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**Meaning & Passion**

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# THREE

## Meaning & Passion

*A Life Worth Living*

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*Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is unique as his specific opportunity to implement it.*

—VIKTOR FRANKL

What if you had never been born?

The classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life* tells the story of George Bailey (James Stewart). George grew up in the small town of Bedford Falls, where his father and uncle had founded a building and loan—a business his father hoped George would someday run. George's vision for his life, however, went far beyond the borders of his hometown. He dreamed of traveling the world, going to college, becoming rich, and building airfields, skyscrapers, and bridges. George could not imagine, under any circumstance, that he would remain in the community where he had grown up. "If I don't get away, I will bust," he once exclaimed. In his mind, Bedford Falls was a crummy little town—no place for anyone who wanted to do anything of significance.

However, not everything turned out as George had planned. Through a series of unfortunate and ill-timed events, his dreams never materialized. On the very day he was packing to travel abroad and then go to college, his father died. Without his father's leadership, the building and loan was sure to be acquired by its competitor, so George postponed his departure. On his wedding day, when George and his bride, Mary (Donna Reed), were leaving town for their honeymoon, there was a run on the building and loan. A large number of depositors wanted to cash out their accounts, but there wasn't enough in reserve. With no other resources, the newlyweds gave the money they had planned to use for their honeymoon to cover the shortfall.

At every turn, George's attempts to pursue his dreams were frustrated. He was hopelessly tied to a small town, with no plausible exit strategy.

One snowy Christmas Eve, an \$8,000 deposit was lost, and George's world completely fell apart. He feared he would be accused of embezzlement, the building and loan would fail, and he would go to jail. What he had spent his entire adult life working to preserve would be erased in an instant. This event precipitated a crisis from which he saw no means of escape. Believing he had completely wasted his life, he ran onto a bridge spanning an icy river, intending to jump.

Hearing about the lost deposit and George's desperate situation, his family and friends began to pray. Those who had been helped over the years by his sacrifice and kindness were asking God to intervene. They prayed because, although he never travelled, went to college, or built skyscrapers, George had touched many lives. When his younger brother was nine, he had fallen into an icy pond and George jumped in, saving his life. As a child, George worked in a drugstore. One day, the druggist inadvertently filled some capsules with poison. George discovered the error and refused to deliver them. He had also influenced the lives of scores of individuals through the building and loan, often lending money to lower middle-class working families, enabling them to buy their own homes. His life had made a significant difference in the lives of many, and now those he had influenced were praying on his behalf.

In response, God sent an angel, Clarence (Henry Travers), to intervene. Clarence arrived just in time to save George and hear

him exclaim in anguish, “I wish I had never been born.” In an effort to help him see the value in his life, Clarence showed George what life in Bedford Falls would have been like if, indeed, he had never existed. Without George, his brother died because no one was there to jump into the pond and save him. The druggist spent time in prison for poisoning a child. None of the homes or businesses funded by the building and loan were built. George’s life and his many acts of kindness had a profound impact on others, prompting Clarence to observe, “Strange isn’t it? Each man’s life touches so many other lives, when he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?”

After seeing the meaningful impact he had had on others, George experienced a change of heart. He began begging for his life back. Hearing his plea, God returned everything back to the way it had been, and, overjoyed, George immediately ran home to see his family. He arrived to find the police waiting to arrest him for misappropriating funds, but just as they were issuing a warrant for his arrest, his wife arrived with many of George’s friends. In addition to praying for him, they were gathering donations to replace the \$8,000 that had been lost. Though not individually wealthy, these friends and family members donated what they could and easily paid the debt.

George Bailey lived a meaningful life—one that made a very real difference. And in fact, his story is an inspiring reminder of our own value. Each of us is born with a life worth living—a calling that, if unheeded, will leave a hole no one else can fill.

## **The Intersection of Meaning and Passion**

As illustrated by the fictional George Bailey, everyone has something to offer. The success of any group is dependent upon each person making a contribution. Only by inspiring grit in individuals at every level is it possible for an organization to reach its full potential.

In this chapter, I propose that the kind of wholehearted, persistent investment that results in high-level success is found at the intersection of meaning and passion. Long-term commitment that brings out the

very best in us is motivated by what we value (meaning) and what we love (passion).



