

How Does a Sense of Purpose Impact the Workplace?

Part III

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As I have written in each of my June articles, this will be my last column until September. A year ago, which was the 25th anniversary of my first website article, I reflected on the themes I had addressed in 250 articles during those 25 years. Some chronicled the ramifications of major national and worldwide events such as 9/11, natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, the pandemic, and increased political divisiveness. Other articles highlighted the impact of changes in my life during those 25 years, including the birth of four grandchildren, the passing of my two surviving brothers, and an increased appreciation of the importance of family, friends, and community in enriching our lives. I also wrote many articles related to specific interests such as resilience across the lifespan, intrinsic motivation, effective leadership, noteworthy educational practices, parenting and family issues, and bringing purpose and meaning to our lives.

It's difficult to believe it's been a year since I reminisced about the first 25 years. My final article for this year (or more accurately, the academic year that I follow) is the last of a three-part series, all focusing on the importance of having a sense of purpose in our lives. [My April column examined the work of psychologist David Yeager](#) and the ways in which learning and intrinsic motivation were reinforced when students experienced a sense of purpose during the learning process, while last month's article identified what Yeager identified as three distinctly different mindsets held by teachers and other adults, [only one of which was posited to strengthen a sense of purpose and self-worth in students](#).

In describing the three mindsets, I observed that they closely aligned with the late psychologist Diana Baumrind's seminal work on parenting styles. In the 1960s, she described three main types: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Later, psychologists Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin added a fourth style that they labeled uninvolved or neglectful.

Purpose in the Workplace

This third article shifts the focus from students and schools to adults in the workplace, indicating that a sense of purpose, which is often associated with the belief that we are making a difference in our world, is not limited to a particular age group or confined to a specific

environment. Rather, the experience of purpose represents a significant force throughout our lives, boosting intrinsic motivation, self-worth, and resilience, whether in a preschooler helping others, a high school student translating what they are learning in an American History class to volunteer for a local political candidate, a middle-aged individual appreciating that their work as an IT specialist has meaning, or a senior citizen engaging in activities that promote the well-being of others.

A common complaint I've heard from adults in therapy is that their work provides little satisfaction or meaning in their lives. Feelings of stress and burnout are sometimes represented in their counting the months or even years before they can retire. These feelings at work can negatively impact our lives outside of work, resulting in an ongoing cycle of stress in all areas of our lives.

As a therapist, consultant, and speaker, I've learned that many people do not recognize their contributions at work, especially when they receive little, if any, positive feedback from leadership. To illustrate this assertion, I often share two examples, both of which occurred when I was the opening day speaker at two very large school districts. One was held at an arena in town with about 1,500 school staff in attendance. I was seated in a row near the stage but off to the side. People already seated in that row did not know I was the keynote speaker. As we were waiting for the program to begin, I overheard their conversation, with one wondering why they asked secretaries to attend these opening day school events since no one ever mentioned them. Well, that was about to change.

During my keynote, I described my experience as an opening day speaker several years earlier. I sat on stage with several other people who were offering brief remarks before I began. They included the superintendent of schools, the head of the School Board, a teacher, and a member of the Facilities Department. I was seated next to the latter, and we chatted for a few minutes. He told me they often had a non-faculty staff member on the program. As we surveyed the large audience, he told me he was nervous, not being accustomed to public speaking.

I empathized with him and attempted to convey some words of encouragement. Although he may have been anxious, it did not show, and I will never forget what he said. He introduced the image of a jigsaw puzzle as he described a school system as being composed of many people. He said if even one piece of the puzzle is missing, the puzzle is not complete, that

all pieces are necessary, just as each staff member, regardless of their responsibilities, is needed to complete the puzzle. He ended by emphasizing that all staff should value what they do.

Not surprisingly, his message was very well-received. When he returned to his seat next to me, he asked how he had done. I said he was excellent and really touched the audience. I smiled and added, “You’re a very tough act to follow.” During my talk, I referenced his message on several occasions.

I related this story to the audience shortly after hearing the secretary’s remark that she did not feel that she was seen as a significant part of the school landscape. At the conclusion of the program, a couple of the secretaries thanked me, and one said, “I will never forget that although I may not be a large piece of the puzzle, the puzzle is not complete without me.”

Questions to Ask

In an article titled, “[Purpose at Work: How a Sense of Meaning Drives Retention](#),” author Roula Amire wrote that employees often struggle with the meaning their jobs provide them and suggested they ask such questions as:

“How does what I do here matter?”

