

# What the Heck is Purpleocity? And why do I need it?

By Maryanne Ross, CPIM-F, CIRM, CSCP-F, CLTD-F

Purpleocity can be loosely defined as the art of standing out from the crowd. It describes people who relentlessly pursue their dream and goals and use their talents to create a competitive advantage for themselves, their companies and their products and services. The term was coined when my two good friends, Joni Holeman and Michael Ford and I were asked to give a presentation for other ASCM volunteer leaders at a Regional Event in 2007. Purpleocity was somewhat based on the popular book of that time, *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable*, by Seth Godin.

For me, it had a deeper meaning, born of the tool I used to stay motivated to attain my first ASCM certification, my CPIM (Certified in Planning and Inventory Management). When I was studying for that certification (over 30 years ago), it was necessary to pass five individual and grueling exams. At the time, I was a material handler in a factory in Florida. I had no college education, and I was attending APICS (now the Association for Supply Chain Management, or ASCM) meetings with middle- and upper-level managers from some of the biggest companies in Central Florida. Many talked of the difficulty of passing these exams and earning this certification. And here I was, a factory floor employee, trying to do what people (who I considered to be way above me) were struggling to do!



One day when my fears were overwhelming me, I came home from work and began cooking dinner for my family. Once I got the dinner in the oven, I decided to use a few spare minutes to skim through the latest copy of Reader's Digest and I came across a short story about a little girl who came home from school crying and clutching a drawing of a bird. She had colored the bird purple and her teacher gave it a frowny face and wrote across the top "birds are not purple, please do over". She was sad and angry and insisted to her parents that birds could too be purple because she could see one in her mind. Her parents were so impressed with her spunk and her strong convictions. And so Purple Bird became the way the family expressed a belief in an idea or dream that they wished to pursue.

The story made me think of my own seemingly crazy idea, to earn this certification despite my poor math skills and despite the naysayers that I worked with who had no desire to improve themselves and didn't want to see anyone else rise above their current station either.

And so as soon as dinner was over, I headed down to Kmart to comb through the toy shelves and find a purple bird to remind myself of my crazy dream and my desire to fly my own Purple Bird. I was incredibly lucky that night because after digging through carts of plush animals, I did find a small purple bird, which I hung from the rearview mirror in my car. I looked at that bird every morning and every evening for the next several months, and I swore that I would achieve my goal, my Purple Bird. And finally, I did!

Once I achieved that goal, I decided to take a Dale Carnegie course in Leadership Development. This course included a weekly practice in public speaking, which terrified me. Out came the Purple Bird again! I think you can see a pattern developing here. The point in sharing my silly way of conquering my limiting beliefs is to help you shine a light on your own goals, your own uniqueness, and your own talents, which you can turn into a core competency if you will just believe in yourself. But it means that you will have to take small chances and you will have to learn to fly your own Purple Bird.



# Three simple (but not always easy) steps for becoming Purple

## Figure out what sets you apart from the others

First, you must decide on what you do (or could do) that sets you apart from others. What makes you come alive? What would you do for free if money were no object?

When I set my goal for earning that first certification and that Dale Carnegie certificate, my only goal was to become a shop floor supervisor. That was as far out of my comfort zone as I could see. Once I achieved both, I skipped that first level of management and went right into middle management. From there, I earned another certification in Resource Management and climbed the corporate ladder again.

Somewhere along the way, I decided that I wanted to teach the APICS certification courses. And so I began teaching and I discovered that I loved it (and I still do). Helping others achieve the certifications and begin to make a difference for their companies is now my life's work and yet I don't consider it to be work at all. Which is why I encourage you to think about what excites you, what you love, what you can easily lose track of time doing.

If you uncover that deep down desire, and you hone your skill and your craft, you will never work a day in your life. Your vocation will seem more like a vacation. You will have Purpleocity. Others will know it just by being around you. Think of someone who absolutely loves what they do and exudes that passion.

Recently, I watched *McCartney 3, 2, 1*, a miniseries with Paul McCartney and Rick Rubin. What struck me most about this series was that I was watching two men who absolutely love what they do. Whether you like their music or not, the series was a testament to their passion and their genius and their Purpleocity.

You may not feel that your talent is on par with theirs. I could say the same about my talents. But the point is your talent is your own, and once you embrace it, and perfect it, it becomes your core competency. As Mother Teresa often said, "we can't all do great things, but we can do little things with great love." Love what you do, love how you do it, love who you serve. Slowly but surely, it will show and people will notice. And then one day you will realize that you are Purple.



