



The Seven Things to Know About a **COMPELLING PURPOSE**

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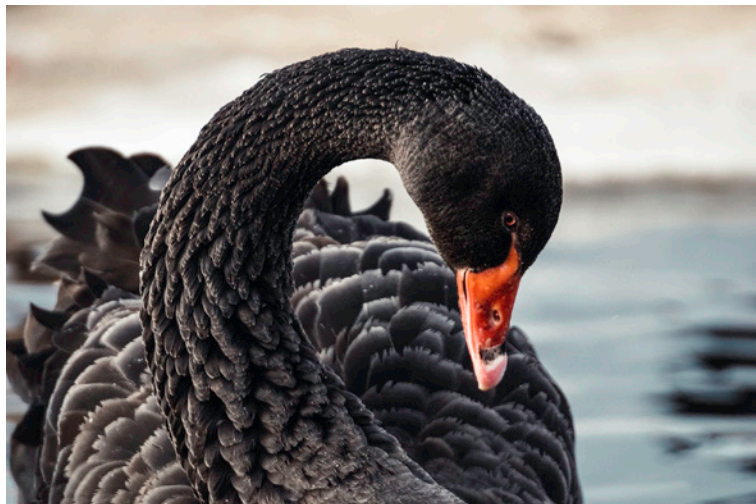
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“The less credible the business purpose, the greater the value of a compelling why at an individual level.”

In business magazines, on webcasts and within leadership programs there is constant reinforcement of the need for a successful organization to have a meaningful purpose. A major cancer hospital describes its purpose as “To cure cancer in our lifetime.” A bionics company outlines its purpose as being to “Make the wheelchair redundant.” LEGO describes its purpose as, “To inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow.” Patagonia’s website is dominated by a purposeful statement, “Earth is now our only shareholder.” Meanwhile, purposeful investment funds have totally changed the capital market’s landscape. Their overall theme, “Do well by doing good.”

The world of business is not as it was. American economist, Milton Friedman,¹ wrote, “An entity’s greatest responsibility lies in the satisfaction of the shareholders. Therefore, the business should always endeavour to maximize its revenues to increase returns for the shareholders.” Jack Welch² rode to fame (and great personal fortune³) as the uber-hero of unbridled shareholder maximisation. Feeding on the



political and economic pressures of the day, it became the dominant corporate theme of the 1990s. Even “Neutron Jack” changed his mind, however. In 2009 he said, “Shareholder value was the dumbest idea ever.” It’s hard to disagree with him. At one time, General Electric (GE) was the most admired company on the planet. On August 28, 2000 – Welch’s

1 He won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1976.

2 In 1999 *Fortune* magazine called Jack Welch “The Man of the Century.”

3 In 2000 his salary package was \$122 million.



final year in the CEO role – GE’s (all-time high) stock closing price was \$257.10 US. By 2010 it was trading at \$14.50 US, although it has recovered some since.

In championing shareholder value to the exclusion of virtually everything else, Welch and a legion of his shareholder-focused acolytes had somehow lost touch with the purpose of business. In *The Practice of Management*, Peter Drucker wrote, “There is only one valid definition of business purpose, to create a customer.” Not to serve the customer. To *create* a customer. This implies: (1) a laser-like focus on what *tomorrow’s* customer wants to buy and *how* they want to buy it; (2) a deep understanding of how changing societal attitudes, which may have nothing directly to do with product or service, have a profound influence on the buyer’s choice; (3) letting go of outdated products and technology before you have to;⁴ and (4) recognising that innovation and thought leadership are the price of staying in the game.

General Electric’s fall from grace was the inevitable outcome of a culture with an unswerving need to chase earnings. Everything else, including the much-lauded Crotonville experience,⁵ amounted to great marketing but not much else. GE’s ever higher valuation persuaded a generation of leaders into following the same shareholder maximisation philosophy. In doing so, those same leaders fell into the most seductive performance trap of all – the assumption that if you are making money, you must be successful.

Make no mistake, the shareholder is a key stakeholder. If you don’t attract and retain investors, you can neither fund the business nor raise new capital. Creating long-term value for the shareholder is no less meaningful.⁶ The problem arises when:

- Short-termism – as in quarterly results – dominates decision-making in the C-suite. The outcome? A board of directors where the skill set is largely financial; management gaming the balance sheet⁷; annual bonuses at the top that have been described, elsewhere, as “immoral;” stock buybacks that inflate the value of share options; and a cut and run mentality when the share option price has been optimised.
- Bigger is better. The outcome? Growth, volume and scale – not tomorrow’s customer – dominate the C-suite conversation.
- There is a lack of focus on the business fundamentals. The outcome? Small,

4 In acquiring Alstom for \$13.7 billion, GE doubled coal-fired, power generation capacity. In 2018, GE was forced to write down \$23 billion in goodwill for its power business, more than it had paid for Alstom three years earlier.

5 GE’s management campus was created in 1956 to make GE the “best managed company in the world.” In the 1990s it was described as “The epicenter of GE culture and an ideal that connects heritage and vision to performance.” Ironically, GE’s culture was its Achilles’ heel.

