

# Everyday Abundance: Why We Must Invest In Finding Purpose

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Careers. I'm an organizational psychologist writing on future of work and HR.

I do... Throughout my life and career, I have found myself checking in on my purpose time and time again. Take this one time as an example:

It was a crisp fall evening I left my executive office admiring the art on the walls, trying hard not to breathe as to I wouldn't break down and cry... We had announced restructuring one of our business' heartlines four days ago. It had gone exceptionally well. The majority of our workforce was excited for the future, realizing product possibilities ahead. We had built a rock-solid leadership team for the group. I had personally prepared promotional arguments and worked on compensation packages of several well-seasoned, high performing, highly-deserving team members. There was an element of thoughtfulness and care in the process. That morning, I had



received a phone call from the ex-chairman of the company announcing we'd dissolve the new structure as he "had a better idea for rebuilding our capacity." After spending a whole day on calls and meetings, I had walked out of the campus, feeling the warm tears falling through my cheeks against the fresh air. I asked myself, "Why, why am I even here?"

The truth is, all of us, without an exception, at some point in life find ourselves asking existential questions that are often inspired by our deepest thoughts, aspirations, and experiences. All of us struggle with connecting to our purpose and finding meaning at times. For this, it may be fair to say *purpose* is one of those most known and unknown phenomena in life. The lack of awareness and understanding of it results in chaos, miscommunication, dysfunction and formation of unproductive communities. The dominance of it may be felt in value conflicting situations causing individual suffering when one doesn't have emotional agility to navigate through it.

In the world of business, purpose is both a hot topic and an unsolved dilemma. Corporations with a lack of strategic purpose falter at engaging stakeholders while individual employees who are not valued for their strengths struggle self-motivating.

Whether we like to admit or not, purpose is a fundamental human need.

The level of our connection to purpose has profound consequences for how we experience life: how we operate in the workplace, how we relate to people, how far we lean in, how much we accomplish and what level of performance we attain. Those of us who understand what we stand up for are better equipped to cope with curl balls thrown at us often quicker to pick up self after a fall and manage internal energy. Those who remain connected to purpose can better experience meaning.

Purpose is also one of the core human attributes found in a collaborative study I did with [Stanford University's CCARE](#) worth investing in if we aim to expand individual capacity and grow organizational resilience as 21st-century leaders.

### **What Is The Purpose?**

Purpose is often defined as a central, self-organizing life aim. It is the greatest source for meaning, which is often referred by academics and philosophers as a path to a good life. The kind of meaning is commonly understood by the concept of *eudaimonia*, an ancient Greek word for 'human flourishing'. In scientific terms, it may be translated as a pathway to happiness though it is really not a passing positive emotion. Meaning is long-lasting and supports both sense-making and action-taking. It requires our participation in something bigger (than self) for the broader good.

Purpose is also self-organizing in that it provides a framework for systematic behavior patterns in everyday life. From the practical perspective, it embodies and awakens an intrinsic motivation while providing a reason for our being and belonging. By connecting to a purpose, we are presented a choice by the moment to develop an attachment to a growing idea and/or develop a sense of possibility. Through that self-organization, we develop an inner connection to a mission, an effort towards goal-setting and a desire in allocating necessary resources.

Psychologists who study meaning-formation have pointed to three important anchors that define purpose:

- Core aims and aspirations of what we want to do and who we want to be,
- Coherence or making sense of life and weaving threads together,
- Significance beyond the trivial or momentary – orienting toward a bigger value.

Stanford's research has been able to validate purpose is not only a philosophical construct, establishing and pursuing a sense of purpose in life has a proven bearing on our health and well-being. Empirical research shows us that without clear purpose, goals or values, we experience a considerable amount of stress, struggling to reach meaning formation. Inside all the enduring organizations we studied, where resilience levels were high and stress levels were low, individuals were (1) clear on their life-task majority of the time and (2) could connect to the company mission.

### **It's A Matter of Heart**

So, how does it work?