Amy Wrzesniewski, a faculty member at the Yale School of Management and an expert in finding meaning in our employment, suggests that we can view work from three perspectives—as a job, career, or calling:

- ◆ Individuals who approach what they do as a job think of work primarily as a means for earning income. Work is a simple work-for-pay transaction. The employee puts in the time and the employer signs the paychecks.
- ◆ Work can also be viewed as a career. From this perspective, the current job is viewed as a stepping-stone to the next. The goal is to climb the corporate ladder and to one day have a desk in the corner office.
- ◆ Some consider their employment a calling. They are passionate about what they do and find it meaningful. It's part of their self-esteem and identity.

Wrzesniewski proposes that “a calling is assumed to be unique to the person, comprising activities individuals believe they must do to fulfill their unique purpose in life, and offers a path to connect with one’s true self.” Individuals who desire to fulfill their calling focus on making a contribution to others and serving a greater good. Their primary motivation is the pursuit of an important value rather than a paycheck or the next position on the org chart.

Employees who view what they do as a calling are more satisfied with both their work and their lives in general. They spend more time at their place of employment and are more persistent when pursuing difficult challenges. As a result, they outperform their peers.



Finding value in one's activities is a key to grit, and regardless of the role or task, an organization's success is fundamentally dependent upon individuals finding meaning in what they do. Take, for example, call-center employees who perform the notoriously difficult task of soliciting funds. Not only is their work highly monotonous, but they also experience frequent rejection—and sometimes open hostility. As a result, these employees typically have difficulty maintaining motivation, and their turnover rate is high.

Adam Grant, the author of *Give and Take*, studied the persistence and performance of callers who were soliciting scholarship donations from university alumni. In this study, he found that fundraisers who met with a student who had benefited from their fundraising efforts spent more time speaking with donors and raised more money than the fundraisers who did not meet a beneficiary. In fact, the callers who had briefly talked with a scholarship recipient spent 142 percent more time soliciting funds and raised 171 percent more revenue! Armed with tangible evidence of the positive impact of their efforts, these call-center employees were more persistent and successful. Simply meeting an individual whose life was improved by their efforts gave them a reason to dial the next number.

We, too, invest in what we value (meaning) and what we love (passion). Grit is motivated by our personal beliefs regarding what is worth doing and what is enjoyable and interesting. When motivated by what matters most, we will work hard even in the absence of external incentives—and persist even when others are not watching.

## Meaning—Do What You Value

*... being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself.*

—VIKTOR FRANKL

He was prisoner number 119104.

Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1905, Viktor Frankl became one of the most influential psychiatrists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over the course of his career, he was professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School, as well as a visiting professor at Harvard University, University of Pittsburg, U.S. International University, and University of Dallas. During his lifetime, he travelled to five continents, lectured at 209 universities and was awarded 29 honorary doctorates from universities all over the world. He also published 39 books. At the time of his death in 1997, his book *Man's Search for Meaning* had been translated into 24 languages and had sold more than 10 million copies. A survey conducted by the Library of Congress and the Book-of-the-Month Club ranked *Man's Search for Meaning* among the 10 most influential books in America.

Frankl was the middle child in a pious Jewish family with three children. During his adolescence, he became fascinated with philosophy and psychiatry, reading most anything he could get his hands on. In high school, he began corresponding with, arguably, Vienna's most famous resident—the internationally renowned founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. At age 17, Frankl sent Freud a paper he had written for one of his high school classes. Freud was so favorably impressed by this young student's thoughts and writing he submitted the paper, on Frankl's behalf, to the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. In the fall of 1924, Frankl began medical school at the University of Vienna where, in addition to excelling in the classroom, he continued to write and publish articles. After completing his residency, he began practicing psychiatry, eventually becoming chief of neurology at Rothschild Hospital in Vienna.

He was a rising star with a growing national and international reputation. In another time and place, Frankl could have had a storybook life and enviable career; but there was a dark cloud gathering over Vienna and all of Europe.