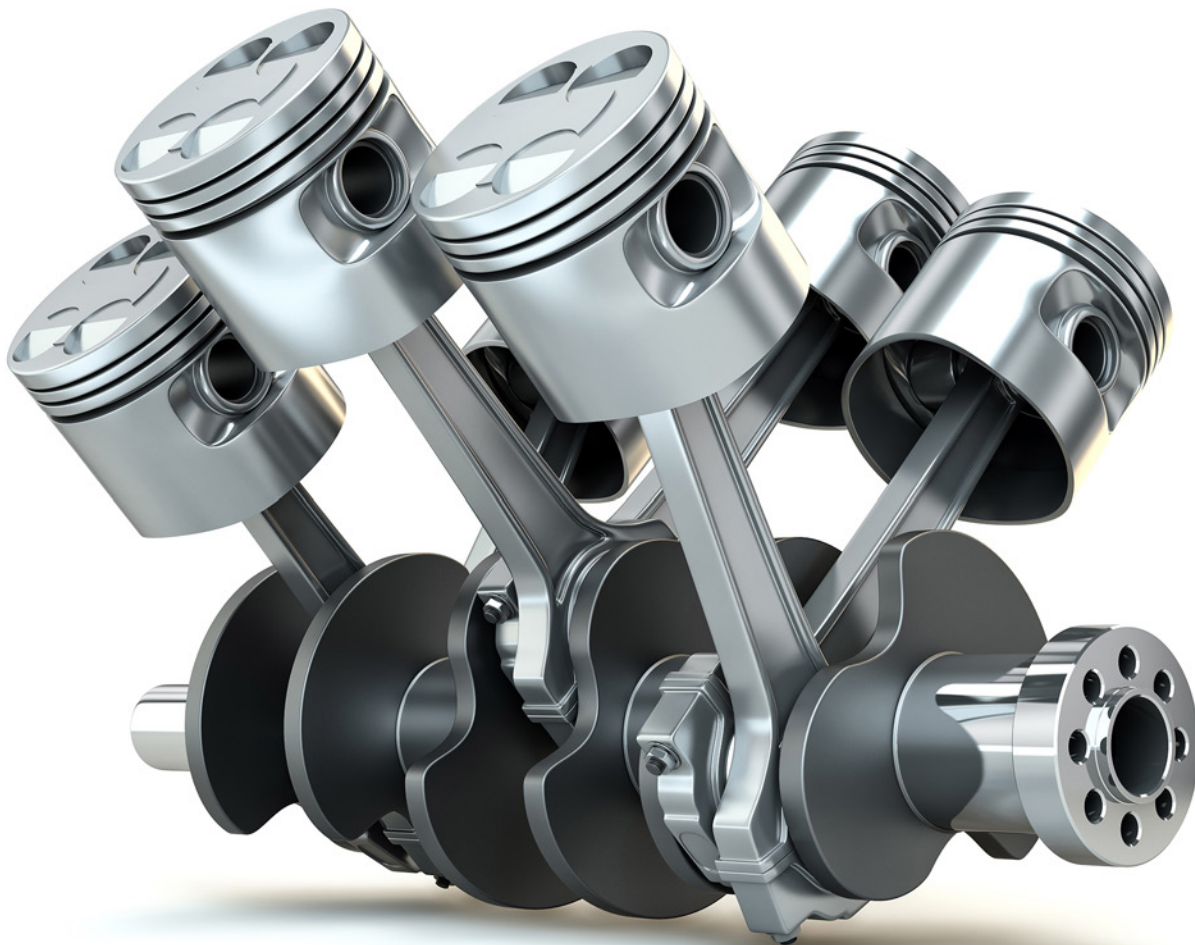
6 A new definition of *shareholder capital* is warranted.

7 Shareholders and even the board are often little aware of the extent to which the results are “groomed” to meet short-term commitments to the capital markets.



strategic problems are allowed to fester to the point where they derail the business.

- A static mindset inhibits organization agility. The outcome? Breakthrough ideas get strangled at birth. Acquisitions become clones of every other acquisition the business makes. Top talent in acquired businesses move on. Learning from best practice is stunted and Black Swan events overwhelm the leadership.
- The people in the business become little more than a supportive cog in the financial machine. The outcome? The performance management process focuses on results and not much else.⁸ Quiet quitting becomes institutionalised. A poor return on the investment in leadership development is inevitable.⁹



⁸ Until 2015, “rank and yank” was common practice in GE. Introduced by Jack Welch in the 1980s, other organizations followed. Evaluated against “the numbers” and based on a normal distribution curve, the bottom 10% are separated on an annual basis. The behavioural equivalent of throwing a hand grenade into the organization’s culture, it was the perfect way to instil intra-team rivalry and, in doing so, destroy even rudimentary collaboration.

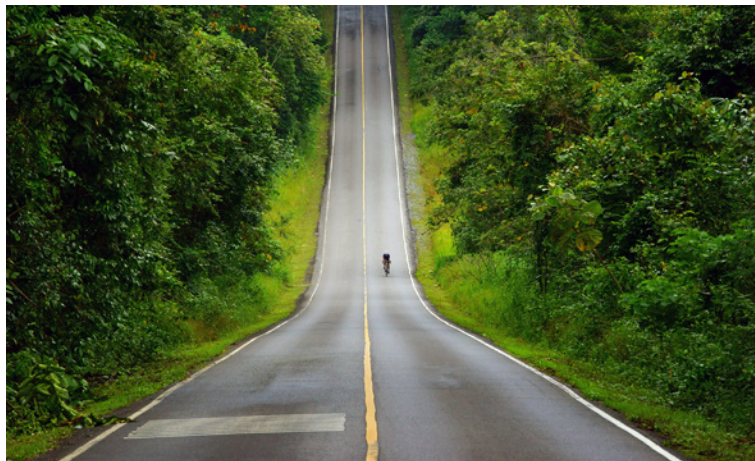
⁹ *Forbes* magazine, in 2019, reported that the leadership development spent globally was \$366 billion.



