



# THE PRAGMATICS OF PURPOSE

## WHAT IS PURPOSE?

Purpose, both for the individual, the team, the organisation, the community and the country describes the 'why' for what we do. As the famous philosopher Nietzsche is attributed with saying, "When mankind has a 'why' for what he does, he can deal with any 'how'".

Being clear on and aligned to a shared purpose makes life together significantly easier. We don't always have to like each other, or even agree on actions or decisions; however, providing we share purpose and are unambiguous on why we are doing what we are doing, we are able to tolerate difference and work with it.

At its best, shared purpose is inspiring and clarifying. It satisfies and addresses the need to have a reasonably predictable frame for the future. Anxiety, rooted in the parietal lobe of the brain, is significantly amplified when we are unsure about what lies ahead, either in terms of an agreed outcome, or in fact, embodied in the overt intentions of a significant other (parent, teacher, partner, leader and/or team mates).

When we know why we are doing something, from the simplest to the most complex task, we are able to offer the best of who we are. We can think and contribute without spending too much time on predicting where it might take us. When that why is shared by important others (parents, teachers, partners, leaders and/or team mates), and when we understand how the choices we and others make today aggregate to our shared future, we are more effective; we make better decisions, are more accountable, can be more innovative, and can, in situations which set up competing priorities, know how to choose wisely without being instructed.

The brain has been described as a 'self organising system'. That means the human brain is designed to organise itself without specific or linear instructions. This enables us to learn, grow and contribute in a somewhat organic way, without the continuous presence of expert guidance or detailed written plan. It doesn't mean that a plan isn't valuable. It simply means that the brain can operate effectively without one but is fractured and anxious without a sense of purpose.

Human beings can and do think about their own thinking (it's called 'theory of mind'). Some suggest its evolutionary advantage emerged when we needed to operate cooperatively. We discovered that without long sharp nails or teeth, our growing brains had to learn to think first how we felt ourselves, and then how others might feel/think and to predict what might help us to work together. Shared intent made such thinking useful and significantly increased our chances of survival. In the absence of a shared intention or purpose, we were doomed (and are still doomed) to be highly tactical or transactional.

Today, mired in a purposeless environment, we become either opportunistic, grabbing what seems the best choice in the moment to serve an immediate outcome and/or we become compliant. In a compliant state we need instructions, to be told what to do. We follow, with little thought, not leading ourselves or others effectively. This is as true for teams and organisations as it is for the individuals and families.



Purpose, therefore, is a powerful coalescing force that helps guide our actions towards the future. Done well, our actions add to one another. We move with certainty forward, not into multiple confusing or competing futures, but into a clear and agreed future.

Whether or not the purpose is the 'right' purpose, is not the issue here. It is the power of a shared 'why' that matters, enabling us to prioritise tasks so ensuring we are investing time and energy into the 'right' areas, which build over time to deliver our shared ambitions.

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When purpose then is clear, when we have agreed on the ‘why’ for what we do (in teams, families or businesses), the key to success becomes a process issue. Aligning to purpose is not about adding actions to our daily commitments, having ‘purpose’ specific discussions or asking ourselves endlessly how can I aid or how can we aid our agreed purpose; it is more a guiding mindset and an all pervading sense of how to make good choices.

### 1. A GUIDING COALITION

Whilst purpose can be clear in the minds of individuals and in teams, it benefits from a coterie of people who obsess about its power to draw us into a unique or special future. It is estimated that only 10% of the population are true ‘visionaries’, able to envision a future path as if it were real. Once articulated, it isn’t rocket science to recognise the impact of real advocates for purpose. They should:

- Own the purpose as their own
- Be clear about the benefits of success
- Be able to describe the purpose endlessly to large and small audiences, with passion and in simple, engaging language to ensure broad understanding and clarity
- Recognise and be committed to successful execution of tasks, who’s individual value may not be immediately apparent but which aggregate over time to move everyone forward towards the purpose
- Not sit in judgement; they will find a way over, under or around any obstacle without rancour, retaining a sense of hope and optimism towards the future

The guiding coalition does not have to be (although it is significantly enhanced if it is supported/represented on and by) the Executive or most senior leaders/individuals; but it does have to be people with the freedom to act and fight for what they see clearly as the agreed path forward.

