seven clear, well-articulated competency statements. These statements form the center of your Sunflower and serve as the essential DNA of your business identity and growth strategy.

Three Types of Competencies

In working with hundreds of teams, I've found that competencies tend to fall into three categories:

- **Obvious Competencies:** The strengths everyone already knows and names. They're important, but often not enough to differentiate you.

- **Hidden Competencies:** These are buried deeper and take thoughtful questioning to uncover. Often, they live in the know-how of your people or in processes no one has identified as special, even though they are.

- **Missing Competencies:** Just as important is knowing what you lack—capabilities you'll need to acquire, build, or partner for if you want to reach your goals.

The goal of this step is to surface all three and then distill down to what I call the irreducibles—the true essence of what you do better than anyone else.

Asking the Right Questions

Identifying your core competencies begins with asking the right questions, not just once, but again and again, peeling back the layers until you find the irreducibles. Here are some of the key questions I use with teams:

- What does your product or service actually do, beyond what it is?
- Why is this outcome valuable to the customer?
- What specific skills, capabilities, or processes make that value possible?
- What operational advantages do you have in creating or delivering your offering?
- What unique advantages do you have in how your product is sold, serviced, or distributed?
- Where does your team have deep expertise or "extreme know-how" that competitors lack?
- Which aspects of your offering are the most difficult for others to copy or replicate?
- What internal strengths do you repeatedly leverage to generate value, and could they be used in new areas?

The answers to these questions often start broad and general. But I have found the real value comes through refinement. Team discussions should aim to reduce those broad ideas into tight, specific statements, or even single words, that accurately reflect the essence of your most powerful capabilities.

What? What Else? What If?

I have also found a helpful framework is to move through three stages of exploration:

1. **What?** Start with the obvious. What are we already good at? These are the established, visible competencies that everyone in the room is likely to name.

2. **What Else?** Dig deeper. Beyond the obvious, what latent or underutilized competencies might exist within your operations? For example, a company that excels at manufacturing might also have developed hidden strengths in regulatory compliance or distribution that have never been fully leveraged. A ladder company came to me long before airtags were available. Questioning brought out a hidden strength. They had developed a way to tag their ladders so they could keep track of them during delivery. Together, we determined this would be valuable to their customers too, differentiating them from other ladder manufacturers.

3. **What If?** Look forward. What competencies are missing, but could be acquired or developed, to open new doors? I've seen these "what if" competencies play a critical role in innovation and expansion, especially when planning for future

markets or business models. At Ascend we determined to get licensing approval in European and Asian countries. Each national approval took about two years to obtain. We did this quietly without the knowledge of our competitors. It provided a barrier to entry and a competitive edge that made us attractive to multinational companies because it meant they only needed to have one system company wide.

By identifying not only what you currently do well, but also what you have overlooked and what you could build, you begin to see your business in a more dynamic and expansive way.

Collaborative and Democratic Discovery

Mining competencies is a team sport. I always advise gathering a diverse group—not just executives, but the people closest to the work, the "go-to" problem solvers in your organization. You want to hear from the R&D group as well as the Marketing and sales side. Make the process democratic. Every voice counts equally in this process and no idea should be ridiculed or dismissed. One of the great strengths of the Sunflower Model® is it turns what can feel like a nebulous conversation into a structured, inclusive process.

Once you've brainstormed a list of possible competencies, score them as a group using clear evaluation criteria. Then rank them as set forth in the discussion of the matrix on Xpage ___and set a threshold: those that score above the line are kept, those below are set aside. What remains is your core.

Judging the Business Potential of Your Competencies

Of course, not all competencies are created equal. Some offer much more strategic leverage than others. That is why I always evaluate them systematically.

I recommend assessing each competency using a set of weighted criteria, including:

- **Value:** How much measurable value does this competency create for the customer?
- **Uniqueness:** What makes it different, rare, or difficult to replicate?
- **Leverage:** Can it be applied across multiple products, markets, or opportunities?
- **Market Relevance:** Does it align with growing needs and trends?
- **Competency Richness:** Does it draw deeply on what you already do best?
- **Time to Market and Time to Revenue:** How quickly can it start generating profit?
- **Barriers to Entry:** Is it hard for competitors to copy? Can you patent it?
- **Stealth Potential:** Can you develop it quietly before competitors notice?
- **Funding Potential:** Would investors recognize its value?
- **Product Complexity:** How challenging will it be to build and deliver?

I also consider factors like market size, market growth rate, competitive intensity, and scalability. Together, these criteria form a robust lens through which to evaluate the true business potential of your core competencies and the petals they inspire. There may be other criteria your team suggests that are specific to your industry. Include them too.

A Note on Criteria Integrity

Before applying your criteria matrix, I always make sure the list of criteria is clean and non-redundant. For example, "difficulty finding employees with the required skills" and "how easy it is for competitors to hire skilled staff" are really two sides of the same coin. Combining them avoids skewing the scoring process.

A thoughtful evaluation of competencies requires more than intuition. It takes a disciplined framework of scoring, comparison, and honest discussion. By applying these criteria, I have seen teams dramatically improve their odds of identifying and executing impactful ideas. This approach transforms competencies from vague strengths into actionable, revenue-generating strategies.

In the Sunflower Model®, a set of core competencies that combines high customer value, strong differentiation, and broad leverage across multiple use cases represents what I call a portfolio with transformative potential. This kind of portfolio has the ability to reshape markets and deliver lasting, industry impact.

As philosopher Lao Tzu once said, *"He who knows others is wise, he who knows himself is enlightened."*

Mining your core competencies is how your organization comes to truly know itself.

Core Competencies – The Center of Your SunFlower®

Now it is time to dig in and begin shaping your own SunFlower, starting with Step 1: drilling down into your core competencies, the very center of the flower. This step is foundational. Uncovering the true essence of your capabilities and uniqueness through the lens of core competencies is not just an exercise, it is a transformative process within the broader SunFlower journey.

Thinking of yourself or your organization in terms of core competencies often sparks an awakening. It opens up a new way of seeing your business, not just for what it does today, but for what it can become. While this process may validate your current direction, more often than not, it leads to a reframing of your identity and a shift in strategic trajectory. This is the starting point for becoming a successful company.

Let me illustrate this with a real example from my own experience. NetCracker was widely recognized as a successful company when it was acquired in 2008 by NEC for $300 million. Rewind ten years to 1998. At that time, NetCracker was a small startup struggling to reach $500,000 in annual revenue. The founder, Michael Feinberg, and his son, Andrew, visited my ranch to work through what I now call the SunFlower Model®, focusing especially on Step 1, identifying and refining core competencies.

Through that process, they gained the ability to see what truly made their business valuable, unique, and leverageable. That clarity redefined the company's identity and opened up a whole new set of strategic possibilities. What followed was a decade of transformational growth and success that culminated in a major acquisition and lasting market influence.

This is the power of starting with your center, of truly knowing who you are, what you do better than anyone else, and how to unleash that potential across a field of opportunities. This is how successful companies begin.

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A Defining Pivot: The NetCracker Story

In early 1998, I invited Michael Feinberg to meet me at my hotel in Boston. Michael, five years my junior, was leading a small company called NetCracker that developed what he described as "routing simulation" software. I was impressed by his intelligence, energy, and capabilities, but the company was struggling. After five years in operation, they were still generating under $500,000 in annual revenue. They were in survival mode. Michael was aware of my background with Ascend and had sought me out for advice.

We sat across from each other at a coffee table in my hotel room while he gave me a brief demo of his software. As he spoke, I mentally ran his offering through the Sunflower Model® As soon as he finished, I got straight to the point. "Frankly, you're focused on the wrong product," I told him.

He looked taken aback. I continued. "You're never going to make significant money selling routing simulation software. That's a game no one has ever truly won. Customers don't see it as essential or strategic." Then I leaned in and asked, "What is your core competency? What do you do better than anyone else?"

Michael began reiterating different aspects of routing simulation, but I stopped him. "Michael, your real core competency is the graphical database you've built. You have an extensive, visual representation of networking equipment from all the major manufacturers."

What stood out to me during his demo wasn't the simulation at all. It was the detailed imagery and metadata surrounding Ascend, Cisco, Nortel, Lucent, and others. "That," I told him, "is your treasure. How did you even compile that?"

He explained, "We have Russian PhD engineers working in Moscow for eight hundred dollars a month doing this."

It clicked. NetCracker's real strengths were twofold. First, they had built a highly specialized graphical database of network equipment. Second, they had access to low-cost, highly skilled engineering talent. I said to him, "You've got a gold mine here. Honestly, you could rent out your engineers and still make more money than you are now."

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Michael was clearly flustered. Our hour was up, and he shook my hand politely and left. I wasn't expecting to hear from him again.

But three months later, I got a call from his 28-year-old son, Andrew Feinberg, a sharp, direct Harvard MBA. "Rob," he said, "my father told me about your meeting. I think you're right, and I want to hear more."

I invited Andrew and Michael to visit my ranch in Montana. Andrew was smart, articulate, and focused. My instincts told me I needed to bring my best thinking.

That morning, we gathered in the conference room. I drew a circle on the whiteboard, symbolizing the core of the Sunflower, and asked them to define their core competency.

Michael wrote, "routing simulation software."

I responded immediately. "If that were true, you wouldn't be here."

Andrew stepped up, erased the phrase, and wrote, "proprietary network equipment database."

"Now we're getting somewhere," I said.

I began asking a series of questions to test their understanding of the asset they already had.

Q: "How do you access the database?"
A: "Through proprietary PC software."
Me: "That's a problem. We need this to be web-based."

Q: "What exactly does the database contain?"
A: "Visual models and technical data for all major networking equipment."
Me: "Excellent."

Q: "Can you tag devices with metadata, like last service date, current firmware version, or asset ownership?"
A: "Not yet, but we could."
Me: "Do it now."

The conversation kept going, and the more we unpacked, the clearer it became. NetCracker wasn't a routing simulation company. It had the potential to become a web-based, visual inventory database, a powerful solution for telecom companies and enterprises managing billions of dollars in network hardware.

"You're sitting on a critical infrastructure opportunity," I told them. "You could help telecom companies track, analyze, and manage their physical network assets in a whole new way. And that's just one petal. There are more."

Andrew was intrigued. "Give me a few weeks," he said. "I'll go out and see if anyone bites."

A few months later, I got another call. Andrew had secured a five-million-dollar order from a regional telecom provider in Portland. That one deal exceeded the company's total sales from the previous five years combined.

