

Article

KNOW YOUR PURPOSE

– four steps to understand and formulate your purpose



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Ingrained in our human nature is a desire to have a sense of meaning in our life and understanding our purpose. We have a longing to be part of something larger than ourselves and more meaningful than simply “being”. In other words, we need a reason to get out of bed every morning.

The human search for purpose is not a new trend. In fact, it has preoccupied many civilisations throughout history. In ancient Greece, Aristotle spoke of eudaimonia as that enduring ingredient in life that makes life worth living¹. And in Japanese culture, the concept of ikigai has existed for millennia. Ikigai means to experience that feeling of accomplishment and fulfilment which follows for people who pursue their passion².

Also in present days, big thinkers are consumed with the importance of and the potential in having a clear purpose and making meaning out of what we do. One of the most prevailing current thinkers who has made the bestseller lists is Simon Sinek, who argues the essential in identifying your “why” and put that first in everything you do, whether it is the way we talk about ourselves or as guidance around our big decisions in life.

¹ <https://positivepsychology.com/eudaimonia/>; Catherine Moore; psychologist, MBA, December 07, 2021.

² García, Héctor & Miralles, Francesc (2017): “Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life”. London: Penguin Life.

In the past decades, it seems that the topic of meaning and purpose has broadened somewhat from focusing on individuals to also addressing teams and organisations. And with good reason as there is a lot of power and potential in purpose. Teams become more efficient from being clearly formulated around their purpose, and organisations have more engaged employees if they can feel that they are part of a purpose-driven organisation and can tap into the organisational purpose³.

This article:

- a. Stresses the importance of and potential in working with a purpose for individuals, teams and organisations alike.
- b. Argues that most people do not have just one purpose but multiple related purposes.
- c. Offers a method for individuals to get closer to finding and formulating their personal purpose. Unfolding a team's purpose is not necessarily a lot different, which will also be addressed in this article.

Purpose leads to happiness, resilience and business

Put simply, we have three good reasons for working with purpose: it leads to joy of life, it increases resilience, and it is good for business – and in that order.

Not only do people who know their purpose in life feel a greater sense of fulfilment and are happier than other people, they even live longer and healthier lives. So, why do we all not live in accordance with our purpose?

Two large obstacles for knowing your purpose are:


- Many people find the concept of purpose difficult to grasp and complicated to work with.
- We get distracted by responding to the fast-paced world around us.

Let us begin with **the first obstacle**. What is a purpose other than a somewhat intangible concept that we all would like to know and pursue? Richard Leider, a best-selling author and senior fellow at the University of Minnesota has dedicated his professional life to working with purpose. **He defines purpose as the sum of our values, passion and gifts.** Our values are the beliefs that matter most to us and that fence in how we would like to live our lives. Our *passion* is what we especially like to invest ourselves in. And our *gifts* are what we are particularly good at. Richard Leider's approach makes the concept of purpose somewhat more tangible and operational. Later in this article, we will look at how we can work with each of these elements to get closer to understanding and defining our personal purpose.

The **other big obstacle** to understanding and having a clearly formulated purpose is the many distractions we are constantly bombarded with. The way we live our efficient lives today, we constantly need to be somewhere and be something to someone else: calls, business meetings, presentations, one-on-ones, parent-teacher consultations and obligations to acquaintances, family and friends. And if we cannot make it physically, we can always go virtual and squeeze in an additional activity or arrange the details of the project over the chat or texts tonight – we all have smartphones anyway, right? When we finally have an unscheduled hour, we collapse – perhaps on the couch with the remote control – or catch up on last night's lack of sleep.

³ Feldman, Janet (2016): "People on a mission", Korn Ferry Institute, 2016.

⁴ Bilodeau, Kelly (2019): "Will a purpose-driven life help you live longer?" in Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, 28 November 2019.



The last thing we do is to sit down and reflect on our personal purpose, whether our values and way of living are aligned or similar big questions. Such questions require headspace and time for deep reflection – both of which are scarce for many. We need to create that space and dedicate our mental capacity to working with our purpose at well-chosen moments and places (ideally tranquil and inspirational places, such as forests, parks or by the ocean). That could require a bit of planning and determination and probably giving other activities a lower priority. **If we do not dedicate the time and energy to define our purpose and simply let life happen to us, we risk getting swirled around in the wind with no direction and little meaning in our life.**

The fact of the matter is that knowing and being clearly formulated around your purpose builds the resilience and direction you will need when a crisis occurs. A clear purpose can guide us in determining which activities to invest ourselves in and dedicate time to. And just as importantly, when to walk away – from new opportunities, tasks or even people that do not fit with what we truly believe in.

Sometimes, we meet people that live in accordance with their values, passion and gifts. Typically, they have a certain lightness and happiness around them.

When we meet these people and feel their infectious energy, we tend to see them as superhumans. The truth is, however, that we can get there ourselves by reaching an understanding of our purpose and pursuing opportunities, people and activities that are rich on purpose.

