

Finding True Meaning at Work

“Without work all life goes rotten- but when work is soulless, life stifles and dies.”
— Albert Camus

Recently there has been discussion among consultants, business owners and CEOs about the search for soul in the workplace. While most agree that religion is not an appropriate topic to approach at work, leaders are examining the role of true meaning and purpose in the corporation, both on an organizational and individual level.

Tom Peters, Stephen Covey and Warren Bennis have joined the discussion. An Internet search reveals many new books on the subject of bringing heart and soul to business. Steven Covey says there is a “spiritual renaissance taking place in the business world today.”

At the same time that corporate leaders are searching to discover ways to ignite commitment and performance, people working at all levels are seeking to find true meaning in what they do. There is a struggle to find what engages one at work at the deepest level.

The nature of work is changing in our world today. Job security is gone. The rapidly changing job environment causes many of us to ask ourselves questions such as, *“What is the true meaning or purpose in my work?”*

Here are four personal questions that are worth asking:

1. What is my purpose here?
2. How can I bring more meaning to my work?
3. Is this job what I am really meant to do?
4. Is there a place for me and my true values in this workplace?

A vice-president of a regional bank comments: “I knew my work was suffocating my soul but to admit it would be too devastating; it would mean that I had to do something about it!”

The fear of having to look at the possible meaninglessness of one’s work comes from the automatic thinking of, “Well, I have to work, I can’t just drop-out. I can’t change my company, so I’d better not think about it at all.” But there are things the individual can do to find or discover meaning at work.

A group of CEO’s of fast-growing technology companies were asked, “What will be the greatest challenge facing your organization five years from now?” More than half responded with something like, “We will be

struggling with how to reignite commitment and help people find meaning in their work.”

Companies that can no longer offer security or pay raises struggle with finding ways to foster loyalty and commitment. Technology companies have turnover rates of 12 to 17 per cent. With security gone as a carrot, a new generation of workers is looking for more from work than money. Personal balance is becoming increasingly important to both men and women.

For the person busily engaged in daily efforts, the crisis of commitment at work is highly personal: it threatens the inner sense of purpose, caring and vitality that makes work worthwhile. When a person has not found an inner purpose, their work becomes routine, tiring, boring and without energy. For some, this leads to irritability and difficult interpersonal relations. For others, there can be burnout and depression. For a small few, there is even violence, disruption of work and not-so-subtle forms of sabotage.

Meaning and the Bottom Line

For corporations, the degree that each worker can find meaning in their work will be reflected in the quality of commitment and excitement (or lack of it) that is present in the workforce, and ultimately in the competitiveness of the business.

Behind the grumbling and cynicism found in most workplaces there is a longing to find true meaning and some joy or enthusiasm on the part of most individuals. We love to laugh at the cynical humor found in Dilbert, the comic strip that declares, “*All people are idiots!*” At a more profound level, however, we crave proof to the contrary.

When companies offer their people training and workshops designed to rekindle their enthusiasm and commitment, there is often skepticism and resistance. Participants groan about another management fad. Many positive changes may occur after such workshops, but often the change is short-lived. Traditional change efforts are only effective when they address deeper personal levels.

It is no longer sufficient to have a job; people are seeking a fuller life at work, one that is consistent with the larger focus of their lives. It is becoming more common to hear workplace discussions of “meaning,” “purpose,” “spirit” and “passion.” These ideas are now seen as a vital component of workplace satisfaction, which in turn affects performance and productivity.

Life at Work Is Like a Marriage

Many people spend more time at their work than in their marriages. Yet more energy is usually spent resolving marital issues than those at work. Finding true meaning at work is a personal and individual project that must also be linked to the organization. For true commitment to take place there must be a marriage of ideals, both personal and organizational.

A couple may learn communication skills that change the way they argue, make decisions, and make requests of each other. There is another level of awareness and development that must be in place for a marriage to sustain itself and flourish. This level goes beyond communication techniques to include mutual respect, self-responsibility, and shared values. Profound communication arises naturally when these deeper changes are in place.

So too are empowerment, teams, and organization development helpful tools for companies and leaders. They produce positive and worthwhile changes in both corporate competitiveness and integrity. Finding true meaning and commitment at work is about going deeper to reconfigure work life in ways that can bring out the deepest human potential.

Essential Human Needs

Human beings require a sense of belonging in the world, of having a place and of making a contribution. For most, this comes through work. Work is as much about spirit or soul as it is about salary. Even when the salary is seen as the biggest carrot, it is often because the money goes toward raising a family and providing a life for others.

