

How to Tap into Purpose to Motivate People

Shine the light of purpose over your life and your organization.

By Shawn Murphy

For too long purpose has been erased from organizational life. The only mention of purpose in a work context has been that of the organization's. This is no longer enough to differentiate yourself, your organization, and your performance. The same is true for your employees.

Motivating for Performance & Overall Life Satisfaction

Motivating people goes well beyond pay and benefits. These short-term motivators don't get to the heart of a more effective way of motivating for performance; today's employees long for something more. They want to be part of something bigger than themselves. They want to know their work matters.

You already have an advantage over for-profit organizations that traditionally have focused on money as a motivator. As a nonprofit, purpose is more central to your existence. It's time to leverage this influence to give employees a more meaningful work experience.

Intrinsic motivators, such as purpose, are more effective than external motivators, such as money, in inspiring high performance. Purpose is rooted in the contents of a person's life. It's a reflection of what drives a person to achieve great things. Purpose helps people experience the good life. When you succeed in helping employees live a richer life, you have a competitive advantage in keeping and attracting the talent you need to achieve your goals. Equally as important, purpose helps motivate higher levels of performance.

Research shows that purpose-oriented workers are more likely to grow personally and professionally and provide high value to their organization. Purpose at work helps with overall life satisfaction, a mutually beneficial outcome to the organization and to the employee.

Purpose & the Optimistic Workplace

In a recent study, 65% of employees said they would rather have a new boss than a pay increase. In a separate study by

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LinkedIn of 18,000 employees, only 15% were happy in their jobs. And in a Willis Towers Watson study, fewer than half of respondents believed that their senior managers cared about their well-being. These numbers are merely a sampling of the dismal mood that hovers over most employees' work experiences. Yet, work doesn't need to be a drag. It can be a source of optimism. When you create an optimistic environment, you have a huge advantage in attracting and retaining the most talented employees – the ones who are unhappy with their current employment and looking for a more purpose-filled experience at work.

Your role as a leader is key to helping work become a positive contribution in your employees' lives. Research studies from both Gallup and the Hay Group find that an employee's immediate leader's style has the greatest influence on employee engagement, morale, and performance. In short, you play a pivotal role in the influence of work on your people; you set the tone in the work environment.

Purpose is the trigger for workplace optimism to emerge. Workplace optimism isn't about having a rosy view of the world. Rather, an optimistic workplace gives people hope that good things will come from their hard work. Purpose leads to possibility. Possibility leads to innovation. These two inputs help pave the way to better results.

Purpose & the Leader

In their study of purpose and leadership, Nick Craig and Scott Snook found that fewer than 20% of leaders are aware of their purpose. When leaders aren't focused on their personal purpose, they're less fulfilled at work and more likely to leave the organization.

Purpose isn't solely a spiritual endeavor. It's a work focus that can lead to greater meaning in work and positively shape how you lead. If you don't connect with your own purpose, you can't be an effective mentor to others who are seeking meaning in their lives.

“Help people uncover their purpose for themselves.”

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Shaping an Environment that Energizes Everyone

People in optimistic workplaces outperform those who work in negative cultures. They're more confident and work together more seamlessly. And it's you – their immediate leader – who has the biggest effect on their mood. You can transform the work experience by focusing on the following essential beliefs:

The team is more important than any individual. Ask employees to identify goals that encourage collaborative behaviors and develop a cohesive team identity. The more connected people are, the more satisfied and energetic they feel and the better their work performance. Teams are also able to come up with more creative solutions than any one person working alone.

There's value to experiencing joy at work. When people's brains are opened by positive emotions, they can better see connections and options to solve problems. Let others see your joy and pride when someone does great work. Celebrate key project milestones and momentous occasions in employees' lives.

People's personal and professional lives are connected. Help employees construct a satisfying work-life balance. Commemorate their personal triumphs – getting married, having a baby, or buying a home, for example. Be there when life's lows affect them – a divorce, a death in the family, and the like. Show your understanding by giving them a flexible schedule, extra time off, or the opportunity to work from home to help them manage their stress and commitments. Their home life will affect their work, whether you acknowledge it or not. When you affirm it, they'll view you as a collaborator rather than an adversary.

Relationships with employees need to be richer. Take time to get to know your staff beyond their roles at work. Instead of “managing” people, aim to fulfill a higher calling as a steward, coach, mentor, leader, and guide. Spend time one-on-one with employees to help them identify their educational goals and connect their work with the organization's vision. Encourage face-to-face meetings and get-togethers whenever possible. Interaction is the fuel for positive energy.

