



Andy Rankin
Director
Creative Metier Ltd
a.rankin@creativemetier.com

Coaching For Meaning And Purpose

Executive summary

At a time of extreme change in financial markets, down turns in economic growth and prosperity, and threats to job security there is a new set of challenges for organisations in approaching employee engagement and performance. This paper explores the case for focusing on “meaning” and “purpose” in the workplace and in coaching these topics as a valid activity. Supporting the full employee self to be present, including making sense of their place in the world, is an essential step to influencing employee engagement. Global surveys are showing a strong link between levels of engagement and bottom line results. Coaching is a critical resource for organisations to utilise in this area.

The paper concludes that people who find meaning at work, especially in times of change, who are more “authentic” and aligned with their own values, can work out of a “different” place. They are more likely to make a conscious choice to contribute themselves fully to the challenges invested in the organisation at the time. They are more focused and resilient. They are more capable of navigating change and supporting those around them. With natural empathy they are good to be around and make better bosses, colleagues and employees.

The Search for Meaning and Purpose

Typically questions of meaning and purpose are seen as woolly, touchy feely and out of place in the hard edged world of organisations and performance. However, we don't have to look far in a wider social context to see that these questions are increasingly popular areas of interest and concern for individuals. This may well increase as the “credit crunch” takes hold, threats of recession, job losses and increasing prices dominate the news and impact daily living.

At the end of April 2008 a new book, “The Last Lecture” shot to the top of a New York Times bestseller list. On YouTube (1) close to two million people viewed the video of the lecture and associated responses over a short period. The book was co-written by Carnegie Mellon Professor Randy Pausch, who dying from pancreatic cancer, gave his last lecture at the university on 18th September 2007, before a packed auditorium. It is part of an ongoing series called “Journeys” where academics are invited to give a “last lecture” sharing life experiences.

In the following week the number two best seller, in its first week of sales, was a title “Just Who Will You Be”, by Maria Shriver. Shriver’s message is “What you do in your life isn’t what matters. It’s who you are”. Another best seller, first published in 2002, was Po Bronson’s “What should I do with my life?” (2). Following extensive interview research for the book he distils his experience of hundreds of interviews with people across the world. There are accounts of many different individuals working through different types of adversity and challenge to try to achieve a life of meaning and connectivity to a deeper purpose. Whilst these popular books were written before the global events of financial downturns and warnings of recession, I suggest that these are good examples of a general thirst people have for exploring meaning and making the most out of their personal life journey.

From an organisational point of view it is interesting to note that recent global surveys, such as Towers Perrin’s Global Workforce Study 2008 (3), show quite low levels of potential employee engagement. Results from Towers Perrin indicate that less than 1 in 5 employees declare themselves as fully engaged. Close to 4 out of 10 people are what is called disenchanted or disengaged. It would appear that time spent in our organisations is falling quite a way short of harnessing the full human spirit.

The research also shows strong financial correlations between levels of engagement and the bottom line. For example high engagement firms experience earnings per share growth rate of 28% compared to an 11.2% decline for low engagement firms. The Global Report concludes that one disturbing fact emerges: The global workforce is not engaged — at least not to the extent that employers need their employees to be in order to drive results. In other words organisations would do well to pay attention.

So here we have a number of bestselling books over time on topics related to meaning and life purpose. There is the significant interest in a YouTube activity such as the “Last Lecture”. There is global research stating that all is not as good as it could be in organisational life where human motivation is concerned. I believe the environment gives us some pretty strong hints of the type of dimensions that may have some influence on human participation in organisations. These are dimensions beyond current models of pay and reward, competency development, performance management and associated coaching practice. It may help to explain why only a small per cent are fully engaged and why so many fall into the disenchanted end of the spectrum. People are just not finding the broader meaning they want and need from their work experience.

What is the organisational context for “finding meaning” at work?

Penna, the human capital management consultancy, has published some research (3) exploring this topic. Unsurprisingly they report that their extensive literature search reveals no universally accepted definition of “meaning at work”. However, they do pull together some results to consider at individual, organisation and society levels:

Individual

- A sense of “self” – and the space to be myself
- Balance between my work and non-work life
- Harmony between my personal values and those of my organisation

Organisational

- A sense of community at work – the opportunity to feel part of something bigger than myself
- The opportunity to interact with others
- The opportunity to contribute to the organisation’s success
- A manager or leader who creates meaning for me

Society

- An opportunity to contribute to society
- Working for an organisation with a strong sense of corporate responsibility

These themes show that the experience of meaning in a working life is, as we would expect, more than a wage or salary, more than performing well and more than getting a product or service into the market place.