For organisations, purpose means business

It turns out that purpose-driven organisations are highly rewarded. For instance, studies show that stock prices are 12 times higher among purposeful, value-driven companies than among their competitors⁵. Other studies show that purpose-driven organisations report compounded annual growth rates of 9.85% compared to 2.4% among peers⁶. Finally, a 10% improvement in employees' connection with the organisation's purpose results in an 8.1% decrease in employee turnover⁷.

When an organisation is clearly formulated about its purpose and sets a clear direction, it offers something more than an office desk and four walls for the employees to tap into (or the opposite, to tap out of, leaving an open position for a "true believer") – something that goes deeper than the paycheque. Being a purpose-driven organisation does not mean to have the company's one-word-values on posters in all meeting rooms. A purpose needs to bring the values to life by offering an actionable aspiration⁸.

Examples of purpose-driven organisations could be Tesla, aiming to make sustainable transport available to more people (getting a lot closer with their mid-range Model 3)⁹, or the VF Corporation (a billion-dollar company covering clothing brands such as Vans, The North Face, Timberland and many more), which formulates their purpose as "*we power movements of sustainable and active lifestyles for the betterment of people and our planet*". The VF Corporation boycotted leather products from the

⁵ Musser, Chris (2019): "One Employee Question That Leaders Can't Afford to Ignore" in Gallup.com, 27 September 2019.

⁶ Feldman, Janet (2017): "People on a mission", Korn Ferry Institute, 2016.

⁷ Dvorak, Nate (2017): "Three Ways Mission-Driven Workplaces Perform Better" in Gallup.com, 4 May 2017.

⁸ McKinsey (2020): "Purpose: Shifting from why to how" in McKinsey Quarterly, 22 April 2020.

⁹ Mainwaring, Simon (2019): "Purpose At Work: 10 Brands Leading With Purpose In 2019" in Forbes.com, 31 December 2019.

Amazon as a response to Brazilian politicians not acting against raging fires¹⁰.

When employees feel a personal match with the organisational purpose, their own purpose is confirmed and enhanced, which often results in a highly motivated and energised employee. And energy – positive and negative – is contagious and spreads to other parts of the organisation.

Demystifying what purpose is

To demystify the concept of purpose somewhat, a purpose formulation does not need to be a “golden sentence” that will guide you through the rest of your life. **A purpose can change or needs to be adjusted, and you can even have multiple purposes.** A personal purpose is not a goal or something that can be achieved and ticked off. A purpose is a direction in life. It helps you choose which way to go when you are faced with big or small decisions.

HBR author John Coleman points to some common misconceptions around purpose. Among others, he argues that purpose is not one single thing as we all have multiple sources of purpose: work, family, friends etc.¹¹ Coleman presents what I think is a healthy scepticism about traditional ways of working with and thinking of purpose and couples it with how we live our modern lives.

However, this article argues that we do need to find one primary purpose. And underneath that primary purpose, I agree with Coleman, we have several purposes, depending on the environment and context you are in (work, relations, family, hobbies, volunteer work etc.) – indeed, there are many sources of meaning and purpose in most people’s lives if we know where to look for them. The overarching purpose should be the lighthouse that

guides the sub-purposes tying all the purposes together to become even stronger and more meaningful.

Similarly, a purpose-driven organisation has one defined purpose guiding everything that takes place at the organisation. However, at team or department level, quite likely, there is a need to translate the organisational purpose into their specific context. When successful, the team’s purpose will help to create a clear direction and a team identity – of course, in alignment with and supporting the organisational purpose.

In sum, for purpose-driven organisations and individuals alike, we need one primary purpose. And underneath it, we have context-dependent sub-purposes aligned with our primary purpose. **As people and contexts change over time, we should reassess our purposes from time to time to see if they are still providing the right direction.** That goes for the individual, for the team/department and at an organisational level.

A process for finding your purpose

Often, it takes a deep crisis or a tough situation in which you feel a sense of despair to take the time and energy to evaluate the way you live your life and potentially set a new direction. But why not do so proactively and use the inner knowledge and your formulated purpose to build resilience – enabling you to deal with the next crisis proactively.

This article offers a way to get started. Do not be overambitious or too impatient, and do not expect to find your life purpose over the next 30 minutes going through the steps. Finding or defining your purpose is a process which requires self-knowledge and reflection, whether you are pursuing your personal purpose or your team’s purpose.

¹⁰ www.VFC.com

¹¹ Coleman, John (2017): “You Don’t Find Your Purpose – You Build It” in Harvard Business Review, 20 October 2017.



Personal purpose

Firstly, I suggest you team up with a “purpose partner” – a friend, a close colleague, a coach – to support you through the process. The role of the purpose partner is to ask the tricky questions that get your reflections going, call it when it is time to move on or perhaps help you narrow down and formulate your thoughts when they are all over the place. Be flexible in the process. Set aside 2-4 check-ins of 1-2 hours to deep dive into conversations around each purpose element while allowing for reflection in between the workshops. However, if there is energy and flow in the thoughts and conversations already in the first meeting, then extend it. Be flexible, and go with the energy.

The following four steps will take you a lot closer to understanding and formulating your purpose¹².

Step 1: name your gifts.