But the story didn't end there. NetCracker didn't just cash the check and settle in. They kept evolving. They developed, acquired, and layered new competencies onto their foundation. This continual expansion of capability unlocked more revenue petals and more verticals. Eventually, NetCracker became one of the global leaders in helping major telecommunications companies modernize their operations support systems into next-generation digital platforms.

I will never forget seeing Andrew on the cover of *Forbes* in May 2011. I smiled and thought to myself, "That's the power of knowing who you are. Another successful company, all starting with a Sunflower."

Who Do You Think You Are?

A clear and confident understanding of your strategic identity is the foundation of all meaningful progress. Whether in life or in business, personally or organizationally, knowing who you are and what truly sets you apart is the essential starting point for reaching your full potential.

When I worked with NetCracker and helped them examine their foundational competencies through the lens of the SunFlower Model® they uncovered latent strengths that transformed their entire business model. That pivot did not come from changing their industry. It came from better understanding themselves.

The ancient Greek maxim "Know thyself," often attributed to Socrates or Heraclitus, is usually applied to individuals. But I have found it is just as relevant for organizations. The question is, how does a company come to know itself?

In my work with business leaders, I see too many organizations defining themselves narrowly through the lens of a current product or service. When I ask teams to map their identity on a whiteboard, they almost always start with what they sell, not their core strengths. It seems to be nearly instinctive.

This tendency to equate your product with your identity is a kind of strategic identity crisis. Yes, your product or service is an outgrowth of your capabilities, but it is not your core identity. When you frame your organization only around what you make or sell today, you shrink your vision without even realizing it. If NetCracker had clung to their identity as a "routing simulation software" company, they would never have uncovered their true value or built a globally recognized business.

Compounding this problem is the widespread appeal of "best practices" in management thinking. Too often, I see companies trying to imitate the strategies of successful competitors, believing they can achieve similar success by following the same path. But this creates a subtle and dangerous form of identity theft. Rather than building a unique path rooted in your own capabilities, you adopt the crowd's path, and in doing so, you may also adopt their blind spots. As Jules Goddard and Tony Eccles have described it, "When the same sources of error unite all the competitors in a given space, they become what we call 'common nonsense.'"

There is an important lesson here. The words imitation and limitation are separated by just one letter. Following the herd may seem safe, but it often limits your potential. The most successful companies I have worked with are the ones that break away from conventional wisdom. They are not different just for the sake of being different. They are different because they have taken the time to deeply understand what makes them unique.

So if your products, services, and competitors do not define your identity, what does? Do you avoid the trap of "common nonsense" to figure out the essence of who you really are?

The answer lies in identifying your core competencies. These fundamental skills, capabilities, and advantages form the center of your organizational SunFlower. They are the roots from which everything else should grow, including your strategy, your products, your markets, and your long-term impact.

When you get this right, your organization stops chasing trends or competitors. Instead, you start charting a path that is distinctly yours, built from the inside out.

Core Competencies – The Taproots of Identity and Competitive Differentiation

The essence of competitive advantage lies in differentiation, and meaningful differentiation begins with knowing who you are. Thinking differently about your organization requires you to see it not merely as a provider of products or services, but as a curated collection of core competencies. These competencies are the taproots of your identity and the foundation for strategic positioning.

Rather than defining your organization by the product you sell or the competitors you face, I encourage you to adopt a different mindset. Envision your identity as an evolving portfolio of core competencies. As I said earlier, this concept first came to me through the landmark *Harvard Business Review* article "The Core Competence of the Corporation" by C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel. That insight fundamentally changed the direction of Ascend Communications and helped fuel its rise into one of the most successful ventures in American business history.

Core competencies represent the unique, hard-won skills, knowledge, and collective learning that set your organization apart. These could be technical capabilities, proprietary processes, specialized sales channels, supply chain relationships, or even unique cultural attributes that deliver an experience others cannot replicate. They are the distinctive capacities that allow your business to deliver differentiated value.

Unlike rigid organizational boundaries or surface-level corporate slogans, core competencies are dynamic and deeply embedded. They are rarely created overnight. Most develop organically over time, forged through experience and iteration. Others are intentionally acquired to position the company for future growth. In either case, these interdependent capabilities form the bedrock of your identity and signal the shape of your future potential.

The most successful entrepreneurs I have worked with act as stewards of their competency portfolio. Like a museum curator, the entrepreneurial leader is not only deeply familiar with the contents of their collection but is also responsible for selecting, refining, and acquiring new competencies that expand their strategic capability.

As your portfolio of competencies matures and becomes more integrated, it begins to function like a combination lock. A one-digit lock has only ten possibilities. But a six-digit lock has a million. The more cohesive and differentiated your collection of competencies becomes, the more challenging it is for competitors to replicate. This kind of multi-dimensional competitive lock creates real market asymmetry and defensibility.

While this may sound straightforward, I find that most organizations struggle to articulate their core competencies clearly. Too often, they default to describing their product or service instead of identifying the deeper skills and structures that enable them. Yet I have seen that even small directional changes in this area, an intentional shift in how an organization defines itself, can yield dramatically different outcomes. NetCracker is a powerful example. Had they stayed focused on routing simulation software, they never would have achieved a three-hundred-million-dollar acquisition. Their shift in focus, from product to competency, redefined their future. Note that every new product area a company enters enlarges it's core competency. It is not a stagnate concept.

Three Non-Negotiable Criteria for Core Competencies

All authentic core competencies share three foundational attributes.

1. **They are difficult to imitate.**
   Sustainable advantage depends on scarcity and defensibility. Competencies that are hard to replicate, because they involve tacit knowledge, cultural nuance, long-term investment, or proprietary systems, provide lasting advantage. If your competitors can easily duplicate what you do, it is not a core competency, it is a commodity. Unique competencies make you stand out in a crowded field of sameness.

2. **They can be leveraged across products and markets.**
   True core competencies are not one-trick ponies. They can be deployed across multiple revenue streams or verticals. This principle of leverage allows you to launch new products or expand into new markets more quickly and cost-effectively by building on what already exists. You are not starting from scratch each time. Instead, you are multiplying the return on investment in your existing skill sets. You also build additional core competency with each new product or market expansion.

3. **They provide real customer value.**
   The value of a competency must ultimately be reflected in what it does for your customer in financial terms. I always ask, how much money does this make or save my customer? That is the value equation. It is a clarifying lens that cuts

through assumptions and forces measurable thinking. A competency that does not translate into economic benefit for the customer is unlikely to drive growth.

Clarifying Your Core: Drilling Down to the Irreducibles

The process of identifying core competencies is both an art and a science. At its best, it is a distillation, an exercise in uncovering the irreducible truths about your business. In mathematics, irreducibles are prime numbers, values that cannot be divided further. In business, irreducible competencies are the essential capabilities at the root of all your differentiation and potential.

This process of discovery often requires you to challenge assumptions and reframe how you see yourself. But once surfaced and clarified, these irreducibles become the foundation of everything else—your strategy, product development, market focus, and long-term positioning.

In the SunFlower Model® your competencies are not just the center of the flower. They are the energy source from which every petal, whether a product, revenue stream, or market expansion grows. And as that center strengthens and grows, so does your ability to create value, drive innovation, and build a business that truly stands apart.

Drilling Down to the Irreducibles: Finding Your Core Competencies

I have always thought of the word *irreducible* as beautiful. It means something that cannot be simplified or broken down further, something that has reached its elemental form. In mathematics, for example, prime numbers like two, three, five, seven, and eleven are irreducible. They are the foundational building blocks from which all other numbers are composed. Everything else—odd or even—is a composite, made from these core elements.

In business, discovering your irreducible core competencies is much the same. It is about identifying those essential, indivisible strengths that define who you are at the deepest level, your strategic DNA. These are not surface-level capabilities or features of your latest product. They are the enduring skills, systems, or structural advantages that underlie everything you do.

Drilling down to your irreducibles is both a science and an art. It involves thoughtful inquiry, pattern recognition, and an intuitive sense of what truly sets you apart. For me, this process has become second nature, an instinctive way of seeing the hidden architecture within an organization. Over time, I have refined this into a repeatable framework that any leader and team can use to uncover their true core.

Here is how I break it down:

1. **Start by listing what you believe your competencies are.**
   Do not overthink it at first. Write them out. These may include technologies, skills, processes, relationships, or cultural strengths. Do not confuse this with

listing your products. Products are outcomes. Competencies are what enable those outcomes.

2. **Ask the "Why is this important?" question—repeatedly.**
   For each competency listed, ask why it is valuable. Then ask again. And again. Like peeling back layers of an onion, this helps you move past superficial answers and toward the deeper essence. Eventually, you will hit a point where the answer can no longer be reduced. That is when you have likely found something irreducible.

3. **Apply these three criteria rigorously.**

- Is this difficult for competitors to imitate?

- Can this be leveraged across products, services, or markets?

- Does this create real, measurable value for customers?

4. **Test for coherence and cohesion.**
   Are your competencies interrelated? Do they support one another and create multiplicative value when combined? Irreducibles often do not stand alone. They form a network of strength that is more powerful than any single element.

5. **Validate with history and results.**
   Look backward. What sucesses in your history can be directly tied to these competencies? What market recognition, revenue growth, or customer loyalty came as a result of using these abilities? Your irreducibles should have a legacy of proof. If this is a new company each member should look to their past career to find these.

6. **Don't forget to consider the stem of your SunFlower.**
   What are the driving forces of your industry? Are they changing? If so, are they drying up or growing? I found this out the hard way. Ascend's first product was excellent engineering and on time, but the Telephone Companies had not delivered Integrated Services Digital Networks (ISDN) when promised. We had no services to hang our hardware on. This was the seminal event that induced us to look at our core technology to determine what else we could do with this technology. That is what led to Ascdend's SunFlower where the team decided to go after an infant industry that showed a lot of growth potential in the early '90's called – The Internet.

Once you have drilled down to the irreducibles, something powerful happens. You stop defining your business by what you make and start defining it by what you are made of. That distinction is transformative.

As with prime numbers, everything you build going forward—products, services, new markets—will be a composite of these elemental competencies. And because they are uniquely yours, they become the foundation for long-term differentiation and sustainable growth.

In the SunFlower Model®, these irreducibles are not only the center of your flower. They are your taproots. They nourish every petal and guide every strategic decision. Find them. Name them. Nurture them. And let them shape the organization you are becoming.