## Find your competitive advantage

The second step, now that you have Purpleocity, is to leverage it into a Competitive Advantage. Michael Porter, Harvard Professor, and author of *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*, identified three generic competitive strategies. These are Low-Cost Leadership, Differentiation, and Focus. He went on to further break down these into a couple hybrids, but for our purpose, we can stop with these three.

If you were to decide on a Low-Cost strategy for your competitive advantage, you will look for ways to offer your product or service at a minimized cost. You will have to ask yourself if you can do it with a flair so that you do not lose your Purpleocity in the process. If so, go for it! Southwest Airlines originally competed as a low-cost provider. Costco is also considered by many to be a low-cost provider. But many of my students insist that Costco delivers exceptional customer service while keeping costs down. I would have to agree. Their customer service makes them Purple.

If you choose to compete on Differentiation strategy, you will look for ways to set yourself apart from the competition. There will be something unique about your product or service that will enable you to charge more for it. In my humble opinion, this is Purpleocity at its best.

There is a wonderful book called *Fish!* By Stephen C. Lundin, Harry Paul and John Christensen. It describes a group of young men who were selling fish in an open-air market in Seattle. They were not the only sellers of fish in that market and the work was cold, nasty, and monotonous. Once they realized that they had a choice to work there and that they could choose their attitude towards the work, they created a system for adding value to their service and for delighting their customers at the same time. In short, they developed Purpleocity and locals came to the fish market just to watch them work. There is a YouTube video on this fish market, it's the Pike's Place Fish Company. Check it out and be prepared to see Purpleocity in action!

competitive advantage: the advantage a company has over its rivals in attracting customers and defending against rivals

Source: APICS Dictionary



If you decide to use the third strategy, Focus, you will concentrate your efforts on a narrow range of the marketplace. You will pour your genius into serving them.

In the 1995 movie, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, we meet Glenn Holland, a composer who believes that he will one day write a groundbreaking piece of music. But to earn a living until that day arrives, he takes a job teaching music in an Oregon high school. His job frustrates him at first, but the decades stretch on, and he barely notices as his focus is on his students and his ability to convey the love of music to them. Here was an ordinary man demonstrating his Purpleocity by pouring his love of music into his young students for decade after decade.

And now it is your turn to decide how to turn your core competency into a competitive advantage. Hopefully, my examples have convinced you that your core competency, as humble as you may see it, can set you apart from the competition because of the way you choose to demonstrate it to the world around you. There are window washers who dress as superheroes as they clean windows at Children's Hospitals. These real-life heroes have turned a mundane task into something that delights critically ill children. I can't think of anything more Purple than that. The only limit that you will experience will be your imagination and how you choose to show up with your core competency.



Photo: Children's Miracle Network Hospitals

Maybe you don't interact with your company's customers. You can still take the opportunity to focus on your internal customers: your boss and your co-workers. Resolve to make your boss's life easier. Stop worrying about whether he or she likes you, make it your business to like them. Help them shine in any and every way you can think of. Yes, your co-workers are going to accuse you of brown nosing. Let them. You're not sucking up if your actions create value for your boss and your company. Let the small-minded people have their snarky comments. Their meager performance will continue to provide meager results. You are destined for bigger and better things.

Your Purpleocity is going to take you places, I promise you this to be true. Become curious about your co-workers and their day-to-day tasks. Ask them to explain the difficulties in their work. Ask if there is anything that you do that contributes to their challenges. Ask if there is anything you can do differently that would reduce their problems. You may not find a way to solve their issues, but they will likely remember that you tried. As a matter of fact, position yourself as a problem solver. You will never hear a Purple person say "that's not my job" or "they don't pay me enough to do that." Purple people go above and beyond the call of duty. They aren't happy fitting in because they know that they are born to stand out.

## Purple People

Here are some people who I think are the epitome of Purpleocity:

- Mr. Rogers
- Maya Angelou
- Mahatma Ghandi
- Dolly Parton
- Greta Thunberg
- Walt Disney
- Robin Williams
- Joshua Chamberlain
- Cal Ripkin Jr
- Ruth Bader Ginsburg
- Volodymyr Zelensky
- Marjorie Merriwether Post
- Katharine Hepburn
- Steven Spielberg
- Oprah Winfrey
- Cher

Think of some people you admire. What qualities make them Purple People?



