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To Give Your Employees Meaning, Start With Mission

by Teresa Amabile and Steve Kramer | 11:00 AM December 19, 2012

It is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work. -Jim Collins

Do you feel that you have work worth doing (<http://blogs.hbr.org/hbsfaculty/2012/08/what-makes-work-worth-doing.html>) ? If so, you are among the more fortunate of our readers. If not, you are among the many who find that their work — the thing to which they dedicate so many of their waking hours — holds little meaning. Instead, work is merely a means to an end, where people suffer through their jobs in hopes of finding time for those things that matter more: family, faith, hobbies, vacations, even watching TV. Work is simply something to be endured.

Must it be this way? We don't think so. In our own work (<http://hbr.org/product/the-progress-principle-using-small-wins-to-ignite-/an/10106-HBK-ENG?Ntt=progress%2520principle>) , we have found that people's work lives are enriched greatly when they feel they are making progress on work that is meaningful — in other words, when they feel they are making a difference in the world. These findings are reinforced by those of Scott Keller and Colin Prince in their book *Beyond Performance: How Great Organizations Build Ultimate Competitive Advantage* (http://www.mckinsey.com/client_service/organization/latest_thinking/beyond_performance) . Keller and Prince show that when organizations give people a sense of meaning in their work, it's not only good for employees, but it's critical to building a healthy organization — one that is well-functioning and competitive.

Why is meaning so important? Because when people find meaning in the work, they also feel a sense of ownership. The work means something to them personally. And as Keller describes (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/04/increase_your_teams_motivation.html) , when people take ownership of the work, they are more committed to it, more intrinsically motivated, more engaged. And that makes for better performance (<http://hbr.org/2007/05/inner-work-life-understanding-the-subtext-of-business-performance/ar/1>) on all dimensions.

Unfortunately, too many companies don't even try to make work meaningful for the people doing it. Managers in such companies seem to think that paying people is reason enough for them to perform at their best. But extrinsic motivation only goes so far. It doesn't lead people to be highly engaged or creative (<http://hbr.org/1998/09/how-to-kill-creativity/ar/1>) . Even the mission statements of some companies fall flat, focusing solely on shareholder value, competitiveness in the

marketplace, or staying out of trouble. Would this mission statement inspire you?

The Company's primary objective is to maximize long-term stockholder value, while adhering to the laws of the jurisdictions in which it operates and at all times observing the highest ethical standards.

Dean Foods Company (<http://www.deanfoods.com/our-company/investor-relations/corporate-governance.aspx>)

Mike Brenner and Steve Van Valin, of the consulting firm Culturology, talk about sources of "meaning amplification" (<http://culturologyworks.com/is-work-life-balance-an-oxymoron/>) " that managers can tap in their quest to sustain employee engagement. These sources spiral out from the self (providing for one's family; making progress in challenging work), to a broader array of other people (working as part of a well-functioning, respected team or organization; having a positive impact on customers; contributing to one's community or country); and finally to the broadest level (serving society; helping people around the world). Employees will be most strongly engaged in their work when they perceive it as serving each of these goals in some way.

To accomplish this, leaders have two tasks. First, they must communicate to employees how their work contributes to these sources of meaning. Often, a well-articulated mission statement is the place to start. Contrast these two corporate mission statements to the one we quoted above:

Our mission: to inspire and nurture the human spirit — one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time.

Starbucks Coffee (<http://www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information/mission-statement>)

Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis..

Patagonia (<http://www.patagonia.com/us/patagonia.go?assetid=2047>)

These statements give people a sense of how their efforts will contribute to the lives of the customers, communities, and world they impact.

Unfortunately, far too often, mission statements turn out to be empty lip service to values that aren't lived every day by managers inside the organization. So this is the leader's second task: walking the talk of the mission statement. As our research (<http://hbr.org/2011/05/the-power-of-small-wins/ar/1>) shows, the organization must actually support employees' ability to achieve meaningful goals. In the best companies, where employees are engaged and performance shines, leaders at all levels respect employees and consistently strive to give them the autonomy, help, resources, and time they need to do great work.