As Frankl was studying medicine and beginning his professional career, Adolf Hitler's influence was growing and anti-Semitism was on the rise. Jews were experiencing such increasingly brazen and ruthless

persecution that even his patients would insult him, calling him a “dirty Jewish swine.” In September of 1942, Frankl and his family were arrested and imprisoned in the concentration camp at Theresienstadt. When he and his fellow prisoners arrived at the camp, those who were not immediately sent to the gas chambers were stripped, their possessions were confiscated, and every hair was shaved from their body.

Over the next three years, Frankl was herded from camp to camp and exposed to the most inhumane treatment—the unimaginable had become reality. He and his fellow prisoners were starved, beaten, and forced to labor with grossly inadequate tools and only minimal protection from the elements. When Frankl was liberated in April of 1945, he was severely malnourished, weighing only 83 pounds and suffering from an irregular heart rhythm, edema, and frostbite.

In the midst of one of the darkest periods of human history and the worst possible personal circumstances, Frankl not only survived but, remarkably, developed an optimistic view of the human condition based on what he later described as “an unconditional faith in life’s unconditional meaning.” The Nazis had taken everything from him except the last of human freedoms, the freedom to choose how he would respond. He observed firsthand, on a daily basis, that a reason to live was essential to survival. Frankl discovered that those who had a person they hoped to see again or a calling they hoped to fulfill would cling to life regardless of the odds. In contrast, those who lost hope would lie on their bunk and no amount of coaxing could persuade them to continue on. Based on his experiences in the concentration camps, Frankl concluded: “There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning in one’s life.”

During his confinement, Frankl used his expertise as a psychiatrist to help other prisoners make it through the day. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he describes his encounter with two men who had lost all hope and were on the verge of suicide. In his conversations with them, he helped them find meaning—a reason to live. For one, it was a child he adored who was waiting for him to return. For the other, there was a series of books he wanted to write. Frankl himself found meaning in

the hope of seeing his wife again, lecturing about the psychological lessons learned from concentration camps, and finishing a manuscript he had begun. He observed, “A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life.”

To the Nazis, Frankl was nothing more than prisoner number 119104. They did everything they could to reduce his existence to six digits sewn on his shirt. They treated him like a beast to be used up and thrown away. They had mercilessly and with callous disregard taken everything from him, yet he transcended his situation, finding a reason to live in the midst of senseless, abusive mistreatment. Sustained by meaning, he survived to become one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most influential psychiatrists and inspirational writers.



As Frankl’s remarkable life so clearly demonstrates, individuals who find meaning, a reason to live, are often able to transcend even the most difficult and horrific of circumstances. Though not a panacea, and the sobering reality is that many died in the concentration camps despite an equally heroic resolve, those who succeed in discovering their unique purpose are often able to overcome and, remarkably, flourish regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Individuals who arrange their lives around what they value are irresistible—an irresistible force in the relentless pursuit of a dream. The loss of a job, the meltdown of a significant relationship, physical abuse, and financial stress may create angst, detours, and profound heartache; but individuals who have discovered their purpose somehow find the courage to keep moving forward. As with Frankl, meaning transcends the moment and creates the passionate pursuit of a calling that must be fulfilled.

The search for personal meaning involves the identification and pursuit of what one values most. It often, if not exclusively, entails developing an outward focus. It’s not found solely in satisfying one’s

own needs or pursuing personal interests; rather, it's discovered by focusing on making a difference in the lives of others and contributing to the greater good. Meaning is drawn from a cause to embrace, a person to love, a mission to live, or a creative work to complete.

Each of us has a meaning to uncover and pursue—a unique calling. There are commitments only you can make and goals only you can achieve. Your actions in pursuit of this calling become the footprint you leave on this planet—your legacy.

Legacy building may be as simple as the smile you offer to the barista at Starbucks or the helping hand you lend to the person in the next cubicle. Perhaps it's the violin recital you attend to encourage your son or the homework assistance you offer your daughter. Maybe for you it is the business you were destined to start or the team you are best qualified to lead. While there are others who can smile, help, and lead, no one does these things exactly like you and no one occupies the unique position you occupy. Meaning is found by living the life only you can live, making the difference only you can make, and caring for those only you can care for. As George Bailey discovered, your unique calling consists of what the world would miss had you never been born.

