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Nurturing Personal Purpose at Work

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Every human being seeks a purpose, a “why.” Psychologists describe it as one of the main factors of resilience to survive under extreme circumstances. Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist of Jewish origin, discovered in Auschwitz that having a purpose in life, something important to live for, contributed enormously to staying alive in the Nazi concentration camps. Researchers of positive psychology, among others, attribute having a purpose in life as one of the first causes of happiness, understood as “eudaimonia.”

In a world that is in constant flux, where the path to follow is unclear, and where it can be hard to tell right from wrong, having a guiding purpose can be life changing. When people discover their purpose and live accordingly,

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their existence becomes more authentic and meaningful. Consciously or unconsciously, people seek to understand their purpose in order to reach and drive toward their full potential.

In today's corporate world, the idea of a personal purpose at work—a “why” to guide our efforts and dreams—is increasingly making its way into companies. By clarifying a purpose, people find greater meaning in their work, thus improving their motivation, efficiency, and ability to lead. Nowadays, an increasing number of companies are well aware of this and, through training programs and coaching, they invite their managers to be thoughtful about their purpose. They believe that, to be authentic leaders, managers must be able to, first and foremost, identify their own purpose. In some of these programs, some people write their purpose down and keep it in their wallet; others draw it or represent it with concepts and ideas. In other programs, people are asked to write a song about their purpose!

Reflecting on the purpose of one's work is a highly rewarding and inspiring exercise that can not only help one make better use of his or her abilities, but also serve as a guide in discerning future decisions. This exercise also helps to harmonize the purpose of the individual with that of the organization, which results in greater job satisfaction and quality of work. However, experience also shows that one's purpose tends to weaken over time, running the risk of being forgotten altogether when not properly nurtured.

The root of this problem is often a weak perspective of what purpose really entails, and what activities help to drive its development. Of course, the path to purpose does not end with a slogan, drawing, or plaque. Rather, defining one's purpose is merely where the path begins. What should one do to keep purpose *alive* over time?

Based on our experience and research, this chapter attempts to present a holistic model for personal purpose, and the processes that drive its development. With our model, we hope to provide a design framework for the development of programs and initiatives that center around purpose at work. However, it is only a model, and as such it is necessarily incomplete. Many nuances are missing or are not treated here with the depth they deserve. But we are satisfied that our recommendations cover the main dimensions of purpose at work and will act to stimulate its future development.

Head, Heart, and Hands

Many experts explain purpose as our *raison d'être* (our reason for being) or in other words, our “why,” being the essence of what we bring to this world. But purpose is not born from just any “why”—one that might only subjectively explain a person's actions. Rather, purpose reflects the identity of a person

objectively, in terms of what they actually do. In some cases, for example, this identity can be linked to practicing a recognized profession, one that contributes to the well-being of society. Objectively, that purpose would transcend the motivation of the person practicing such a profession. Take a doctor, for instance, who might have several motivations for her work, whether that be to make money, to be the best doctor in the hospital and gain recognition, or simply, to pursue a career. While the perception of herself as a doctor can be characterized by other elements such as her degree, her knowledge, the clinical methods she uses, as a doctor, none of these are her purpose. When we talk about purpose, a person's degree, knowledge, or even their accolades are rather irrelevant. What matters is that which most *characterizes her as a doctor*: to heal people, to save lives.

Although all doctors share an objective purpose because they belong to the same profession, it is also true that each person is unique and immersed in a different context. Therefore, subjectively the “why” can also be something intimate and unique for each person, linked to one's own subjective identity and, at the same time, open to others, and to the satisfaction of the needs of others.

Much like we have seen from organizational purpose, from the subjective perspective of the individual, the purpose is not a monolithic idea. Rather, an individual will have a purpose that entails three interdependent dimensions. The first dimension reflects the knowledge that each person has of their own purpose; the second is the practical implementation of the action, and the third is the motivation that drives people to carry out that purpose. These three dimensions can be symbolized in three fundamental parts of the human body: head, heart, and hands (see Fig. 8.1).

