



THE WHY OF WORK

7 Guidelines To Connect Employees To Purpose

Anne Bahr Thompson

(Founder Onesixtyfourth, Author, Brand Citizenship Pioneer)

annebt@onesixtyfourth.com

DEFINITION OF PURPOSE

Whether it applies to an individual a company or something else, **purpose is the reason something exists**. And while we may think of it as a new concept, spiritualists, existentialists, religious scholars and the like have explored the purpose and meaning of life for centuries.

Wallace B. Donham, Dean of the Harvard Business School, made a statement about the purpose of the business sector in 1929, which in the midst of the global pandemic and the Great Reshuffle seems prescient:

“Business started long centuries before the dawn of history.... But business as we now know it is new—new in its broadening scope, new in its social significance.... Business has not learned how to handle these changes, nor does it recognize the magnitude of its responsibilities for the future of civilization.”

And forty to fifty years later, management guru Peter Drucker tied the purpose of a business to employees' desire to add value through work:

“The number of people who are really motivated by money is very small. Most people need to feel that they are here for a purpose, and unless an organization can connect to this need to leave something behind that makes this a better world, or at least a different one, it won't be successful over time.”

Today, business leaders are grappling with the role they should be playing in society – and increasingly in the political debate. Growing urgency around climate change and social justice, inequities and greed has made connecting employees to purpose beyond earning a profit a very real – and even tangible – challenge for business.

CONNECTING WITH PURPOSE AT WORK CONNECTS US WITH OUR PERSONAL VALUE

To connect with employees a company's purpose must clarify its raison d'être, or reason for being. To be credible, the purpose of a brand must be rooted in what the business does yet broad enough to encompass a social mission. Importantly, purpose is not a for-profit company's social mission; if it was, the company would be a social enterprise. When effective purpose communicates how a company creates or adds value to society every day. It acts as both a filter and a benchmark from which to guide all an organization's actions.

For employees as individuals, purpose is very often tied to how they feel fulfilled and see themselves adding value in life. Through research, my consulting work and experience, we've identified that personal purpose sits at the intersection of three things:

1. The things that energize us – or our personal passions
2. Our gifts or the things we're good at that add value (all of which don't necessarily align with our passions!)
3. How we personally define fulfillment and success.



Each of these three things are unique to who we are as individuals. An additional dimension to this is the level at which we seek to have impact. Some of us look to influence things at a societal level, others at an organizational, and still others at an individual, one-on-one level. We don't have to necessarily do this at work, but if our responsibilities and roles at work accommodate this, it's a big plus to creating meaning and feeling fulfilled!

7 GUIDELINES TO CONNECT EMPLOYEES TO PURPOSE

Connecting employees to purpose and living it across all aspects of your organization is a journey that by necessity must adapt with the shifting cultural landscape. In a business climate seeking to eliminate risk through big data analytics, however, the notion of no absolute rights and wrongs can be discomfoting. Trial and error is necessary to break the status quo and acculturate new ways of doing things. No matter where you are in the journey you may fail before being successful. Experiment, fine-tune processes, scale initiatives, measure impact, and begin again.

Here are 7 guidelines we focus on when helping clients connect employees to purpose:

- 1. Confirm that your purpose is genuinely tied to your business value proposition, clearly articulating the reason you exist at the highest level.** When purpose primarily is focused on a social mission, employee engagement program, reputation management,

cause marketing campaign or the like it may create a lift in engagement but it won't cultivate long-term fulfillment. And it can lead to inconsistent policies and behaviors, employee cynicism and even reputational damage. ([Primer on clarifying purpose as an organizing principle for your brand and business.](#))

2. Avoid the temptation to turn purpose into a tagline. To cultivate a sense of belonging purpose must be more than words on a page. Empower employees to discover their own sense of purpose and meaning through workshops, online programs etc. and find the intersection between their personal purpose and the company's raison d'être. Offer employees a place on their company profile to share what the company purpose means to them personally.

3. Envision your best workplace and rewrite your narrative. Your cultural narrative should reflect your long-term ambition and the ideal culture that will support achieving your purpose. This story should come from the heart (in other words, ring sincere) and reflect a state of being whole (a definition of integrity that is often overlooked). While the spotlight has been placed on "authentic" narratives, social media has made us all aware that authenticity can be curated and even contrived. Sincerity and integrity however, cannot. ([Guidelines for rewriting your narrative.](#))

4. Activate middle management. Building an inspired middle management team is one of the overlooked keys to success in connecting employees to purpose. Middle managers who openly communicate their personal purpose to their teams and discuss how it links to their work life, model vulnerability that cultivates inclusion and belonging.

5. Enlist untapped evangelists. Across all levels of an organization lies a pool of often untapped evangelists who are easy to identify and a great resource to inspire cultural change and connection to purpose. Consider networking them through a Purpose Council that builds employee teams focused on pioneering purpose efforts within their departments and across the organization.

6. Ensure you satisfy foundational factors for good corporate culture as you connect employees to purpose. Attributes such as treating employees with respect and as individuals; having supportive leaders who offer encouragement and live the company's values across all their actions; offering formal and informal learning and development opportunities; and embracing transparency in communications.

7. Adapt well-being into a performance indicator. As well-being morphs into a measure of success at work it must be seen as more than a healthcare/benefits tool. Consider ways to tie your purpose and values to employee well-being and incorporate these elements into individual performance evaluations as well as brand scorecards. After all, that which is measured is managed and improved.

3 additional areas to consider for organizations further along their purpose journey...

8. Include identifying and understanding personal purpose – and how individual employees can connect with the brand’s purpose – as part of employee development.

An awareness of someone’s personal purpose – and the level at which they will feel fulfilled having impact (societal, organizational, individual) can help guide career development and identify the fit and misfit of a specific role early on. Workshops to connect team members to their team’s and/or organization’s purpose are a great way to connect people to purpose, and there are many software programs available to do this in an easier to scale and less bespoke manner.

9. Help employees balance their professional and personal lives and ensure they have time to *work* on all aspects of their life.

Consider the term work-life balance, which in many ways positions work as something outside our life. An enemy of life, for many. Yet our professional lives are a part of daily life—a critical aspect that can bring a sense of achievement and fulfillment when it our jobs have meaning. Imagine reframing work-life balance as life balance and helping employees flow seamlessly through the day.

Recent research has shown asynchronous work schedules are successful globally, so what about deploying them locally. And what if employees were trusted to take a two-hour break during the workday to run errands, manage childcare issues, etc. and then return to work, ending the 8 hour work-day 2 hours later. Job-sharing is another an option, especially for mothers. Other easier to scale ideas that acknowledge the realities of modern lives include health and well-being apps, educational resources for working parents on managing home schooling or people caring for elderly parents, Employee Resource Groups for Working Parents, Single Parents, etc., and wider ranging knowledge libraries and services that help employees juggle work with personal responsibilities.

10. Offer Social Learning Journeys for people working in sustainability, supply chain, cause marketing and philanthropy (and potentially all employees interested in systems change aligning operations w/purpose).

When employees first-hand experience suppliers and/or communities you support through philanthropic and related initiatives bridges of understanding are built through a wider systems perspective. Ideating alongside the people who are part of your ecosystem leverages local knowledge and gives communities agency to help develop solutions to the challenges that impact them and the sustainability of your business operations.