A circular chain graphic made of dark blue metal links, set against a light blue background. A white speech bubble shape is positioned on the left side, partially overlapping the chain. The chain forms a circle that is mostly complete, with the white shape cutting into it.

# The Caring Mandate

Carol Sanford

# The most frequent question

I am asked when working with leaders in Fortune 500 or an entrepreneurial growth company is, “what do you do with the people who don’t care?” I suggest they put the names of those people in an envelope and put it away for a year. The shock at the end of the year is that there are no people who don’t care and, in fact, never were—no matter if it is about customers, ecosystems, or their own growth.

Most businesses and organizations are designed, then led or managed, in a way that works against people caring for anything but their paycheck. Caring and the sense of responsibility and innovation that goes with caring are designed out. For example, organizational practices are based on seeking to motivate people from the outside with incentives and rewards programs. These practices actually reduce caring, which reduces innovation, performance, and responsibility.

Research at Wharton School reveals that people who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to generate creative outcomes—even more so if they are also motivated by caring to help others. We already know that people who have an intrinsic interest in their work are likely to look for ideas that are novel, because they are curious and interested in learning how to engage the activity in new and interesting ways. But if people also have a desire to help others, then they will look for ideas that are useful as well as novel.

There is one additional level of motivation that accelerates innovation, responsibility, and caring even further and faster. That is when they know they bring something that only they can bring, and the recipient of that something has the experience of it being just for them.

This three-phase connection works whether in our family, in our business and work, or in our connection to social and planetary causes. It leads to three levels of motivation.

- **Level One:** An opportunity that intrinsically connects with a person fosters innovation (contrasted to external stimulus used to activate performance).
- **Level Two:** An opportunity that is seen to contribute and makes a difference to some specific real “others” (i.e. contrasted to abstract “others” in a market segment).
- **Level Three:** An opportunity that is seized where we can bring something that only we can bring, to someone who experiences it as created just for them.

At The Responsible Entrepreneur Institute, we have researched, reported on, and taught individuals, leaders, and executives how to work on all three of these levels simultaneously.

We figured out the key, how to build that third level of caring into strategy, into leadership and the culture, and into work design in every function. The same method is also useful to build families, relationships, and one’s personal life based on caring.

**Test it:** Think about a person close to you, like a spouse. We love it when we find the perfect gift—whether a product of service—one that we thought of, found, or created; and our partner feels so deeply appreciative because they feel that we know and love them deeply for having brought that perfect gift to them. The funny thing is, it is also true for customers when we do that for them. Communities of places or interest also have new spirit when a business provides that level of caring. Earth has the same experience but has no voice to sing it out. It is true for all of life... and it is not hard to produce. It is, however, most urgent because caring is slipping away in our families, businesses, and even our democracy. Would you like to help change this?

**Prepare for the caveat:** To take on the design of a caring organization, family, or citizenry, you have to let go of how counterintuitive the path to get there will seem on first blush. Some people never get it. Well, it is not so much counterintuitive, as counter educated—for decades, by all social institutions. But the amazing story is that individuals and families, businesses and other organizations, as well as change agents that invoke the call for more responsibility have rapid and deep success when they get it.

It is very common to hear sales and marketing leaders talk about “relationship.” All sales strategies and marketing campaigns work to build a relationship with a buyer. Trust is the basis of relationship! Therefore, it is the way to repeat sales and customer loyalty.

However, I think that in order to meet the third level of motivation, we have to go toward something deeper and more at the core of relationship. I call it the Essence-to-Essence connection. Something in us connects with something outside of us, at a core level, and meaningful magic happens.

## Essence-to-Essence: The Prime Source for Innovation, Growth, and Responsibility

When a business has Essence as its reference point, everything it undertakes has a multiplier force and magnified clarity. When Essence is missing, it is a Sisyphean task to run a business and manage its challenges. Without Essence understanding as a way of working, we cannot master responsibility for our actions and create the caring that builds healthy communities and galvanizes innovation. This extraordinary and important work is our mandate as humans and the role we play in ecosystems. But what does it actually mean?