"The Duel" by Andrew Wyeth

At first glance, Andrew Wyeth's painting *The Duel* appears simple, just a granite rock and an oar. But its power lies in its restraint. To me, it is not merely a seascape. It is a distilled portrait of Walt, a local Maine fisherman, and his lifelong battle with the sea. It symbolizes life, struggle, and death, told through the irreducible remnants of a man's existence. Wyeth could have painted Walt himself, his weathered face or his boat, but instead, he stripped the scene down to its elemental truths, the tide marked stone and the oar. These became enduring symbols of a life lived in rhythm with the tides.

Wyeth did not arrive at this image by accident. He completed more than forty-five watercolor studies, each one gradually removing physical detail, paring back the boat, the man, the clutter, until only the essence remained. For me, this is the perfect metaphor for drilling down to your core competencies. It is not about adding layers. It is about peeling

them away. It is about uncovering what lies beneath the surface, the fundamental forces that give your product, service, or organization its soul.

Beethoven offers another example I often site. His Fifth Symphony, one of the most iconic in music history, begins with just four notes, a simple motif that a child could tap out with one finger. But from those four notes, Beethoven builds a towering creation, a symphonic journey that has resonated across generations. Those notes are like your core competencies, foundational rhythms from which your most impactful creations emerge. Complexity, beauty, and power all stem from simplicity deeply understood and skillfully arranged.

The legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright took a similar approach. He began with two deep competencies, an understanding of nature and a mastery of geometry. From this foundation, he developed a third, the ability to abstract natural forms into pure geometric shapes. Wright would reduce a leaf or flower into a triangle or spiral, then apply those forms to floor plans, window panes, light fixtures, even furniture. The result was a unified aesthetic in which every element echoed the same core ideas. If you looked at Wright only through the lens of "building design," you would miss the richness of his broader creative ecosystem. The petals of his sunflower included art glass, furnishings, decorative motifs, and more.

The same is true for you and your organization.

As Prahalad and Hamel first articulated in their influential 1990 *Harvard Business Review* article, "The Core Competence of the Corporation," your strategic identity is not defined by what you sell. It is defined by the deep competencies that underline what you sell. These can include skills, technical know-how, proprietary processes, distinctive sales channels, unique manufacturing methods, or even uncommon customer or supplier relationships.

But not all competencies qualify. To be considered core, they must meet three key criteria:

1. They are difficult for competitors to imitate.
2. They can be leveraged across multiple products, services, or markets, the petals.
3. They deliver real, measurable value to your customers.

These are your rock and your oar. Your four-note rhythm. Your abstracted leaf. These are the irreducible truths at the heart of your sunflower. Strip away everything else, and this is what must remain.

What is a Core Competency?

A core competency is a word or phrase that expresses a unique skill, technique, process, location, or advantage of a business or individual. Core competencies differentiate you or your company in the marketplace. They are what you do better, or differently, than others. A core competency is not your product. Your product is a petal that stems from the core.

When I work with teams, I encourage them to articulate their core competencies in clear statements, then test those statements with probing questions. Here are a few examples of how I approach this exercise:

1. **"We are best at creating digital dialing software and hardware that allows inter-computer communication."**
   - What technical knowledge or expertise enables you to be the best?
   - Do you have proprietary methods or intellectual property?
   - Are your engineers recognized as industry leaders?
   - Have you developed an approach or innovation that puts you ahead of competitors?

2. **"We do fabric design for the home, based on abstract original art."**
   - Is there a unique method your designers use to translate art to fabric?
   - Do you have exclusive access to artwork or artists?
   - Does your team have market insight that influences superior design?
   - Is this capability institutional or dependent on a single individual?

3. **"We use computer-aided design (CAD) tools to design food courts for restaurants and malls."**
   - Are your CAD tools proprietary?
   - Do they allow for faster, cheaper, or more effective outcomes?
   - What is your edge in design execution or client experience?

4. **"We make hybrid wines and custom label those wines."**
   - Are your wine blends unique in taste or combinations?
   - Do you have exclusive access to certain vinyards?
   - Is your labeling process meaningfully differentiated?
   - Do you serve a niche market others overlook?

5. **"We build compliance software for the airline industry."**
   - Are you the first to offer this?
   - If not, what sets your product apart, technology, user experience, delivery platform?
   - Do you use proprietary algorithms or workflows?

These kinds of questions help you pressure-test your statements and see if what you believe to be a core competency truly meets the criteria of value, differentiation, and leverage, as we define them in the *Sunflower Model®*.

Constructing Ideas from Core Competencies

Ideas are not plucked from a shelf. They are constructed. The foundational building blocks of those ideas are your core competencies. An idea begins to take shape when those competencies intersect with real customer pain points in a defined market.

So where do you begin?

I recommend starting with what I call the **What, Why, How Chain of Questions**:

Ask yourself and your team:

- What makes our product or service unique?
- Why does this matter? Who cares?
- How does this advantage actually deliver results?

This kind of self-inquiry often uncovers buried competencies and reveals unmet opportunities hiding in plain sight.

A Hypothetical Case: Reviving Research In Motion

Imagine you are the CEO of Research In Motion, the creators of the first smartphone, facing a sharp decline. I would advise assembling a small, cross-functional team of your brightest thinkers from engineering, marketing, sales, operations, and customer service. Using a whiteboard, ask these questions for each department and each product:

- What is truly unique?
- What intellectual property or patents do we hold?
- What differentiated processes or relationships do we have?

List every answer. This internal audit may surface dozens of hidden competencies you can refine, validate, and rank.

Case Study: A Café in Montana

A small-town café serving lunch and dinner had hit a growth plateau. The food, coffee, and location were excellent, but the business was stuck with slim margins and limited revenue potential. The owner began auditing operations, asking simple questions. How was scheduling managed? How did tools integrate?

He discovered that the café relied on disjointed systems, a mix of paper, spreadsheets, and manual labor. No software on the market solved these inefficiencies. So he partnered with a developer to build a custom platform. The result was a new core competency, a software solution tailored for cafes like his. This transformed his business from a commodity food provider to a scalable, tech-driven software enterprise with other cafes lining up as customers.

That is the kind of shift the *Sunflower Model®* is designed to reveal. By uncovering and leveraging your core, you can open doors to entirely new opportunities, sometimes in places you least expect.

Case Study: Compliance Software for Airlines

In a small Midwest town, I worked with a consulting duo who saw airlines struggling under regulatory overload. Pilots, mechanics, and managers were buried in paper. One regional airline was spending millions just managing compliance documents. We honed in on this pain point.

Our research revealed that no effective software solution existed to streamline and digitize regulatory workflows. So they built one, an iPad-compatible, cloud-based compliance platform. By addressing a clear pain point with their competency in process design and software development, they created a scalable product and, in doing so, developed a new core competency. This core competency had the potential to grow into any area burdened by government compliancy requirements.

You are not your product. You are your core competencies. Competencies come first. Products and services are simply the offspring of those foundational strengths. Yet time and again, I see ndividuals and organizations allow their identity to be hijacked by a single product. I call this product identity theft.

Imagine you are on the board of a community theatre in need of funding. The knee-jerk solution is often, "Let's do a show." That seems logical. A theatre puts on shows. But what if that decision, made too quickly, actually narrows your vision? What if the show, well-intentioned as it may be, steals focus from other, potentially better opportunities? Instead of starting with a product, what if the theatre started with its competencies?

When I helped one such group through this exercise, we discovered a gifted teaching pianist, a student prodigy with international promise, a Broadway-trained actress and singer, a charming venue, and a loyal community of supporters. Those core competencies sparked a whole range of creative revenue ideas: hosting private concerts, offering vocal and acting workshops, renting space for events, and building community programming beyond the stage. By focusing on the product, they had bypassed a wealth of hidden potential.

The same holds true at the corporate level. Take Honda. Most people think of Honda as a car company. But is that really its identity? Honda also produces motorcycles, generators, lawnmowers, and power equipment. If Honda had seen itself as merely a car manufacturer, it would have shut the door on an entire universe of opportunity. Instead, Honda defined itself around a fundamental competency, reliable small engines. That identity, rooted in transferable, high-value skill, allowed it to thrive across product categories. Small engines became the core. Autos, motorcycles and machines were simply petals on the SunFlower, the vehicles to carry the engines.

The lesson is simple but vital. Do not confuse your product for your identity. Do not let a single idea, however exciting, eclipse the greater truth of who you are and what you are capable of. When you anchor yourself in your core competencies, those things you do best are difficult to imitate, transferable across markets, and valuable to others. Then you

build not just products but a platform for continuous innovation. That is the difference between having a product and building a legacy.

Find Your Bright Spots

One of the most effective ways I have found to uncover core competencies is to look for what I call Bright Spots. These are areas, examples, or outliers where things are already going unexpectedly well. Rather than focusing only on what is broken, Bright Spots ask a different question, what is working exceptionally well, and why?

Consider a real-life example. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, a team of aid workers was tasked with a seemingly impossible mission: reduce widespread child malnutrition in rural Vietnamese villages. They had almost no budget and very little time. Traditional approaches like big aid shipments, outside expertise, and government programs were not options. So they tried something different. They went from village to village and asked a simple but powerful question, are there any children here who are thriving despite the odds?

In one village, they were pointed to two families. Family A was receiving regular care packages from a government employee relative, an unreplicable advantage. But Family B was different. Their children were healthy, and the reason was not money or access. It was behavior. The mother had been supplementing her children's meals with small bits of local shrimp and feeding them smaller portions five times a day rather than just two. It was practical, local, replicable, and it was working. This behavior became the model. Over time, that Bright Spot was replicated in village after village, improving the health of millions of children.

I have seen the same principle apply anywhere, even in the vast complexity of ocean conservation. Imagine you are leading a large, well-funded nonprofit focused on restoring marine life around the Hawaiian Islands. The problem is competing interests. Local fishermen, spear divers, tourist operators, hotel developers, and government agencies all claim a stake in the ocean. Managing this tangled web seems nearly impossible, until you look for a Bright Spot.

On the Big Island, one small bay stood out. Unlike the others, this community had returned to traditional Hawaiian fishing practices, only fishing in season, self-policing the waters, and enforcing local respect for the ecosystem. It worked. The bay was healing. Fish populations were rebounding. When I learned about it, I advised the nonprofit to amplify that local effort rather than impose a new plan. Supporting the community's model allowed it to spread to other nearby bays and communities, proving again the power of finding what works and building on it.

Bright Spots are the overlooked gold mines in any system. Whether within your organization or in the market at large, they represent successful exceptions that carry the DNA of core competencies. When you spot them, ask, why is this working, and how can we make it part of our broader identity and strategy? By identifying and amplifying

Bright Spots, you clarify and reinforce the core skills that set you apart, and you open new pathways for sustainable growth and impact.

