

Working on Purpose

WE ARE PURPOSEFUL PEOPLE! Just follow any of us through our days and you will easily see that we are going somewhere. There is intention behind our actions; there is purpose behind our performance.

You may be wondering what my words—this column—has to do with your purpose in HRD and, maybe, the purpose of your life.

The leap to life purpose may seem grand and ambitious, but that's exactly what this column will try to sort out—life purpose as expressed at work. We invest most of our waking hours in work. And most of our life energy. Through our work, we serve our customers, satisfy our employer, interact with coworkers, and bring home a paycheck. However, we have purposes beyond meeting everyone else's needs. Every action we take, every thought we express, every emotion we feel suggests there is life larger than work and a purpose larger than a job description and a paycheck.

In HRD, we help people work on their purposes. We ask them to think about their work, determine how central they want it to be to their lives, and consider how they can make it more rewarding. Our own deep engagement with developing others often goes far beyond what an employer would or could demand. In our work, many of us believe we are serving human purposes larger than the corporation.

By serving these purposes, we are on the path of organizational change. But organizational change efforts that ignore human aspirations are doomed. Transformational efforts—whether for one person or 10,000—must reach past inflexible organizational walls to the human life beyond.

Think about where you are most vital, most alive. Think about those activities that you freely pursue, that you enjoy and make the time for. Consider what feeds your soul, captivates you, draws you back again and again? What is it? A project, a hobby, a game, clients, a job? Why does it continue to engage and attract

you? Why does it feed you? The answers are an expression of what you are and what you are becoming. Whether your fascination is fishing or refinishing, gardening or computing, training or reading, it's an expression of your reach toward your life's purpose.

Purpose is related to incompleteness. Notice again what you want to learn. Chances are no matter how much you know about the interest, it's not enough. Your incompleteness keeps you coming back for more. For example, in HRD we are curious about people, about how they learn and why, about how they change and why. Look through back issues of this magazine and you will see topics returned to year after year because we

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are not finished with them yet. As a profession we are not through considering motivation, change, learning, work groups, organizations, systems, performance. If we were finished with any of these topics, the definitive article would be enshrined forever. That has not happened and will not happen with any of those subjects. We can't let go of them because we are still learning about them; we are not through with them—and they are not through with us.

Here is another approach to learning about the purposes behind our work: Think of some part of your work to which you willingly give your time, talent, and energy. Come up with a phrase that describes it and write it down on a blank page. When you are finished, ask yourself: And why is that so important to me? Write a thoughtful line or two in answer to

this question below your work phrase. And then, ask yourself: "And why is *that* important to me?" And then ask yourself one last time: "And why is that (the third notation) so important to me?" Write down your answer and then reflect on what thoughts came up for you with this exercise.

Your answers probably touched on deeper reasons than money that you pursue your work. The "three whys" take you beyond work toward life aspirations. It is life fulfillment you are seeking, and your work is part of that fulfillment. By the time you get to the third why, you've probably learned that you're not working only because you want to be a trainer. Your HRD roles help you down a life path to your more complete self. And it is the same with the people you work with; they are on personal paths, too. They are looking for meaning in their lives; some of them have fulfilling work lives, while others have given up or just haven't noticed the possibilities. In our attempts to engage them in their work, we ask them what they like about it and why. And just like us, their excitement links back through the whys in their lives.

Through neglect and overwork and forgetting that we are attempting to live a life, we can lose our whys. By getting caught up in the whats, hows, and whens, we travel down whyless paths which become ruts.

Look at your three whys again. During your workday, repeatedly ask yourself, "Why is this important to me?" Remind yourself daily of the deeper purposes that draw you to this work. You will lead a fuller life and do better work when you do.

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