*“When a business has Essence as its reference point, everything it undertakes has a multiplier force and magnified clarity.”*

# Learn What Essence Is!

Essence is the singularity that makes a thing what it is and constitutes or marks its true nature or distinctive character. It is the one thing that—no matter what else you take away—you cannot take away and still have this entity be what it is. The essence of plants or flowers gives perfumes and tinctures their potency. We often speak of how clearly essence shines through at the end of someone's life, which is appropriate because it comes in with us at birth. Until we see Essence in every person and entity we engage with, we tend to work at the surface and not the core, relating superficially and partially.

For businesses, Essence is the foundation of non-displaceability. It's also the basis for each of us to become irreplaceable as individuals. This is because working from Essence enables us to bring a unique and meaningful contribution to everything we touch and create. Essence is not something we invent; it is a given that gets revealed and expressed in the lives of people and things from within themselves. When an organization or individual engages Essence as a source, it becomes a pattern generator for life.

Each one of us, as an individual, embodies our own unique Essence. This is an enduring aspect of ourselves that becomes increasingly manifested through the different phases of our development. The same is true of any living entity.

Our Essences can be restrained, hidden, and covered over by the demeanors and behavior patterns that we learn to adopt to match social situations. When this happens, we eventually begin to experience ourselves as “lost.” We sense that we are becoming more like intelligent machines than persons.

## The Story of Colgate, South Africa

Essence also becomes increasingly manifested over time for businesses, communities, watersheds, or nations. In 1992, Stelios Tsezos, Colgate’s General Manager for Africa, committed to build a great country while building a great company. He launched a major change effort in South Africa in support of the transition from two centuries of apartheid to universal enfranchisement. His first step was to connect the company to the Essence of South Africa. With that we could link the Colgate initiatives to the story of transition.

For South Africa, Essence was connected to the concept of “birthing an era.” It was well understood at the time that modern humans emerged as a species in Southeast Africa. South Africans strongly identified with this story of their region, and referred to it as they spoke of the birth of a new era—the New South Africa. Into this understanding of context, Colgate embedded its Essence, which for two centuries had been articulated as “seeding hope.”

Tsezos's initiative nested these different Essences within one another. Colgate's South African workers and suppliers were engaged to bring Colgate's Essence and strategies into alignment with the uniqueness of their country. In harmony with their evolutionary idea of what was being birthed as a society, they began to look at what they could birth as a company, manifesting South Africa's and Colgate's Essences in every task of the business. Systems were put in place to grow and support people and to assess the achievement of aims that grew out of extensive conversations concerning the Essence of a nation and each person's own Essence in relationship to it.

*“Each one of us, as an individual, embodies our own unique Essence. ... The same is true of any living entity.*

The first thing they birthed was an economic development initiative—to improve the oral health of children—that seeded micro businesses for almost 15 percent of the women in two major townships. These business owners were educated by volunteer dentists, who also tracked results for research purposes. The business owners used their new knowledge and skills to teach parents how oral health worked. Colgate products were sold through these micro businesses as the primary offering.

They also helped birth new business and community leadership. At the time, Nelson Mandela had authorized the establishment of Township Councils. He could see that the ability to govern across tribal boundaries was critical to the unification of the new nation and the councils were intended to build this governing capacity. The councils were filled with many Colgate employees who had been deeply involved in the company's internal education program designed to prepare black leaders to take on new roles in senior management. A beneficial side effect was that this education helped build effective leadership within the township councils, which resulted in their successful emergence. In turn, experience within the councils enriched the education program and escalated the rate at which blacks were promoted into top-level leadership roles at Colgate.

The new South African constitution mandates that companies match the percentage of roles within their businesses with the percentages of the racial mix of the country's population. This was accomplished at Colgate in six months, far short of the five years allowed within the mandate. Mandela could point to Colgate's success in his arguments with companies that professed to be unable to move black managers into management at the rate required by law. Because education had been forbidden to blacks in the region for decades, the excuse was their supposed lack of knowledge and intelligence. As Stelios Tsezos pointed out, "Intelligence is not dependent on formal education. It thrives in communities everywhere."

