

Are You Lit?

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I want to ask you a question, and I want you to let it land before you answer it. Are you lit?

I do not mean caffeinated, hyped, or running on the borrowed intensity that gets people through a quarter and breaks them in the next. I mean something specific and technical. Lit is another word for passion, and passion is a mood. It is the mood of moving toward a future you love, in action you believe will get you there. When you are in that mood, the work feels like an expression of who you are. When you are not, the work feels like a tax you keep paying on a life you have not yet started living.

This paper is about why that question, ‘*are you lit?*’, is the most important question a small business owner can ask themselves, and why almost nobody asks it. It is about why I have organized 30 years of work around teaching people how to answer it honestly and how to live in such a way that the answer is yes more days than not. And it is about what specifically changes in your business when you take lit-ness as seriously as you currently take revenue, headcount, or any other number that shows up on a spreadsheet.

A Question Big Business Does Not Have to Ask

Big business does not worry about whether the people running it are lit. If a Fortune 500 CEO is dim, the board notices, the numbers slip, and someone gets replaced. The company absorbs the cost and keeps moving. There are processes, layers, redundancies, and consultants. The interior life of any single executive is, in the end, an HR question.

Big business has also engineered something quieter and more pervasive. Because it depends on interchangeable labor, it requires a workforce that has been trained to override its own signals. The norm that emerges from that requirement is the one most of us grew up inside. How you feel does not matter. Suck it up. Good people do not

complain, do not let their inner state interfere with output, and do not bring their personal weather into the office. Anyone who admits to being dim gets coded as weak, undisciplined, or not serious. Shame enforces the norm, because shame is cheap and effective at keeping people from telling the truth about their own state.

This norm is not neutral. It is functional. It serves a particular kind of economic arrangement, and it works reasonably well when humans are being deployed as units of labor inside a system designed to absorb individual variation. The problem is not that the norm exists in big business. The problem is that small business owners have inherited it without realizing they are running operating software that was written for a different machine.

If you own your business, there is no board to fire you and no replacement waiting in the wings. You are the energy source. When your light dims, the business dims with it. The hires get a little less inspired. The sales conversations lose their edge. The hard decisions get postponed because nothing in you is willing to fight for them. The team takes its cues from a leader who is going through the motions, and the whole organization quietly drifts toward the average mood of its founder. You cannot 'suck it up' your way into a great company, because the very thing being sucked up is the thing the company runs on.

What I Mean by Lit

Most people, when they hear the word lit, think of energy. They picture someone hyped, intense, performing enthusiasm at high volume. That is not what I mean.

Lit is the mood of passion in a precise sense. A mood is not a feeling that visits you, like a wave of irritation or a flash of joy. A mood is a stable orientation that shapes what you can see, what you can do, and what you find meaningful. The mood of resignation makes a calendar full of opportunities look like a calendar full of burdens. The mood of ambition makes a long road look like an exciting one. The mood of passion specifically organizes you around a future you love and a path of action you believe will get you there. It is generative. It produces creativity, resilience, willingness to take risk, and the patience to keep going when the immediate evidence is unclear.

Lit is what passion looks like from the outside. When a person is in the mood of passion, you can feel it. Their eyes work differently. Their voice carries something. They notice things the dim version of themselves would have walked past. They make decisions a dim person would have postponed. The same human, in the same role, with the same skills, performs at a different level depending on whether they are in this mood or not.

This is why I teach mood. It is why Planning a Brilliant Life sits at the entry point of so much of my work. Mood is not the soft stuff that comes after the strategy is finalized. Mood is the substrate on which all strategy is executed. A business led by someone in the mood of resignation will produce different results than the same business led by the same person in the mood of passion, even if the spreadsheets and the org chart and the marketing plan are identical. The mood is the strategy.

Why I Trust This

I have been working on this for 30 years. For most of that time, I could not have explained it the way I am explaining it now. I just knew it was good. I was doing it for my employees before I had any of the language I now use to describe what I was doing. I came to the framework gradually, through Toby Hecht and the linguistic ontology lineage I have learned inside, but the practice predates the philosophy. The philosophy let me name what I was already seeing. What I was seeing came first.

I want to tell you three things I saw, because the cumulative weight of these observations is what made this incontrovertible to me.

The first happened early, when I was running an IT business with about 30 employees. I had been studying with Toby and I trusted his discourse, so I started practicing what he taught even before I fully understood it. I had an employee whose work had created a real problem with a client. The conversation I needed to have with him was a hard one. In every prior version of my career, those conversations had a familiar texture. The person became defensive, or frightened, or quietly withdrew into protection mode, and the fear changed what was possible in the dialogue. I had learned to brace for that.

