



VISION AND PURPOSE

With a “why” for what we do we can deal with almost any “how”.

Victor Frankl, the author of the book *Man’s Search For Meaning* first came to this realisation as an inmate of Auschwitz during World War II. Frankl was incarcerated at the beginning of the war. He was 25 years old. He was also a psychiatrist and a Jew. Frankl made a decision early in his incarceration that he would survive the experience and he would use his skills as a doctor to help as many other people survive as was humanly possible. Frankl survived the war.

Frankl makes the comment in *Man’s Search For Meaning* that we would all (quite reasonably) have believed that the young, or the fit, would be the best survivors under such extreme conditions – physical abuse, starvation, fear, illness and brutal death in abundance. And that, in part, would have been right – for a day, a week or, in fact, at best a month. Then, something else came into play. The penny did not drop for Frankl until 26 December 1944.

Through the second half of 1944, rumours were rife throughout the camps that the Allies would release inmates by Christmas 1944. In the second half of the year, with this sense of the possible in their hearts and minds, some 70% of inmates “chose” not to die. How did Frankl know? - because the death rate dropped by 70%. The conditions did not change. In fact, some would say they became worse. None-the-less, the death rate plummeted – that is until 26 December.

Despite rumours to the contrary, when 26 December came around, the Allies had not, in fact, released the inmates of the concentration camps. It was then that Frankl realised the power of purpose and vision. With the prospect of release no longer real in their hearts, adversity overwhelmed already desperate people and they began to die. According to Frankl, the death rate rose by some 70%. Without a “why” for what they were experiencing, something yet to be done in their lives, people gave up.

This is the territory of vision, the power of purpose, the sense of hope and anticipation for a future yet to be, that pulls us through the present, empowering us to make choices that enhance the possibility of this future materialising. Frankl’s story of Auschwitz is a terrible and compelling example of the power of this capacity in human beings.

Personal Purpose

In our lives today, having a sense of purpose, a vision, something towards which we are aiming, which we aspire to, is a critically important part of our “wellness”. It is also the breeding ground of a fair degree of anxiety. Some people seem to be consumed with passionate purpose, appear to know exactly what they were placed on the planet to do. They have been pursuing it with vigorous determination throughout their lives.

Unfortunately, many of us don’t feel this is true for us. We sort of have a sense of purpose but we are not necessarily convinced it is “the one” or as meaningful as we would like it to be.



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Sometimes we feel we are at a competitive disadvantage. The person next to us has a sense of purpose, a vision or goal they are striving hard to achieve. For some reason, we are not so directed.

Before moving on, then, to look at the match to organisational vision, or, indeed, the keys to effective envisioning, let's just take a very brief look at how purpose emerges from our life's experiences. It is actually far simpler than most people imagine. What it isn't, is an immaculate conception, a midnight imagining such that we wake up in the morning and go "Bingo – got it! Now I know what I want to do with the rest of my life".

Evidence would suggest that real purpose - what, why, when, where and how we will do something - emerges from four distinct processes. Each of these four processes cycles on a continuous basis, constantly refining and improving our sense of purpose – from cloudy to clear. The four stages are as follows:

(Adapted from *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants* by Roger Von Oech.)

Exploration

A period of research and data gathering, of tasting and trying, of pushing and shoving our world. During exploration we are building knowledge and gaining a sense of preference - what we like as opposed to what we don't like.

Artistry

A period of shaping and refining. This comes from a period of exploration during which we have built a sense of what we might prefer to do – in life, at work, in the community, in our backyard! As our sense of what we might prefer to do builds, the artist in us then begins to shape our preliminary idea. Moulding, pushing, crafting a "sense of possibility" into a concrete idea.

Judgement

Following this period of creating or innovating, we put on our judging capacity. This is the skill (in all of us) that allows us to test our assumptions, to affirm or challenge the appropriateness of what it is we are wishing to do. The judge "advises" the artist in us – determines where an idea needs further refinement, what the wins and losses might be based on what is presented.

