

Opinion: Working on Purpose

Forget vision statements; it's meaning that people need at work. Here Colin Reeve, MD of R&A Consultancy and Training, explains how to make work matter more.

Do you believe in vision statements? Does the vision statement expressed by your organisation fill your working life with a deep sense of purpose? Do you even know what it is?

The problem with vision statements is that they are just that, statements. Sometimes they are aspirational but typically they are disconnected from those they are meant to inspire. But vision itself is hugely powerful. So how do you get it to live?

I have an answer. At R&A we do a great deal of work with managers, helping them to see what is necessary for them to become effective leaders and considering with them how they can bring a new energy and purposeful engagement to work. And the way we approach this is to help people to align their behaviour with their deeply held vision, mission and values.

We often start this process by helping people elicit their values as these have a profound impact on motivation and attitude towards work. Imagine how you would feel in the morning if the five values which were most important to you were all being stimulated at work. Now imagine the opposite. How would you feel then?

This work on values opens the door to understanding our purpose, or mission. The word 'mission' can frighten people but it can simply be defined as that which we are drawn to, enjoy paying attention to or which we are passionate about. It may be quality, innovation, customer service, profit or output. It is those things we constantly seek to put before everything else. And while values provide our motivation, having a clear sense of our purpose or mission goes further than this. It provides passion and, longer term, a sustainable energy.

And when this passion is stimulated at work, the consequence is that we start to become unstoppable. For leaders this is an extremely powerful insight, especially when it is recognised that values and mission exist in everyone, are easy to access and provide extraordinary levels of energy.

More than this, however, it is possible to help teams and individuals tap into an even greater source of power, their inspiration. Each of us can get inspired when we have a clear picture of what our world could look like if we were living our mission. This picture of success is often grandly called a 'vision' and is often only seen as a leadership concern.

But the good news is that everyone has this resource inside them. And even better news is that when values, mission and vision are aligned to behaviour this has an enormous impact on the productivity of organisations.

Let me give you a real life example of how this work has made a powerful difference to an R&D team in a multinational food manufacturer. Before I started working with them this team had lost their sense of purpose; they were listless. Their perception was that they were regarded as 'boffins' and little else by their colleagues. As a result they felt invisible and undervalued.

Working with them on values and purpose, however, helped this team to reconnect immediately to what they were passionate about and within R&D they realised that they had a direct way to express themselves. However, what they also acknowledged was that they needed to change their behaviour and communicate better.

They had to let other people in the company know what they were excited about and explain how it was integral to the future success of the business. Not surprisingly this recognition allowed them to access an enormous untapped energy and, in turn, helped them get in touch with their passion about work.

It is surprising that more companies haven't made this link between values, mission and vision and how, when people are aligned at these levels they inevitably have so much more to give. In my view this is what effective leadership is all about.

Leaders are the conduit for energy within their organisations and should be judged on whether they help energy flow better as a result of their actions. People want to be engaged in purposeful endeavour and are crying out for leadership that will channel their efforts.

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