

# Leading with Purpose



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*'When we choose who we really are, everything changes'* Robert Quinn

## Introduction

One of the foundations of the Henley Leadership programme is to provide the environment and opportunity for participants to take time out to reflect on their leadership and consider different leadership models, approaches and points of view in doing this. How often do we think about why we want to be leaders, or what values, motivations and needs drive our leadership behaviours? When we believe we are clear about our long-term direction and that deep sense of what we want, do we let other seemingly urgent issues distract us from it? What do we truly value in our lives at a deep level? Do we have the will and energy to make it happen? Do we ensure that we are using our sense of purpose to guide us? How much time do we spend making a strong connection with our purpose, allowing it to guide us, keep us going, and give us energy and resilience, as well as thinking about how it aligns with the organisation we work in?

The values and beliefs that we hold drive purpose, as well as what we want to achieve in our lives. The point of view put forward in this paper is that as leaders we can gain much by clarifying what our individual purpose is and aligning our behaviours to it. This provides us with considerable focus and energy. Clarity of purpose helps us deal with new circumstances or challenges as they arise, guiding our choices. A strong connection with purpose can result in further breakthroughs in our leadership. Clarifying and connecting with purpose also enables us to make a stronger connection with our organisation's purpose, and in so doing inspire our people to do the same.

Research is showing that organisations that support their leaders in making the connection with personal and organisational purpose, in turn enable employees to experience the same journey and produce extraordinary performance. Providing others with a meaningful purpose is a powerful leadership tool, one that can transform a group and allow it to reach new heights of accomplishment.

While the major focus of this paper is on understanding purpose at an individual level, there is an inextricable link with purpose at an organisational level, therefore there are references to how organisations benefit from having a clear sense of purpose.

The paper also shares a practical approach for capturing your purpose and revising it over time, depending on changes to circumstances.

## Current thinking

*'When people make a fundamental choice to be true to what is highest in them, or when they make a choice to fulfil a purpose in their life, they can easily accomplish many changes that seemed impossible or improbable in the past'* Robert Fritz

Current thinking has been influenced by earlier theories. More than fifty years ago, the famous psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl said it was people's search for meaning that defines human beings. People are motivated to make sense of their lives and to find a purpose that goes beyond thinking about their own basic needs. People want to find the answers to the questions 'Why?' and 'What for?' and if they could find the answers then they could bear many of the challenges that life throws at them. Abraham Maslow took up some of these theories and argued that there is a set of basic physical needs that people must satisfy, but beyond these they strive for companionship and belonging – and ultimately for self-actualisation. It is by satisfying these latter needs that people generate a true sense of meaning and fulfilment in their lives. Maslow believed that self-actualisation occurred when people connected with the unique aspects of themselves and were able to contribute to society in a distinctive way by stretching themselves to be what they can be. The primary need associated with self-actualisers is the need for meaning and purpose in their lives. They want their work, their activities and their existence to have some value and to be a contribution to others.

Recent thinking and research into what makes leaders successful is emphasising the importance of clarity about one's purpose in life and making a strong connection with that purpose. The critical role of authenticity in the inspiration and motivation of people is becoming increasingly apparent, and clarity of purpose is seen as a key driver of the perceived authenticity of leaders. Robert Quinn (2004), in his book *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It*, points out that being clear about our purpose and making a strong connection with it makes us feel better about ourselves and helps us close the gap between who we think we are and who we think we should be. This brings our values and behaviours into greater alignment. Pursuing our purpose in the face of uncertainty helps us to gain hope and energy, clarify the result we want to create, and be committed, engaged and full of energy in achieving those results. Ryan and Robert Quinn (2009) say, in their book *Lift: Becoming a Positive Force in Any Situation*, that when people are purpose-centred, they envision and pursue extraordinary results that are not constrained by previous expectations or the expectations of others. The results they pursue are energising because they are self-chosen, challenging and constructive.

Writings in the *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) include articles and blogs about the power of purpose. Bill George, author of *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value* (George, 2003), along with Peter Sims, Andrew N McLean and Diana Mayer, published an article titled 'Discovering your authentic leadership' (George et al, 2007), which suggests that we all have the capacity to inspire and empower others, but first we must devote ourselves to our personal growth and development as leaders. They point out that no studies have produced a clear profile of the ideal leader, which they applaud because it avoids people trying to imitate it. They believe that people will trust you when you are genuine and authentic, not a replica of someone else. In their view, authentic leaders demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practise their values consistently and lead with their hearts as well as their heads. Through a series of in-depth interviews of many leaders they found that rather than identifying any universal characteristics, traits, skills or styles, their leadership emerged from their life stories. These leaders were constantly testing themselves through their real-world experiences and reframing their life stories to understand who they were at their core. In doing so they discovered the purpose of their leadership and learned that being more authentic made them more effective.