Make Your Competitor's Weaknesses Your Core Strengths

One of the most strategic ways I have found to develop core competencies is by identifying the weaknesses of your competitors and turning those gaps into your own strengths. This approach goes beyond simply comparing products. It requires a deeper analysis of the foundational skills, processes, and capabilities that define both your business and theirs.

When my wife and I co-founded Ascend Communications, Cisco Systems was the dominant player in networking. They already had billion-dollar revenues and a stronghold on local area networking and routing software. But I insisted we go beyond looking at Cisco's product catalog and instead analyze their underlying competencies through the lens of what I now call the *Sunflower Model®*. What we discovered was a critical blind spot. Cisco lacked depth in wide area networking. Meanwhile, we had already built real strength in that very area. At first, even we were unsure whether this competency had significant market value. Then the Internet exploded onto the scene, bringing with it a massive demand for robust wide area network infrastructure. That core competency became not only valuable, but essential and highly differentiated. By building on a weakness in the market leader's offering, Ascend carved out a new path to rapid growth.

I have seen the same pattern play out in unexpected places. In a basement in Montana, A small wine company started out simply purchasing grapes from Washington and producing wine for personal enjoyment. As they evaluated the local market, they noticed something others were missing. Wine distributors weren't offering hybrid wines, even though customers were showing interest in those unique flavors. On top of that, event organizers, resorts, and wedding planners showed real enthusiasm for custom labels, something rarely provided at scale. They built new competencies in customization and hybrid wine production, creating a niche that was both distinctive and scalable. As a result, the company doubled its growth for several years.

These stories have a common thread. The most successful businesses are not just competing on products. They are competing with core competencies. They identify gaps in the market and build strengths that turn those gaps into sustainable advantages. Uniqueness, customer value, and leverage are always at the heart of this process, just as the *SunFlower Model®* teaches.

King Of (or sucking all the air out of the room).

 Some of the most successful businesses I have encountered discovered a market not yet recognized by anyone else. Ascend is one example. None of our potential competitors

recognized the Internet as a market in 1992. We were first and we had several technical areas and international licensing requirements, where we made sure we stayed ahead – two years ahead so they could not catch up. We had a 90% lock on providing internet infrastructure when our company was sold in 1999. But that is only one example. A contractor who has done several projects for me told me last month he no longer builds houses. He was the first in our state to figure out how to build cell towers and now all the cell services want him to build their towers due to his proven expertise. It plays much better than houses where he has lots of competition. A roofer had a program built that ensured more a smooth supply chain – then he locked in the insurance market. He can have the same quality roofs built for less. Insurers who must replace roofs after storms loved that. The list is endless. Look for an area where you spot something needed that either saves your customer's money or saves them time – a gap your competitors have not noticed. Then work to figure out how to stay ahead in the area so potential competition cannot catch up. You become King Of if you have pattens or are reliably better or cheaper. But you must be constantly vigilant to stay ahead. Intel Corp, for example, used to be in this position, but they rested on their laurels too long and lost their position as King Of microchips.

Chapter 4: Leveraging Your Core Competencies — The Petals on the Sunflower

Once you have determined your identity and built a portfolio of unique, valuable competencies that compose the center of your Sunflower, the next step is to explore how those strengths can be leveraged outward to create value. This is where products, services, and strategic opportunities emerge as the petals of the flower.

In a collaborative setting this phase becomes a powerful ideation process. Begin by listing your current revenue-generating offerings, the petals already in bloom. Then expand the view and brainstorm every possible way your core competencies might be used to solve problems, enter new markets, serve new customer segments, or form new partnerships. At this stage, no idea is too big or too unconventional. I let the process be open, iterative, and generative.

By shifting from a product-based mindset to a competency-based one, creativity flourishes. You are no longer boxed in by what you already sell. Instead, you am asking, how can your strengths be translated into new forms of value? Petals may take the shape of new offerings, industry verticals, geographic expansions, or even strategic partnerships. Some petals might seem far afield at first, but with the right competencies, they may become transformative.

As new petals are proposed, a natural cycle begins. These ideas often lead back to your core. Do you currently have the competencies to execute this petal? If not, what would Iyou need to acquire, develop, or partner for? In this process, the exploration of new petals often reveals potential gaps or untapped capabilities in the center of your Sunflower. The dynamic between what you can do and what Iyou could do opens doors for both innovation and strategic outlooks.

Once you have a robust list of potential petals, the next step is simplification. Group similar ideas into clusters, what I call super-petals, such as broad market categories or key customer segments. From there, break those super-petals down into sub-petals representing specific products, services, or channels. This structure helps prioritize which opportunities are most aligned with your existing strengths and which merit additional investment.

Ultimately, leveraging core competencies through this petal-generation process creates a living, evolving strategy. your organization is no longer defined by static product lines, but by an adaptable, resilient engine of capability, ready to grow in new directions. Thinking this way allows you to move beyond mere competition and into true leadership.

Compete with Cores, Monetize with Petals

In the *SunFlower Model®*, petals represent revenue streams. At the micro level, they are the individual products and services that stem from your core competencies. At the macro level, they represent broader markets and industries where those competencies can be applied.

For example, when I look at Honda, the petals at the product level include lawnmowers, cars, weed-whackers, and generators. At the industry level, the petals span automotive, lawn equipment, power tools, and marine equipment. Each petal traces its roots back to Honda's foundational core skill, engineering reliable engines.

The Power of Leverage

Leverage is the force multiplier that allows you to do more with less. When you reuse a skill, process, or capability You have already developed to create something new, you fundamentally change the ratio of effort to output. You reduce capital investment and time while increasing impact. The stronger and more refined your core competencies, the greater the number of ways they can be leveraged to unlock new value and revenue. That is the power of a well-cultivated Sunflower, expanding outward without having to rebuild from scratch.

Sunstorming for Petals

Sunstorming is the creative process I use to generate and organize petals around core competencies. It involves three stages:

Stage 1: Ideation.
Start by listing all the possible ways your core competencies could be applied, new products, services, applications, markets, industries, or customer problems. Think expansively. Apply the two-thirds leverage rule when possible, meaning each petal should deploy at least two out of your top three core competencies. But do not discard any ideas yet. If in doubt, include it. This stage is about casting a wide net.

Stage 2: Refinement.
Next, filter your petal list. Remove any items that do not meet the two-thirds leverage rule. This ensures that each petal is genuinely rooted in your organization's strengths. you are not just chasing exciting ideas. Focus on ideas that are executable, defensible, and scalable based on what you already do best.

Stage 3: Evaluation.
Finally, apply decision criteria to each petal. The first three are always constant, value, uniqueness, and leverage. Ask, does the competency help customers make or save money? Is it difficult for others to replicate? Can it be used across multiple applications? From there, brainstorm additional criteria with your team, such as speed to market, required investment, alignment with vision, and risk. These become the yardsticks for evaluating and ranking petal options.

From What to Why: Visualizing and Validating My Sunflower

Once you have completed the Sunstorming process, you have a visualized Sunflower. The center holds your distilled core competencies, and the surrounding petals represent all the possible ways to monetize them. Some petals reflect your current business, while others are new opportunities yet to be explored.

At this point, all petals are still hypothetical. Which ones should receive further attention, time, and resources? This is where I have seen organizations stumble. Too often, opinion and hierarchy dictate direction. In the absence of a disciplined evaluation process, the loudest or most authoritative voice in the room tends to dominate. That is not strategy, it is noise.

The *Sunflower model®* gives you the focus and discipline to ensure your decisions are grounded in reality, aligned with your core, and aimed at creating sustainable growth.

The Critical Decision Matrix

To move from ideation to validation, I use my Critical Decision Matrix. This tool brings rigor and alignment to the prioritization process and helps me focus on opportunities that align with the *Sunflower Model®.*

Here is how to build it:

1. Create a table or spreadsheet.
2. Across the top, list the petal options.
3. Down the left-hand side, list the agreed-upon decision criteria.
4. Then each member of the team scores each petal against each criterion.

Start with the foundational criteria—value, uniqueness, and leverage, and then add others that the team agrees on, such as time to market, required investment, potential ROI, strategic fit, or scalability. (Leave enough space in each box of this matrix for each member of the team to put their initials and a 1-10 score)

The result is a data-informed framework that allows the team to make decisions based not on instinct or politics, but shared logic and insight. From this matrix, the top petals emerge, and with them, a focused and validated path to revenue growth.

Examples of Validation Matrix Decision Criteria

When you evaluate potential petals in the *Sunflower Model®,* it is crucial to ground your decision-making in clear, consistent criteria. These criteria form the foundation of a validation matrix, which helps the team move from idea generation to aligned action. Below are examples of decision criteria I commonly use to assess petal options.

The **Two-Thirds Leverage Rule** is always my first and most foundational test. It asks whether the proposed product, service, or market application leverages at least two-thirds of identified core competencies. While this is more of a guideline than a strict formula, it serves as a litmus test to ensure that core skills play a central role in any opportunity pursued. If a petal does not meet this rule, remove it from consideration.

The **Value Equation** is carried over directly from the core competency assessment. It asks how much value you create for the customer—not how much revenue is generated for yourself. How much money do you help the customer make or save? A strong value equation typically delivers at least twice the benefit compared to what the customer pays. The stronger the value proposition, the higher likelihood of market success.

Uniqueness or Differentiation addresses whether your offering stands out in the marketplace. Is this product or service difficult to imitate? Does it solve a problem in a way others do not or cannot? The harder it is to replicate, the more defensible and valuable the petal becomes.

A **High-Growth Market** is another essential criterion. Rather than chasing a large, stagnant market, look for a smaller, fast-growing segment that matches your scale and capabilities. That is where your competencies can shine and gain traction quickly.

Consider whether a product is **Strategic or Tactical** in your customer's business. A strategic petal is core to the customer's operations—it is a "must-have." A tactical one is a "nice-to-have" that can be postponed or replaced. Strategic petals tend to drive more value and create deeper customer relationships.

Time to Money is practical and critical. How quickly can you move from sale to revenue collection? Products or services with shorter sales cycles and faster payment terms are more attractive, especially for lean or scaling companies. My wife's hairdresser commented that she poured all her revenues back into the business for the first 5 years. Her husband supported her through this. Startups need to do a realistic assessment of how long they can go without making a profit or how much they can take from the current profits to grow an expansion. My wife was able to support us through the first year of my first startup.

Strategic Relationships consider whether you already have, or can develop, the partnerships and ecosystem connections needed to drive adoption. Existing relationships can dramatically accelerate market entry and customer acquisition.