Meaning is a powerful, stabilizing force in our individual lives and in society as a whole. If we base our decisions and actions on moment-to-moment feelings or highly variable situational factors, rather than deeply engrained values, we are less persistent and focused. If our primary ambition is immediate gratification, we will change course at the first sign of difficulty. If our only goal is to seek pleasure and avoid pain, then unpleasantness is interpreted as a sign that we are headed in the wrong direction.

In contrast, meaning is highly stable over time. It's largely unaffected by transient feelings or situational variables. If we find deep and lasting value in our families, we will do most anything to assure the stability and longevity of these relationships. Even when we don't feel like it or are busy with other obligations, we will find time to be with those we care about. Similarly, at work, our commitment keeps us motivated even when there are many barriers to success. On any given day, we may not feel like doing our job; yet, because of our dedication to co-workers and to our organization, we get out of bed and make the

commute. Our deeply held values, the ones in which we find meaning, set our direction, stabilize our course, and keep us focused on our calling.

The pursuit of what matters most often requires sacrifice and determination. As a general rule, meaning is not readily found by travelling the path of least resistance. It takes persistent investment to honor one's commitments and achieve one's goals. Without grit no one would write a novel or compose a concerto. Apple, Twitter, and Marriott would not exist without visionaries who were willing to invest the sweat equity necessary to ensure success.

Interestingly, there is a paradox associated with the search for meaning. As individuals focus on the welfare of others and contribute to a cause bigger than themselves, they often benefit as much, or more, than the people they are trying to help. In his book *Give and Take*, Adam Grant highlights this paradox. He concludes that givers do better than takers. Over time, those who give without concerning themselves with what they will receive in return (givers) do better than those who focus on what they are able to get from others (takers). Seeking meaning, though other-focused, is not purely altruistic. Grant notes that givers build better networks, are more successful, are more receptive to feedback, work harder, are more persistent, and make those around them better. He also notes givers are at the top of their class in medical school, the most productive engineers, and the top salespeople.

This paradox is central to Frankl's worldview. He observed: "For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself."



Martin Seligman has developed an exercise designed to demonstrate that "an orientation to the welfare of others is, in the long run, more satisfying than an orientation to one's own pleasure." In this exercise, which Seligman calls *Fun Versus Philanthropy*, participants are asked to

engage in an activity they find highly enjoyable. This activity can be anything they find pleasurable—like eating a fine meal, spending time with good friends, or watching their favorite television show. Then, they are encouraged to spend an equal amount of time doing something focused on contributing to the welfare of others. This philanthropic act can be anything that benefits another person. Predictably, individuals who try this exercise find pleasure in the fun activities. What may be less intuitive is that philanthropy is also associated with positive feelings—and, interestingly, the positivity associated with helping others lasts longer than the positivity associated with seeking pleasure.

You may wish to try this exercise for yourself. Sometime in the next few days, spend time engaging in a fun activity and then spend an equal amount of time doing something philanthropic. Begin by engaging in an activity exclusively because it feels good. Select anything you find enjoyable. Then, switch your focus and spend time helping another person. You may tutor a student, assist a colleague with a difficult project, or help your neighbor move some furniture. The particular activity you choose is not what's important. What's important is that you do something to benefit another person without expecting anything in return. After you have completed this exercise, consider its effect on you. Do you agree with Seligman's observation that an orientation to the welfare of others is more satisfying than an orientation to your own pleasure?

Meaning gives direction and purpose to our lives. It's our "why"—our reason for getting out of bed in the morning. When we have identified our unique calling, we are able to overcome the difficulties we encounter and, with grit, pursue our commitments and goals.

## **Passion—Do What You Love**

*Passion is what we are most deeply curious about, most hungry for, will most hate to lose in life. It is the most desperate wish we need to yell down the well in our lives. It is whatever we pursue merely for its own sake, what we study when there are no tests to take, what we create though no one may ever see it.*

*It makes us forget that the sun rose and set, that we have bodily functions, and personal relations that could use a little tending.*

—GREGG LEVOY

David hit the career lottery. He absolutely loves his job. But unlike the lottery, his success is not based on a number drawn at random; rather it is a result of the intentional pursuit of his passion. For as long as I have known him, he has been a complete computer geek. From a very young age, he displayed a knack for understanding technology, creating applications for handheld devices, and, most importantly, responding to my requests for free help when I had a vexing computer problem.