- Making money becomes more important than making a difference. The outcome? Emerging social trends are ignored. Long-term investment in needed innovation and technology is reigned in.
- The internal focus is about making the business ever more efficient – getting better and better at what you have always done – with little more than lip service to the future organization culture. The outcome? A tactical mindset bleeds into the underlying thinking about what it means to be a successful leader. The impact on executive succession being especially damaging.

As we start to embrace the second quarter of the 21st century, fully meeting the needs of the shareholder, the workforce, and the customer become an undeniable business imperative. Add diversity, inclusion, and sustainability to the mix and you have a pretty good case for stakeholder capital. Welcome to the era of “purposeful performance.”¹⁰ Embrace the belief that if you satisfy all of the stakeholders the value created is greater than the sum of the parts. Think of it this way. An engine firing on all cylinders will gain more traction and travel further/faster than the same engine firing on only one. The leadership point of view? A sustainable business must be managed from the outside-in. BHP, Australia’s largest company, describes purposeful performance as, “The long-term health of our business is dependent on the long-term health of our society and a sustainable natural environment.”

And the heartbeat of creating stakeholder value? The organization’s purpose. It’s the tip of the competitive spear, a rallying cry, a self-sustaining source of inspiration that connects what we do with the why the best of us do it. It’s the high-octane behavioural fuel that drives the team’s emotional engine. In a major business, the top team can organize along two distinctly different philosophies. One, to run the business such that the various parts of the business support each other (integrated). Two, a portfolio approach where each of the operations is a standalone entity. The reason for the former is the (often unrealised) value of synergy between the businesses.



In the integrated model, the purpose is developed and supported from the centre. In tandem with the organization’s values, the compelling purpose becomes a unifying force – the cultural glue that binds the different parts of the business together. Unless we are talking

¹⁰ A term coined by Indra Nooyi, the former Chairman and CEO, PepsiCo.



about a “conglomerate,” different divisions or businesses can have their own strategy and even culture but not their own values¹¹ or purpose.

The purpose is *why* you do what you do. It allows the provider to build an identity in the marketplace such that the right customers are drawn to the product or service offered. It attracts capital. *Doing good by being good.* It’s the platform around which meaning and a sense of belonging are built. It’s what makes employees go the extra mile. In surfacing and delivering your purpose consider the seven ideas that follow:

1. Confusion is the enemy of capability.

There needs to be a clear distinction between:

- The organization’s story: through a succinct, rich, and colourful narrative, the organization’s culture comes to life in the moment. As a rule of thumb and dependent upon the sector, it’s stories that compete and not products and/or services.
- Purpose: our *raison d’être*. Why we do what we do. The engine of meaning.
- Values: three to five unambiguous statements that define what has primacy in day-to-day decision-making. They are of the moment, not aspirational. In performance terms, the values describe the “how.” Written as action verbs, they capture the decision, were they in the room, that the founder(s) would have made. As with the purpose, the values must engage different constituencies both within and outside of the business. It’s important not to confuse organizational and personal values. Think of the organization’s values as guiding principles. In a multicultural setting, don’t expect everyone involved to have the same personal values. We can, however, expect (must expect) them to find a common cause in the organization’s guiding principles.
- Vision: the organization we strive to become.
- Brand: a promise to the customer. What the provider is committed to deliver. If the brand promise doesn’t live inside the organization, you don’t have a brand, you have a marketing campaign.
- Strategy: the long-term plan or series of strategic scenarios. The first 12 months of the strategy being the operational plan.
- Mission: is an action-based purpose. If you have a strong purpose the mission is redundant. Having both confuses people.

¹¹ The values need to be interpreted to fit the local culture. Teamwork in Canada and teamwork in South Korea draw on a very different cultural context. Candour is never going to mean the same in Japan as it does in Holland.



Culture is a system. All of the above are essential building blocks in that system. Everything is connected to everything else. Miss an element out or focus on only part of the system and unexpected consequences can be expected. Consider The Great Famine in Ireland in the middle of the 19th century. The potato crop – the primary food source – rotted in the field because it was attacked by a previously unknown blight. A million people died, and a million-and-a-half emigrated. The source of the blight? A uniquely potent source of fertiliser (Guano) that had been discovered in Peru. Potatoes brought on board to feed the crew of the Irish bound ships became infected. It spread from there. Even today, Ireland has a significantly smaller population than it did before the 1845–1849 famine.

2. Products and services, the business model, and the organization’s purpose have a synergistic relationship.

The provider’s products and services are the vehicle through which the seller brings their business model to life. They are to the business model what the power train is to an automobile. The more horsepower available, the bigger the hill you can climb.

There are three value platforms: (1) adding value, (2) creating value, and (3) inventing value. *Adding value* is how you differentiate a commodity. Your garden centre sells you plants – a commodity. Adding value enters the picture when the advice you are given





makes you come back. What is added value today becomes commonplace tomorrow. Before it became standard fare, free internet at your favourite hotel was added value.

Creating value lies in moving beyond the customer's/client's immediate needs and where the provider strives to make the customer's/client's business (or consumer's life) better. It draws on the provider's ability to build a strategic¹² partnership plus clearly differentiated products and services. In executive search, creating value transforms the client's approach to talent acquisition such that, for the client, it becomes a competitive advantage.