Head: In order to live our purpose, we need not only to know it but also to know how to communicate it. In other words, when we understand our purpose and are able to express its contents and meaning, in our own unique way, then it comes to life and starts to answer the age-old questions of: Why and for whom am I here? Who do I serve, or should I serve, and how? These are deeply personal questions and ones that we alone should freely answer for ourselves. It is not critical that our purpose be written down, but simply that we know it and that we are able to explain it (even if we explain it only to ourselves).

Hands: However, purpose is not knowledge alone, like an algebra problem that ends once solved. Nor is it like an inspiring slogan that is hung from the office walls for further contemplation. Rather, a proper understanding of purpose is to recognize that it also leads us to action. In fact, many say that, in order to truly know someone's purpose, look to their actions. Purposeful

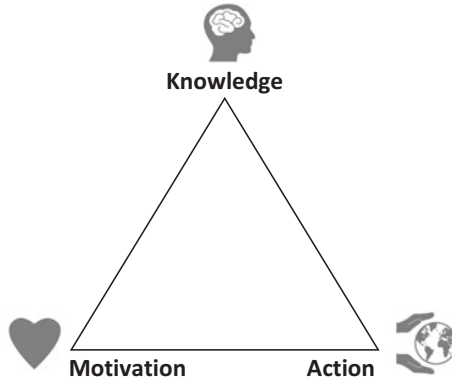


Fig. 8.1 Holistic conceptualization of purpose (Source: Adapted from Rey, C., & Bastons, M. (2018). Three dimensions of effective mission implementation. *Long Range Planning*, 51(4), 580–585. / Graphic Design: Reproduced with permission from Freeland Communication Studio SL)

action is in itself an essential part of purpose. Without it, our purpose is incomplete. If our purpose is not carried out through our deeds, then indeed we have no purpose at all.

Heart: And finally, for purpose to be empowering, it must transcend both our knowledge and action. Purpose is energy, will, impulse; it is the inner force or motivation that orders and drives our internal potential—our values, beliefs, desires, affections, and feelings. When we compare our purpose to another person’s we find that ours resonates internally and compels us to act. Another person’s purpose does not have this same effect on us, although it might be somewhat inspiring. In fact, when we discover the energy in another person’s purpose, it is likely that there is a connection to certain aspects of our own. This dimension of purpose moves us. We come to see our purpose as not only a responsibility to fulfill, but as something that is born from within, deeply personal and motivating.

Coherence, Authenticity, and Integrity

Our purpose is internalized and sustained when these three dimensions—heart, head, and hands—are linked, respectively, through coherence, authenticity, and integrity (Fig. 8.2). We define these words in the following way.

Coherence is defined as the fit between knowledge and action—between what we define as our purpose and what we actually do. When we are coherent with our purpose, it shows through meaningful practical deeds. Coherence entails the deployment of purpose in ambitious and realistic commitments



Fig. 8.2 Fit between the three dimensions of purpose (Graphic Design: Reproduced with permission from Freeland Communication Studio SL)

that are adaptable to our personal capabilities as well as our surrounding circumstances.

Authenticity is the fit between knowledge and motivation. It is the connection between what we define as our purpose and what really moves us internally. It considers the values, beliefs, and feelings that feed into our purpose. No doubt, we are the first to benefit from authenticity, as it builds order and harmony in our beliefs and feelings. Authenticity thus reflects our purity of intention. For that reason, it helps us build trustworthy and lasting relationships with others.

Finally, **Integrity**, is the fit between motivation and action. It connects the motivation we derive from our purpose to our day-to-day actions. Integrity, as the “synthesis of virtues,” is about living purpose in a natural, yet habitual way. It is earned over time and stimulates the ability to transform purpose into consistent action, performed on a regular basis, in harmony with our motivations. Integrity is the quality of being naturally authentic and coherent in every moment and in everything we do—both the most significant and the most commonplace.

Coherence, authenticity, and integrity represent the strength and quality of a purpose. We could say that they are the fundamental leading indicators, the “scorecard” for our personal purpose.

