

The purpose trap: Why you should be careful when looking for purpose in your work

By Dragan Milicevic on February 03, 2021

"The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle. As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it"
-Steve Jobs

Steve Jobs made this famous statement back then in 2005 at his Stanford commencement speech. Finding purpose in your job has meanwhile become the hottest credo in the leadership and self-development arena. There are numerous publications, trainings, coachings on how to find your purpose. Simon Sinek became famous with his talk about how even companies are having to focus on purpose in order to be successful. Work has become the ashram of self-actualization, to such an extent that it's almost become unacceptable to be working for money – it has to be purpose!



I have witnessed this trend in my coaching practice as well. The more time people spend at work (50, 60, 70, 80 hours per week), the more the search to do something meaningful during such long hours logically makes total sense. But here is the problem – one that I have observed with many of my clients: If you confuse the search for your life purpose or fulfillment in life with the search for more and more purpose in your job, it comes with risks and you may fail.

It might frustrate you

"What do you do outside work?" I asked one of my coachees who came for coaching with the objective of finding purpose in her work. Her answer was: "Catch up on sleep", followed by a pause, "Get a work out", followed by another pause. Her working week was 60-70 hours, with next to no social life, no partner, lots of hobbies which she does not have time for. She tells me that she has been searching for a meaningful job for quite some time, and has made several job changes. But without finding the "right" purpose. The search, she tells me, has made her miserable and demotivated. And she is not a rare case. The risk: it may eventually impact her current performance negatively.

I asked her a little later "And how will you find time for friends, family, your health once you find the job that finally gives you purpose? You may end up working even more..." Pause, and she started to cry. She was clearly confusing life purpose with job purpose. It is

extremely rare that work can become our purpose in life. For most of us this won't be the case. And, why should it? At this point my coachee and I could start with the actual coaching: Looking at the bigger picture.

You could get burn-out

Doing something that has purpose motivates and satisfies us. For companies, purpose is a great motivator that goes beyond money and cost very little. However, we know from research in the area of burn-out that it is not those who dislike their work who are at the most risk, but those who "love" their job. -A Canadian study among 3,715 employees across 12 organisations found that employees driven by purpose are significantly more stressed and score lower for well-being, resilience, and self-efficacy than those who are not (Moss, 2019).

Reality will catch you up

There is an assumption that once having found purpose in my work, I will always be happy. The reality of organisational life may get in the way, though. Not all colleagues are nice and exciting. Not every boss is protective, encouraging and inspiring, there are politics that dictate tiresome processes and decisions. If you are truly passionate about what you do, these realities can become very frustrating. One of my other coachees echoed this: "After all the good work we have done, I am too tired to adjust our recommendation to the CEO, just because he does not like to hear the truth". If you don't accept the realities of organisational life you may end up chasing the perfect environment and ultimately not finding it.

It may impact your leadership effectiveness

If you, as a leader, have found your purpose in work, that's great. The risk arises if you assume that everyone on your team is like that. In other words, people are different. If you expect your team to go the extra mile constantly because it comes easily to you (after all, you are following your purpose), it may not be easy for them. They may have a fulfilling social life outside work which has priority. Purpose may not be the only motivator for them. Not acknowledging the differences in people and what motives them may limit your leadership effectiveness.

Does your job have to be devoid of purpose?

Clearly, no. However, there needs to be a balance. Your life should have purpose. And that purpose should stem both from what you do at work AND outside work. If you sense you are trapped in the search for purpose in work, here are 3 questions that may be helpful:

- What is it I am ultimately hoping to get, once I find my purpose in work? What's my goal here on a deeper level? (Acceptance, love, sense of self-worth etc.?)
- Is work the only/right place to find it?
- How much purpose does my non-work life have? And why?

In summary: Purpose in work not only drives us forward, it also gives meaning to what we do. If you shift your search for fulfillment in life and purpose to work, you may fail. Corporate America, corporate Germany, corporate you name it won't be able to give it to you. This is the moment to start thinking about the bigger picture – your life.

References

Moss, J 2019, 'When passion leads to burn out', *Harvard Business Review*.

Schmalenbach, M 2019, 'Opfer der Leidenschaft', *Die Zeit*, edition 02.