Watch for **Stealth Market Opportunities**, those rare chances where a promising market remains largely invisible or undervalued by competitors. Identifying and acting on these opportunities can create tremendous upside.

When analyzing **Competition**, look at both the quantity and quality of rivals. Are they well-funded and sophisticated? Or are they bloated legacy players, fragmented startups, or otherwise vulnerable? This may reveal exploitable gaps or it may reveal strong competition.

Finally, examine **External Driving Forces**, what I call the stem of the sunflower. These are macro trends, technologies, or regulatory shifts that can either support or hinder a given petal. A strong tailwind can supercharge even a modest competency, while strong headwinds can stall even the best ideas. For example, the guy with the biggest copper mine to produce wire when electricity became available had a strong tailwind. On the other hand someone who came up with a better way to sharpen a stick spear just as bronze tips became available had insurmountable headwind.

This is not an exhaustive list. Different businesses, depending on industry, stage of growth, and strategy, may add, remove, or weight these criteria differently. But these core elements form a baseline framework for making disciplined, repeatable decisions about which ideas are worth pursuing.

Shifting the Conversation from "What" to "Why"

One of the greatest strengths of the validation matrix is that it reorients team discussions away from opinions about what to focus on, and toward shared reasoning about why and how to move forward. Too often, I have seen decisions made based on gut instinct, the loudest voice in the room, or internal politics. These discussions are emotionally charged, rarely productive, and often divisive.

When everyone argues over the what, teams lose sight of the logic and rationale behind their choices. Debates become editorial, biased, and even personal. Eventually, someone in authority has to step in and make the decision, often leaving much of the team disillusioned or disengaged.

By contrast, the validation matrix brings logic into the room. Everyone is invited to contribute to the criteria—the whys behind the decision—not just the whats. This creates a shared language for decision-making and brings structure to what is often an emotional or political process.

In the early stages, this mirrors the brainstorming approach I use to generate petal ideas. Everyone has a voice, and all ideas are welcomed without judgment. But now, instead of throwing out potential petals, participants contribute the standards and logic that govern how those petals are evaluated.

This is the discipline of the *Sunflower Model*® in action, ensuring that what comes next is rooted in alignment, and purpose.

Scoring the Matrix: From Alignment to Action

Once you have built the matrix, with petals across the top and decision criteria down the side, it is time to score. Each team member independently scores each petal against each criterion on a scale from one to ten. A low score, such as a one, indicates a poor fit or

significant concern. A high score, such as a ten, signals strong alignment or advantage. Your Matrix should show each team member's score for each petal and criteria.

For example, if a petal faces fierce competition from entrenched market leaders, the "Competition" criterion might score low. But if another petal reveals a stealth opportunity with minimal awareness, it might score very high on both "Stealth" and "Uniqueness."

Once everyone has completed their individual scoring, we compile and compare the results. Significant discrepancies in scores become points of dialogue. Why did one team member rate a petal low on value while another rated it high? These differences are gold. They surface assumptions, expose blind spots, and create opportunities for alignment. Ask every team member whose score was out of line with the consensus what they know that caused them to score it differently from everyone else. They often know something the rest of the team did not. Discussion may reveal something significant that causes the others to change their score.

By moving through this process, I have seen teams build clarity, cohesion, and commitment. Scoring does not just prioritize opportunities, it builds shared conviction around which directions deserve focus and resources.

In the end, the matrix becomes more than a tool. It becomes a mirror of the team's logic, alignment, and strategy. Most importantly, it ensures that the path forward is defined not by opinion, but by insight and critical thinking.

Let's take a closer look at this step in the *SunFlower Model®* as it is one of the most pivotal elements in driving effective and inclusive decision-making.

Surfacing the Differences

Imagine a situation where four team members are scoring the validation matrix. Each brings their own experiences, assumptions, and priorities to the table. When evaluating a particular petal against a given criterion, two of the team members land on opposite ends of the scale. One assigns a score of three out of ten, signaling major concerns, while another gives it a nine, expressing strong enthusiasm. The remaining two score it in the middle, both giving it a six.

What does this spread of scores tell me?

At the very least, it tells me there is a need for further discussion. The disparity signals that not everyone sees the petal the same way, and that is exactly where valuable insight lives. As the facilitator, I begin by asking the individual who scored the petal a three to explain their rationale. Why such a low score? What concerns do they see that others might be missing? Their response opens the door for deeper conversation and can reveal blind spots, overlooked risks, or market nuances that have not yet been considered.

Likewise, I then ask the individual who gave the petal a nine to share their perspective. Why are they so optimistic about this opportunity? What value or strategic advantage do they see? Their explanation may influence others, perhaps by pointing out upside or

customer demand that others had not factored in. After the dialogue, each participant is free to amend their score, or leave it unchanged, based on what they have learned.

This structured approach enables constructive, evidence-based debate around areas of disagreement. It replaces unproductive, opinion-driven arguments with collaborative inquiry. In doing so, it brings valuable knowledge to the surface and promotes alignment around key strategic choices.

Where scores across the team are already closely aligned, there is little need to dwell. Consensus is evident, and time can be better spent on areas of divergence.

From Divergence to Conversion

Ultimately, this process exposes differences in perspective and encourages healthy discussion. It minimizes the risk of decision-making being dominated by the loudest voice or the highest-ranking executive in the room. Instead, it fosters engagement, collective reasoning, and shared ownership of strategic direction.

Once all petals have been scored, we calculate the average scores for each. This creates a force-ranked list of strategic options, revealing which petals deserve the most immediate attention.

Interestingly, this often leads to surprising insights. In many cases, new potential petals, ideas that emerged through the Sunstorming process, score higher than a company's current core business. When this happens, it suggests that the future growth potential of the organization may lie beyond its existing product or market focus. These findings often point toward the need for future strategic re-alignment, or even reinvention. This happened at Ascend in 1992 when our current business of video conferencing came in fourth when we did our first company SunFlower Matrix. The direction that came in first from that session – the direction we then pursued – was the initial infrastructure for an infant industry called The Internet.

However, it is essential to remember that a high-scoring petal is not yet a validated opportunity. At this point, it is simply a prioritized hypothesis, an idea that has survived early vetting and is worth exploring further.

The next phase is deeper validation, which brings me to the final stage of the *Sunflower Model*® the Walkabout.

Chapter 5: Refining Your Sunflower

The Matrix Team Approach — Accelerating Understanding, Agreement, and Communication

At this stage of the *Sunflower Model®*, you often find yourself looking at a sprawling garden of petals, numerous potential revenue streams where your core competencies could be applied. But having dozens, or even hundreds, of petals is no better than having none if you cannot make a confident decision. The challenge becomes, how to select and prioritize the right petals?

The answer lies in refining your Sunflower through the Sunstorming and Sunforming stages, a logical, inclusive process that engages the full team and drives alignment, and action.

Sunstorming vs. Brainstorming

I have learned that traditional brainstorming, where group members throw out ideas without much structure, often fails to deliver strong results. Research shows that as group size increases, the quality of ideas tends to decrease. In my experience, the most productive idea generation often comes from individuals, not groups.

Why is that? Because groups can quickly become influenced by dominant voices or fixated on early ideas, which limits creative range and objectivity. That is why I use *Sunstorming* in the *Sunflower Model®* which starts with individual input and then organizes and refines ideas collaboratively, ensuring all voices are heard.

Decisions and Criteria

As Albert Camus said, "Life is the sum of all your choices." Every action you take, business or personal, is rooted in a decision. Yet I have seen many people, consciously or not, opt out of decision-making, letting others or sheer circumstances choose for them.

To make better decisions, especially within a team, I make sure they develop and agree on clear, shared criteria, the standards used to evaluate options.

In complex decisions, where multiple variables and conflicting priorities exist, criteria bring structure. The best choice become clear. Whether I am working with my wife, a nonprofit board, or a leadership team, aligning around well-defined criteria ensures decisions are not only logical but also inclusive. This is where the Criteria Matrix comes in, an effective tool to organize inputs, assess trade-offs, and drive alignment.

The Car Buying Example — A Matrix in Action

Let me share a simple example.

A couple is shopping for a car. The husband wants something sporty and red. The wife prefers a spacious SUV and dislikes red altogether. At first glance, their preferences seem incompatible. If they list all available cars, the petals in this example, the range is wide, from red convertibles to roomy SUVs.

Now they apply a matrix approach. Across the top, they list the possible vehicles. Down the side, they list criteria, such as red color, speed, roominess, gas mileage, safety, price, warranty, reliability, and so on. Each partner scores each vehicle against these criteria.

For instance, "red" may score a ten for the husband and a zero for the wife. That is okay. The matrix allows both perspectives to exist side by side.

As more criteria are added, individual biases become less dominant. "Red" no longer drives the decision, it is simply one input among many. This balanced, structured approach enables the couple to see the big picture and reach a decision that reflects their shared needs, not just their individual preferences.

The Power of Multiple Scores

We apply the same principle in team settings. Each person scores each petal against the full set of criteria. These multiple scores are essential, not just to reflect individual views, but to fuel meaningful discussion where scores differ.

Differences in scoring highlight areas where the team needs to talk more deeply, share knowledge, and seek mutual understanding.

This method fosters full participation, reduces emotional bias, and builds consensus. Once individual scores are collected, they can be averaged or used to facilitate discussion and re-scoring. Either way, the result is a more unified team and more thoughtful decisions.

Refining Your Large and Cumbersome Petal Matrix

When I was at Harvard Business School, I observed an exercise designed to test how individuals behave when making decisions alone versus in a group.

In one scenario, teams were given the following survival challenge.

It is 2:34 p.m. on October 5. You and your team have crash-landed in a floatplane on the eastern shore of Laura Lake, located in the subarctic wilderness along the Quebec–Newfoundland border.

Each individual was asked to independently rank a list of survival items—compass, matches, sleeping bag, axe, and so on—based on importance. Then the group reconvened and ranked the items collectively. Both sets of rankings were then compared to an expert's list from the survival field. The challenge was that the group failed if any individual's ranking outperformed the group's.

Failure, as it turns out, was common. Why? Because group members often deferred to the most dominant voice in the room. Quieter voices, often with valid insights, were dismissed, and consensus reflected confidence, not correctness.

Now imagine applying the *Sunflower Model*® and using the Criteria Matrix approach. Every voice would count. Each participant would independently score the items against agreed criteria, and differences would spark constructive dialogue rather than get drowned out.

This structured, inclusive approach ensures smarter, more balanced decisions, and it strengthens the team's alignment and confidence in the path forward.