This was quickly proven by the black leaders at Colgate, who used everything they were taught to educate others in the organization and to grow the business rapidly in a time of challenging transition. To speed up the growth of new leadership, the contribution of employees was actively tapped on a grand scale. Colgate intentionally structured work systems to lift up the Essence of each employee and align their unique contributions with the Essence of the company. Essence alignment was imbedded in the company's strategies and, with the Essence of South Africa serving as inspiration, Colgate's financial growth was rapid (40% revenue growth annually in the first five years). There were also no strikes at Colgate, at a time when strikes were rampant across the county. This one change effort in Colgate, to work from Essence and grow the company by educating workers and customers, made a huge difference to the birthing of the new South Africa.

*“ Examining the founding or birth story of a person or a business can assist in the discovery of Essence ...*

# Understand How Essence Alignment Works

**Revealing Essence:** Finding and applying Essence is a reflective process rather than a produced one. It is about quieting the mind to see patterns that are implicit rather than explicit, patterns that lie behind what is grasped with the senses. Examining the founding or birth story of a person or a business can assist in the discovery of Essence, which is often more apparent in the major events or turning points in life.

These major occasions often evoke a more essential expression of who a person or business is and, when this is understood, can become instruments for the conscious realization of Essence. Essence is revealed in the process we use to work through a turning point and what results is distinctively and concretely our unique offering. Essence is found in the value that is realized by others as a result of our successfully navigating major transitions.

*“Even when Essence is not clearly articulated, it will be embedded in a new business, providing it with a sense of identity, a sense of “this is who we are.” But as a business grows it may lose its way.*

# The Story of Seventh Generation

When Jeffrey Hollender co-founded Seventh Generation, an ecological household products company, he was coming off the seeming failure of a not-for-profit organization. He had been unable to satisfy his deep desire to make a better world for those with less opportunity and skill, individuals who were trapped in a system of social justice that was mostly unjust. It took a few years, but Hollender realized that the birth of Seventh Generation from this experience of injustice was an opportunity to call out the systemic dissonance that existed between the company's proclaimed intentions and its behaviors, especially among its leadership.

This deep concern for systemic resonance is an Essence quality in Hollender, has been at the heart of what he stands for since he was a child, and has shown up repeatedly in moments of major life change. At these junctures, he felt a pull to be true to the justice of what he was fighting for—from being arrested with Green Peace to creating transparency about all product ingredients and packaging at Seventh Generation.

This pattern is common among founders of successful companies that bring benefit to the world. They embed their Essences in their businesses and realize their Essences through them. This creates a kind of organizational DNA that remains long after they are gone. Jeffrey has now founded Sustain, Inc., a non toxic condom company which will carry that same Essence into the world.

**Aligning a Business with Essence:** Even when Essence is not clearly articulated, it will be embedded in a new business, providing it with a sense of identity, a sense of “this is who we are.” But as a business grows it may lose its way. People seek to put their own stamp on the organizations they work in, and if they have no awareness of or consideration for the importance of Essence a business may grow so far from its roots that it becomes commoditized or, even worse, fragmented. It may lose what makes it unique and who it is. Many egos competing to express themselves can cause the loss of connection to Essence and the business’s loss of identity.

There are several frameworks that can be used to apply Essence to every part of a business—to bring it back to home base, so to speak. Here are five questions that can help to illustrate this.

When applying Essence to product development for example, we might ask:

1. How will the product (designed from Essence) be UNIQUE? (or How does it enable us and our customer to manifest uniqueness?)
  - How will it truly be known as ours and ours alone?
  - How will our technology be unique or how must it be unique to pull this off?
  - How will our organization be unique in its work and way of working?

2. What will the product's HIGHER NATURE be? What is the most it (the product designed from Essence) could become?
3. What will its LOWER NATURE be? What is the least it must be (given this Essence)?
4. What or who will be its MASTER? Who or what must it serve and how must it do that uniquely?
5. How will it be NOURISHED and how will it NOURISH others? What "flows and feeding" will it require?

These are unusual questions to ask in a product development process, but they lead to a more distinctive and market differentiated offering. People know immediately that a product designed from Essence is from "that" business. For example, an Apple product is instantly recognizable. Apple has developed systems and technologies that are different from other businesses' in order to realize its Essence in every product. The company's clarity about Essence enables it to be unique and inherently itself. Essence serves as the baseline below which Apple will not fall. What must be mastered is different for Apple. What it sees as mastery is different from what its competitors see. You can observe this in the design aesthetic that permeates the company. It nourishes Apple in a unique way to make hiring and development unique to its Essence. The same is true for Seventh Generation and for any business that chooses to align product development with Essence.