This time was different. I did not approach him with my goals or my frustrations. I approached him through his ambition, the future he had told me he wanted to build for himself. I gave him fierce feedback. He took it on as if it were his own. He did not get defensive. He did not narrow. He said something to the effect of, oh shit, I need to do something about that, and the way he then went and did something about it was unlike anything I had seen from a person receiving hard feedback. The conversation worked because it was happening inside a different ontological frame. He was not defending himself against me. He was working with me on a project we both cared about, his life.

The second observation accumulated over time, with the rest of the team. I started to notice that the people whose personal narratives were coherent with where the business was going did things I had never been able to get teams to do through any other means. They came in on Monday having thought about things over the weekend. They worked at home without being asked. They went above and beyond, repeatedly, in ways that no incentive structure I have ever seen could have engineered. And critically, this only happened with the people for whom the connection was real. With others, the same approach did not produce the same result. That difference taught me something important. If lit-ness does not happen for someone in your environment, that is not a failure of leadership. It is information. They are not the right person for the seat. The mood diagnostic does not just work on you. It works on every relationship in the business.

The third observation cost me real money. Toward the end of that company's life, I stopped being lit. I watched what happened. My sales suffered. My judgment narrowed. The decisions I needed to make stayed undecided. I eventually closed the business in a way that left significant value on the table. If I had been lit, I could have sold it. I was not, and I could not. After that, I worked for a stretch as a solopreneur, and I discovered something I had not appreciated when I had a team. A lot of what had been lighting me up was the team itself. Without that source, I had to become deliberate about my own mood in a way I had not had to be before. That is when this stopped being something I did intuitively for others and became the conscious central practice of my work.

I have watched a lot of performance changes in human beings over 30 years. The change that happens when a person locks onto a future they love is the most impactful one I have ever seen, by a significant margin. The closest comparable is fear. Threatening someone's life is similar in that the motivation can be very strong. But the effectiveness in fear is much lower. Fear mobilizes, but it narrows. A person operating in fear is fast, defensive, and brittle. A person operating in passion is fast, expansive, and adaptive. Same energy, completely different output. This is the human-centered claim, and it is not a soft one. It is an accurate one. We are biological creatures. Our nervous systems do different things under fear than under passion, and the suck-it-up norm is asking owners to operate on a fuel mixture their bodies were not built for. The body will rebel. It will start to get sick. The headaches, the unrestoring sleep, the inflammation, the short fuse, the Sunday night dread, these are not character flaws. They are signals from a system telling the truth about being asked to walk in a direction it did not agree to.

About 75 percent of the people I have worked with as clients describe the work as transformative. That is a number I have come to trust because I did not engineer it. I did not run a survey or curate testimonials. People simply tell me. The percentage is what it is because passion-grounded work touches something most other forms of business coaching never reach.

What Changes When You Take This Seriously

If you accept, even provisionally, that lit-ness is a leading indicator of business performance and not just an interior nicety, a number of decisions in your company start to look different.

Hiring changes. You stop hiring people whose presence dims you, regardless of how strong their resume looks. You also stop hiring people who do not have ambition of their own, because your way of leading does not work on people who are not going somewhere. The final filter becomes whether they have a future they are reaching for and whether your business can be a meaningful part of how they get there.

The calendar changes. Meetings that consistently dim you get audited rather than tolerated. Standing commitments that have outlived their usefulness get renegotiated. The week starts to be designed around the hours when you are most lit doing the work that most needs you, rather than around the inherited expectations of how a business owner is supposed to spend their time.

The client roster changes. Clients who dim you get released, even when the revenue is good, because the cost of keeping them is paid in the energy that would otherwise have produced your next ten clients. The math on this is rarely visible on the income statement, which is why most owners never run it.

The product mix changes. Offerings you cannot deliver *lit*, get redesigned or retired. There is no point producing something you have to drag yourself through, because the customer can feel it whether you think they can or not.

The team conversations change. You start asking your people whether they are lit, and you mean it. Engagement surveys disappear because they were never measuring this, and everyone always knew that. You replace them with the simple discipline of paying attention to who is lit and who is dim, and treating that information as actionable.

The strategic planning changes. You stop building toward a future version of the business that requires a dimmer version of you to operate. You stop scaling things that work only because you are personally compensating for their weaknesses. You let the design of the business be shaped by what keeps you lit, because your lit-ness is the asset the whole thing rests on.

Each of these is a concrete shift. None of them is visible to a reader still operating inside the suck-it-up norm, because that norm makes the diagnostic invisible. You cannot audit something you have been trained not to feel.

How To Actually Do The Work

Once an owner accepts that being lit matters, the next question is how. There is a taxonomy of practice underneath this, and I will name it briefly. The thing to hold onto throughout is that mood awareness is not one item on the list. It is the underlying

capacity that makes every other item possible. You cannot tell what your ambition actually is when you are dim. You cannot design a business that fits you when you cannot feel what fits and what does not. You cannot read whether your team is lit when you have lost the ability to read your own state. Mood awareness is the navigational instrument. The taxonomy below is the geography it lets you navigate.

