

The Power of Purpose

Why Purpose Statements Bring Key Decisions and Knowledge Gaps Into Focus

By Katherine Radeka



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Key Takeaways

- **The purpose is the reason why something needs to be done: why a Key Decision is high impact / high unknown and why a Knowledge Gap needs to be closed.**
- **Purpose statements tie these reasons back to the overall program's Core Hypothesis.**
- **Write the purpose statement early to sharpen the Key Decisions and Knowledge Gaps, and sometimes expose the fact that you've been asked to work on the wrong question.**

Last week, a paying passenger was dragged off of a United flight by law enforcement officers because United needed the seat to reposition crew members so that they'd be in place to start the next day. The passenger was injured in the incident, which was captured and shared on social media, creating a public relations nightmare for United and costing them many thousands of dollars more than the reward they could have offered to a volunteer that would be worth taking. This unfortunate incident shows how badly things can go wrong when people execute tasks without connecting them back to their purpose.

Even if United's only purpose was to do the thing that's going to be the most profitable and set aside any ethical or customer service concerns, calling law enforcement was the wrong thing to do. And even if the only purpose the officers had was to preserve order, the image of a bloodied sixty nine year old who just wanted to get back to work diminishes their agency's reputation as preservers of order.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "purpose" is the reason why something is done. For a Key Decision, it's the reason why this Key Decision is a high impact / high unknown decision. For a Knowledge Gap, it's the reason why this Knowledge Gap needs to be closed—how it will support a stronger Key Decision with less risk. Without this connection back to the overall mission, Knowledge Gaps can get fuzzy and it's not clear when a Knowledge Gap has closed enough to move on to something else. Without this connection, Key Decisions can weigh criteria to steer a decision away from the overall mission for the product.

In a Rapid Learning Cycles program, the Core Hypothesis builds alignment around the program's overall mission and the company's belief that this product will generate business and customer value. Key Decisions and Knowledge Gaps need to be aligned with this core mission. That's why every Key Decision and Knowledge Gap report contains a section to describe the purpose of the Knowledge Gap or Key Decision.

Clear Purpose Statements Sharpen Key Decisions and Knowledge Gaps

We take the time to write these Purpose Statements to ensure that the Key Decision or Knowledge Gap is focused on delivering the value promised in the Core Hypothesis for the program. By drafting this statement for every Key Decision and Knowledge Gap, the Key Decision and Knowledge Gap owners document their understanding of the reason why these questions are important.

As they do, the questions to be answered come into focus. A Key Decision like "Which motor will we choose?" becomes "Which motor delivers the best combination of low cost, performance and weight?" if those are the things that stand out on the Core Hypothesis. A Knowledge Gap like "What motors are available from our existing suppliers?" becomes "What are the cost, key performance parameters and weights of the motors that are available to us from these three suppliers?" A broad, fuzzy question that would be hard to answer has been sharpened into a crisp, clear question that will have a more concrete answer, because the Knowledge Gap Owner has made the connection to the reason why these questions are important.

Why Is Your Key Decision High Impact and High Unknown?

When your team brainstormed potential Key Decisions and then filtered them, the group members looked for decisions that had high impact and high unknowns. Why was this decision chosen when others weren't?

Chances are, the program would not be able to deliver on the Core Hypothesis without this decision, and this decision is so important to the final product that changing it later would cause serious problems. That's why the Key Decision has high impact: it's mission-critical and hard to change. The purpose statement should record why the decision is so important, going back to the Core Hypothesis: "The Core Hypothesis states that this will be a low cost, lightweight, high performance chainsaw. The motor is a key driver of cost and weight, and its power parameters determine our performance constraints."

You may also want to include the reasons why the decision is high unknown: "The motors used in our existing products were primarily chosen for cost and performance considerations, but they are too heavy for this product. Our past experience shows that lightweight motors will either cost more or compromise performance, so we need to find the best solution that optimizes these core trade-offs." Often, this part of the purpose statement will show up again for the Knowledge Gaps related to this Key Decision.

Why Does This Knowledge Gap Need to Be Closed?

We close Knowledge Gaps to eliminate much of the risk of making a decision that has a lot of unknowns, by eliminating as many of the "known unknowns" as we can: "The new product requires a motor that optimizes cost, performance and weight, and the motors we use in existing products are too heavy. In the past, we've chosen heavy motors to get the best cost vs. performance so we don't have a motor that meets the requirements."

Every team has more Knowledge Gaps to close than they can close. The purpose statement can also describe why THIS Knowledge Gap was chosen to be closed in lieu of others. For example, "Our current motor suppliers do offer solutions in this space, but we have not had the need to explore those options until now. If one of them can meet the need, it will save a lot of time and money vs. finding and qualifying a new motor supplier." By capturing this in the purpose statement, the team won't revisit the decision to not try to find a new supplier unless this Knowledge Gap is closed and there is no viable alternative.