Abraham Maslow, the renowned psychologist, defined the human “hierarchy of needs” on four main levels: security, relationship, self-esteem, and self-actualization. As one’s basic security needs are met— for food, clothing and shelter— one progresses on to fulfill other needs. This could be applied to the workplace as well. Once one’s salary fulfills the basics, there is a search to fulfill the needs for satisfying relationships, acquiring self-esteem, and realizing one’s full potential.

A 1996 *Fortune* magazine survey indicated that eight out of ten people would continue working even if they became rich enough that they did not need the money. Why? Most replied to have a sense of service, to help themselves and others grow, and to perfect their skills. Many of course said that they would modify or change the nature of their work to conform more with their spiritual, social or artistic values.

It appears that this struggle – to find true meaning in one’s work – is happening on all levels, from the frontline workers to upper level management and executives. People are searching to unlock their deepest

capabilities: a sense of service, being in the moment, true community, personal alignment and artistry.

Language and Work

There are things that one can do to awaken a sense of meaning at work. But one can be impaired by the use of certain words. Language is powerful. It does not merely describe but also shapes reality. Language becomes the filter through which we perceive the world. When we talk about finding true meaning at work, we are addressing fundamental and essential human questions about true purpose. While corporations use words such as “empowerment, commitment, team-work and quality,” they do not use words such as “soul, spirit, courage, personal values, and higher purpose.” As one CEO put it, “It’s illegal to ask people to look at their personal values during work.”

How then do businesses tap into a deeper level of engagement? Words such as community, meaning, service, contribution, joy, passion, vocation and soul are powerful and meaningful to most individuals. How do you talk about these things without it leading to discussions that are no longer appropriate for the work environment? How do companies appeal to people’s deepest aspirations, creativity and convictions without using words that can be seen as inappropriate or too personal?

There is a change in vocabulary that is gradually taking hold. Soft-sounding words like “values” and “meaning” are becoming as bold and common in the corporate lexicon as “bottom-line” and “return on investment.” Corporations are realizing that who you are and what you stand for are as important as what you sell.

Awakening Meaning at Work

You can awaken a sense of meaning at work. There are many consultants, trainers and coaches who are committed to this process. Whether one is an executive looking for ways to rekindle commitment and community in the company, or whether one is simply burned-out and bored at work, here are some exercises and suggestions for awakening meaning. Using a professional coach will greatly enhance the effectiveness of these suggestions.

Ask yourself three questions daily:

1. **What ignites my passion in today’s work?**
This first question serves to reclaim attention from the tyranny of the urgent and redirect it to what is truly meaningful.
2. **How can I bring true value to this moment?** The second question serves to disengage from emotional entanglements and view issues with a fresh inner perspective. This leads to constructive action.

3. **What would I like my legacy to be in this assignment?** The third question serves to bring more value and meaning to an onerous project. Whenever an assignment begins to weigh heavily and becomes a work pressure, this question can redirect and reenergize.

Organizations and Meaning

In the same way that these questions can provide personal energy to everyday work life, an organization, whether large corporation or small business, might ask itself these questions:

1. What brings meaning and community to our company?
2. How can this meeting or project be an expression of our highest aims?
3. What would be of service right now?
4. How can this conversation be more open, clear, or authentic?
5. What is our larger responsibility as a team or organization?

Four Paths for Finding True Meaning at Work

It is clear that there is a definite thirst for deeper ways of working. In workshops all over the country, coaches are talking to thousands of people who express this need.

One method has been used extensively by Eric Klein and John Izzo in their book, *Awakening Corporate Soul*. They asked people to describe what elements were present when they had experienced meaningful moments in their work – moments when they felt energy, commitment, performance and satisfaction were at their peak, “*at 150-percent levels.*”

Four areas of engagement were elicited by this question, which the authors describe as paths toward finding 150-percent levels:

1. **The path of self** whereby the person finds a personal passion in his or her work, in touch with core values and then actively brings these into the daily work.
2. **The path of contribution** whereby the person becomes engaged in the worthy goals of his or her daily efforts.
3. **The path of craft** whereby the person develops an intense enjoyment in the moment to moment action of his or her work.
4. **The path of community** which is when the person finds that connection to others goes deeper than the job description and he or she connects to bring out the best within one another.

Whether a person is in touch with their spiritual side or not, even the most agnostic among us has this basic human need to be useful and to have some sense of meaning in work.

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