The first piece of work is personal ambition. You have to know what you actually want. Not what your industry wants, not what your peers want, not what the version of you from 15 years ago wanted, not the polished story you tell at networking events. You. The future you are reaching for that lights you up when you think about it honestly. Most owners have never given themselves permission to ask this question without the answer being immediately filtered through what is realistic, what is acceptable, or what other people would respect. The first step is to drop those filters long enough to find out what is underneath them.

The second piece of work is using yourself as the design center for the business. Most strategy advice tells you to start with the market. Find a need, fit a solution, position a brand. That advice is not wrong, but it is incomplete in a specific way. It assumes that any well-designed business will work for you as long as it produces revenue. That assumption is false. A business that makes money but dims you is not a successful business. It is a slow extraction of your life. The corrective is to design the business around who you are first, and let the market fit be a constraint that is worked out inside that frame rather than a starting point that overrides it. Three things have to be in place for this to work.

You have to know your stand. Your core values, the commitments you will not abandon under pressure, the things you are unwilling to compromise even when compromising would make a quarter easier. This is not a values poster on the wall. It is the ground you actually stand on, the thing that holds you steady when conditions get hard.

You have to know your why. The impact on the world that lights you up. Not a generic mission statement, but the specific kind of difference you want your work to make. This

is the why that survives a bad month, because it is not contingent on the month going well.

You have to have a vivid, specific picture of the company you are building. Not a five-year financial projection. A picture. The kind of place this is, the kind of people who work here, the kind of work that gets done, the kind of customer who is served, the texture of an ordinary Tuesday inside it. This picture is the future you and your team are walking toward. Without it, there is nothing for anyone to align around, including you.

Most leaders are far less clear about these three than they think. Not because they are lazy or unintelligent, but because they cannot feel the gaps. Other people can feel the gaps, though, which is why their teams hesitate or resist or drift. Developing real clarity here takes more time and more patience than anyone wants it to. I routinely spend six months with people working on this and almost everyone resists the amount of effort required. Vision is not a flash of insight. It is the product of sustained inquiry.

The third piece of work is coherence with everyone you associate with. Once the business is genuinely an expression of who you are, everyone you bring into it has to be coherent with that expression or the expression dims. The team you hire, the clients you take, the partners you choose, the vendors you depend on, all of them either reinforce the lit version of the company or quietly erode it. You do not get to opt out of this. You only get to choose whether you are paying attention to it or not.

This is where the practice scales beyond the owner. In my own company, I made myself the final interview for every hire, and I assessed exactly two things. Core values and ambition. If a candidate had no ambition of their own, I did not hire them. Not because they were a bad person, but because my way of leading does not work on someone who is not going somewhere. If they had even a sliver of desire, I would dream with them. Have you ever considered growing into this? Most people have never had anyone reflect a bigger future back to them. When you do it without flattery, with grounded specificity, something ignites. They become loyal in a way that no incentive structure can produce, because you are now connected to their own life, not just their employment.

Once that connection exists, performance management changes shape. When someone drifts or underperforms, you do not pressure them for your goals. You hold up the mirror to their ambition. The conversation I described earlier with my employee, the one where the fierce feedback landed without defensiveness, was that conversation. It was not a technique. It was the natural consequence of the relationship being structured around his life rather than my numbers. He took the feedback on as his own because that is what people do when their work is genuinely connected to who they are becoming.

The constraint, and it is a real one, is that this only works when there is genuine alignment. If someone's actual ambition does not fit inside your business, cherishing them may mean helping them move on to something that does. Cherishing is not keeping people. It is holding their concerns as your own, which sometimes means being honest that this is not the right place for them. A coherent team is a team in which everyone wins together, including the owner. That is not idealism. It is the only configuration that produces self-generating fire, the kind of team that does excellent work without your continuous input because they are working on their own lives inside the work.

A Question, Returned

So, I will ask you the question again, and I want you to sit with it before you answer. Are you lit?

Not are you busy. Not are you successful by the metrics other people use. Not are you keeping up. Are you, today, in the mood of moving toward a future you love, in action you believe will get you there?

If the answer is yes, protect it. It is the most valuable asset your business has, and it does not appear on any spreadsheet your accountant will ever produce. The work in front of you is to keep it lit and to design every decision so that the answer stays yes.

If the answer is no, that is information worth taking seriously. It does not mean you are weak, undisciplined, or not cut out for this. It means the most important work in front of

you is not the next launch, the next hire, or the next system. It is getting yourself back. Everything else follows from that. Nothing else works without it.

The norm that says how you feel does not matter was written by people who did not have to live with the consequences of their own dimness. You do. The good news is that this is not just a personal cost. It is also the lever. The same biology that makes the dimness expensive makes the lit version of you exponentially more effective than the dim version. Pay attention to the question. Build the kind of life and business in which the answer is yes. Everything I do, everything I have learned over 30 years, is in service of helping people do exactly that.