The Purpose Statement

It's hard to pack all of this into a single sentence, but you don't need more than a short paragraph:

"The Core Hypothesis states that this will be a low cost, lightweight, high performance chainsaw. The motor is a key driver of cost and weight, and its power parameters determine our performance constraints. The motors used in our existing products were primarily chosen for cost and performance considerations, but they are too heavy for this product. Our past experience shows that lightweight motors will either cost more or compromise performance, so we need to find the best solution that optimizes these core trade-offs."

This one short paragraph on the Key Decision report will snap the decision makers into the right mindset when they review the knowledge you've built to develop options and your recommendation. It will remind them that you are asking the right questions so that you can develop a recommendation that sticks.

Answer the Right Question


When I work on my own Key Decisions and Knowledge Gaps to support the RLCI team, I like to start my first draft reports before I do anything else, to make sure that I'm answering the right question. I just open up a new report, enter the heading information and the Key Decision or Knowledge Gap, and then write the Purpose Statement. Most of the time, this just takes a few minutes.

If it's hard to write a clear purpose statement, then you may be asking the wrong question. Your Key Decision may not tie back to the Core Hypothesis for the product, perhaps because it represents someone's pre-existing notions about the product that are not necessarily required. Your Knowledge Gap may not be as critical to the Key Decision as it seemed during the Kickoff Event.

If it's just a matter of focusing the question back onto the Core Hypothesis or the related Key Decision, then **change the question**. In the Rapid Learning Cycles framework, we expect that the questions evolve as we build our knowledge. But if it seems like you are asking the wrong question entirely, you'll need to bring that up with your program manager right away, and share it in your team's status event, as the answer to "What help do I need?" "I need help with KD #03. It doesn't fit with the program, and I'm thinking about eliminating it / refocusing it. I need to talk to anyone on the team who thinks that would be a problem, sometime in the next three days." That would avoid any surprises for anyone who may have a different understanding of the question.

Eliminating a Key Decision doesn't mean that the decision won't get made. It means that you have recognized that the decision is either a Known Solution or that it does not have sufficient impact or risk to justify additional learning ahead of the decision. Eliminating a Knowledge Gap means that work will stop on it, except for capturing any knowledge you've already created. More often, you'll bring a Key Decision or Knowledge Gap into focus.

Focused Purpose Statements Lead to Focused Questions and Focused Answers

United's first attempts to communicate about the passenger incident only threw gasoline on the fire, because they were unfocused and full of jargon that showed United didn't yet understand the purpose of those communications. Things didn't calm down until after United's CEO, Oscar Munoz, sent out a clear apology, compensated all of the passengers who experienced the upsetting event, and vowed to realign the company's policies and procedures for such problems around better customer service. But by then, a lot of preventable damage had already been done. 

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- [Keep It Short and Simple: Knowledge Capture Reports for the Rapid Learning Cycles Framework](#)
- [Keep Your Learning Cycle Plan From Tangling Up: Five Tools to Display Relationships Between Key Decisions and Knowledge Gaps](#)
- [Coach for Better Knowledge Gap Questions: Why Smart Framing will increase speed, quality and opportunity](#)



About the Author

Katherine Radeka has a rare combination of business acumen, scientific depth and ability to untangle the organizational knots to remove the barriers to change. Since 2005, Whittier Consulting Group, Inc. has helped some of the world's leading companies get their products to market faster.

She has a global reach with clients in Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Australia/New Zealand. She has worked with companies in pharma, biotech, medical device, high tech, consumer electronics, food and beverage, and consumer packaged goods, among others. She currently supports more than 150 implementations of the Rapid Learning Cycles framework through the Rapid Learning Cycles Certified™ Professionals Community.

Katherine is the author of two books. Her first book, *The Mastery of Innovation: A Field Guide to Lean Product Development* won the Shingo Research Award in 2014. This book contains 19 case studies of companies, including Steelcase, Ford, Novo Nordisk and Philips Electronics, who have used lean ideas in product development to get their ideas to market faster.

Katherine's second book is *The Shortest Distance Between You and Your New Product: How Innovators Use Rapid Learning Cycles to Get Their Best Ideas to Market Faster*. This book summarizes Katherine's ground-breaking work to integrate Agile Development with her work on Knowledge Capitalization into a proven method for accelerating innovation.

Katherine has climbed seven of the tallest peaks in the Cascade Mountains and spent ten days alone on the Pacific Crest Trail until an encounter with a bear convinced her that she needed a change in strategic direction.

