

Microspeak: North star

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I noted it in the interview with the Defrag Tools show, but I'll make a proper Microspeak for it. Today's term is *North star*.

This term rose quickly to prominence in October 2015. My research suggests that it had been simmering below the surface for about a year. For example, here's an isolated citation from May 2015:

| The best you can do is paint a compelling picture of an improved world (your north star), and plan the long journey to it.

This citation is interesting because it seems to give a definition for “north star”: It means “a compelling picture of an improved world”.

The term has become wildly popular of late at Microsoft. I guess a major executive used the term recently, so now it's suddenly the cool thing to say.

We had a team meeting a little while ago. One of the agenda items was “Longer term North star topics”, which was itself rather intriguing. During the meeting, I noted¹ the following uses of the term:

| There may be changes along the way, but your north star of the feature is intact.

| We have to decide where we want to go as a north star.

I raised my hand. “What do you mean by north star? Because if you follow the north star, you end up at the north pole, and not where you actually want to go.”

The speaker seemed a bit frustrated by this question. “Who is this idiot who doesn't know what a north star is? Certainly this person hasn't been in all the meetings I've been in, where people are saying ‘north star’ all over the place.”

The speaker noted that I might want to look it up in the dictionary, because it would have told me that the north star is the goal you have beyond your immediate goal. It's a guiding principle that keeps you on the right path for your journey. (Curiously, this definition doesn't

appear anywhere in any online dictionary I could find. It also doesn't match the citation at the top of this article.)

So there you go. An explicit definition, as provided by somebody who used the term. I embarrassed myself in front of my whole team for you.

Bonus chatter: Later that same day, a top executive sent mail to the entire company. It too used the term “north star”:

With Microsoft's mission as our north star—to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more—we have a...

¹ Yes, when I attend meetings, one of the things I pay particular attention to is new jargon, so I can add it to my collection of citations. If you see me pull out my phone and jot something down, it's either because I'm writing down a question to ask later, or I'm preserving something you said so I can add it to my Microspeak citations.

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