

Leaders Create Meaning

by Robert Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Too many people go to work each day in a zombie-like state where they go through the motions all day and try to stay out of trouble with the boss. Work life is a meaningless array of busywork foisted upon them by the clueless morons who run the place. They hate the environment and intensely dislike their co-workers. Their suffering is tolerated only because there is no viable option for them to survive. What a pity that anyone would spend even a single day on this earth in such a hopeless atmosphere.

We can fault the individuals who allow themselves to be trapped in this way, but I believe the environment created by leaders has a great deal to do with this malaise. Reason: if you put these same individuals in an environment of trust and challenge, nearly all of them would quickly rise up to become happy and productive workers. It is essential that each individual in the workforce find real meaning in the work being done, and the responsibility is on leaders to make that happen.

Some good research into this conundrum was presented by Viktor Frankl a half century ago in his famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl posits that it "is a peculiarity of man that he must have something significant yet to do in his life, for that is what gives meaning to life." He discovered this universally human trait while surviving the most horrible of life conditions in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. One cannot imagine a more oppressive environment, but believe it or not, many people at work feel like they are in a kind of concentration camp. The antidote is for leaders to create something significant yet to do.

Dave and Wendy Ulrich, co-authors of *The Why of Work* put it this way. "In organizations, meaning and abundance are more about what we do with what we have than about what we have to begin with." They point out that workers are in some ways like volunteers who can choose where they allocate their time and energy. For their own peace and health, it is imperative that workers feel connected to the meaning of their work.

What can leaders do to ensure the maximum number of people have a sense of purpose and meaning in their work? Here are a dozen ideas that can help.

1. **Create a positive vision of the future.** Vision is critical because without it people see no sense of direction for their work. If we have a common goal, then it is possible to actually get excited about the future.
2. **Generate trust.** Trust is the glue that holds people together in a framework of positive purpose. Without trust, we are just playing games with each other hoping to get through the day unscathed. The most significant way leaders help create trust is by rewarding candor, which is accomplished by not punishing people for speaking their truth.
3. **Build morale the right way.** This means not trying to motivate people by adding hygiene factors like picnics, bonuses, or hat days. Motivate people by treating them with respect and giving them autonomy. Leaders do not motivate people, rather they create the environment where people decide whether to become motivated. This sounds like doubletalk, but it is a powerful message most leaders do not understand.
4. **Recognize and celebrate excellence.** Reinforcement is the most powerful tool leaders have for changing behavior. Leaders need to learn how to reinforce well and avoid the mine-field of reinforcement mistakes that are easy to make.
5. **Treat people right.** In most cases focusing on the Golden Rule works well. In some extreme cases the Golden Rule will not be wise because not all individuals want to be treated the same way. Use of the Platinum Rule (Treat others the way *they* would like to be treated) is helpful as long as it is not taken to a literal extreme.
6. **Communicate more and better.** People have an unquenchable thirst for information. Lack of communication is the most often mentioned grievance in any organization. Get some good training on how to communicate in all modes and practice all the time.
7. **Unleash maximum discretionary effort in people.** People give effort to the organization out of choice, not out of duty. Understand what drives individuals to make a contribution and be sure to provide that element daily. Do not try to apply the same techniques to all individuals or all situations.
8. **Have high ethical and moral standards.** Operate from a set of values and make sure people know why those values are important. Leaders need to always live their values.
9. **Lead change well.** Change processes are in play in every organization daily, yet most leaders are poor at managing change. Study the techniques of successful change so people do not become confused and disoriented.
10. **Challenge people and set high expectations.** People will rise to a challenge if it is properly presented and managed. Challenged individuals are people who have found meaning in their work.

11. **Operate with high Emotional Intelligence.** The ability to work well with people, upward, sideways, and downward allows things to work smoothly. Without Emotional Intelligence, leaders do not have the ability to transform intentions into meaning within people.
12. **Build High Performing Teams.** A sense of purpose is enhanced if there is a kind of peer pressure brought on by good teamwork. Foster great togetherness of teams so people will relate to their tasks instinctively.

This is a substantial list of items, but most of them are common sense. Unfortunately they are not common practice in most organizations. If you want to have people rise to their level of potential, they must all have a sense of meaning. To accomplish that, focus on the above items, and see a remarkable transformation in your organization.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. He can be reached at bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585-392-7763.

Website: www.leadergrow.com Blog: www.thetrustambassador.com