### 2. STRATEGY IS LINKED

The purpose is threaded through the strategy. The strategy is tested by questions such as:

- Do the visionary goals (5 – 10 years out) clearly contribute to achieving our purpose?
- Is the linking simple, clear and concise?
- Are the measurements at each level of strategy clearly linked?
- Can we finally say, at the level of individual performance:
  - We know our purpose?
  - We are clear on our visionary goals (a stretch on where we are today but clear and agreed to)?
  - Does the strategy articulate how we move from the future back to the present (with a broad range of measurements, for example, balanced scorecard)?
  - Do business and operational plans show the links to strategy, which in turn deliver on the visionary goals, which in turn continue to enhance the purpose?
  - Can the individual say, with hand on heart, I have a clear line of sight to the purpose, I know and value and the part I play, I have clear and aligned contributions to make and know and understand the measurements I will use to ensure my success to this end goal?

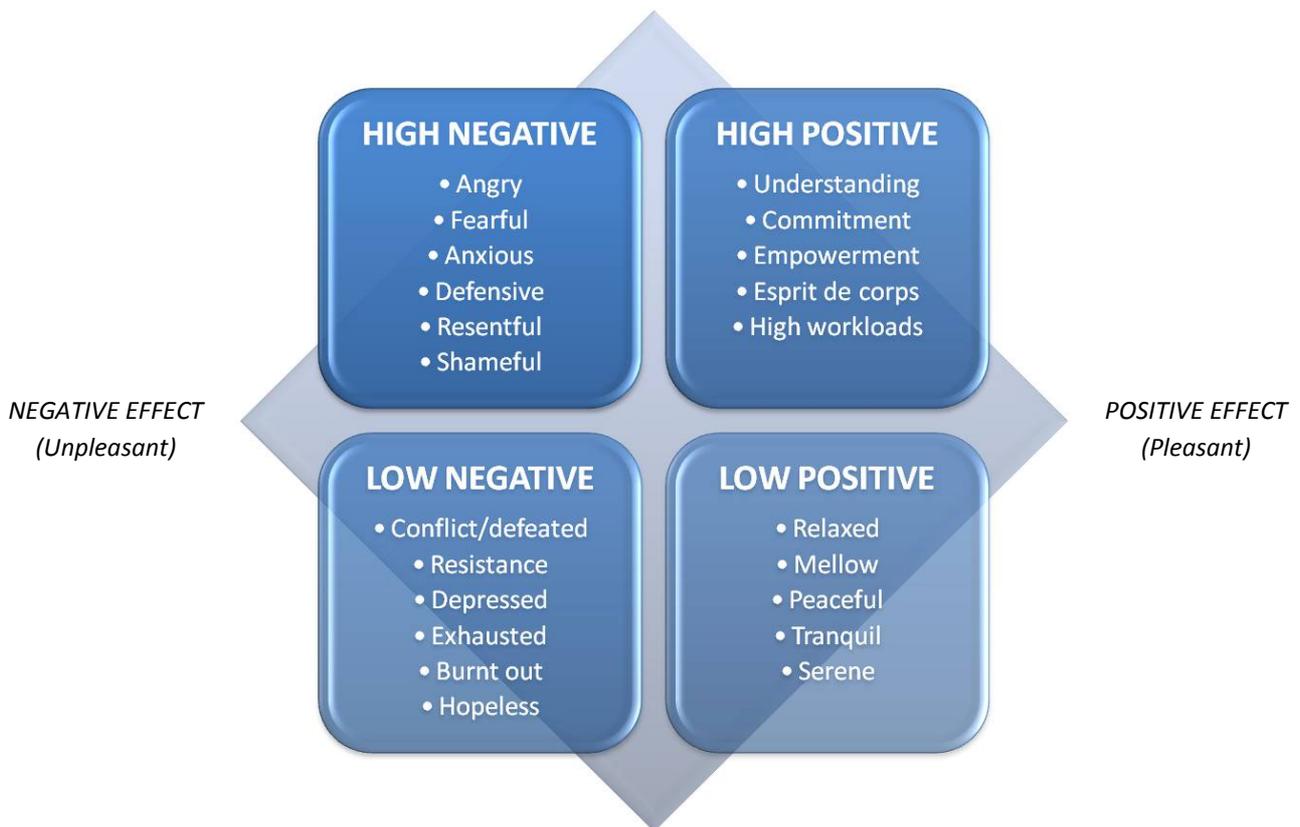
### 3. THE QUALITY OF YOUR COMMUNICATION IS THE RESPONSE YOU GET

Engagement is measured regularly to the purpose, values and plan. Leaders know how to ensure people are clear (tested at the front line, not in senior ranks), and hold themselves responsible for this.

We know how people feel formally (research) and by proximity and day by day feedback.

*(Engagement Model: Loehr & Schwartz, The Power of Full Engagement, Allen & Unwin 2003)*

## INTENSITY/ENERGY



It's not difficult to pick how effectively we are communicating, clarifying and guiding people on the purpose journey.

#### 4. LEADERS COMMUNICATING THEIR INVOLVEMENT WITH ENGAGEMENT

There is a lot of emphasis today on leadership education. The net benefit of leadership education is that there is an improving level of engagement in the business or group. Leaders are having a positive impact on climate. If organisations are investing in a heightened level of alignment to purpose, it is important, then that:

- There is a clear and compelling reason to do so (as opposed to where we have come from)
- The current/aspirational culture is 'blueprinted', written up, shared and engaged with
- There is a process and/or series of events to begin the purpose engagement journey
- Rewards and recognition are linked to engagement
- Recognise the downside of not connecting to purpose (both commercially, in teams and individually)
- Provide appropriate resources to ensure the journey delivers the promise (that is, there is an appropriate investment in time and facilitation as appropriate to align people)
- Recognise the power of repetition (both message and process), that is, you say what needs to be said as often as required and in as many forms as possible until what is fed back is the same