Inventing value enables the buyer/client to either reinvent the business or open up entirely new markets. The basic currency in inventing value is creative innovation plus thought leadership. A group of international consultants form a collaboration to help a major multinational reinvent its culture. The outcome? The culture shifts from managing the business from the *inside-out* to one where the emphasis becomes managing from the *outside-in*. Instead of responding to client concerns/problems (which they did brilliantly), the business starts to present solutions/opportunities that clients and potential clients were not aware of. Apple, under Steve Jobs, was a classic example of inventing value.

Moving up the values ladder means that: (1) price becomes less of a factor; (2) customers/clients are less likely to migrate to a competitor; and (3) in a business-to-business environment, it allows the provider to build a relationship with market leaders. The learning deficit of not working with market leaders is a competitive disadvantage that will erode the provider's ability to compete – especially against new entrants.

The greater the level of value offered by the provider, the higher the need for them (the provider) to: (1) invest in learning; (2) develop outstanding teams; (3) attract and retain the best; and (4) build an ethos of inclusion, innovation and inspirational leadership. The challenge? Without a compelling purpose, the provider is unlikely to migrate much beyond added value. And, certainly not in a sustained way. Without a big enough emotional engine, the value hill is too steep to climb. Unless at the core of everything the business does there is a real sense of meaning, in the quest to partner with market leaders the baton will be passed to a competitor that does have a compelling purpose.

3. The purpose has to be authentic and subject to change.

Think of the purpose as the creation story. Why the organization exists, its reason to be. A compelling purpose can be a winning competitive advantage. But it has to be authentic. It has to capture what you are actually doing! Not what you want to do, or what you claim to be able to do. With discerning customers, if the purpose turns out to be little more than a marketing exercise, you are harming the brand.

¹² "Strategic" implies "a solution" that will have a positive impact well into the future.



A lofty purpose that lacks credibility will quickly become a target for the cynics and malcontents within the informal organization. An aspirational purpose, similarly, might sound noble, but unless there is evidence that the organization is moving in that direction it will have little emotional traction. I am reminded of a time when I was a member of a corporate team for, what at the time was, the world's largest diesel engine and farm machinery company. I was part of a select group of senior executives charged with defining the organization's purpose. The proposed purpose? "To feed the world." It was a well-meant purpose from a very talented group of international executives. But was it compelling? Was it authentic? It's very doubtful that, upon waking, the typical supervisor's first thought was, "I have to rush to work to feed the world."

We live in a time of change. The purpose has to evolve with the company. It has to thrive in real-time. I can't hold what I can't touch. A valid purpose thus needs to reflect: (1) shifts in societal priorities, (2) "noise" from the investment community, (3) the organization's emerging business model, (4) the ideal customer, and (5) what the organization's top talent demand from their employer. The purpose also has to be supported by the entrepreneurial flair and leadership competencies needed to build long-term success. It doesn't matter how strong the plough is, you still need the right horses to pull it.





Developing the purpose is underscored by a key question. Is this an all-weather (generalised) purpose or one that focuses on one single, unifying social issue? Sustainability, for example. Microsoft's purpose is "To empower every person and organization on this planet to achieve more." McKinsey's purpose, similarly, is "To help create positive, enduring change in the world." In a far more pragmatic vein, Warby Parker, the international vision care company, makes the commitment that for every pair purchased, a pair of glasses is distributed to someone in need.

4. Developing the purpose.

Although the rationale behind the purpose may be complex, it has to be communicated in simple and assessable language. Getting there, however, isn't always easy. And set aside the thought that it should be a democratic process, that it should be developed collectively by all of the stakeholders. Have different constituencies make suggestions, provide feedback, and validate the end product, but don't let the herd decide. If you do, it will likely lack strategic intent, and be devoid of creative energy. In other words, it will sound just like everybody else's purpose. As with the organization's vision, values, strategy, and business model, the purpose must originate and be owned by the top team.

Getting to the purpose starts by casting a wide net. It means looking beyond the obvious (lateral thinking), breaking new ground (creative thinking), and insight based on experience (intuitive thinking). It also implies a large slice of pragmatism. Will the purpose being suggested make a real difference? Will those in the middle of the organization be energised by it?

Surfacing the purpose isn't an afternoon brainstorming session. Getting it right is more important than doing it fast. All that said, learning starts with a question. It will differ from sector to sector but whittling down a long list to only half-a-dozen critical questions is probably a good place to start.

- What were (are) our founders passionate about?
- What got us here as an organization? What makes us special?
- What do each of the various stakeholder constituencies suggest is the organization's purpose? Make listening to middle management a priority.
- If we were a new market entrant, what would give us immediate commercial traction?
- Which of the organization's values has the greatest traction?
- What is it that the market leader in our sector does that separates them from the crowd?



- Where is our most successful competitor vulnerable?
- What aspect of our brand promise delights the customer?
- What do we want to be known for ten years from now?
- What is that we do, if only some of the time and in some places, that brings people together (builds a sense of belonging)?
- What do tomorrow's customers want to buy and how do they want to buy it?
- What is it that our most loyal customers want us to do differently?
- What do those described as "top talent" love about the organization? Why do they stay?
- How will technology change how we do business? Will that open up opportunity to better serve society?
- Are there investor groups that list us as "not to buy?" Why?
- Who are our most successful suppliers? What can we learn from their purpose?





