



Finding True Meaning at Work

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

Business owners, leaders and CEOs everywhere are talking about the search for soul in the workplace. While most agree that religion is not an appropriate topic at work, leaders are examining the role of true meaning and purpose, both on an organizational and individual level.

Steven Covey says there is a “spiritual renaissance taking place in the business world today.”

While corporate leaders are searching ways to ignite commitment and performance, for most people this means finding true meaning in what they do.

The rapidly changing job environment causes us to ask 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?

Companies grapple with how to foster loyalty and commitment. A new generation of workers is looking for more from work than just money. Personal balance is becoming increasingly important to both men and women.

When a person is overwhelmed by work stress, the challenge of commitment at work is highly personal: it calls into question one’s inner sense of purpose, caring and vitality that makes work worthwhile. When a person hasn’t found an inner purpose, his or her work becomes routine, tiring, boring and without energy. For some, this leads to irritability and difficult interpersonal relations. For others, it leads to burnout and depression. For a small few, there can be violence, disruption of work and sabotage.



Rona Fluney, a Certified Business and Personal Coach, brings over ten years experience coaching leaders, executives, entrepreneurs and professionals. Her background includes leadership and board roles, project management, and consulting. Rona’s effervescent enthusiasm and collaborative approach spurs clients to achieve business results, adopt and implement change, build on leadership capabilities, to step out of comfort zones, peak performance, and increase emotional intelligence.

Kinetic transformation occurs when connection and focus converge in ascending the “Peak.”

Benefits of reaching the “Peak”:

- Increased accountability and commitment
- Clarity in what you want and need
- Exploring new perspectives and opportunities
- Greater self-awareness and learning
- Improved working relationships and enhanced teamwork
- More joy, success, balance, and fulfillment into your life

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Research from the Gallup Organization reveals that less than one third of the U.S. workforce feel truly engaged in their work. The other two-thirds are either just showing up, or actively disengaged.

Meaning Improves Competitiveness

For corporations—big or small—the degree that each worker can find meaning in his or her 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 actually a longing to find true meaning, joy or enthusiasm in most individuals. We 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 for “empowerment, quality improvement, team-building, visioning” and so on.

These are great techniques and procedures for changing organizational behavior. Many positive changes occur after workshops. However, 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; many 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. For true commitment to take place in any relationship there must be an alignment of ideals and values.

For example, communication skills may help but do not make for a lasting or fulfilling marriage. There is another level of awareness and development that must be in place for a marriage or any relationship to sustain itself and flourish, including the relationship with people at work and with the organization. This level includes mutual respect, self-responsibility, shared values and the willingness to be fully seen. Profound communication arises naturally when these deeper changes are in place.

Training and development programs such as empowerment and team building are helpful tools for companies and leaders. They produce positive and worthwhile changes in both corporate competitiveness and integrity. However, 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 need to feel a sense of belonging in the world, of having a role to fulfill, and of making a contribution. For many people these needs come through work. For most people 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 a higher purpose such as 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, relationships, self-esteem, and self-actualization. As one’s basic security needs are met, that is, food, clothing and shelter, one progresses on to fulfill the other needs. This could be applied to the workplace as well. Once one’s salary provides the basics survival needs, one searches to fulfill 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 that they needed to have a sense of service, to help themselves and others grow, and to perfect their skills. Many 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 creativity.

The Language of Meaning at 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.”

How can leaders tap into employee’s 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 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 such words as soul, spirit, and personal values?

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

There are things you can do to awaken a sense of meaning at work. There are many consultants, trainers and coaches who are committed to this process.

If you are an executive or leader looking for ways to rekindle engagement and enthusiasm, here are some questions for awakening meaning in yourself and others. Using a professional coach will greatly enhance the effectiveness of these thought exercises.

Ask 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.

Meeting outer responsibilities while fulfilling inner goals becomes one process. If I do this, then:

1. I will be one step closer to...
2. I will free up time for...
3. It will enable us to move forward to...

True Meaning on an Organizational Level

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

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 question has been used extensively by Eric Klein and John Izzo in their book, *Awakening Corporate Soul* (1997). 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**, which is where 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 of each other.

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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