- Leaders are visible in their support of purpose, not just in public forums, but in the ordinary day to day activities of their people (visibility is crucial, as is personal engagement to purpose)

#### 5. LEADERS COMMUNICATING THEIR EXPECTATIONS (THAT IS, WHAT THEY BELIEVE IS THE 'IDEAL' OF ENGAGEMENT TO PURPOSE)

Leaders need to think through not only why engagement to purpose is so crucial, but what engagement looks like. That includes:

- Being clear (and saying as much), about what change to a more purposeful organisation looks like
- Explaining what is tolerable/intolerable behaviour in the purpose filled context (that is, rules)
- Identifying ideal standards for decision making, resource allocation, managing competing priorities, etc, using purpose as a yard stick
- Identifying what is expected of people and at what levels
- Identifying and resourcing purpose processes appropriately
- Managing the planning process so individual performance agreements link, including regular performance reviews of which a review of an individual's contribution to purpose is integral
- Staying open to feedback in terms of what's working/not working (that is, not dismissing feedback on engagement)

## 6. HOW STAFF AND LEADERS ALIKE USE PURPOSE AT ITS SIMPLEST

Purpose can be embedded in new initiatives at all levels of an organization; however, that is not where its power lies. Purpose implementation is most powerful in the prosaic; the ordinary day to day actions of individuals and teams. Questions to help stay or improve focus include:

- Are all members of the team/s able to describe the purpose of the organisation in their own words so
  - (a) it is meaningful to them individually, and
  - (b) it is basically consistent intention?
- In what contexts does the team currently talk about purpose?
- In what ways can the team enhance the purpose dialogue as a means to stay connected, be more insightful?
- Are actions and critical choice points measured against purpose (that is, how do these enhance our purpose)?
- When people or teams are overloaded, is purpose used to sort priorities (that is, if we have limited time, which actions will deliver best purpose (short, medium and long term))?
- Are tasks and their progress framed by purpose, measured in alignment with the key performance indicators apparent in strategy, business and operational plans (that is, avoiding busyness versus linked business)?
- How is time managed (there is never any more or less time); do people think about doing what's important as much as what is pressing?
- Do people have responsibility to push back on tasks when they feel they are not purpose linked (that is, seem opportunistic or transactional)?
- How are decisions managed (hierarchy or purpose based)?