- Who are our most successful customers? What can we learn from their purpose?
- In attracting top talent, what is that we do that they love?
- Is there an unfulfilled societal need that we are uniquely positioned to address?
- Is there any legislation on the horizon that will change how we do business?
- When we lose top talent, what kind of organization do they join? What is the emotional appeal?

5. Does every business have a compelling purpose?

As we flatten the organization, jettison a command-and-control approach, and expand the value of the team, the “noise” that fills the white space on the organization chart becomes ever more important. The signals that support trust. The chatter that creates commitment. The messaging that manifests meaning. The practices that produce purpose.

All this raises a question that can be flexed in different ways. “I am in a business that sells a common commodity.” “My organization produces a product that others suggest is harmful – carbonated soft drinks with a high sugar content.” “Where I work is still wedded to shareholder value and short-term results.” The question? Can we still have a meaningful purpose?

It may not have the compelling nature of “making the wheelchair redundant” but you can still find a purpose. Some time ago, I worked on culture for a major Dollar Store chain. Their purpose was, in part, to sell toys, party favours, and a host of other products that



families wouldn’t otherwise have been able to afford. Far more empowering, however, was their social purpose. A percentage of their profits went to support several children’s charities. In their corporate office, the enthusiasm was palpable. The walls were covered with examples of how employees, regardless of level, were making a difference. You could tell, just by being there, that it was a great place to work. And it really didn’t have a lot to do with the balloons, cake decorations, or multi-coloured bunting that they sold in their stores.



It's important to move beyond the detached, charitable donations dispensed from the corporate office. As with the Dollar Stores, the social purpose has to be something employees touch and feel every day. This is not to decry the underlying generosity of spirit involved in periodically nailing boards together for Habitat for Humanity and/or making the occasional foray, after dark, to dispense blankets and soup to the unhoused. The dilemma? The occasional "good works" don't reach the threshold of being a compelling purpose.

Meanwhile, purpose is a double helix of behavioural DNA that contains two interrelated emotional messages: the organization's purpose and a work-related personal contribution. If they are not congruent, if one doesn't support the other, the discordant tension will create an internal conflict that, one way or another, will find a means of expression. Quiet quitting?

6. A personal purpose.

Five different conversations frame the ongoing dialogue at work: (1) shared purpose, (2) negotiation, (3) persuasion, (4) resolving conflict, and (5) coaching. One might think that problem-solving would be a sixth. It's not – it's another form of negotiation. Not infrequently including, negotiating with one's self. A successful leader wants to be dealt, and then be able to shuffle, a conversational full house. When the organization's purpose is deemed to be either unnecessary or difficult to define, two contingencies emerge. One, we throw too much emotional weight on the other four conversations. Two, a *personal purpose* fills the vacuum.

The less credible the business purpose, the greater the value of a compelling why at an individual level. Uncovering personal meaning doesn't start there, however. Creating a culture where employees connect with how they make a difference demands a special kind of leadership. A way to be that draws on a serving spirit. A mindset that sees every bump in the road as a harbinger of possibility and not just another problem. Hubert Joly, a former CEO of Best Buy and a passionate proponent of purpose, puts it this way, "People are not a resource, they are the creative engine of innovation and change that companies urgently need."

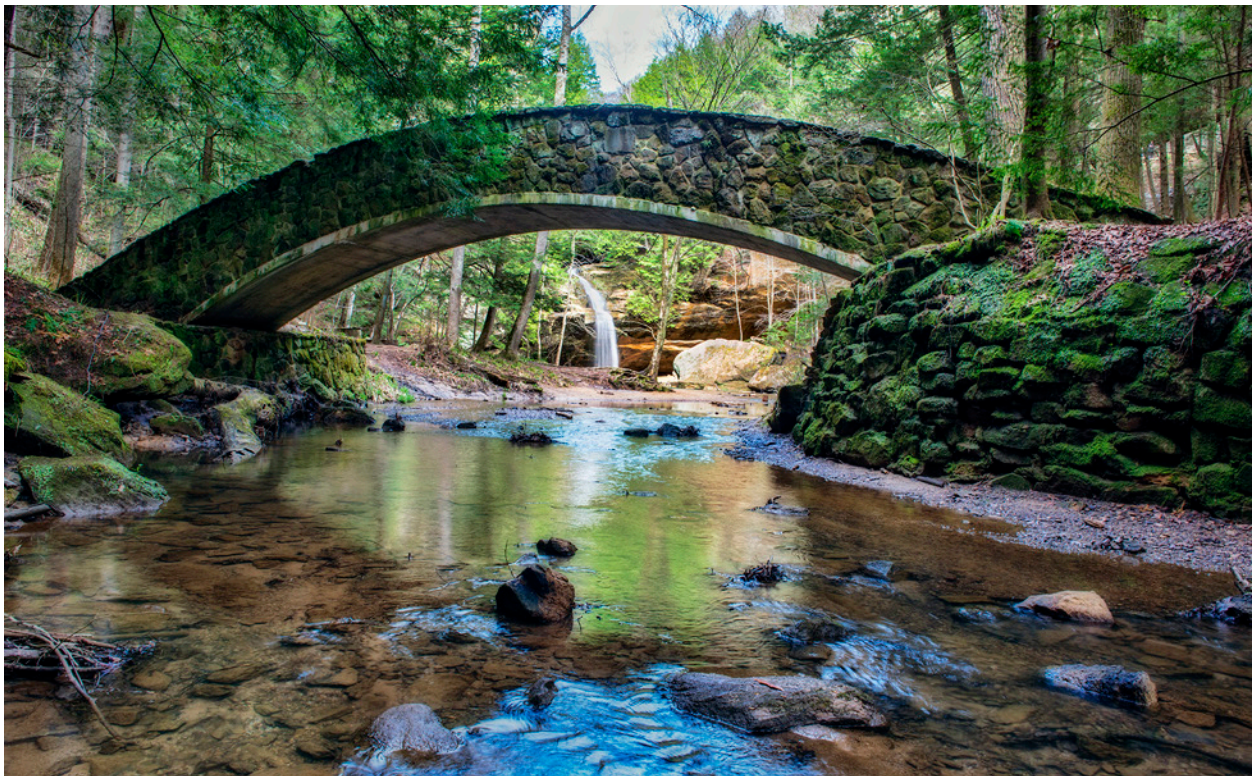
To support a team member looking for a personal purpose is to understand that there are two kinds of goals: moving ahead goals and contribution goals. The paradox? Although the vast majority of self-help programs/books focus on the former – "How to make money in the stock market" – there is far greater satisfaction and personal growth in "other" centred goals. When did you last go through a performance discussion where your contribution to others on the team was the central focus? When was the last time such a discussion encompassed personal purpose? Coach those on your team in how to coach and you are nurturing a meaningful personal purpose. For most of us there is