When a business and its people feel that they are pulling against one another, the work of creating and marketing new products becomes one of corralling wild horses and depriving one in order to feed another. Constant trade-offs is a sign that a business is severely out of alignment with its Essence.

## Example: Seventh Generation Aligns Essence and Product Development

**Seventh Generation's Essence Aligned Product Development:** Making Systemic Dissonance Apparent through Radical Transparency

1. **Essence Expression:** Seventh Generation was the first household products company to list all of the ingredients on its products' labels, although it was not legally required to do so. It was the first to state its goals for ecological self-management, and to use the annual report to point out where it had fallen short. All of this set a new standard and was very disruptive for the industry. **Product:** Seventh Generation uniquely distinguished its products by making available to every buyer group the details they needed for buying decisions. Many people had serious allergies and environmental sensitivities or values that they did not want to violate. They could not trust other brands to protect them. Through full disclosure, Seventh Generation did.

2. **Higher Nature (the highest they could be):** Seventh Generation expressed the Higher Nature of its products by rigorously seeking out and sourcing ingredients that were both effective at cleaning and benign with regard to human, animal, and planetary health. It was the high standard of simultaneously meeting both requirements that made them adored by the Seventh Generation Nation.
3. **Lower Nature (what they must be):** The minimum that these products can be, when Essence is what sources them, is forthcoming and radically transparent. On one occasion a supplier, without the company's awareness, made a chemical change that might have affected users' health. When Seventh Generation learned of the issue, it created an extensive educational notice on its own sites and elsewhere to tell buyers of the shortfall. It replaced all product and offered coupons for future use. This enabled the company to maintain its covenant with its customers. No systemic dissonance was allowed, no matter the cost, between what was promised and what was delivered. To live up to its Essence of Radical Transparency, Seventh Generation quickly exposed itself and made it right. It was trusted to behave this way.
4. **Master:** Seventh Generation sought to serve all its stakeholders simultaneously, without tradeoffs. In particular, the intersection of human and planetary health was its reference point for mastery. If a product was food for the planet, then it was good for humans. This kind of simultaneity became the indicator for when integration and full integrity had been achieved.

5. **Nourishment:** For Seventh Generation, the nourishment of Essence is fostered by authorizing every employee to ferret out any error or misalignment. Everyone who works for the company feels personally responsible for a high level of integrity. Employees are affirmed for their tenacity with regard to achieving this high level of integrity. It's a focus that begins with the job interview.

Deep connection to Essence has made Seventh Generation a highly respected company with a tribe of followers that participate actively online to call out any errors they experience in the resolution of dissonance, in either message or product. This nation of followers has the company's back. As a result, the company has moved the homecare products industry toward full disclosure and transparency as well, with Wal-Mart joining its lead. It proved that transparency sells and this spawned several new homecare businesses (e.g. Method, Mrs. Meyers), each with its own Essence, driving increase in the market share for natural homecare products to an average of 8 percent per year. Seventh Generation has influenced the entire natural products industry, as shown by the awards it has received for being one of the most respected brands across industries.

# Learn What Essence is Not!

For individuals, Essence and personality are very different. Personality is the social conditioning we acquire as we grow up, from family, schooling, religions, and other social systems. We make choices about how to accommodate others and fit in, and as a result we acquire personality, some of which is useful and some of which is our life's work to outgrow and transform.

Strengths are part of personality. Strengths are learned and retained whether they help us manifest our uniqueness or not. They may be useful or a deterrent to us as we move into the world or the creative activities that we most desire. Strengths demark a person or a thing's good or beneficial qualities. But every strength has an opposite, and we rarely talk about strength alone, more often about "strength and weakness."

Essence has no opposite. Essence preexists personality and cannot be discovered in the world of the senses. Essence, which is not acquired by socialization, does not exist in the same way personality does. It cannot be seen or heard. It has to be intuited over time by watching a person's processes and the outcomes of actions. Essence is the core of a person and can often be recognized in infants or very small children, before they are socialized into selectively expressing their uniqueness. Essence is born with us and it dies with us. It is always whole and purposeful, never selfish or extractive.