In the next section, I will show how to manage and interpret those multiple scores, and how to use them to make clear, strategic decisions that move your organization forward.

The Sunflower Model® in Action

When I think about how to lead a group through a tough decision, I come back to the *Sunflower Model*®. I picture that same survival group in the wilderness, but this time with a leader who understands the importance of criteria, scoring, and team alignment.

Rather than immediately ranking items, I start by refocusing the group on the criteria. I ask, "What are the qualities or principles that should guide our decisions?"

One by one, each person offers a criterion:

- Person A says, "What keeps us warm"
- Person B adds, "What keeps us from starving"
- Person C says, "What keeps us hydrated"
- Person D offers, "What helps us navigate or find help"

After more discussion, the group agrees to add a fifth criterion: "What allows us to communicate."

Now, instead of jumping to conclusions, we build a Criteria Matrix. We list the survival items as columns and the agreed criteria as rows. Each group member independently scores each item against each criterion on a scale from zero to ten, where zero means "not useful" and ten means "extremely useful."

For example, let's take the compass and its connection to warmth.

- A scores it a 3, thinking it might help us find shelter.
- B scores it a 9, believing it will definitely lead us to safety.
- C scores it a 0, seeing no immediate link.
- D also scores it a 0, agreeing with C.

At this point, I begin what I call the Sunforming process, facilitating discussion and refining the scores. I ask B to explain why they gave the compass a 9. B argues that it can guide us back to civilization, and therefore, to shelter. The others challenge that assumption, pointing out that even if we find civilization, it may take too long and we could freeze before we arrive.

B is free to revise their score, or not. In this case, B keeps the 9.

Next, we have to consolidate these scores—3, 9, 0, and 0—into a single representative score. I propose three options:

1. Drop the highest and lowest scores, then average the remaining (dropping 9 and 0, averaging 3 and 0 to get 1.5).

2. Average all scores (3 + 9 + 0 + 0 ÷ 4 equals 3).

3. Take the median (ordering 0, 0, 3, 9 and averaging the two middle numbers for 1.5).

After some discussion, the group agrees on the first option, dropping extremes to reduce outlier influence.

We then apply this scoring method consistently across all cells in the matrix. There is no one correct way to calculate scores, but the key is consistency and team consensus.

Why This Matters

This example shows the power of structured, collaborative decision-making. Instead of letting dominant voices dictate outcomes, the matrix method democratizes input, surfaces insights from quieter members, and encourages respectful dialogue. It turns opinions into measurable data and keeps the team focused on why a decision makes sense, not just what to decide.

When I use this same approach with the petal matrix in the *Sunflower Model®*, it helps refine a large set of ideas into a prioritized roadmap, backed by alignment and confidence.

Turning Petals into Priorities — Applying the Matrix in Practice

Filling in each cell of the matrix with scores and discussion takes time, but the payoff is worth it. The team reaches real alignment. In the survival group exercise, after we

completed the scoring and discussion, the group ultimately ranked their items—matches, axe, compass, canteen, and bedding—in order of priority. That time invested built mutual respect and understanding, and the decision was smarter because of it.

Let me revisit the *Sunflower Model*® terminology here:

- The petals in this case were the survival items, like the compass, matches, and bedding.

- The criteria were warmth, food, hydration, guidance, and communication.

- The criteria matrix allowed the group to rationally rank their options based on shared logic.

Now, let me show you how I applied the same process at Ascend Communications to decide which direction to take the company and which products to pursue.

Ascend's Petals — Exploring Strategic Options

At Ascend, our potential petals included:

- Internet infrastructure
- Remote access
- Telecommuting
- Video

We then evaluated each petal using a set of carefully chosen criteria:

- **Two-Thirds Leverage Rule:** Each petal had to leverage at least two-thirds of our core competencies. This rule ensured we were building on our strengths. If a petal failed this test, we eliminated it.

- **Value Equation:** We asked, "How much money does this product help the customer make or save?" This was not about what we earned. A strong value equation usually delivers at least twice the benefit compared to the cost. If we couldn't calculate the value, we knew we needed to rethink the idea.

- **High-Growth Market:** Rather than chasing huge but stagnant industries, we looked for smaller, fast-growing segments where our competencies could shine and gain traction quickly.

- **Strategic vs. Tactical Product:** We favored products that were "must-haves," integrated into the customer's operations, over "nice-to-haves" that could be postponed.

- **Stealth Market Opportunity:** Great markets often remain invisible for a time. We looked for those rare opportunities before competitors caught on.

- **Competitors:** I categorized competitors into seven groups:
    - Fat and lazy
    - Clueless
    - Legacy
    - Big sharks
    - Balkan states
    - Shark startups
    - Small but dumb
      Competitiors one through three were favorable, while the others posed varying degrees of risk.
- **Competitive Differentiation:** We identified unique advantages we could leverage. For example, although Cisco was dominant in local networking, Ascend had superior expertise in wide-area networking, which became critical for Internet infrastructure. Once the market understood that, Ascend's stock price soared and split three times.
- **Time to Money:** We evaluated how quickly each petal could convert sales into revenue. Faster cycles reduced risk and improved cash flow.
- **Driving Forces:** We looked at external trends that could amplify a petal's success. For example, growing Internet demand and falling costs aligned perfectly with our dial-up infrastructure play.
- **Purchase Order Proof:** Nothing validates a product better than a paying customer. At Ascend, we engaged with more than a hundred Internet providers. One of them, PSI, co-designed the product with us, placed the first order, and tested the prototype, providing crucial early validation.
- **Sales Agreements:** Ascend never signed exclusive agreements as that severely limits the upside potential of multiple customers.

This process of applying the *Sunflower Model®*, with its structured criteria and matrix scoring, allowed us to prioritize opportunities logically and confidently. It aligned our team, sharpened our strategy, and paved the way for Ascend's explosive growth.

The Matrix in Action — Scoring with Discipline, Aligning with Purpose

When we used the *Sunflower Model®* at Ascend, I led our team through building a 10-by-4 matrix, ten criteria and four petals, creating forty cells. With four of us in the room, we didn't score separately. Instead, each person scored each cell together, one cell at a time. That exercise produced 160 individual scores.

Once we completed the initial scoring, I reviewed every cell where scores varied significantly. If one person gave a petal a nine and another gave it a three, I would ask both to explain their reasoning. This back-and-forth often led to clarification and deeper understanding. One team member might say, "Oh, I didn't know that," and adjust their score to a seven. Others might hold their position, but now with more informed reasoning. This dialogue was never about who was right. It was about building shared insight and team alignment.

By the end, the matrix served as more than a decision-making tool. It became a unifying force. Once all scores were finalized and averaged, using whichever method we had agreed on in advance, whether median, trimmed mean, or simple average, we ranked our petals:

1. Internet
2. Remote Access
3. Telecommuting
4. Video

At the time, video was our core business. Yet it ranked last. That was eye-opening. The process revealed that our best opportunity lay not in what we were already doing, but in pivoting to a more strategically leveraged petal — Internet infrastructure.

Reducing and Refining the Strategic Team Matrix

I have seen some teams build massive matrices. In one case, they had a 15-by-25 matrix, with four scores per cell. That meant 1,500 individual data points. While it may seem overwhelming, large criteria-petal matrices are common, and I have developed several ways to reduce and refine them.

Step 1: Grouping with Super Petals

You can begin by creating Super Petals, clusters of related petals that share a common subset of core competencies. In the above case, one Super Petal was "Washing and Cleaning," which included petals like Giggly, Wiggly, and Bumpy. By grouping their 25 petals into four Super Petals, the matrix was condensed from 15-by-25 to a manageable 15-by-4. Once grouped, you then turn to reducing criteria.

Step 2: Reducing Criteria Through Correlation

Look for redundancies and inconsistencies in the criteria.

Synonym Elimination — Sometimes two criteria express the same idea. For example, "unique" and "exclusive" mean almost the same thing. Keeping both overemphasizes that dimension unnecessarily. Eliminate one to keep the matrix clean.

Antonym Pair Elimination — Watch for opposing pairs, like "complex" and "simple." Scoring both creates double-counting and logical contradictions. If someone scores "complex" as an eight and "simple" as a two, that tells me enough. Keeping both adds noise, so remove one.

Logic Flagging — When someone scores both "complex" and "simple" high, that is a red flag. A product cannot logically be both complex and simple. As facilitator, I flag this and ask the team to resolve the inconsistency.

Step 3: Removing Low-Information Criteria

Sometimes I find criteria that add no value to the decision. If every team member gives the same score to every petal on a criterion, it contributes nothing to differentiation. I call this zero-information. Removing it does not change the relative rankings, because subtracting the same value from each petal preserves their order. This principle reminds me that what matters is relative differentiation, not raw score.

Step 4: Refining the Matrix Through Recursion

I always remind teams that their matrix is only as good as the quality of their criteria. If weak or misaligned criteria are used, the rankings will also be weak. The solution is recursion, repeating the matrix scoring exercise using better inputs.

The best source of better inputs? Your customers.

This is why the Walkabout, which I will discuss in the next section, is critical. Engaging with customers, users, and the market uncovers insights that refine the decision-making framework. In our Harvard survival simulation, imagine if each team had access to an Arctic expert. That expert might have pointed out a missing criterion, like "waterproofing." Adding this insight would dramatically change the outcomes.

Recursion, by definition, means applying a process to its own output. Once new, better criteria are revealed through customer interaction, have the team re-run the matrix, update the scoring, and recalibrate the rankings. Each iteration improves alignment between your competencies and real-world customer needs.

The combination of these techniques — grouping petals, eliminating redundant criteria, removing zero-information dimensions, and applying recursion — transforms even the most unwieldy matrix into a precise and powerful decision-making tool.

Next, I will walk you through the most vital step of the *Sunflower Model*® validating your Sunflower through the Walkabout and collaborative customer engagement.

Chapter 6: The Walkabout

The Walkabout — Validating Your Sunflower

Once the team has brainstormed, scored, and ranked potential petals using the *Sunflower Model(R)* matrix, what they have are hypotheses, educated guesses about which directions hold the most promise. The next step is to validate those hypotheses through real-world input. That is the purpose of the Walkabout.

The Walkabout is a structured field exercise where you allocate a percentage of your time and resources to gathering direct customer insights. The petal options generated in the scoring matrix may look promising on paper, but they are still untested assumptions. The Walkabout allows you to vet those assumptions through conversations with customers and ecosystem players. Occasionally, it evolves into business development opportunities, but its primary purpose is not to sell. It is to listen and learn.