Your gifts are the things you are really good at and that you love doing. Create a list of all your gifts. And do not be humble. Invite your purpose partner to give their view on your greatest gifts or ask other people close to you what they see as your gifts (something you are skilled at and seem to love doing).

Once you have listed all your gifts, narrow them down to a short list of the one or two that you believe are your greatest gifts. Now describe each of them in just 1-2 words (for example: deep listening, detailed planning, optimism, humour, clear speaking, execution).

Step 2: name your passion.

Your passion is what you would like to invest your gifts in. Ask yourself what you are most curious about and wish that you had more time and energy to investigate or work with. This can be a quite difficult

step for some people as we tend to focus on what we dislike or do not want rather than putting words to our passions. That too can be a point of departure to get the process started, identifying the things that you are *not* passionate about. With help from your passion partner, steer the conversation back to the identification of your passion. Identifying your true passion can take several conversations to uncover.

Step 3: name your values.

Your values are the beliefs that matter most to you and that fence in how you would like to live your life. Knowing your most important values, you can also identify environments that fit your values – environments where you are likely to thrive professionally (your work, boss, colleagues etc.) and privately (communities, friends, other relations etc.).

To kick-start the process and the conversations with your purpose buddy, it might be helpful to get external inspiration. There are several helpful tools to be found. For instance, you can choose to do an online self-assessment of personal values or use value cards as inspiration to identify your core values¹³¹⁴. Whichever method you choose, narrow down your values to end up with one or two core values that you want to be reflected in your purpose.

Step 4: formulate your purpose.

As a last step, combine it all into a purpose statement that entails your gifts, your passion and your values in one or two short sentences, for example:

Gifts: *people understanding, operational.*

Passion: *unlocking how to live a happy and meaningful life.*

Values: *adventure, integrity.*

¹² Leider, Richard J. & Shapiro, David A. (2012): *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life.* New York: Gildan Media.

¹³ Barrett Values Centre: www.valuescentre.com

¹⁴ University of New Mexico, Department of Psychology, Personal Values Card, William R. Miller, PhD, Janet C'de Baca, PhD, Daniel B. Matthews, PhD, & Paula L. Wilbourne, PhD.

Purpose statement: *my purpose in life is to use my people skills and my operational bias to help individuals and teams make meaning out of what they do. I am actively seeking to do so in adventurous settings while nurturing integrity in and across my relations.*

When you develop your own purpose statement, make sure it is in the present tense to make it current and actionable.

As mentioned earlier, underneath your primary purpose statement, you may need to develop sub-purposes that are more relevant to a specific context that is important in your life. Your sub-purposes should, however, point in the same direction as your primary purpose.

The team's purpose

When developing a team's purpose, you can go through a similar process, although with a few important tweaks. First, nominate a strong facilitator to steer you through the process over a series of workshops (e.g. 3-5 half-day workshops with a few weeks in between), allowing time enough for discussions during workshops and for reflection in between.

There is a bit of preparation to be done before the first workshop. If the organisation has a clearly formulated purpose, then that should be the backdrop of the team's workshops and ultimately of the purpose statement that the team develops. If the organisation does not have a purpose statement, consider dedicating some time and energy in working with what is there to create whatever synergy possible between the organisation and the team's purpose. For instance, work with the corporate values. Often, corporate values are far from self-explanatory, so consider inviting in someone who can put them into context and explain them, for instance the founder or a cultural carrier, preferably someone who has been part of developing the values in the first place.

Now, with the organisational purpose and context in place, follow a similar process for understanding your personal purpose. Work to understand and boil down the team's key gifts, the true passion of the team and the values that the team wants to operate in. Finally, formulate the team's purpose statement. Throughout the process, make sure that you continuously check in with the organisational purpose to make sure that there is a fit.

Expect a fair amount of discussion when developing your team's purpose. It can be quite emotional to be forced to narrow in on what should go into your purpose statement as it naturally also involves deselection of other gifts, passions and values. Again, a strong facilitator is highly recommended to steer the process.

With the purpose formulated, it is time for you or your team to start exercising the purpose and bringing it to life. To begin with, this may play out simply by talking about it, for instance when you introduce yourself or your team to make it part of your story. Start using it actively to guide your decision-making. And occasionally, confirm (or adjust) your purpose to fit the desired direction for yourself or your team.

What are your next steps?

Working with your purpose is meaningful to most of us as it revolves around what we want to do with our lives. Why we want to get out of bed in the morning. Author, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl states that *"it is the inner spiritual freedom that makes life meaningful and purposeful"*¹⁵. Making use of that inner spiritual freedom, freedom of own thoughts and actions can be nothing but meaningful.

When working with your purpose, there is a direct impact on other dimensions. As stated in the introduction, there are strong indications that people who live their lives in accordance with their values

¹⁵ Frankl, Viktor E. (2006): *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston MA: Beacon Press.

and passions live longer and healthier lives. Knowing your purpose and living in accordance releases positive emotional energy and may even lead to happiness. Your mental focus sharpens when being purpose driven – it becomes clearer what to focus on and what to spend less time and energy on to live a meaningful life.

Best of luck in your pursue of purpose!



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