Tony Schwartz (2011), in his HBR blog 'The exhilarating power of purpose', shares his personal experience of making a career switch after deciding that the work he was doing did not make much of a positive difference in the world. He was successful, but felt he was taking on assignments just to make money – over time he got to like it less and less. After establishing with a colleague a company that helps organisations energise, engage, focus and inspire their employees, he now feels privileged to be doing something he believes in and to collaborate with people on a shared mission.

He says he has met relatively few leaders who communicate a strong sense of purpose and make their people believe what they are doing really matters. He believes that the most reliable source of purpose comes from serving something larger than ourselves and adding value that way. He suggests two questions that we can ask ourselves:

- *If you are a leader, what do you and your company truly stand for, and how can you more powerfully communicate that mission to those you lead?*
- *If you are an employee, what can you do to invest your work with a greater sense of meaning and value?*

Kim Cameron is a leading proponent of positive organisational scholarship. In his book *Positive Leadership* (2008), he points out that when people feel they are pursuing a profound purpose or engaging in work that is personally important, significant positive effects are produced, including increases in commitment, effort, engagement, empowerment, satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment. He believes that leaders who enable meaningfulness and purpose in work are interested in highlighting the value associated with the organisation's outcomes, which extend beyond the personal benefit of individual employees.

Mike Pedler, John Burgoyne and Tom Boydell (2010), in their book *A Manager's Guide to Leadership*, suggest that leaders do things 'on purpose', i.e. being clear about what they are aiming to bring about. Without clarity of purpose, or a deep sense of what we want, our actions can be erratic, driven by short-term, even random influences. They acknowledge that purpose can be hard to find at times and at other times hard to hold on to – that we can lose heart and purpose as the urgent drives out the important, or as success continues to elude us. They believe that in any situation the 'How?' questions lead us to be concerned with action or implementation, but the 'Why?' questions connect us to our deeper sense of purpose – they see these as the leadership questions and encourage us to check our sense of purpose 'compass' by asking the 'Why?' questions from time to time, for example:

- *Why should I resolve this problem?*
- *Why would anyone want to help me with this?*
- *Why should I change my busy schedule to focus on this?*

John Whitmore (2009), one of the pioneers of the coaching profession, in his book *Coaching for Performance*, highlights how employees are increasingly showing signs of wanting their work to be of value and to have meaning and purpose. He believes that it is possible for people in organisations to find meaning in their existing work and thereby maintain their performance with greater willingness and satisfaction. He observes how much more of a focus this has become for the coaching profession.

Just as it is seen as important for individuals to have an 'invigorating sense of purpose', according to Gurnek Bains (2007) in his book *Meaning, Inc.*, it is also important for organisations to have a core purpose that goes beyond business success, makes people feel they are changing society as opposed to just servicing needs, gives them the courage to set extremely stretching goals and makes the organisation groundbreaking in its pursuit of the core purpose.

In his HBR blog, 'Are you different on purpose?', Bill Taylor (2011), the co-founder of *Company* magazine, highlights examples of companies that have established a clear sense of purpose and quotes the co-founder of advertising agency GSD&M, Roy Spence, who said: 'Behind every great brand is an authentic sense of purpose – a definitive statement about the difference you are trying to make in the world and a workplace with the energy and vitality to bring that purpose to life.' Spence says that purpose enables you to look at an opportunity or challenge and ask yourself: 'Is this the right thing to do given our purpose?'

Bill Taylor suggests that useful questions to ask yourself are:

- *Why does your company exist?*
- *Is it different on purpose?*

Loïck Roche and John Sadowsky (2005), in their article 'Providing a sense of deeper purpose: leadership best practice', maintain that true leaders enlarge the perspective of those around them. In a corporate setting, enlarging perspective involves infusing the workplace with meaning. They refer to Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline*, who suggests that communicating a story of purpose invites listeners to become part of something larger than themselves, showing them the possibility to make a difference in a bigger arena than they had perceived possible.

So we can see how current leadership thinkers are highlighting the power of individuals becoming clear about their purpose, and using it to guide them, as well as the benefits organisations can obtain by embracing and living up to a clear sense of purpose.

### Writing your own purpose statement

*"If we continually clarify our basic purpose, it becomes a magnet.*

*We are drawn toward the purpose and begin to pursue it'* Robert Quinn

A purpose statement defines where you want to go, what you want to do and how you would prefer to do it. It is a process of thinking that helps focus your mind and, in turn, your actions. Writing your purpose statement is a way to capture the essence of who you are and what your purpose is. The statement might help describe the kind of person you are, what motivates you, what is important to you and what guides your choices and behaviour.