Living Our Purpose to the Fullest

For our purpose to develop, in its fullest sense, the three dimensions must be aligned. Purpose must be whole, of one piece. In this sense, our quest is not only to discover the *most inspiring* purpose, but also to achieve harmony

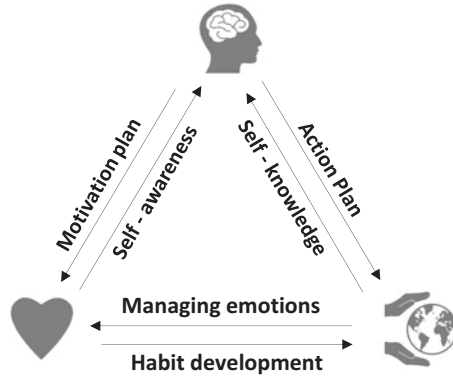


Fig. 8.3 Fundamental undertakings of purpose development (Graphic Design: Reproduced with permission from Freeland Communication Studio SL)

and fit between its three dimensions. To develop our purpose, and to live it out in a coherent, authentic, and integrated way, it is helpful to focus on six fundamental *areas of development*. Below, we briefly describe each one and include some reflective questions to illustrate their scope and development (Fig. 8.3).

1. Self-knowledge. Before all else, and for us to more fully understand our purpose, it is helpful to reflect upon our experiences, our talents and potential, and ask ourselves: in which areas of my work might I have the greatest impact on others? This type of knowledge comes from observation, analysis, and reflection upon our own activity as well as feedback from others. It is based on evidence, facts, results, and concrete behavior in action. This self-knowledge leads to the appreciation of what we do well—for having developed certain skills, strengths, or being gifted in certain ways in areas that we find meaningful. Focusing on what we do well can provide a sense of contribution to our identity.

Reflective questions to ask:

- What are my main talents and strengths? Have I identified them clearly?
- What am I especially good at? When do I function naturally, almost effortlessly, and it is valued, especially by others?
- How do my actions contribute to making the world a better place?
- In what activities do I feel I contribute my best self to others?

- Who are the beneficiaries of my work (people or groups)?
- What might my contribution be to the mission of my company/organization?

2. Self-awareness. In our journey to purpose, we will need to discover a higher level of awareness in ourselves and connect with our internal drivers—our beliefs, values, desires, dreams, feelings, affections, and so on. These help to provide us the guidance toward what may ultimately become our purpose. It is all about becoming aware of our deepest motivations, those which often remain invisible to others, and at times to ourselves as well, unless we take the time to sincerely reflect about them.

Reflective questions to ask:

- What are the problems in this world and in my professional environment that particularly concern me?
- What are three core values of most importance to me?
- What would I never accept, under any circumstance?
- What do I enjoy doing? What especially motivates me? What do I love about my work?
- What would I do if fear were not a consideration?
- Which past projects am I most proud of? What was at stake?
- In what activities do I feel a natural ability to give my best?
- The day I retire, what would I like people to say about the impact I had on them?

3. Motivation plan. This process is about reinforcing and enhancing the energy that drives our purpose. Through the motivation plan, the space occupied by our purpose in our inner dialogue—imagination, desires, values, affections, feelings, beliefs, and so on—is broadened. It enhances the motivational power of purpose and keeps it alive through actions such as reflection, meditation, visualization, storytelling, dialogue, and gratitude. Actions such as these can be distributed throughout our day or periodically concentrated into longer periods, in order to keep purpose front and center in our daily activities.

Reflective questions to ask:

- Do I recall my purpose and reflect on it every morning? Do I cherish it?
- Do I do this throughout the course of my day?
- Am I grateful for having a meaningful purpose?
- Do I take my purpose into consideration when making important decisions?

- What techniques or resources do I use to keep my purpose front of mind during the day?
- Do I have role models in my life who inspire and serve as an example to drive my purpose? Do I often communicate with people who have a similar purpose?
- Do I study topics related to my purpose that inspire and reinforce my commitment?