The challenge with our internal judge is rarely its effectiveness. Most of us have a potent internal judge who, for many people, more often than not, diminishes their sense of what is possible in their lives rather than enhances it. In this process, the power of the judge is determined by the appropriateness of his or her timing, ie. the judge must not come on board (overly) during a period of exploration, if the judge does come alive when we are creating, it represents the death knoll to a period of innovation, to the mindset of the artist.

The judge is, however, that part of our thinking, which ensures all contingencies have been thought of, preferably before the situation, is a fait accompli.



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Warriorhood

The warrior is that part of us that becomes consumed with passionate purpose, goes out and willingly fights for what we believe in. The warrior looks for ways to make things happen, to ensure dreams and ambitions are fulfilled. The warrior inside us is well prepared for adversity (both physical and spiritual) and welcomes the battle, knowing that in the trial, real strength is measured.

These four stages are never fixed, and the beauty of this relatively simplistic model is that it acts as a compass when we look at where we are in our lives and the strength of our personal purpose or vision. Generally speaking, if you find that you are little persuaded to vigorously pursue a specific purpose, chances are that you are not convinced it is the right thing to do. So go back to the judge and give the judge another airing. The judge will reveal, if you are listening well, what it is the artist needs to reconsider. And finally, if the artist in you is having trouble determining a valid, real, exciting sense of purpose that you genuinely believe in, chances are, you have not done enough exploration. Go back to basics and play again in the universe – taste, try, look, listen and experiment.

It is also worth remembering that even when you are sure of your purpose, each of these stages is constantly being recycled but at an ever-increasing level of refinement. It is an upward spiral dynamic that, with clarity and commitment, absolutely delivers what you want, perhaps not exactly when you want it, but eventually!

In the world of work, finding a purpose or sense of vision can still follow the same cycle. If, as you come to consider what your personal purpose is, you are unclear, chances are you need to give yourself permission to 'play' with your work life. This should not be underestimated in adults. Most of us feel compelled to take life seriously and to put our heads down and commit to the path on which we find ourselves. If we are on the "right" path (ie. it suits us) then fine and good. But if we are unhappy or dissatisfied, it can be devastating, slowly corroding our sense of self and of our own possibilities.

To play then, seems an extraordinary answer but it is vitally important. It can mean many things to many people, but consider that it may mean the rebirth of curiosity, the generation of a sense of inquisitiveness. It may be a request to be given variety and choice in the work we do, flexibility and abundant opportunity to test ourselves and to learn. This is a key consideration as we look at where we are with our personal vision, both in life generally and, perhaps of more relevance in this day and age, in our work life.

To help you make some distinctions, consider some of the following questions:

- What do I passionately love doing?
- What do I love doing passionately?
- What really excites me in life?
- What do I find boring, tiresome, tedious?



- What have I done in my life that has given me a sense of achievement?
- What have I done in my life that has left me feeling that my time was wasted?
- What do I love about being with people?
- What do I love about being on my own?
- What in my day-to-day environment gives me energy?
- What in my day-to-day environment robs me of energy?
- What are my preferences for gathering information? Do I prefer the detail around me, paying attention to what I learn through my senses or do I prefer the world of concepts, of ideas?
- What are my preferences for making decisions? Do I prefer to think things through, work them out logically, or do I prefer to make decisions based on what's important to me and to others?
- If I could wave a magic wand and do or be anything in the world today, what would I do or be?
- What do I think is possible in my life?
- What do I think is impossible?
- What in my working life do I absolutely love to do?
- What in my working life do I absolutely hate to do?
- What in my working life would I love to be doing five years from now?
- What in my working life would I hate to be doing five years from now?

These questions are by no means definitive, but they will help you sort what it is in your life (both private and professional) that really counts, that you value. Your answers act as light beacons in the night. Don't discount them.

Vision and purpose emerge from an honest sense of what it is that you as a human being are able to honestly tell yourself (and powerfully others) that you want. Dream a thousand dreams, because if one comes to life, it will be more valuable than never to have dreamt at all.

