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# The Role of Leaders in Helping Others Find Meaning at Work



By Schon Beechler , INSEAD Senior Affiliate Professor of Leadership and Organisational Behaviour

**"Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for." - Viktor E. Frankl**

The first job I ever had was working second shift in an injection plastics molding factory in Binghamton, New York during the summer between my first and second years of college. I started on the simplest machine making tiny, yellow, dynamite caps and worked my way up to operating injection molds that made plastic liners for sewer pipes, contraceptive foam applicators, and plastic cogs for sewing machines. Each mold was operated by one person so there was no one to talk to, except on break, but the novelty of moving from machine to machine every night was enough to keep me motivated for the first couple of weeks.

Soon after, the foreman realised that I was becoming bored and disengaged as the monotony and the fatigue from standing on a cement floor for 8 hours began to take its toll. One afternoon he assigned me to a machine at the back of the factory that made the plastic red lenses that are inserted in stoplights. As he was explaining how to operate the machinery he leaned

over and said in a quiet voice, “You know, this job is really, really important. When you do a good job, the plastic in this lens reflects the light behind it just right so that drivers can see the red signal when they pull up to the stoplight. Doing the best quality job on this machine will help to save many people’s lives. I think you have had enough experience on the other machines that I can trust you.”

My ears perked up and I promised him, and myself, that I would do my best work all shift long. In a brief moment, he helped transform a dull, tedious and unpleasant job into something meaningful for me, giving me energy, focus and commitment to my job that was completely lacking when all I could see was another monotonous task.

### **The universal search for meaning**

The search for meaning is universal, as noted by the neurologist, psychiatrist and holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl in one of the most powerful and enduring books of the last century, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. While it is a search in which we must each actively participate, the leaders in our lives play a crucial role in helping us connect or re-connect to that sense of purpose, to what is meaningful, and help fuel our desire to not only survive, but to thrive in all aspects of our lives.

The current leadership and talent literature is rife with suggestions about how to engage, excite and keep employees. While job enrichment, flexible benefits packages, and other levers can all help to engage talent, explicitly providing a link between individuals’ values, what they find meaningful, and the work that they do every day can be a powerful motivator.

For example, studies have shown that when people feel that they are pursuing a profound purpose or engaging in work that is important personally, there are significant positive effects such as reductions in stress, turnover, absenteeism, dissatisfaction, cynicism and depression. In addition, research shows increases in commitment, happiness, satisfaction, engagement, effort and empowerment, and a sense of fulfilment among those who find meaning in their work. And what is important is not the nature of the work itself, but the relationship between the individual and their work.

In 2001, researchers Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton conducted a study of how people coped with what many would consider extremely distasteful jobs at a hospital in the Midwest. Interviewing a custodian on staff, Candice Philipps, who was assigned to clean up vomit and excrement in the oncology ward when people came for chemotherapy, they found that even someone with duties distasteful to most, could find meaning in their work: “My job is equally important to the physician. I help these people feel human. At their lowest and most vulnerable point, I help them maintain their dignity. I make it okay to feel awful, to lose control, and to be unable to manage themselves. My role is crucial to the healing process.” In Candice’s eyes, her job was not just a job, but a calling.

Kim Cameron, in his book *Positive Leadership*, observes that work is associated with meaningfulness when it has one or more of the following key attributes:

1. The work has an important impact on the well-being of human beings
2. The work is associated with an important virtue or personal value
3. The work has an impact that extends beyond the immediate time frame or creates a ripple effect
4. The work builds supportive relationships or a sense of community in people

### **The Role of Leadership in Meaning-Making**

While some people come to work for a particular organisation because it is aligned with their values, has a clear impact on the well-being of others, or provides clear meaning through its long-term impact and/or supportive relationships, leaders can also help employees find meaningfulness in their work where these attributes are less obvious.

Executives I work with often become so entangled with the enormity of their positions in guiding their organisations to success that they often lose sight of their role in helping their employees sustain their energy and commitment to that success by staying connected to what is meaningful in their lives. Even in organisations that have a mission to do good in the world, leaders need to continually re-connect each person in the organization to that mission and provide a sense of purpose for coming to work every day.

In an era where we get beaten down by harsh economic realities, 24/7 work demands on our time, and increasing levels of stress in all areas of our lives, it is critically important that leaders find ways to help all of their employees connect or re-connect to what is important, to a purpose, to our universal search for meaning. And just as importantly, leaders need to re-connect with their own sense of purpose to be able to continue to fuel their own inner fire.

To conclude with a quote from Viktor Frankl, "... the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."

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