In our coaching and group work at Creative Metier we often ask people about those times when they have felt most alive or “in flow” at work. What are the factors that contribute to those feelings? Here are typical responses that support the Penna findings:

- Working to a common purpose
- Being part of a winning team
- Feeling recognised
- Feeling appreciated
- Feeling part of something bigger
- Given responsibility
- Allowed to be myself
- Listened to

In November 2007 members of our team attended a Meg Wheatley seminar, “Finding our way – leadership for an uncertain time”, at the Centre for Leadership Studies at Exeter University. She asked the audience what they felt were the key factors of effective leadership that they had experienced first hand. A very similar list to the above emerged and she stated that this is her experience wherever she asks this question across the globe.

These recognisable themes are gems of human experience. Undoubtedly employees respond well when they are in place. This gives the coaching profession a very clear arena to work in fruitfully.

Meaning and Spirituality

Is there a case to state that there is something “spiritual” in this universality or do these experiences only belong in the field of human potential, which HR has translated into topics such as employee engagement, values management, talent management etc? Should the word “spiritual” only sit with the experts who reside in the homes of religious faiths? Danah Zohar, who has coined the term Spiritual Capital (5), goes out of her way to state that her use of the term “spiritual” does not mean an association with a particular religion or set of beliefs. Spiritual is thus positioned as a universal human principle about meaning, purpose and values.

The successful BBC television “Monastery” series in 2005 followed the experience of a group of men on a retreat at Worth Abbey (6) in the south of England. The quest to find meaning in life surfaced regularly in the programmes. The religious setting and activity of the retreat in the Benedictine Abbey meant that the spiritual context of meaning was squarely in the frame of these men’s search. In

contrast development activity, articles or research in an HR or organisational context may well fight shy of a spiritual context or indeed the word spiritual.

At the European Mentoring and Coaching Council conference at Ashridge Business School in March 2008 I attended a session exploring the importance of “spiritual intelligence” in potential coaching scenarios. What was most memorable for me, and it stills lingers many months later in fact, was a collective murmur of agreement in the room when a participant suggested in the plenary discussion that what we deeply seek as human beings is a “life well lived”. This simple phrase clearly resonated with the 50 or so people in the room.

In our own coaching practice at Creative Metier, we specialise in working with people to explore their long term future direction. We provide a deep reflection space for people to step back to consider simple but profound questions of what it is they really want to do with the rest of their lives. It also creates an opportunity to explore what is fundamentally important to them and to clarify deep personal values, vision and purpose.

We are often asked whether this approach fits in an organisational context. Surely people will choose to leave if given the time to deeply reflect on their situation? In our experience more people choose to stay and build from their current situation than to immediately throw things up, leave their organisation and change direction. There is a good chance that people have more or less found the right career area, and the right employer, and simple adjustments can often make a significant difference to the quality of their working life.

What has surprised us in our work is that in providing a listening space for people to deeply reflect on what is important to them, a spiritual dimension often shows up in the thinking process. It is not always connected to a recognised religion or movement but it is certainly a distinct category that merits a mention here.

Benefits to exploring meaning and purpose

What might the benefits be of tapping into the full “employee self”, where individuals discover not just their strengths and weaknesses, their personality traits, MBTI type etc. but also their deepest aspirations and search for meaning? I have the following suggestions. Where there is an alignment with their personal values and a deep sense of their own authenticity then individuals work out of a “different” place. They are more likely to make a conscious choice to contribute themselves fully to the challenges invested in the organisation at the time. They are more focused, resilient and able to personally navigate change and the challenges of life. Being “in tune” with themselves they have more natural empathy and rapport with colleagues, team members and bosses - they are good to be around particularly at times of change. Also a deeper self knowledge and confidence allows people to know when there is not a “good fit” in a given situation. They are better able to articulate what is not right which can lead to dialogue and exploration of what can be done to improve outcomes.

There is a challenge for coaches, under pressure to be seen as “business focused”, to not fight shy of the topics of meaning and purpose. There may prove to be a profound link with engagement and the management of change. During the summer of 2008 The Association for Coaching sent out a survey to explore the state of Meaning and Purpose in coaching. This perhaps indicates a growing awareness in coaching circles that here is an area of opportunity to explore and dare I say exploit.

References

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