When you are faced with a specific challenge or change in circumstances you can refer to your statement, read it carefully and even rewrite any part of it that needs to be rewritten. The statement is always evolving and when you finish re-reading it or amending it, you feel clearer about who you are.

Here are some useful questions you can ask yourself to help you reflect on your purpose:

- *Do I have an invigorating sense of purpose that ignites my passions?*
- *Do I have aspirations beyond living a high-quality and pleasurable life?*
- *If others were asked would they be able to identify my core values?*
- *Do I have a distinctive set of strengths that make me feel unique?*
- *Do I feel connected in a meaningful way with others around me?*
- *Do my aspirations and goals stretch me?*
- *If my current dreams were to come true would I feel that I had lived a worthwhile life?*

You can follow these steps to writing your purpose statement:

1. Think about the questions listed above, as well as your own leadership behaviours. What might be driving them? What values do you believe in? What motivates and energises you? What preferences do you have when it comes to activities and organisational relationships that you involve yourself in? What is your preferred style of leadership? Who inspires you? What does it take to change your thinking and actions?
2. Write a statement describing your personal purpose. It would normally be three or four paragraphs long, but write as much or as little as you feel is needed to accurately describe your purpose.

## A purpose statement

Here is a fictitious example of a purpose statement: it is not real but is based on our experience of what people tend to say:

My purpose is to have a positive impact on everyone I come into contact with every day (myself included). In all aspects of my life I enjoy connecting with others and helping them to grow and be the best they can be. This is driven by my core belief of seeing the possibility in people and the fundamental belief that this can be seized through continuous personal growth. I get insights from every conversation I have and I learn more from others than I learn from reading. I strive to be a model for others in my own personal growth, just as others have been role models and examples for me in my own development.

I have a strong work ethic and am driven to do what I commit to do and value this in others. I am very determined once I set my sights on a goal that means something to me. I am committed to creating an environment where people can be their most authentic selves. I have experienced the unbelievable outcomes for individuals and the business that become possible from this investment. I strive to maintain trust and integrity as the cornerstone of my leadership. When I see values or standards being pushed to one side it is important to me to stand up for what I believe is right – I hate injustice of any sort.

I like to find new ways of doing things and making connections between people and projects to simplify and align, to achieve a common purpose more rapidly and without duplication of resource or effort. I believe there is always more than one way to resolve issues and will always keep my mind open to alternatives.

My relationships with people in all areas of my life are immensely important to me and are a vital way for me to realise my goals. I value contact, openness and truth – I want to keep this present in all my relationships. I have learned the need to continually invest in relationships and to always be authentic, while also seeking to understand and not judge others.

3. Once you have written your statement, ask yourself whether it describes you well and how strongly you feel connected to it – and what it would take to strengthen that connection. This might cause you to change some words or add others. Think about how it explains your leadership behaviours and forms the foundation for you to create further breakthroughs in your leadership. Use it to assess your feelings of connection with the organisation's stated purpose, vision and strategy, and to help you strengthen this connection. Read it often, rewrite it where appropriate as a way to maintain a strong connection with it and to let your purpose guide you.

## Final thoughts

We should free up more of our time for self-exploration, to examine our experiences and reflect on whether we are being the person we want to be – and are we truly applying our own distinctive strengths and characteristics? We are often too busy trying to get things done or to prove ourselves – our drive and resilience can keep us going for a while but unless we invest the time there will always be something missing that we didn't explore enough.

Things like needs, values, preferences and motivations are less tangible and can be difficult to get a grip of. It's not easy and does take some personal courage and honesty to open ourselves up to doing this.

The best way to really test your true values, leadership principles or purpose is when you are under pressure to behave in a way that is not in alignment with them – that is when you get to find out where the line is beyond which you will not go.

Being clear about your purpose and embracing who you are gives you greater confidence in yourself and this becomes obvious to people around you, who can find this inspirational.

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Graham Graham Loudon-Carter is a visiting tutor and Executive Fellow at Henley Business School. He is a member of the core tutor team that supports the Leadership Programme. Before joining the Business School, Graham had a long career with Diageo PLC. He was a senior human resources executive and a member of business leadership teams in Europe, the USA and Latin America, and also spent periods of time in corporate organisation development and management development roles with a global remit. Graham is originally from South Africa, where he spent 10 years with the South African Breweries Ltd (later known as SABMiller) before moving to the UK in the late eighties.

Graham also runs his own independent coaching practice, which focuses on individual and leadership development, building on his many years of experience coaching senior leaders in the corporate environment. He has a BA Hons in Industrial & Organisational Psychology and is a Graduate Member (MBPsS) of the British Psychological Society (BPS).

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