Inside our human bodies, our hearts and blood vessels are not technically components of our nervous systems, but, our brains and central nervous systems are linked closely to our cardiovascular function. This means our hearts' activity is intimately monitored and regulated by our brains. Recall how your heart may start to race when you feel a negative emotion like being nervous, anxious or excited. In experiencing such emotions, our brain initiates a series of events that lead to the secretion of adrenaline, causing the heart to beat even faster. This is a loop that will diminish our physical resources and when prolonged, have a lasting impact on our stress levels.

When we have a clear sense of purpose, however, we are presented by the possibility of not only realizing who we are (psychological impact), which leads to the development of better authenticity (spiritual impact), we experience better synchronization between our hearts and brains, preserving our most sacred natural resources and decreasing anxiety (physical impact).

## **Organizational Purpose Matters, Too!**

Similarly, at an organizational level, when an employee experiences 'meaning finding' at work, we find their engagement, commitment, and alignment to the organization's values and/or the goals at hand are increased, therefore, increasing performance.

According to BrightHouse and Boston Consulting Group analysis of 2017, among organizations that had high purpose score, there are more than twice as many Total Shareholder Return (TSR) performers as low performers. Similarly, Paul Zak through his study of the neuroscience of narratives has been able to validate that strategic narratives embodying purpose cause us to pay better attention and involve us emotionally to move into action. Scholars studying ideological messages and meaning-making find organizations play an important role in shaping or influencing the meaning of work for their employees.

Researchers have also explored how certain leadership styles can influence the degree to which work is perceived as meaningful. This research has particularly emphasized the meaningfulness-related outcomes of transformational leadership, defined as going "beyond exchanging inducements for desired performance by developing, intellectually stimulating, and inspiring followers to transcend their own self-interests for a higher collective purpose, mission, or vision" (Howell & Avolio, 1993, p. 891).

Organizations and the symbolism of its leaders' interpretations of, communications about, and responses to various work events and circumstances, therefore, have an important influence on the meanings people make of their work (Podolny et al., 2005).

## **Reconnecting To Purpose**

I grew up in a Sufi community, where our base beliefs are grounded in concepts of trust, love and harmony. I believe all creation is interconnected and we are each worthy of our space and contribution. This is one perspective that supports purpose finding. For those who haven't had the benefit of such a belief system, psychologists have developed a 'Purpose in Life' (PIL) scale, leveraging Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, which holds three dimensions:

1. Believing that broader life has a purpose,
2. Upholding a unique value system,
3. Having the motivation to achieve future goals and overcome challenges.

This formula honors the self-determination theory (SDT), which represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality. The conditions supporting one's experience are grounded in our need to serve self, grow competence and build relatedness. These are the motivators that foster the most volitional and high-quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence and creativity in the workplace.

In an organizational context, leaders can imbue work with meaningfulness by prompting employees to transcend their personal needs or goals in favor of those tied to a broader mission or purpose. The motivators from SDT translate into the workplace as mastery, autonomy and purpose. Depending on the degree these three psychological needs are supported or unsupported within a social context will have a robust detrimental impact on wellness in and of that setting.

Purpose is important to us as individuals because it points us toward the future and the possibility of self-expression, providing an opportunity for us to bring who we are, our natural strengths, and what we want from our lives and from our work into the conversation. By the virtue of this possibility, purpose presents us with an opportunity for meaning - a way of understanding life events and our existence in relation to them. It fuels our inner power and supports courage development, which we will get to in the next article.

Purpose is also important for our organizations because it helps mobilize and protect the well-being of our most important asset - people. It supports the cultural development of inspiration and meaning. Remember in the 21st century, customers and stakeholders are not only looking to have products and services cheaper and faster; they also want to have confidence on an organizations' presence, conscious, capability and advocacy.

As G.H Hardy, a pioneering mathematician once said: "If a man has any genuine talent he should be ready to make almost any sacrifice in order to cultivate it to the full."

For that, if you are going to do one thing for yourself and your organization today, let that be an investment in finding your purpose, connecting to it and leading from it. As the irresolution of our search and disconnection produces all the more confusion, frustration and biased decision making - both at an individual and organizational level.