After receiving a degree in electrical engineering, David began developing software for a wide array of applications in a variety of industries. Currently, though living in Indianapolis, he is a project manager and software developer for a highly successful equity firm in California. When I asked him why a West Coast company would hire him and allow him to work from his home in the Midwest, he stated it was based on his ability to adapt to customer needs, his problem-solving capacity, and his can-do attitude. He manages projects well and meets demanding production schedules. Both he and his company benefit because he is doing what he loves and what he does best.

We all have a natural affinity for certain activities. We are simply drawn to them. These are our passions. They are as unique as our fingerprints—one person's drudgery is another's delight. Some people love to hike, while others spend their day with a book in their hand. Some dig into the details with great vigor, while others find joy in the big picture. For David, though he may not know exactly why, writing software has piqued his interest. Don't tell his employer, but he might very well do the job for less money because it brings him such great satisfaction.

Our passions are the things we love—the parts of life we connect with emotionally. Sometimes our response is jubilant, expressed in ecstatic outbursts like the crowd leaving the stands, rushing the field, and tearing down the goalposts after a last-minute touchdown. Or the senior management team shouting and exchanging high-fives after securing a major account. More commonly, though, passions are

experienced and expressed more subtly. For those who love nature, the feeling of awe associated with ascending a mountain peak may be so understated it is barely noticeable. At work, the satisfaction of finishing an interesting project is the silent reward for a job well done.

Perhaps because of the associated positivity, our passions motivate us, influencing the path we choose in life and the activities in which we engage. We tend to be intensely driven to seek that which captures our imagination—the things we do for their own sake. Our interests compel us to read late into the night, disregarding our need for sleep. It's why we stay past quitting time even when there is no imminent deadline. Success in any field is difficult to imagine without some level of interest and curiosity. Where there is passion, there is grit.

Frankl's inspirational journey of survival, resilience, and transcendence was sustained by his relentless search for meaning. Who could ever have guessed the desire to publish a manuscript would enable him to resist the focused hatred of a nation bent on his destruction? The backstory of David's success is his focused passion. He invests and feels a deep sense of personal satisfaction because he is succeeding at what he loves. Meaning and passion drive commitment, ultimately helping individuals find their unique calling and reach their potential.

## **Live at the Intersection of Meaning and Passion**

To make this more applicable and to help you get a better sense of what you find meaningful and what you are passionate about, consider taking a few minutes at the end of your day to engage in the following exercise:

Begin by envisioning your *best possible self*. “Imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all your life goals. Think of this as a realization of your life dreams, and of your own best potentials.” In this imagined future ...

- ◆ What are things like in your significant relationships?
- ◆ What have you achieved at work?
- ◆ Is there a cause you have made your own?

- ◆ What is the place of spirituality in your day?
- ◆ How are you spending your leisure time?

Then, organize your thoughts and describe this imagined best self in writing. Compose a brief description of your ideal future.

Now, with your best possible self in mind, review the activities you engaged in over the past 24 hours. Did your actions today move you one step closer to a better tomorrow? Did you work hard and persist at tasks designed to build the future you desire?

Next, imagine what the *best possible day* might look like for you—one fully invested in meaningful and interesting pursuits. Consider what you would need to change in order to create a better future for yourself. What activities would you need to add? What would you need to stop doing?

To further clarify and refine your thinking, repeat this exercise on each of the next few days. Begin by reviewing and revising the written description you created of your best possible self. Refine your description so it more closely represents what you value (meaning) and love (passion). Then review your day focusing on the questions: Am I currently investing in activities that will help me reach valued goals? And, do my actions bring out the very best in me?

Finally, plan the next day so its focus centers on using more time and energy in pursuit of what matters most to you, living as much as possible at the intersection of meaning and passion.

The purpose of this exercise is to help you identify more clearly the commitments you hold most dear. This is your bucket list of valued goals—the life you would be living if your dreams were to be fully realized.