“What is my purpose?”

“Why am I doing the work I am doing?”

Amire continued that the following three questions asked in research conducted by her organization Great Place to Work, were found to predict worker turnover:

“Are you proud of where you work?”

“Do you find meaning in your work?”

“Do you have fun at work?”

Amire reported that a “no” response to any of the questions was found to increase the likelihood of the worker leaving. She explained, “People want to spend their time in meaningful ways. Purpose is the way you make a difference in the world. It’s why you matter. All humans seek purpose, and employees are emboldened more than ever to go find it.” She added, “If you want to know your employees’ commitment to their jobs, don’t ask them if their salaries are fair, ask about purpose and connection. . . . Employees need to feel appreciated by their managers and see that their work makes a difference. Purpose must be coupled with clarity.”

Strategies to Strengthen Purpose

An article posted on the [Terryberry website paralleled Amire's perspective](#). Employee purpose was defined as “the sense of meaning and fulfillment that an individual derives from their work. It’s the connection between what an employee does daily and how it contributes to a larger mission, personal values, or the organization’s purpose.”

The Terryberry article observed, “Employee purpose directly impacts engagement, motivation, productivity, and overall job satisfaction. . . . When employees feel that their work has meaning and contributes to something larger than themselves, they are more likely to be committed, innovative, and loyal to their organization.” The article cited a number of studies to support these findings and also highlighted the following five strategies to improve employee purpose (please see the Terryberry article for a detailed description of the five):

Align work to the company mission. “One of the effective ways to cultivate purpose is by ensuring team members understand how their work aligns with a meaningful mission. . . and by showing employees how their individual roles contribute to the bigger picture.” One example offered is that a cashier or stocker at a supermarket may view their job as just scanning barcodes or placing items on the shelves, but they can be helped to understand—as emphasized in the talk given by the facilities department worker at school—that they are an essential part of the process, that “they’re ensuring that families have access to fresh food, making sure a parent can provide a healthy meal for their child, or helping an elderly customer find what they need.”

Provide personal and professional growth and development opportunities. This detail, although seemingly obvious, is lacking in many organizations. When there are few, if any, possibilities for an employee to grow and advance in an organization, it lessens a sense of purpose. According to one study, a notable number of employees, especially younger ones, reported that they would be willing to accept a 5% reduction in pay to work for an organization that offered opportunities for career growth.

Recognize and reward. I’ve consulted with organizations that seem to operate with the belief that if an employee does something right, it’s what’s expected, and there is no need for praise or recognition; however, if they do something wrong, they should hear about it. I’ve worked with parents who follow a similar practice with their children. The Terryberry piece emphasized, “Recognizing and appreciating employees’ contributions reinforces their sense of purpose. Beyond acknowledging achievements, companies should highlight the impact of employees’ work, whether on customers, colleagues, or the community.” These kinds of

recognition should not be used to play one person or team against another but rather to support all teams in reaching their goals.

Empower employees with autonomy. As my readers are well aware, I believe a basic ingredient of intrinsic motivation, responsibility, and resilience is when people feel their views are elicited and respected. The Terryberry article observed, “Autonomy and trust contribute significantly to an employee’s sense of purpose. When employees have ownership of their work and are empowered to make decisions, they feel a greater sense of responsibility and fulfillment.” As one example, a study by Harvard Business Review found that employees “who have autonomy over their work schedule and methods are nearly five times more likely to be engaged at work.”

Listen and adapt to boost employee engagement. Terryberry's advice about this strategy captures the importance of constantly adapting to the ever-changing needs of employees and an organization. “Companies must listen to their employees and adapt to their needs. Regular check-ins and surveys help organizations understand what drives their employees and what might be hindering their sense of purpose. Acting on feedback to improve workspace culture, job satisfaction, and career development opportunities ensures that employees feel heard and valued.”

As noted earlier, the basic principles and strategies of supporting intrinsic motivation and purpose in the workplace are equally relevant to support these attributes at our schools and homes. Regardless of our age and setting, we all want to feel that what we do makes a difference and has a purpose. Responsibility, caring, and resilience thrive when these feelings are present.

Final Comment

We live in a very challenging time. I hope during the next few months you find time to relax, recharge, enjoy interactions with family and friends, and engage in activities that bring a sense of purpose to your life.

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