Work should align with meaning. Motivation thrives when people understand why they show up to work and why it matters. Personal expression through work is a major contributor to people's well-being and optimal performance.

Leaders need to actualize human potential. Place value on relationships that respect the whole person, not just the employee. Provide workshops that deepen people's self-awareness and help them become the best version of themselves.

Use the following pointers to revolutionize the work environment:

Create spaces for random collisions. Make sure there are coworking spaces where people will come in contact with one another informally and often. Experiment with open workplace environments.

Help people integrate their personal values into their work. Assign tasks that align with each employee's values.

Boost collaboration as much as possible. To screen for collaborative tendencies during hiring, pair up two candidates, give them a challenge, and tell them their goal is to make their partner look good. Such hands-on exercises are the best way to spot collaborative people. Having such people on your staff will help create a positive culture.

Encourage (in yourself and others in your organization) a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. Those with a fixed mindset believe that people's intelligence is static and unchanging. Those with a growth mindset realize that intelligence is dynamic and can constantly be improved through effort and determination.

Inquire into each employee's development goals. Your objective is to help every employee have a thriving career and a fulfilling work-life balance.

Work with employees to help them identify mentors. Ideally, each employee should have several mentors of different ages to provide a balanced perspective.

Weave fun, laughter, and joy into each work day.

–adapted from *The Optimistic Workplace*
(harpercollinsleadership.com)

The Ultimate Motivator

How then do you motivate for performance through purpose? It's an important question if you're to help employees achieve goals and engage more deeply in their work and working alongside others.

The first order of business is to help people uncover their purpose for themselves. A good way to start is with the quiz in the righthand column ("Move toward Your True Purpose"). First, take the quiz yourself. Next, ask employees to take it, and allocate time for them to think about their own purpose and how it aligns with that of the organization. Then get together to discuss results and share insights.

Is it a leader's responsibility to help employees find their purpose and integrate it into their work? Absolutely. It's a way to move beyond a transactional relationship – trading time for money – and into a mutually beneficial relationship. The mutuality exists in employees living into their potential and you getting stronger employees who are more deeply committed to the organization's cause and goals.

Savvy leaders recognize that employees have personal as well as professional expectations of their organization. Today's employees want more from their time with an organization. Helping them align with their purpose and perform at higher levels is a way to satisfy their needs. 

Fewer than 20% of leaders are aware of their purpose.

Leverage the Benefits of Purpose

Use these resources to help people find their purpose and align it with the organization's values (NonprofitWorld.org):

Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions (Vol. 26, No. 4)

Why Your Employees Are Losing Motivation – and What to Do about It (Vol. 29, No. 4)

Leading from Feeling (Vol. 27, No. 1)

Creating a Values-Based Road Map (Vol. 23, No. 2)

Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow (Vol. 23, No. 5)

Productive Employees: Two Crucial Ingredients (Vol. 36, No. 2)

Earn People's Loyalty: Here's How (Vol. 17, No. 5)

Coach! The Skill Every Leader Needs (Vol. 37, No. 1)

A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, and Less Burnout? (Vol. 36, No. 1)

Training Programs Need More than Good Information (Vol. 21, No. 2)

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Move toward Your True Purpose

Take the following steps to ascertain your purpose. Then ask others in your organization to do the same.

1. Mine your past experiences.

Think back over your life, and pinpoint moments that hold insights about your purpose.

Identify times when you were most present and excited in your life. About each of these times, ask yourself the following:

- **What were you** doing?
- **What thoughts** did you have when doing this activity?
- **Were you doing it for yourself** or someone else?
- **What emotions** were you experiencing?
- **What energizes you** when you get to do that activity?
- **What did you learn about yourself** in these situations?

What obstacles in your past have had a positive influence on the way you live today?

What themes do you notice in your answers?

Considering your answers to the above questions, pinpoint your personal values, and create a purpose statement for your life.

Based on your purpose statement and your personal values, determine immediate goals to better integrate purpose into your work.

2. Measure the purpose in your life and work.

Ask yourself where you fall (on a scale from 1 to 10) in regard to the following three dimensions of purpose:

- **Scope:** How common is a sense of purpose in your life?
- **Awareness:** How aware are you of your purpose, and how well can you articulate it to others?
- **Strength:** How intensely does purpose shape your thoughts, emotions, and actions?

Decide where purpose isn't present in your work. How can you improve the alignment with your purpose and with your work?

Think of milestones that would indicate to you that purpose is more strongly present in your life – personally and professionally.