## Make your core competency sustainable

The third step is to make your core competency sustainable. This involves lifelong learning and a willingness to unlearn what you think you know and relearn new and different ways to satisfy the marketplace. Learn everything you can about your industry. Stay abreast of new ideas; scour social media, podcasts, and books to stay current. Belong to an industry related association, attend seminars and conferences, network with experts in your industry. Seek out mentors and ask for advice. Don't be so arrogant to think that the way that you do something is the only way to do it. Explore new ideas, new methods. Stay curious. Practice this outside of work as well. Occasionally, take a new route home from work. Try a different cuisine. Have dinner for breakfast and breakfast for dinner. Ask yourself how two completely unrelated things may have something in common. As an example, what might a rose garden have to do with taking a trip to a

foreign country? What does your miniature car collection have to do with your company's order entry process? How does science interact with music or the arts? What famous leader exhibited Purpleocity and how did they demonstrate it? What do children know about being Purple and what could you learn from them?

Being Purple does not guarantee remaining Purple. In order to sustain your Purpleocity, you must identify as a Purple person. You must believe that you are a person who stands out from the crowd, someone who others recognize as different and remarkable. The more you believe that you have Purpleocity, the more remarkable and Purple you become. And yet I can almost guarantee that there will be times when you will be stuck, feeling that you will never uncover that secret sauce of your own Purpleocity. That may just be the time to do the most counterintuitive thing you can think of.

core competencies: skills or knowledge sets that enable a firm to provide the greatest level of value to its customers in a way that is difficult for competitors to emulate

Source: *APICS Dictionary*





**George Does The Opposite | The Opposite | Seinfeld**  
**Watch the clip**

competitive advantage: the advantage a company has over its rivals in attracting customers and

There is an episode of *Seinfeld* where George Costanza uncovers some insight into himself. "Every decision I've ever made in my entire life has been wrong," George says. "My life is the complete opposite of everything I want it to be." Then just do the opposite, Jerry tells him. "Yes!" Costanza exclaims. "I will do the opposite!" For the rest of the episode, George has great success doing the opposite of what his instincts tell him to do.

Sometimes there is merit in stepping back. It can be helpful to think about someone you admire and do what you think they would do in a particular circumstance. Just remember, your aim is not to fit in, but to distance yourself from the crowd. Don't just take the road less traveled, make a road where none previously existed. Forging new paths is the very essence of Purpleocity!

sustainability: activities that provide present benefit without compromising the needs of future generations

Source: APICS Dictionary





# Uncovering and Maintaining Your Purpleocity

I recently found the Strategy Pyramid template on a wonderful site called [strategypunk.com](http://strategypunk.com). I highly recommend that you use a tool like this to formulate your own plan for uncovering and maintaining your Purpleocity.

Start with the three areas of the section labeled "Why?" The vision will describe your future self. What do you dream of becoming? The mission describes your passion, your reason for being, it is your present state of being. Your values are your moral compass, your beliefs, the things you hold dear. Your vision and mission may alter over time, but a person's values seldom change.

Next, move down to the section labeled "How?" Your goals provide the targets that you intend to hit. They provide a framework that allows you to measure your progress. Remember, your goals should be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. And of course, they should align with your overall purpose and values.

The strategy section defines a roadmap, a course of action to achieve your goals and succeed. Earlier in this paper, I outlined three generic strategies for becoming Purple.



In the section labeled "What?" you will outline the system you plan to use to implement your strategy. I use the word "system" deliberately. Reaching a goal implies a state of completion, where a system suggests an ongoing course of action. To sustain your Purpleocity, you will need a regular routine. Perfecting your Purpleness must become second nature, in the same way that musicians, artists, athletes, and writers practice their craft every day. If this sounds daunting to you, I encourage you to talk with any professional who genuinely loves what they do. Most will tell you that they feel alive when practicing their craft, when honing their skills. I feel that way about teaching. I love teaching so much that many nights I teach and reteach classes in my sleep!

Once you have Purpleocity, you will be tough. Tough in the sense that you will have resilience to life's bumps and bruises. You will not need to place your hopes and trust in outside forces, because you will know that you have resources to fall back on in any economic climate.

Someone once said, "A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not on the branch but on its own wings." This is most especially true for Purple Birds!

## Summary

The Three Steps for Developing Your Purpleocity are:

1. Figure out what sets you apart from the others
2. Leverage Your Purpleocity into a competitive advantage
3. Make your core competency sustainable

Remember! Creating a personal competitive advantage is not just about professional success; it can also contribute to personal fulfillment and satisfaction. Pursuing your passions, developing expertise in areas you find meaningful, and achieving mastery in your chosen field can bring a sense of purpose and fulfillment to your life.

Keywords: competitive advantage, core competencies, sustainability

