

Living... On Purpose

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of working with Kevin Cashman, who is a Senior Partner at Korn Ferry International. Kevin is a passionate executive coach, teacher, and developer of senior leaders. We were privileged to have Kevin teaching a workshop to a group of Target senior leaders.

A passion of Kevin's is encouraging others to pause and reflect on one's purpose as a leader. The call to action is simple but profound: Get clear about your purpose so you do not confuse it with performance. Purpose should always drive performance. If you let performance become your purpose, the results are not sustainable and you (and your organization) become lost.

When executive coach and leadership practitioner Richard Leider first published his seminal book "The Power of Purpose" in 1985, it was a novel idea to have what you do for a living be something more than earning a paycheck. Since that time countless books, seminars, and articles have been written with in intention of helping people discover what their purpose is. While the topic is often discussed, finding one's purpose can still be elusive.

Purpose can be a heavy topic because it transcends work. Purpose tends to flow through one's entire life, so to discover it can be energizing and perhaps frightening at the same time. People often think of this as a calling or some sort of divine insight. However you look at it, I can tell you from personal experience that purpose is not something that comes up and bites you in the bottom and says "I'm here". Purpose can become fogged by life's distractions... so you must search for it with diligence.

Strengths and Purpose

In my own practice of career mentoring at Target I try to get people clear on three different areas:

1. **What are you good at?** What kinds of work can you do easily, resulting in great results efficiently?
2. **What gives you energy?** When are you in "flow"? What kinds of tasks immerse you so completely that you lose all sense of time? What types of work make you light up with enthusiasm when you describe them to others?
3. **What do you want to learn?** Reflecting on questions 1 and 2, how can you be more of who you already are through deliberate study, reflection and practice?

I'm a big believer in strengths-based development. I find that increasing alignment to what you do best also creates an increase in engagement, productivity, and overall life satisfaction. If you can get clear about what you're good at, the rewards at work naturally seem to follow. Misalignment often happens when we listen to voices that contradict what we know to be true about ourselves. Over time we can dull our inner voice with the voices from others (be it family, friends, or society at large).

According to Gallup's research, 7 out of 10 working Americans do not have this alignment. While there isn't a true dream job in the working world, a goal I share with my mentees is to have 50-70% of your day to day tasks align to strengths. The remaining percentage of work tends to be things no one wants to do... thus you need to do your fair share.

Several years ago I was struggling with my own purpose. Most people in my line of work reach a point in their career where financial progression dictates becoming a leader of people. If you opt not to take that route (as I did, for a variety of reasons) it's easy to wonder what is next. So often we view money as the only way to benchmark progress. Once you top out in whatever pay scale you have... larger questions seem to loom.

Wanting to practice what I preach, I looked at the timeline of my life to see if there were patterns I should be noticing. What I could see from grade school forward was that I loved learning and liked to share that learning with others. Even from a faith perspective I felt called to teach, although I wasn't always clear where I would teach and with whom. Feeling good about my calling, I embarked upon a journey to hone my "craft" as it were – facilitating and teaching.

Strengths are handy in the purpose journey in that they are signals. A collection of strengths may lead you to your purpose, but they are not a purpose in and of themselves. To quote Richard Leider, "The two most important days of your life are the day you were born, and the day you discover why you were born". To truly know why you were born is much deeper than getting clear about what you do well.

Real Purpose

And so it was that I was sitting in one of our meeting rooms at Target, listening to my friend Kevin Cashman talk about purpose and the importance of pausing to reflect on that purpose. I knew my gift was teaching, but it did not feel like a purpose. Back and forth in my mind I was trying to distinguish between a gift/talent vs. purpose. It was in that moment that I received a profound insight:

Your purpose is to instill a love of learning and self-development within others.

Can you feel the difference between my gift and my purpose? One feels more like a role that I play in life, perhaps how I might define myself to others. The other takes that gift and puts it into service of people. One is the product of gifts, interest, and energy that I possess. Purpose seeks to give those possessions away. My role is self-focused, my purpose is other's focused.

Purpose can take any job, no matter how long you've done it – and give it new meaning. Purpose intrinsically motivates people to get up in the morning. It has been said that our true life is ultimately found in the lives of others... and at the heart of this is purpose. And yet I have asked all kinds of people in their 20's to experienced executives in their 50's... and so very few of them are clear about their purpose. I hear a ton about discovery of passions, interests, and strengths – but not a clear purpose.

Here's my challenge to you: Somewhere in the vast collection of your treasure chest of strengths and gifts lies your purpose. The stumbling block tends to be an inward focus on what we want to do versus an outward focus on how that role can serve others. Some questions for you to ponder:

- How do I describe myself to others when I talk about my work?
- Am I clear on what I do well, what gives me energy, and what I want to learn?
- In what moments of my job have I received the most satisfaction?
 - What was the impact of my efforts on others in that moment?
 - What did it do for them?

Epilogue

So what happened after I received my insight on purpose? Did the clouds in the sky part and a unique beam of sunshine appear on my face? Did I quit my job at Target and proceed to create a fabulous non-profit “love of learning center” for all ages? Did the people at TED ask me to come and give a talk?

No.

Nothing actually happened in the moment, other than the desire to share the insight with all of you via this blog. Purpose may not necessarily change what you’re doing or even how you’re doing it. It will change your understanding of why you do what you do. This can be deeply affirming.

Purpose also gives you the freedom to change your context: A person’s role tends to be deeply entrenched in context. If your role is in finance, you tend to view your career as a finance person. If you are involved in technology, your outlook on future jobs tends to be in IT. Shift your thoughts to purpose and you can give your gifts away to anyone, anywhere. People who are clear on their purpose can shift industries with ease while the rest of us struggle with our ability to make such a massive change.

Here’s the other thing I’ve noticed about purpose: If what you do is directed towards others, you tend to worry less about how good/smart/competent you look. As a teacher I want to be viewed as one of the best. If I stumbled or made a mistake, I would beat myself up or feel ashamed. Purpose begs you to improve along with the people you are serving. You worry less about you and realize you’re on a journey of development with the folks your purpose is directed at. It’s at the heart of what my colleagues call a growth mindset vs. a fixed mindset. We stop trying to hide our mistakes and realize we’re just like everyone else... trying to get better at our gifts, in service of others.

And that realization may be the very best gift of all.