Organizing the Walkabout

For each petal option, identify the customers or ecosystem stakeholders most aligned with the hypothesis. Apply the 80/20 rule, focusing on the 20 percent of prospects who represent 80 percent of the opportunity. In other words the 20% of the customers who have 80% of the market.

The Walkabout is about listening, not pitching. To ensure consistency across all interviews, establish a core set of discovery questions. When everyone on the team uses the same framework, it becomes easier to compare findings, validate assumptions, and spot emerging patterns. This allows you to compare apples to apples.

It is important not to overextend the team or pull critical resources away from the core business. The Walkabout is an additional initiative, not a replacement for day-to-day responsibilities. Because opportunity costs are high, make sure to enter each conversation with a clear purpose, a listening posture, and a well-structured set of questions.

Desired Outcomes of the Walkabout

I have learned to look for seven key outcomes from a successful Walkabout:

1. **Confirm Existing Criteria**
   Direct dialogue with customers can validate the criteria and scoring originally used. Do the things you assumed were important actually matter to customers? Are your criteria grounded in real market needs?

2. **Discover New Criteria**
   Many criteria in the initial matrix were chosen without direct exposure to the

market. Walkabout conversations often surface new criteria that can shift your thinking and reframe priorities.

3. **Identify Pain Points**
Listen for pain points — frustrations, inefficiencies, unmet needs. These are signals that reveal where your core competencies can add the most value.

4. **Gather Competitive Intelligence**
As customers discuss their needs and current solutions, you also gain valuable insights into competitors — where they are serving the market well and where they are falling short.

5. **Spot Missing Competencies**
Feedback often reveals gaps in your own capabilities. These gaps may indicate areas where you need to grow internally, form partnerships, or acquire expertise to deliver fully on a new opportunity.

6. **Engage in Early Business Development**
Although it is not the goal, Walkabouts sometimes generate early sales interest. When a customer expresses willingness to buy based on the current direction, that is a strong sign your hypothesis has merit.

7. **Identify Collaborative Customers**
Occasionally, you will meet customers who want to co-create solutions. These collaborative customers are rare and extremely valuable. They can become true partners, helping extend your core competencies into new offerings.

Debrief and Iterate

After returning from Walkabout conversations, always debrief, synthesize, and compare findings with the team. These debriefs may:

- Affirm the original petal direction
- Modify the scoring matrix with new insights
- Highlight missing competencies or criteria
- Suggest that a petal is not worth pursuing

This feedback loop reflects the iterative nature of the *Sunflower Model*® Walkabouts are not one-and-done. Each round of external discovery feeds back into the matrix, replacing intuitive scoring with data-driven judgments, improving the quality of future decisions.

The Power of Testing Small

Over time, themes and patterns emerge — either reinforcing the original hypothesis, modifying it, or disproving it entirely. That is exactly the point.

By following the discipline of the Walkabout, you:
Think big, test small, fail fast, and learn always.

Even when a petal proves unworthy, the Walkabout is still a success. It saves you from wasting time, capital, and focus on the wrong direction.

The Walkabout is not just a step in the *Sunflower Model(R)*. It is the essence of validation, the point where theory meets reality and decisions are grounded in the needs of the people your business aims to serve. This is where the Petal meets the metal.

Sunflower Points the Way — The Power of the Walkabout

The Walkabout is where the *Sunflower Model®* comes alive. It is the critical transition from internal hypothesis to external validation, from ideas sketched on a whiteboard to real conversations in the field. While the *Sunflower Model®* helps identify and rank petals, strategic opportunities that align with your core competencies, Those rankings are only educated guesses. They are based on internal intuition and subjective scoring. The Walkabout is how to put those guesses to the test.

The Walkabout is a face-to-face market assessment, direct engagement with prospective customers and ecosystem players. This is where you gather authentic data about whether your core competencies truly address real pain points in the market, and you also uncover how much value customers place on your unique capabilities. It is not about pitching or selling. It is about listening, learning, and validating.

From Matrix to Market

Once the petal matrix is scored and ranked, begin the Walkabout with the top-ranked petal. This is your first hypothesis. Now it is time to hit the field, to test that hypothesis through structured conversations with potential customers. These conversations will either:

- Confirm the strength of the hypothesis
- Reveal gaps in your criteria
- Surface new pain points
- Or lead you to re-rank the petal list entirely

If the original number one petal remains the strongest after the Walkabout, great. If not, pivot to the next best option and repeat the process. There are no shortcuts here. You need real data from real customers to make confident, team aligned decisions.

Walkabout Misconceptions

I have seen many misconceptions about market validation. Some people believe it is enough to read a consultancy report or rely on market research firms. Others think it is premature to talk to customers before there is a finished product to sell. Still others assume that listening to social media alone is sufficient.

These shortcuts are tempting, but they miss the power of direct, human interaction.

The Walkabout is different. It means engaging in dozens of conversations (the more the better) with actual prospects. you are not selling. You are learning.

How I Used the Walkabout at Ascend

When we were considering whether to build Internet infrastructure products at Ascend, we had no prototype, no product, just an idea shaped by the *Sunflower Model®*. To validate it, we created a Walkabout plan and executed it rigorously. Here is how we did it:

1. **Target Identification**
   We compiled a list of every Internet Service Provider (ISP) in our target market.

2. **Segmentation by Geography**
   We grouped ISPs regionally to optimize scheduling and travel.

3. **Prioritization**
   We identified the top twenty most promising accounts.

4. **Assignment**
   We assigned specific accounts to each team member.

5. **Scheduling**
   We scheduled meetings with a clear timetable and defined objectives.

6. **Agreed on the questions**
   We asked the same questions of each prospective customer to ensure we were comparing apples to apples.

Walkabout Do's and Don'ts

To make these engagements productive, follow these principles:

- Do not pitch your product. You are not selling.

- Focus on understanding the customer's pain points.

- Listen more than you talk.

- Quantify the value equation, how much time, money, or effort could be saved or generated by solving the customer's problem.

- Do not waste the prospect's time. Be concise, respectful, and purposeful.

- Re-score your criteria matrix based on the feedback you hear.

- Assess whether your core competencies truly align with solving the customer's problem.

Remind yourself, the internal matrix is only a hypothesis. The customer is the final judge of whether your core is valuable and the direction is valid.

The Power of the Walkabout

The Walkabout helps answer hard, strategic questions:
- Which petal represents the best opportunity?
- Is the product idea solving a meaningful problem?
- Is the market ready, and underserved?

A successful Walkabout often leads to collaboration. Sometimes, a prospect leans in, engages deeply, and even helps co-create the solution. These collaborative customers become critical allies in shaping the right offering and bringing it to market. They provide input, early validation, and credibility as early adopters. But, do not promise any exclusive contracts. That would severely limit your own prospects.

Why the Walkabout Matters

Here is how to think about it:
- Sunstorming yields many petals.
- Scoring and matrix ranking narrows the list.
- The Walkabout is the real-world test of the best ideas.
- It confirms or challenges your direction.
- It refines your criteria and scoring with data, not intuition.
- It may lead to collaboration and early business development.
- It shapes a clear, customer-informed product vision.
- It reduces risk by preventing resources wasted on unvalidated ideas.

The Walkabout is more than just a step in the *Sunflower Model*®. It is the moment where you stop guessing and start knowing. It is where strategy meets reality.

From Hypothesis to Strategy

After you conduct enough Walkabout conversations, you will start to see patterns. These confirm whether your core competencies truly align with real-world pain points. You learn which petals are worth pursuing and which to abandon. When done right, this phase

captures the essence of customer validation and dramatically increases the odds of building an impactful, successful business.

As Winston Churchill said, "However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results." The Walkabout ensures you do that.

Chapter 7: Establishing your "King Of" Strategy

Building Long-Term, Unbeatable Advantage

A successful strategy is the disciplined accumulation and integration of core competencies over time, designed to generate an overwhelming, sustainable competitive advantage. It is not just about beating today's rivals. It is about being ready for the fiercest imaginable competitors in the future.

Successful Strategies are proactive, not reactive. They anticipate disruption, embrace scale, and suffocate competition before it can even take root.

We called this our "King Of "Strategy. We had many elements that added together would make us King Of the internet infrastructure. The first was a technology we invented earlier for our Tele-video Conferencing product that could add up bandwidth on demand. That eliminated the need for a dedicated line available for each of our customer's customers. That brought down the cost of Internet services – providing tremendous value to our customers. Also, Any to Any -- we could make any piece of equipment work with any other equipment regardless of brand. That was unheard of until we did it. Another was we got the required licenses in all the major countries. That took two years putting us that far in front of any competitor and made us invaluable to multinational corporations, who were very large customers. That two year lead enabled us to get a lock on the international market. Once we won the multinationals many others wanted to use our equipment too so they could claim compatibility with these large companies. We then established a policy of executing fixes on repair calls even if the problem turned out not to be our equipment. This policy earned us the eternal gratitude and loyalty of our customers. We found they often bragged about this to others, who then also became customers. Last, we figured out how to use sales channels our customers already purchased from which both boosted our sales and cut the number of our salesmen necessary.

Key Principles of Successful Strategies

I have learned that every successful strategy follows a few key principles:

- **Built from Core Competencies:** A successful strategy is always grounded in your unique core skills, both existing and those you intend to develop. These competencies are woven together to create systemic strength.

- **Suffocation Strategy:** A successful strategy is designed not just to outperform competitors, but to create conditions where they cannot break in. It is like tying a Gordian knot around the market.

- **Forward-Looking Defense:** These strategies are built to withstand stronger, more aggressive future players. They include winning tomorrow, not just today.

- **Strategy First, Then Goals:** goals do not define your strategy. Strategy defines your goals. The goals are bold, measurable, and aligned with the logic of the strategy, powered by your core competencies.

A Successful "King of" Strategy balances several elements:

1. King of X -- make the "X" detailed and precise.

2. Measured by means you have measurable, testable milestones and goals.

3. Listing your core competencies and your missing competencies. These represent your in-depth understanding. The more detailed the better. No handwaving here.

4. Your competitors core competencies. This represents in-depth understanding of your competitors, both present and potential.

5. Your customers' needs and requirements. This is your value proposition. You should have a deep understanding of precisely what you can do that will solve big problems your customers.

6. Outside influences that affect your business. These are the things you cannot control such as regulations, political winds and broad technology changes.

Braiding Core Competencies

What makes a successful strategy exceptional is how it braids together multiple core competencies, then adds a twist others cannot easily replicate.