greater gratification in helping a middle-of-the-road colleague become a star performer than there is in meeting the numbers. Not that the latter isn't essential.

The inner compass that keeps us on track, the bedrock that anchors purpose is *our story*. When we lose touch with that story our personal “why” is overwritten by the contingencies of the day. It's a disconnect that is compounded when, as is often the case, we end up living someone else's story. To reconnect with your own story, to uncover the roots that nurture and sustain your purpose, go through the questions outlined in point #4 – Developing the purpose. Rework those questions that speak to you. Make them personal. “What are *you* passionate about?” “What makes *you* special?” “Which of *your* values do you want to shape your future at work?” Be creative. “What is your own path to mastery?” “Are you in the right role?” “Could the role be reworked?” The questions that you uncover for yourself are the ones that will resonate the longest.

Your personal work-related purpose doesn't necessarily mean you have to boil the ocean. To make a difference, start by looking inside the team. Perhaps through masterful listening you can help shape team discussions in a unique way. Would being a mentor to someone who has recently joined the team be satisfying? What about being the individual to go to in terms of what the competition is doing? Maybe learn how to become a great facilitator? The guardian of the team's ability to establish psychological safety?





Your “purpose” should move beyond simply making a greater contribution to the team. Be specific. Define a role – beyond your functional role – where you can develop true mastery.

Tomorrow’s organization will be a team of teams. Knowing, really knowing what makes a team successful and a purposeful contribution in pursuit of that goal would be an amazing contribution. Being part of a great team is a rich and unforgettable experience. An interaction that feeds a deep-rooted need, one that defined us when the most sophisticated technology we had access to was a really sharp stick. When we draw on who we were, we move down the path that shapes who we can become.

The world is in flux. The only thing that is constant is the need to adapt. A meaningful, work-related purpose, thus, demands ongoing learning and growth. Ask for instruction. What do you need to do that you can’t do now? Move to learning how to learn. Challenge the status quo. Become comfortable in being uncomfortable. See not knowing as an opportunity. Push to the edge. Take your learning even further. Learning how to learn – limited only by the depth of your creativity. Leaders are readers. Read more. Network with experts. Let your curiosity run riot. Ask the questions that everyone else would like to ask but doesn’t. Make life-long learning, itself, a compelling purpose. When a shark stops moving it dies. When we stop learning, we stop living.





Growth implies vulnerability, resilience, pushing to the edge, and translating intention into action. Learning isn't reading something. That's knowledge. Learning isn't found in instruction. That's know-how. Discussion doesn't generate learning. That's insight. We learn – and can only learn – when we translate knowledge, know-how, and/or insight into action. That is to say, when, through repetition, we develop and continue to hone positive habits. Meanwhile, a habit, once established, evokes unconscious learning. *Learning by doing.* Personal growth we only become aware of – and can, thus, build on – when we practice deep reflection. *Learning how to learn.* Agility is the capacity to unlearn the old and adopt new habits no less quickly than the rate of change in the emerging environment. Resilience is defined by the repertoire of enshrined habits we have available to us.¹³

Don't just chase objectives. Become the best version of yourself possible. Uncover your personal work-related purpose. Discover and then develop your contribution to the team. Don't cruise, create. Don't exist, explore. Don't retire, reinvent. Embrace the joy of giving – especially as it relates to giving of yourself. Caring matters. There is a wealth of research to support that people with a purpose live longer, have happier lives, significantly reduce the possibility of a heart attack, and are 2.2 times less likely to suffer from dementia.¹⁴

7. Bridging “the why” and “the how.”

The research suggests that only 7% of Fortune 500 CEOs choose to focus on profitability to the exclusion of social goals. That doesn't mean that those same organizations actually have a compelling purpose or that they have aligned the business behind that purpose. Talk is cheap. The road to mediocrity is paved with good intentions.