4. Action plan. Living our purpose means putting it into practice, defining it in personal commitments that are relevant, ambitious, meaningful, and thereby allowing it to lead us to act. The development of an action plan entails projects, actions, decisions, skill development, missions, objectives, and goals. Plans can be short term, lasting days or months, or on the other hand, they can cover a period of several years or even a lifetime.

Reflective questions to ask:

- How am I measuring progress relative to living my purpose? Do I have clear indicators to evaluate progress in my purpose?
- What can I change to make my purpose more effective?
- What new skills can I develop to make my purpose more effective?
- Who can I rely on to make my purpose more effective?
- What missions and SMART goals aligned with my purpose would I like to achieve in the coming days, months, or years?
- What stretch goal (ambitious or audacious) could I accomplish? How would I break it into actionable parts?

5. Habit development. Purpose is not only practiced in our plans but also, and especially, through our actions. Purpose is enacted when we develop habits, or spontaneous behaviors, that allow us to carry out our purpose in a natural way, often without effort and unconsciously. Good habits include, for example, the classic list of *virtues* (practical wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance) or the *seven habits* of S. Covey. These general frameworks, however, should be used with caution, because each purpose, depending on its content, will demand more unique or specific habits.

Reflective questions to ask:

- What do I do frequently and spontaneously throughout the day to live my purpose?
- Have I identified the main habits that drive or could drive my purpose?
- To what extent do I implement my purpose in my daily practice?

- What new habit(s) could I develop to accomplish my purpose with greater impact?
- What negative habits hold back the development of my purpose?

6. Managing emotions. The energy we derive from our purpose does not only come from reflection and meditation but also from our ability to connect our purposeful actions to our emotions and feelings. On the one hand, managing emotions is about identifying and enhancing the positive emotions that are generated when we live our purpose with integrity. On the other hand, it includes taming any of the negative emotions that might weaken our resolve. We can do this through techniques such as *reframing*, observation, and discernment.

Reflective questions to ask:

- How do I feel when I notice I am succeeding in furthering my purpose? What positive emotions does my purpose generate?
- Am I aware of these emotions in my daily practice? What do I do to enhance them?
- Do I celebrate my successes related to enacting my purpose?
- Do I keep a positive attitude in the face of difficulties? Do I look for ways to overcome “purpose failures” in a positive spirit?
- Am I able to enjoy the efforts I take in fulfilling my purpose?
- Do I find a sense of purpose in the little things in life, and overcoming monotony?
- What is my internal dialogue in difficult times or contradictions? At such times, does carrying out my purpose entail more of an effort?
- Am I positive about these difficulties and do I see them as opportunities to put my values into practice?

The Path of Purpose

Each process above plays an essential role in the development of purpose at work. The first two—self-knowledge and self-awareness—help us to discover our purpose and keep it real by adjusting to changes in our professional life as well as to the evolution and progress of our own abilities. The second two—motivation and action plan—help our purpose become a practical reality, leading and effectively directing our daily practice while feeding our need for satisfaction. And the final two—habit development and emotion management—help us live out our purpose over time in a natural and spontaneous

way without having to think too much about it, while cherishing it at the same time. Together, these processes contribute to our living a full and meaningful purpose in life.

A good program for the development of purpose at work, one that is intentional about making a lasting impact, should pay balanced attention to all six processes, stimulating the unfolding of purpose in each. If one is omitted, there is a risk that the purpose will gradually lose strength and, over time, become lost. Many complain about a lack of effectiveness in the variety of personal growth and self-improvement programs that, despite being inspiring, do not achieve long-term changes in people. Perhaps the failure in those programs is that they concentrate on only one of the dimensions—head, heart, or hands—while all three are indispensable for a sustainable personal purpose.

In any case, a purposeful life is more than a goal to be perfectly attained or a particular destination, it is a way of living and being. We should not worry about whether or not we achieve *perfect* knowledge, *perfect* track record, or *perfect* motivation in our purpose as this may be a recipe for unhappiness and dissatisfaction. G.K. Chesterton's famous aphorism puts it well: "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing *badly*." What one should care most about then is always moving forward in one's purpose. It is a direction or journey more than a destination. This is where we find both a sense of real impact and a source of true contentment.

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