Organisational purpose

If our personal sense of purpose or vision matches the organisation within which we work, then it becomes the place of true empowerment. Collins & Porras, in their now famous book *Built to Last* studied a range of the world's most successful organisations, success being determined



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by longevity as well as profitability. Their original theory was that powerful and charismatic leadership sat behind the success of every organisation, and particularly those companies that were “built to last”.

Their findings were to provide a very different scenario for sustainable success.

The compelling “sell” in the work of Collins & Porras is not that they studied and found an emergent pattern between highly successful companies alone. Their chosen point of comparison profoundly reinforced their findings. They did not compare the best to the worst – they compared the best to the nearly best. The differences were specific and far-reaching.

In essence, their findings were quite simple. Firstly, “built to last” organisations had a clearly articulated and commonly owned “core ideology”. This core ideology comprised of a fundamental purpose that could not, in all reality, ever be completed, and a clear and well-recognised set of organisational values. This core purpose and the values that sustained it were, according to Collins & Porras, known by all staff, were adhered to by all leaders and were used to benchmark things as diverse as recruitment policies, staff employment conditions, marketing messages and long range business plans. The core ideology was founded on the importance of controlling and preserving the core – what the business “had yet to do” and what it stood for, its values.

The second critical element that the authors uncovered was an entrenched philosophy that sought to achieve operational autonomy with a focus on stimulating progress. This second component comprised of “visionary ambitions” or, in the language of *Built to Last*, Big Hairy Audacious Goals or BHAGS. These visionary goals were set by all of the *Built to Last* companies. They focused on ambitions that would stretch the organisational capacity, give people a sense of excitement, be a little more than most thought the business could achieve and would, on a continuous basis, move the organisation towards the achievement of core purpose.

These companies recognised that in order to find one thing that would substantially move the company forward they would need to try many things. They encouraged a sense of fearlessness around pursuing new and innovative ideas, providing they supported the core purpose and sustained the values that were part of the core ideology.

In another watershed publication, *The Living Organisation* by Arie de Gues, the author reviewed the experience of the Shell Scenario planners who identified a very similar set of capacities. This group of people (and many of their subsequent successors) was responsible for postulating a whole range of possible scenarios for the Shell Group of Companies and then for analysing the various factors that would or wouldn’t make such scenarios possible.

In the course of their research, they uncovered a very small number of organisations (40 in all) who had existed for as long as, or longer than, Shell, i.e. 100 years or more.

They came across such companies as the Swedish Stora which today is a major paper, pulp and chemical manufacturer. Research revealed that it had had the character of a publicly



owned company from its very early beginnings, more than 700 years ago, as a copper mine in central Sweden. They also looked at the Sumitomo Group, which had its origins as a copper casting shop founded by Riemon Soga in the year 1590.

The conclusion of the scenario planners was that the evidence was sufficient to suggest that the 'natural lifespan' of an organisation could be as long as two or three centuries. Consider the life span of an organisation today. A company is considered successful if it sees out 50 years or so.

Over time, reflecting back on such research, de Gues came to the conclusion that there were four key components to longevity. They included:

- ❑ Sensitivity to the environment (which) represents a company's ability to learn and adapt
- ❑ Cohesion and identity (which represent) aspects of a company's innate ability to build a community and persona for itself
- ❑ Tolerance and its corollary decentralisation (which represent) symptoms of a company's awareness of ecology; its ability to build constructive relationships with other entities, within and outside itself
- ❑ Conservative financing (which represent) the ability to govern its own growth and evolution (by controlling the source of its own capital).

Again, independent research identified the power of internal cohesion and a clear sense of identity (Collins & Porras's core ideology) as distinguishing capabilities of sustainable organisations.

Conclusion

Visions, both personal and organisational, are critical to the wellness of individuals, organisations, communities and nations. With a positive sense of the future, we become engaged in the act of creation. We enjoy a sense of personal "belonging", knowing, to greater or lesser extents, that our actions contribute to something more than we alone could achieve.

Without a personal or organisational vision that we feel ownership over, are motivated by and have a sense of our power to contribute towards, the daily task of living can become an overwhelming, sometimes painful and often banal, mountain of largely meaningless trivia.

With a vision, and action to support it, we can change the world.