Purpose without action is a journey without a destination. *Action* connects purpose (*the why*) with implementation (*the how*). “**To** improve the lives of the unhoused **by** donating a pair of socks for every pair of socks we sell.” “**To** make attraction and retention a competitive advantage **by** partnering with clients in order that they fully understand why their top talent stays.” “**To** transform water-impooverished countries **by** introducing cost effective, atmospheric water generation.” “**To** enable our clients to book hotel rooms at lower prices **by** taking advantage of size when negotiating with various hotel chains.” You can also substitute we for to. “**We** produce beautiful lawns that your pet will enjoy **by** insisting on totally safe garden products.” “**We** provide memorable IT talent **by** utilising a range of unique assessment tools to ensure fit.” Even if **to**, **we** and **by** remain silent

¹³ This paragraph is taken from *The Other Culture: Nurturing the Grapevine*. John O. Burdett (2023). The emphasis being that purpose isn't simply an intellectual or supportive point of view. Purpose is rooted in action. It's not what we think about, it's what we do about it.

¹⁴ From Rush University's Memory and Aging Project, which commenced in 1997.



and (as is often the case) **the how** appears as a sub-heading on the website, three simple words (**to, we, by**) can help clarify the purpose in conversation.

The authenticity of the purpose is realised when the conversation around purpose moves quickly to the how. To keep it simple, **by** isn't always included in the broad statement around purpose. It is, however, essential in making the purpose come alive within the organization. A why without a how is a dream without a deadline, a hero in search of a story, a balloon without a string. If you want to inspire the audience, if you want to engage the customer, if you want to energise the team, you've gotta describe how you *deliver* on the promise that the purpose represents.

There was a time when selling was viewed as exclusively the prerogative of those whose function was labelled “sales and marketing.” That was then and this is now. To be a leader today is to recognise that selling is central to your mandate. Selling the need for change. Selling breakthrough ideas. And selling the organization's purpose. To make purpose come alive, to make the why and the how live and breathe, consider:



- You can't argue, bluster, or finesse your way into trust. Building trust is an action, not an assumption. It matters not that the purpose lives on the page. Does it *enable* the head – do employees, regardless of level, feel that the purpose is strategically sound? Does it *empower* the hand – is the promise inherent in the purpose being fulfilled? Does it *engage* the heart – is there evidence that the purpose has genuine and lasting emotional impact? Does it *enrich* the spirit – is pride, commitment, retention and team chemistry positively impacted by the purpose?
- Words largely inform; images have the capacity to inspire. Support the purpose with vibrant and powerful imagery. Not just what the purpose is but what the purpose does. A single image can work. A video opens up the opportunity to create something memorable. Professional actors will get the job done, but an employee, a customer, or those benefiting from the organization's social purpose is better. Authenticity in action.



- If you hold down a leadership role, use imagery to create a picture of what successful execution of the purpose will look and feel like. Create the video in your mind. Using expressive and rich language, share it with the team. Invite members of the team to surface and describe their role in the video. The more detail you can put into your imagery, the more likely the rest of the team are to join you.
- Translate the purpose into a story (stories). People love positive stories – especially if they can personally relate to and/or feel genuine empathy for the (real) characters in the story. At townhall meetings introduce a customer, a supplier, or a specific group that is benefiting from the organization’s purpose. We are wired for stories. Stories last in people’s minds long after where the recipient read or heard it. A great story has a life of its own. It will be swept along on one of the most perfect communication systems ever invented – the grapevine.
- Symbolism matters.¹⁵ In training events, brand the room – images that reinforce the organization’s purpose. Don’t award prizes for top performers. Send them to meet those who are benefiting from the company’s purpose. To drive home the philosophy of shareholder value, it was not uncommon in the past for employees to have screen savers that listed the organization’s share price in real-time. That those same employees didn’t directly benefit from upward movement of the share price was largely ignored. That modern computers don’t need screen savers doesn’t matter. Create one anyway. One that reinforces the organization’s purpose. One that links the what and the how.
- Make the way the purpose is presented fun and engaging. Games, competitions, and events shouldn’t be limited to “propagating the brand.” Be conscious of the organization’s purpose in everything you do. Avoid, in particular, an unconscious message where the event/activity and your purpose clash. If you make carbonised drinks and part of your social purpose is to reduce the amount of fresh water used in production, sponsoring a golf tournament may not serve you well.

Bridging the what and the how is especially important for the middle kingdom. The perfect way to derail the purpose is when middle managers ask each other, “Do we really need this?” The team can move the chess piece around, beat the corporate drum, produce slick presentations, and walk the talk, but if middle management aren’t on board, no one is on board.

Middle management can either energise the purpose or see it as just another piece of the jigsaw that doesn’t fit the day-to-day puzzle. They have to believe in the purpose. And to believe in it, they have to emotionally touch what it achieves. They have to be

¹⁵ There is a reason why every Roman Legion had their own eagle, that Napoleon created new medals for heroic action, and a whole lot of people get upset when you burn their flag.



emotionally connected to it. They need to see it as the guy ropes that hold up the cultural tent, the glue that bonds their team together, the music playing in the background when dealing with the unions, the source of inspiration when employees are asked to abandon established practice, and the story managers constantly share when celebrating success.

For middle management to be truly purpose driven, we have to first move them off the sidelines. We have to instill hope and optimism. We then have to make them managers and not administrators. Beyond that we have to ensure that they view the purpose as enriching their lives and not yet one more task to perform.