## **Lead at the Intersection of Meaning and Passion**

Simon Sinek, the author of *Start With Why*, begins his popular TED talk with the question: “How do you explain when things don’t go as we assume—or, better, how do you explain when others are able to achieve things that seem to defy all of the assumptions?” In the remainder of his talk, he proposes an answer to this question, suggesting that high-level

success, success that defies the assumptions, is inspired by visionary leaders who have a clearly defined *why*. As an example, Sinek points to the Wright Brothers who were able to succeed at powered, manned flight before anyone else because of their relentless pursuit of a singular objective. They were not the best funded or the most academically prepared to be first, but their laser-focused passion inspired a steeled determination that empowered them to outperform others. Driven by a single-minded focus, they made history.

Individuals and teams achieve the most when they have a compelling *why*—a set of deeply held core values (meaning) and interests (passion) that guide and motivate them. In this section, I propose that leaders inspire the kind of determination demonstrated by the Wright Brothers when they define what's important, set the example, and create a narrative.

### ***Define What's Important***

Every team has its own values. These are non-negotiable core beliefs. They are fundamental commitments believed to be universally good—the right things to pursue regardless of the situation. Individuals who endorse a particular team's values are considered part of the in-group.

A team's core values may include ...

- ◆ Service
- ◆ Benevolence
- ◆ Profitability
- ◆ Integrity
- ◆ Grit
- ◆ Honesty
- ◆ Independence
- ◆ Loyalty
- ◆ Kindness
- ◆ Care
- ◆ Spirituality
- ◆ Comfort
- ◆ Excitement
- ◆ Equality
- ◆ Freedom
- ◆ Happiness
- ◆ Pleasure
- ◆ Beauty
- ◆ Friendship
- ◆ Gratitude
- ◆ Autonomy
- ◆ Achievement
- ◆ Benevolence
- ◆ Power

Take a minute to identify the important commitments endorsed by the teams you lead. Review them with the following questions in mind:

- ◆ Are the values expressed in actions?
- ◆ Is there a basic congruence between what the team views as important and how time and resources are used?
- ◆ Are certain values consistently supported and others ignored?

If a particular team you lead doesn't have clearly articulated values, consider the following exercise. Get your team members together and ask them ...

- ◆ What teams do you most admire? Why?
- ◆ What is it about any team that makes it inherently good and should be considered good by all teams in all situations?
- ◆ Regarding our team, what is it about us that is most admirable?
- ◆ Are there any important values our team is missing?

After having a conversation using similar questions, one not-for-profit organization identified two important values: humility and hunger. Its leaders aspire to attract employees who share these fundamental commitments. They look for team members with a fierce professional resolve and a can-do attitude. Yet, they don't want this hunger to be diminished by arrogance. They hire people who are more concerned about progress than who gets the credit. Humility and hunger have served this organization well. There's a positive climate in the workplace and high-level achievement is the norm.



For fun, apply the above exercise to your family. Get everyone together and ask them ...

- ◆ What families do you most admire? Why?
- ◆ What is it about any family that makes it inherently good and should be considered good by all families in all situations?
- ◆ Regarding our family, what is it about us that is most admirable?
- ◆ Are there any important values our family is missing?

Two values my wife and I communicated to our children were “have fun” and “cooperate.” We desired for our children to enjoy themselves. Yet we hoped they would do so without being disruptive or having to be the center of attention. Whether they were at school, on the sports field, or in a friend’s home, our desire was for them to smile and laugh often while getting along well with others.

A leader’s capacity to identify and communicate values is fundamental to any organization’s success. When every team member is invested in what’s important, a synergy of effort is created, which brings out the best in everyone involved.

### *Set the Example*

Meaning and passion develop in the context of our interactions with others. They aren’t acquired in isolation; rather, they emerge and are endorsed within families, teams, organizations, and cultures. Actions and interests that are affirmed tend to become part of the collective ethos, whereas those that are censured are discarded.

What we value and what we love develop, in part, by observing others. We emulate the people we hold in high esteem. For example, I attribute my work ethic and compassion to my parents. You could set your watch by my dad’s schedule. He was at work by 7 each morning and at home by 5:30 each evening. In addition, when he wasn’t at his day job, he was working on projects on our 80-acre farm. Likewise, my mother invested her energies in cooking, cleaning, and nurturing her eight children. And, as if this weren’t enough, she had another full-time job attending nearly all of our sporting events and school programs.