Take Ascend's *Any-to-Any Strategy*. We already had deep expertise in several digital communications technologies. Instead of offering each one in isolation, we engineered the ability for all of them to interoperate — any-to-any connectivity. That was not just about solving today's problem. It was about creating a future-proof platform. At that point in time – The '90's – no manufacture's equipment would connect to anyone else's, so this was extremely valuable to our customers who had to communicate with other companies with different equipment.

At the time, our approach seemed like overkill, massively overbuilt for what the market needed. But I was not optimizing for current players. I was bracing for big, aggressive competitors like Cisco. That interoperability became our nuclear deterrent, tilting the playing field in our favor and keeping everyone else off balance.

When I explain it, I often use a story from my childhood:
"When I was young, we played touch football on a steep hill in Long Island. The team at the top of the hill had a huge advantage. A successful strategy should do the same — put you on top so your marketing and sales charge downhill."

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Goals That Match the Hill

Successful strategies demand ambitious goals. These are not safe or incremental. They are bold, audacious, and rooted in logic.

At Ascend, our *Any-to-Any Strategy* directly informed the goals for every department. Engineering committed to building out every major communications interface and ensuring seamless interoperability, even when some interfaces would not have made the cut on a "normal" roadmap. Why? Because the strategy demanded it.

Another of our ambitious goals at Ascend was to become the *King of POP* — the dominant player in Internet Points of Presence, the hubs of Internet infrastructure. Here is what that goal looked like in measurable terms:

- Two out of three major interexchange carriers — AT&T, MCI, and Sprint — would become Ascend customers.
- Five out of seven Regional Bell Operating Companies would adopt Ascend solutions.
- Eighty percent of the 4,000 independent telcos in the United States would buy from Ascend.
- Eighty percent of global Internet Service Providers would run on Ascend equipment.

That was not a marketing slogan. That was our scoreboard. And we measured it, tracked it, reported it, and held ourselves accountable.

Execution — The Difference Between Hope and Victory

It is not enough to have a strategy and goals. You must execute relentlessly. Too many companies sabotage themselves with language like:

- "We don't expect to hit this goal, but let's try."
- "Do your best, they're a tough account."

That mindset kills focus and drains accountability.

At Ascend, we measured performance, communicated results, rewarded wins, and addressed underperformance. Our goals were not optional. They were essential. Examples of measurable goals for the "any to any" strategy was for engineering to build the hardware and software needed for a communication interface with DSL which was a competency we did not yet have. One measurable for sales was to learn precisely which interfaces our customers needed to make "any to any" viable.

The payoff? By the time Cisco finally entered the space eighteen months later, Ascend already owned seventy-five percent of the global Internet infrastructure market. We did not just compete. We became the Internet connection.

Build Your "King Of" Strategy

The last step in the SunFlower Model® is to have the team build your "King Of" strategy. The idea is to come up with advantages over present and future competitors -- sucking all the air out of the room. A successful strategy builds a moat around your company, erecting barriers to entry your competitors cannot penetrate.

Ask yourself if you have technology your competitors do not. Is it protected by patents or trade secrets that others will not be able to unlock? Do you have a network of customers from previous products that make it hard for competitors to penetrate? Unique sales channels? Is your service record so stellar that you have earned customers' loyalties? Does your service or product lower the costs for your customers in a manner others cannot replicate? Does your service or product result in higher profits for your customer base? Do you have relationships that give your business an edge? Do you add value by having combinations competitors do not have? For example, in addition to your other great technology, yours comes with a tracking system that lets the customer know where every piece of their equipment is and your competitors are unlikely to be in a position to provide this added feature. Do you have or can you obtain licenses that take time or expertise your competitors don't have? Can you offer smoother or more reliable transactions than your competitors? Have you figured out a space no one else has noticed where you can solve problems for your customers? Can you sidewind into that space before potential competitors notice? A stealth approach can greatly aid success. Perhaps a new driving force – like the Internet in the '90's – has opened up new possibilities others still don't see. For example, heat pumps save utility customers money, but most HVAC providers simply didn't see this for many years. Now they are standard. The opportunities that come with technology changes are endless -- new ones are always popping up. Seek to take advantage of that.

Evaluate all your advantages and then braid them together into your "King Of" statement. What does your business aim to conquer? Build your execution steps around this strategy. Only after this is nailed down do you move on to measurables and milestones. Your "King Of" strategy needs to assess what competencies are you missing to execute this strategy as well as knowledge of the competencies of your competitors, including likely future competitors. At Ascend we knew Cisco was our most likely future competitor. Cisco was the King of Routers. Hence we did not aim our products at the router space. That would be positioning ourselves under the elephant's foot. By not challenging them head on, we were able to angle into the internet space they had not yet seen as a major market. We were there and well established before they made any move in that direction.

To build your "King of " strategy your team must get together after the rescoring that followed the Walkabout and take a 360 degree inventory to see your full chessboard:

•**Your own core competencies** – clearly articulated

•**Missing competencies** – gaps in your competency you must acquire or develop as guided by your customer's stated needs collected in the Walkabout.

•**Customer Perspectives** – what they truly need, what they will buy, what drives their choices.

•**Competitor competencies** – From the competitors that matter most.

•**Driving Forces** – Macro shifts in technology, regulation and economics currently shaping the field.

•**Customer Trajectory** – where customers are being pulled, even before they know it.

Once you assemble these elements, you can transform your "King Of" statement into an executable plan. A strategy is a set of measurable milestones that represents a pattern that you have seen that the customers want and the competition can't provide. It is where the potential competitors are weak but the overall environment supports. Milestones are not every little step but the major steps necessary to get there. "King Of" and the measurables and milestones to get there is the blueprint you draw for your Board of Directors and your executive team. It is not published to third parties or even to minor employees, especially those prone to leave for other opportunities who would take the ideas with them. It is a blueprint for leadership, not a marketing statement.

Chapter 8: Your Journey Starts Here

You've now walked through the full arc of *The Sunflower Model®*. You've learned how to uncover the essence of who you are and what you do best—your unique core competencies. You've seen how those strengths, when clearly understood, can be applied outward to create real value in the world. You've practiced making better decisions, aligning your team, validating your ideas in the marketplace, and executing with purpose.

You've also seen real examples—of individuals, teams, and companies—who used this process to discover opportunities they didn't even know existed, and to grow in ways they didn't think possible.

What you've learned is not a trick. It's a disciplined way of thinking and acting that gives you the confidence and clear direction to take your next steps, and to keep building.

This is your journey.

The Journey of Building Something That Matters

The best companies and leaders don't just create profit. They create impact. They make things better for everyone around them: customers, employees, partners, families, and communities.

Businesses built with intention and integrity often leave their mark in ways far beyond what their founders imagined. Whether you're growing a local business, launching a product, or reinventing a team or organization, you have the opportunity to build something meaningful—something that lasts and creates value long after the initial idea.

That is the essence of this journey.

What You Do Next Matters

Reading this book is just the beginning. The power of the Sunflower Model® only comes alive when you pick up a pen, gather your team—or even just your own thoughts—and begin to put it into practice.

Don't wait for certainty. Don't wait for the perfect plan. Take the first step.

Start by identifying what you do best – let that guide you.

As you move forward, keep these principles in mind:

- **Knowledge creates momentum.** Know who you are. Name your core.
- **Leverage creates growth.** Apply your strengths where they make the most difference.
- **Decisions define direction.** Use criteria, collaboration, and discipline to choose wisely.
- **Listening beats guessing.** Engage with customers, partners, and the market.
- **Execution creates results.** Strategy without action is just hope. Action without strategy is just noise. Combine them.

- **Growth is ongoing.** There is no finish line. Keep learning, adapting, and creating.

The Wife's Tale (Rob Ryan's wife talking)

Part of planning is estimating the cost of getting there. You and your team must make an educated guess at how long your endeavors will take before the business becomes profitable enough to support you and how much it will cost. Rob and I always chose to live on only one income. That stood us in good stead when he was fired and blackballed in Silicon Valley. We could live on my income. That was when he started his first company. As we celebrated the sale of that first company a neighboring start-up founder said to Rob, "what I envy you most is your wife." Rob asked why. The other founder replied "your wife was always supportive and encouraging – while my wife says things like, "as long as you are home anyway, why don't you paint the porch." His company did not make it and they got a divorce. I

It is essential to have the backing of your family. The most important element to achieve that is to have a realistic idea of how long you and your team need to go without income. A wise Venture Capitalist said to me, "calculate that as best you can, then double it, but don't triple it." There are always unexpected roadblocks that come up. No one will be unhappy if you reach profitability a little earlier than expected but everyone will be upset if it is delayed. All the founders of Ascend agreed to go 6 months without salary. There was a hardware engineer we wanted, but he had a young family and could not make it with no salary. He came with us after Ascend got funding, but not as a founder.

From my own experience, husbands and wives work very well together. Even in Medieval times wives of craftsmen were engaged in their husband's business. In the early 1900's the typical shop had an apartment above where the family lived. The wife usually did the bookwork for the business. Several of the businesses Rob mentored either had the wife supporting the husband (now a days, husbands support wives too) or they founded the company together. In the latter case, you are going through your family savings so it is important to have a realistic idea of how long getting the business off the ground will take. I highly recommend you do the SunFlower Model® with your spouse to get their buy in.

The other issue is so called "work life balance." If that is what you are after, DO NOT ATTEMPT A START UP! I was asked to speak to the Entrepreneur's Club at Cornell on the topic of Achieving Work Life Balance. My opening sentence was "Forget it! If you are doing a startup it takes all your attention. There is no balance." It was not a message they wanted to hear. A successful business takes at least 5 years to build. An "exit" (either a sale or merger) to allow the founders to retire is 5 more years. So think of it as 5 years hard work and reinvesting revenues to build a business that will support you as you continue to work. My hairdresser spent five years building her 4 station salon with support from her husband. Or 10 years dedicated hard work to get out by selling the business. We started Ascend at age 40 and were able to retire and play for the rest of our lives at 50. Those 10 years were dedicated to building a successful business. We did not

even think about vacations or balance. This is a life choice and you and your family must make the decision together.

A Final Word

This book has given you a process to follow—a way to see yourself and your organization clearly, to align your team, and to grow into your potential.

But the process is only as powerful as your willingness to use it. The steps spelled out are clear and simple to follow. The work you will have to do in order to follow them is hard. We wish you success!

Somewhere right now, someone is waiting for what only you can create. A customer's problem is waiting to be solved. A team's potential is waiting to be unlocked. A market is waiting to be served better than before.

What you build next can ripple outward far beyond what you see today.

Your Call to Action

Don't just dream—decide.
Don't just plan—act.
Don't just follow—lead.

Plant your SunFlower. Then grow it.