- The purpose has to be communicated with absolute clarity. Ambiguity argues against acceptance.
- The why needs to be connected to the how. If you are faced with a veritable avalanche of everyday problems, the purely aspirational intent of top management is a burden and not a benefit. To believe it, you have to see it.
- “Engagement” of middle managers has to be a priority. The evidence from Gallup and others is that middle managers are the least engaged group in the typical organization. If middle managers are simply going along to get along, purpose is





something of an empty vessel. As a priority, allow middle managers to actually manage. Allow them to make decisions. Assume that given the opportunity, they will get it right. And when someone who deals directly with the customer says, “I’ll have to ask my supervisor,” what you are really hearing is the death knell of your purpose.

- Surface the stories that amplify the purpose and train middle managers in storytelling. When we share a great story, we not only inspire others, we also inspire ourselves.
- Coach, support, mentor middle managers such that they connect with their own personal purpose. Encourage them to share that purpose with their team.

Conclusion

In the face of what amounts to a meta change in the expectations on the part of both employees and society, only a supreme optimist on steroids would assume that it’s business as usual. The rebalancing of power from the enterprise to the employees, in particular, is too profound to be ignored. Nor can we push aside its accompanying chorus of dissatisfaction – union unrest, quiet quitting, and the great exit. It is also clear that the debris left in the wake of a self-destructive approach to shareholder value puts it squarely in the rear-view mirror. In its place? Purposeful performance.

There is no formulaic or paint-by-numbers approach to purpose. Every organization will have to discover its own unique path. The first step? To ensure that there is clarity between values, vision, brand, strategy, mission, and purpose.

Having surfaced the purpose, we need to inject energy into it every day. We have to uncover creative ways to continuously throw another log on the purposeful fire. That implies building a synergistic relationship between purpose and the organization’s emerging business model. It means authenticity, recognising that the purpose evolves, asking the right questions, recognising the role of personal purpose, and bridging the what with the how – especially the latter. It also means filling the vacuum left behind when the organization’s purpose is difficult to define with a focus on personal purpose. Ideally, of course, you need both.

The only thing you can say about your strategy is that, at best, it’s a work in progress. Organization culture thus becomes the primary performance platform that bridges what is with what needs to be. Without a systematic and measured approach to culture, the organization is, metaphorically, staggering forward blindly. For that reason, culture can no longer be an abstruse, esoteric, soft topic delegated to HR. If the top team aren’t fully emersed in creating tomorrow’s culture today, they are, arguably, failing to fulfil a critical fiduciary duty. And a central plank in that culture? The organization’s purpose.



Culture is a system. Important as it is and no matter how well crafted, the purpose can't thrive in a vacuum. It's a critical pillar but is, nevertheless, only one central element in the issues that shape the organization's future. Addressing culture is far more about shaping the context than it is chasing the immediate concerns. Forge it, not fix it! In that vein, you can't manage what you don't measure. How do things happen today? What culture do we *need* to do to succeed in the future? Not what you would like to become (aspiration). What we need to become. Survival isn't a given.

A concluding word on personal purpose. It can be argued that a compelling purpose is essential in an environment where all of the team works from a remote location all the time. Essential, that is, if any real sense of "the team" is to be retained. That said, where a compelling organization purpose is found wanting, a personal purpose goes some way to fill the emotional vacuum. The dilemma? A personal purpose, in the ways suggested, means working closely with others. No problem where the team spends at least part of the time inhouse (hybrid employment). Somewhat more difficult, however, in an entirely virtual work environment.



Building trust is an action, not an assumption.



All this leads to three central concerns regarding teamwork in a virtual setting. If the compelling business is poorly defined and personal purpose is lacking:

1. How do you start to develop any sense of belonging?
2. How do you create an environment where people feel that they are truly part of the team?
3. How do you avoid the costly scenario where employees see the work being undertaken as little more than an employment placeholder until a better offer comes along?

Purpose, if you are not going to leave home – don't be without it.

Finally, we come to leadership. Without the right kind of leadership not much happens. We are describing the cognitive capacity needed to develop a winning strategy. The practical intelligence that lies behind delivering results. The emotional intelligence involved in building meaningful relationships. The social intelligence that strips out bias and reinforces fairness and caring. The intrapersonal savvy that allows us to have a meaningful conversation with ourselves. The ecological intelligence demanded if we are to fully recognise the self-destructive, existential footprint we are leaving on the planet. And what engages, enables, envelops, and integrates these different leadership domains? A compelling “*Why*.” The emotional engine that means behind everything the team/the organization does lies an empowering reason to be. Without meaning the world of work is, literally, *meaningless*.



For Further Discussion

4. Managing the business from the inside-out. The emerging business model. Board governance when shareholder value is no longer the dominant theme.
5. The impact of a compelling purpose on attraction, retention, engagement and quiet quitting.
6. Organization culture as a system. Measuring culture. The role of purpose in organization culture.
7. Developing and communicating the purpose. Organization purpose vs individual purpose.
8. Getting middle management fully in the game.

Anyone who has studied psychology is familiar with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Published in *Psychological Review* in 1943, his research defined self-actualization as the highest need we aspire to. That wasn't the end of the story though. Later in life, Maslow revisited his thinking. Self-actualization remained but at an even higher level of need he identified – **PURPOSE**.





John O. Burdett

*“Purpose without
action is a
journey without a
destination.”*

- J. O. Burdett

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He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He

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John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 15 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His *Leadership Beyond Crisis Series* came out in 2021. In 2022, he brought out a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.

Go to the TRANSEARCH International website to download John's books and articles (gratis). The site also has a number of webinars.