Along with hard work, my parents consistently looked outside of themselves. They were always ready to assist anyone in need. Our home had a revolving door with a steady stream of visitors. There was often an extra place set at our dining room table to feed a friend who, mysteriously, dropped by at mealtime. Many in my hometown were the recipients of Mom and Dad’s gracious hospitality.

While my work ethic and compassion originated from my parents, Tom Ewald, my psychology professor in college, inspired my love for

learning and interest in psychology and medicine. Tom is a tall, balding man with an amazing intellect. When asked a question, he pauses, nods his head slightly, furrows his brow and offers insightful and thought-provoking responses. As a young college student, I remember thinking that someday I would like to have his insight into the human condition. His example has shaped my career.

I find meaning in hard work and compassion, and I love learning and teaching because of the influence of significant people in my life. Without their influence, I would have developed different values and passions.



Like Tom and my parents, Ken Gwartz leads by example. He is a highly effective leader for one of America's largest medical schools. Over the years, he has chaired scores of committees and held numerous prestigious administrative positions. He is widely respected by students, resident physicians, colleagues, and administrators.

Some of his greatest assets, as a leader, are his integrity and authenticity. His actions are consistent with his values. In particular, he values teaching and providing high quality medical care. Guided by these fundamental commitments, he arrives at work early and is one of the last to leave. He is an active and innovative clinician who is highly invested in patient care. His knowledge and clinical acumen set a high standard of clinical excellence. Colleagues regularly seek his expert advice. Along with his dedication to patient care, Gwartz is committed to the educational mission of the medical school. He has received numerous teaching awards and mentored countless physicians who look to him as a role model.

Gwartz's pursuit of excellence influences all who know him. Inspired by his example, the physicians in his department work hard, teach with distinction, and provide high-quality patient care. The integrity with which he pursues meaningful ends brings out the very best in others. His authentic pursuit of what matters most sets a standard and motivates others to follow his lead. His colleagues are

better doctors and faculty members because of the high standards he embodies. These standards have become the norm. Teaching excellence and high-quality medical care are the values that permeate everything that is done. These core commitments guide new initiatives and new hires, creating a positive upward cycle. The individuals he leads are more engaged and the university is a better place because of his tireless pursuit of what matters most.

Teams take on the characteristics of their leaders. If a leader wants her team to provide high-quality customer service, then she must be the first to do so. If loyalty is valued, it must come from the top. Leaders communicate what's important by what they do. If a picture is worth a 1,000 words, an example is worth 10,000.

### *Create a Narrative*

We look for meaning in what we do. It's part of our nature to want our actions to matter. There is an inborn desire to look beyond ourselves and make our work, our communities, and our world better places.

Yet it isn't always easy to find meaning. Some work is poorly compensated and certain roles are associated with limited prestige. In fact, there are a number of tasks that are downright nasty. Individuals who hold low-status jobs may have difficulty finding meaning in their work and even more difficulty finding anything to be passionate about. Even in high-status positions, there are often parts of the day that are real turnoffs.

When individuals are unable to find meaning in their work, there is a precipitous drop in effort. If the only incentive is imposed from the outside, at the first sign of difficulty an individual will abandon what he or she is doing and look for something more meaningful and interesting to do. External motivation is much less effective than internal motivation. If one's primary reason for going to work each day is a paycheck, to keep the parents happy, or fulfill someone else's vision, there is little reason to show up or make an effort.

With few exceptions, however, all work has value. Meaning is about the narrative. It is how people mentally frame what they do; not the details of how they spend their time. Finding meaning and passion

is an interpretive process—a process of making a connection between what one is doing and why one is doing it. Even jobs that are considered by many to be menial or dirty can be imbued with meaning. Wrzesniewski and her colleagues interviewed a housekeeper in a hospital whose job it was to clean up vomit and excrement on an oncology ward. While most would find this job meaningless, this housekeeper did not. She viewed her work as a calling. She stated:

*My job is equally important to the physician. I help these people feel human. At their lowest and most vulnerable point, I help them maintain their dignity. I make it okay to feel awful, to lose control, and to be unable to manage themselves. My role is crucial to the healing process.*

Clearly, the meaning of a particular job is not determined by the tasks it entails or its social status; rather its meaning arises from one's beliefs regarding what's important.

