



Do We Always Need Purpose?

Regain control by better understanding your inner “purpose”.

Like most executives, I travel a lot. This can mean a lot of planning, anxiety, frustration and tiredness. In the past, I would return from a trip in a bad mood, having had no time for myself, and plunge back into work and family life. I’d moan and complain, creating a ruckus if my tea wasn’t just right.

One day, I felt like I’d lost control. I was seeking attention by telling everyone how hard I worked and how tired I was. In reality, I was limiting myself and missing out on things that mattered most to me, not because I wasn’t there physically but because I wasn’t there mentally. Instead of appreciating the moments with my family my mind was constantly on the next Monday morning flight. I was driven by my ambition and purpose, eschewing what I considered the intangibles of life: love and family.

I realised then I needed to take charge of myself. But it wasn’t until I was in an executive training programme with other managers some time later that I came to the realisation what I needed was to start developing awareness with a healthy dose of doubt.

Doubt yourself

Doubt is not ambivalence nor is it debilitating. Rather it encourages healthy self-awareness. Leaders can harness doubt to drive continuous learning, to seek a diversity of opinions from others,

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

encourage peer mentoring or to gather benchmarking. Doubt opens our minds to a deeper level where we are able to recognise hidden thoughts and deal with them equipping us to become the script writers of our own life’s journey

Most of us correct our thought processes on the surface but inside, emotionally we may remain scared, unsure or negative. This needs to be brought into equilibrium with the aspects of life that are going “all right” or that we haven’t checked in on in a while. Harmony of mind, body, soul and nature is important.

Become more self-aware

To borrow a phrase from philosopher Immanuel Kant, we have to develop “purposeful purposelessness”. Essentially this means separating utility and value in our self-awareness in much the same way a great work of literature or a work of art is disassociated from that which is “useful”. Self-awareness may not seem to be “useful” on the surface, but it can help us change the way we see the world.

Much has been said of the mindfulness revolution which has helped companies like Walmart and Google cultivate better understanding among their employees and customers. But science also suggests that when our minds are frantic and not centred we

are unhappy. We may find ourselves ruminating about a business trip or dwelling on anger about arguments or challenges at work.

UC Berkeley Researcher and Scholar Matt Killingsworth's **research on happiness** found that people's minds wander about 47 percent of the time. That means for half our lives we're lost in thought, not in the present. Some might say that this isn't necessarily a bad thing if our minds are wandering off to something pleasant like an upcoming holiday or a dinner out. But it turns out that we are less happy when our minds are wandering regardless of what they're wandering to, because we're missing out on the here and now.

We are floating from day to day on the waves of circumstances. Things are happening around us and we react to them. These waves dictate our mood, our state of mind, our concentration and can even cause psychosomatic illnesses.

Getting to purpose

Over the years, I have developed the following ways to overcome this. They have helped me focus, to become more purposeful in purposelessness and advise others.

1. Realise the futility of desire

Some may think that a permanently happy state is achievable by gaining status, possessions or wealth. But executives I work with find the older they get, the less interested they are in such pleasures. I have a formula for assessing my closeness to achieving happiness, which may help all of us ponder things: Happiness quotient = number of desires fulfilled / total number of desires. If our desires are always growing we will find ourselves scrambling endlessly to fulfil them leaving us constantly unfulfilled. By limiting our desires to what is really important to us we can improve our happiness quotient increase.

As **George Kohlrieser** pointed out in **Leadership: A Master Class**, how you manage your emotions is determined by what you focus on. This is easier said than done. An executive I coached was so immersed in his career that he didn't see his child during weekdays and was too tired during weekends. He had to be encouraged to change his routine and in the end I had to coach him to reframe his desires and look at them as a cost.

2. Shed judgments:

When a person we consider good behaves in a manner we don't agree with, he or she can instantly become a villain in our eyes. This triggers a set of emotional judgments and thoughts which we store for future reference. But as Manfred Kets de Vries

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

writes in **his blog**, management situations are rarely black and white. We should let in the shades of grey. I was once quick to label a vendor as useless and untrustworthy after a bad customer experience, but months later the same vendor jumped out of bed in the middle of the night to help me with a compliance issue. All of us have good days and bad.

3. Forgive

Forgiving others is the start of the journey to happiness and keeps communication open between two people. There are more pros than cons for being forgiving, which leaders need to cultivate. I recall a deal where I was dropped at the last minute for another consultant, despite assurances I would be chosen. I had to realise that my counterpart was under pressure from other stakeholders and couldn't honour his promise. After realising this, I was able to respect his values and internal reputation.

Focus for purpose and growth

Being aware and regulating our thoughts and action in a particular direction is a must for busy managers today. Start with two to three important focus areas per day, such as the roles you have at home, at the office and in your own self. Remember that you will only be able to mentor and support others if you are healthy in soul, body and mind. This should be the purpose and the ultimate aim of your personal growth.



Naveen Khajanchi is the CEO & Director of NKH Foundation

Follow **INSEAD Knowledge** on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)

Find article at
<https://knowledge.insead.edu/blog/insead-blog/do-we-always-need-purpose-4161>

Download the Knowledge app for free