Just as with people, when we create or birth any new form, (such as a business, organization, or nation) it has an innate Essence, which is more or less invisibly influencing decisions, and an acquired personality, often called culture. It takes a bit of time to grasp this, but when it is understood, Essence can become the prime source for building a great business or raising an amazing child.

## Face The Big Question: How Did We Lose Our Way?

Then, why don't we all know our Essence, or the Essence of our business, and use it to create and contribute more? There are many reasons, but the prominent one is that the mind can be a great deceiver, getting us to pay attention to personality and the world outside of us, rather than our own self-knowledge. We get distracted by the illusionists, through schools and popular theories, which invite us to forget what really makes humans and non-human life thrive, enables organizations to matter and make beneficial contributions to the lives of their stakeholders, and even causes societies to do what is best for all beings. We get trapped in seeming trade-offs and forget there are none when we start from the right place. Learning to see these illusions and the alternative is a good place to start.

# Know What is Required of Us

It's about Capability. There is work to be done, but first there is capability to be built. To see the world regeneratively, founded in Essence, is a practice that can be developed. For some people, until it has been applied for some time, it feels unfamiliar and even wrong. The reason for this is that it confronts the worldview we currently hold. In our work with businesses, we have seen it take from six to twelve months for the big shifts to happen, with small ones happening all along the way.

And even bigger shifts occur as leaders continue to change over years how they approach business. Essence thinking and the Essence of the business and its people begin to source everything. This happens when Essence is called upon regularly in business meetings and engagements. It is a capability challenge that needs to be embraced.

*“It's about Capability. There is work to be done, but first there is capability to be built. To see the world regeneratively, founded in Essence, is a practice that can be developed.”*

# One More Story: Reimagining DuPont Using Essence Discovery and Alignment

One challenge for business comes in the acquisition, divestitures, and mergers game. Along with due diligence, Essence can serve to clarify decisions. In one divestiture, DuPont made its move to sell off long-held businesses based on Essence. The company sold its Fibers and Textiles business, its heart and soul, which comprised the operations that made such well-known products as Stainmaster nylon carpet fibers and Lycra stretch fabric. The deal reduced the company's revenue from a peak of \$45 billion in 1997 to roughly \$20 billion the following year. But it soon drove growth through the roof. How did DuPont know to sell off its fibers business?

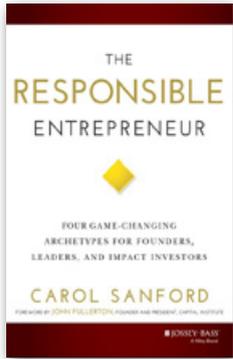
Essence provides the foundation of a business and its offerings, if it sources the unique and differentiated nature of who it is. Essence is present from a company's founding, but often recedes from consciousness over time. Under DuPont CEO Chad Holliday, it was a matter of working with the executive team to revisit the founding story. E. I. DuPont had been an expert at managing risk, particularly in making explosives in France, and then gunpowder, which was DuPont's first product. Not long after, he was creating businesses that managed risks that others were much less able to handle.

To this day, DuPont is known for exemplifying and teaching safety in the production and shipping process. As the revealing process unfolded, it became clear to Holliday and the executive team that fibers was a commodity product that pretty much anyone could make. It was not aligned with their Essence—undertaking endeavors that required their unique ability to manage huge risks. Fibers did not benefit from their Essence. There was a lack of alignment, and so it was sold.

Without this Essence alignment, a business gets fragmented in product development, market messaging, in strategy development, acquisition, and divestiture, and in how it produces, manages, and delivers offerings. With fragmented and unaligned effort, a company wastes resources, makes poor decisions, and sends the organization and the market mixed messages.

**Essence alignment acts like a tuning fork that brings everything into harmony. 🎵**

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Carol Sanford is founder and CEO of the Responsible Business Institute and Essence Alignment Co., a global consultancy. If you would like to help us move the world in a Caring direction, including aligning with the Essence of a business, sourcing its work from Essence, send an email to [movement@essencealignment.com](mailto:movement@essencealignment.com) to join the conversation on the Essence Assessment Process. We are better together. We will add you to the mailing list for the next conversation.

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