A very concrete way leaders help others find meaning in work is by a willingness to do most any task, especially those tasks no one wants to do. When leaders take on an undesirable assignment, they communicate with their actions that a particular role, regardless of its perceived status, has value and is worth doing. For example, Gwartz is the first to take on the most challenging projects. He often assigns himself difficult tasks, knowing others might lose their motivation if they perceive they are assigned too often to the least desirable jobs. He could use his position to insulate himself from the dirty work. Yet, in his mind, nothing is beneath him. As a result of his example, other employees are more willing to look beyond their own immediate needs and see value in any activity.



Individuals and teams who find meaning in what they do are relentless. They are single-minded in pursuit of what matters most. Like Frankl, those who know their “why” will endure most anything and do most anything to not only survive, but to thrive. Like David, those who find their passion are virtually unstoppable. Like Gwartz, those who model the pursuit of core values bring out the very best in others.

## One Leader's Experience

I asked a highly effective leader to reflect on the concepts covered in this chapter. In particular, I was curious regarding his thoughts on two questions: (1) In your work, what do you find most meaningful and what are you most passionate about? and (2) How do you help those you lead find meaning and passion in their work? The following was his response:

*I don't even have to think hard about the first question. By far and away, the part of my job I find most meaningful and am most passionate about is helping. Not winning, but helping. Sometimes that means helping clients solve a real-world problem, sometimes it means helping my colleagues find an answer to an intellectual puzzle, and sometimes it means helping peers develop their strengths. My very best day is when I am able to help someone else succeed publicly (while I am able to remain in the shadows personally).*

*In response to the second question, the only way to help others find meaning and passion in their work is by finding out where they find meaning and passion in their lives, which means taking the time to get to know them as people. Most people crave being truly known, and it brings me pleasure to learn (and remember) things about people they wish others knew. Once I know someone and discover what lights his fire, the next step is for me to demonstrate that I am genuinely interested in helping him achieve his goals. There are a variety of ways to do this, whether by looking for opportunities that fit his specific strengths (which may mean passing up those opportunities for myself), introducing him to people who share similar interests, recommending books or other resources that will enable him to build on his strengths, or making sure to celebrate his successes in a public way.*

*The unstated part of this second question is "How do you help those you lead find meaning and passion in those portions of their work they do not find meaningful and are not passionate about?" Sometimes the answer is by speaking the truth in love and telling them that this is not the right career or place for them and encouraging them to explore other opportunities for which they are a better fit. Sometimes the answer is to encourage them to take control of their own career by "stop doing" those things they find to be drudgery and figuring out a way to spend more of their time doing what*

*they love (I'm a big fan of "stop doing" lists.). Sometimes the answer is to help them (and myself) see that even the things that seem to be drudgery can be meaningful if you step back and consider the larger picture.*

## **An Experiment**

Consider this experiment.

Intentionally add meaningful and interesting activities to your day. These need not be monumental changes to your routine. Simply spend a bit more time doing things you value and are passionate about. Then, as you make these changes, consider the following questions:

- ◆ Are you more persistent and invested when engaged in activities that are related to your values and passions?
- ◆ Do you achieve more when pursuing what you find important?
- ◆ Do you feel a sense of satisfaction when working on projects that you enjoy and value?

Then, adapt the above experiment to help someone you lead find her calling.

Begin by asking her to describe her *best possible future* and *best possible day* (see above). Then, ask her to adjust the activities of her day so she spends more of her time working to achieve her most treasured goals. As she makes these changes, observe the impact. Does she persist even when faced with significant challenges? Is she more productive? Does she experience a sense of well-being?

## KEY CONCEPTS

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### *Everyone matters*

You have a calling to fulfill. When you do the things you were put on this planet to do, you thrive and those around you benefit.

### *Do what matters most*

Spend the bulk of your day focusing on what you value and what you love. And, as a leader, help others do the same. Create a climate that encourages those you lead to invest in what matters most—help them live their calling.