## 7. CONFLICT – MANAGING THIS IN A PURPOSE FILLED SPACE

Many of our disagreements are 'data' based (my data over your data) or what's referred to as raw or skilled debate. We defend our data, our position because we **need** to do so to manage our own need for control, or to contain our own anxiety about an unclear future, to be seen to compete (and win), to control standards, to be seen to maintain or improve our status, to avoid responsibility, to comply with the way things are done because we are afraid of taking responsibility, etc.

In a purpose filled space, we move to a suite of behaviours that enhance both individual and collective experiences. We are more inclined to focus on shared and individual achievements (to standards that are 'doable'), we take responsibility for our actions, we encourage others to do the same, and believe in their potential, and we put a high value around relationships.

Purpose is the coalescing force in this context:

- Purpose is stated up front in conflict; it overrides individual or team territoriality
- All are called to their 'higher selves', to their power to contribute to a shared purpose that is bigger than the individual's conflict
- People have space to state their case cleanly/clearly

- A high value is placed on listening skills (not to the data but to what lies beneath), and individuals are encouraged to learn rather than to debate (content may be the same but the intention is different; not to win but to create)
- Resolution is to aid the purpose rather than to prove a point or to 'win'

## 8. CAPTURING THE 'WINS' - WHAT'S WORKING TO AID PURPOSE

Individuals, teams and leaders are encouraged to capture successes daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual purpose wins (that is, using purpose to manage decisions, allocation of resources, setting priorities, managing conflict), identify how purpose was used and the benefits to individuals and to teams. The business benefits are clarified.

Wins are captured by:

- Leaders setting their expectations for using organisational purpose and so measuring its contribution from the strategic setting to personal performance agreements
- Individuals and teams seeking to capture the benefit of using purpose (and celebrating in existing team processes), weekly, monthly (frequency is important)
- Reporting in normal business communication tools (that is, newsletters, communiqués from the Executive, reports, etc), and again frequency is important
- Short term wins which are crucial, as are small contributions
- Value being placed on relevant symbols (in teams and for the organisation); posters, individual or team objects, areas in the company 'home' dedicated to celebrating purpose
- Demonstrating the commercial/business wins that result from engagement; it is early days in terms of getting the measurements right, but leaders and teams should actively experiment with purpose based measurements

## 9. CREATE A LEARNING CULTURE

It may seem to be stating the obvious, but a purpose journey is not black and white. It is crucial to support the learning of individuals, teams and indeed, the business. Purpose should frame what's working/not working in a safe and respectful way.

*If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing wrong as often as is required to eventually get it right.*

- Place a high value on regular (for example, quarterly) evaluation, both qualitative and quantitative
- Ensure evaluation of purpose and purpose related activities is central
- In planning cycles, expect a learning phase, where expectations, time and competency temporarily mismatch as leaders and staff alike learn (*The Belly of the Dragon*)
- Ensure the learning is an embedded part of the organisational culture

*AND OVERARCHING IT ALL IS THE CONSISTENT, TIMELY AND OVERT LINKING OF PURPOSE AND PURPOSE BASED ACTIONS TO THE VALUES AND BEHAVIOURS OF THE ORGANISATION.*

Purpose and values go hand in hand. Purpose describes ‘why’ we do what we do and values/behaviours describe ‘what is important to us in the way we behave together’ as we pursue the purpose.

If either purpose or values are compromised then the outcomes are lessened for everyone.