

Finding Purpose in Uncertainty



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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Did you know that team members with “purpose” are healthier, more deeply committed to the mission of their employers, and enjoy greater feelings of well-being? Do you have a “purpose”? Do you inspire a sense of “purpose” in the team you lead?

Having a “purpose” doesn’t mean never asking: ‘what am I doing?’ or ‘what am I doing here?’ The most grounded and focused among us ask those existential questions from time to time. Very few of us can report that the pandemic has minimally impacted our lives. And those who can make that claim may not be ready to think and reflect. The disconcerting impacts of the pandemic include both:

- *Dark clouds:* losing a loved one, illness and poor health, financial insecurity at home or in our organizations, and the stress of living in close quarters with extended family members; and
- *Silver linings:* reclaiming the time once spent in vehicular traffic or in the air, reconnecting to and with loved ones who had become roommates instead of life mates, learning how to prepare meals for yourself and others, rather than be waited upon, and genuinely appreciating the dangerous work of first responders and frontline workers.

In a thought-provoking article from McKinsey & Company, the authors of “Igniting individual purpose in times of crisis” remind leaders about powerful truths that many of us may have let recede into the remote recesses of our leadership brains. These include:

Never take motivated employees for granted.

My hunch is that most team members at your organization are working incredibly hard—and effectively—under straining circumstances. Remember to express your thanks and appreciation for the work they do to lift up your mission.

Be gentle but firm with poor performers.

Since the pandemic began, I’ve heard from a number of leaders who have told me that previously scheduled performance improvement plans (PIPs) or termination strategies for poor performers are on hold, given the circumstances. While I applaud the gentleness and understanding that this implies, leaders must consider the toll exacted by your organization’s weakest links. Ineffective, uncooperative, and unmotivated team members sap the energy and enthusiasm of the entire team. By waiting to take action, you’re effectively punishing those

working incredibly hard to advance your mission.

Connect the dots with purpose.

The McKinsey & Company article authors write that “...what people need from work and what drives them personally can be complicated.” They explain that “Sometimes an individual’s purpose aligns perfectly with organizational purpose...But other times it’s only a partial match...” Sometimes in the nonprofit sector, we hope, wish, presume, and assume that every team member feels a personal connection to our mission. That isn’t always the case. I remember asking a CFO about his personal interest in his employer’s wildlife-focused advocacy work; he told me, “I’m here because I enjoy finance!” The McKinsey team urges leaders to be open and empathetic, as a pathway to instilling the “trust necessary to encourage people to leave their comfort zones and explore how their purpose might be better met at work.”

Lead with compassion, honesty, empathy, and vulnerability.

A recurring theme in many of the thought leader pieces I’ve been reading this year is the importance of balancing the go-to leadership traits of decisiveness and confidence with equal measures of humility and vulnerability. None of us know when the post-pandemic phase will begin, how long it will last, or the source or consequences of the ‘next’ interruption to normal. But we can be honest about what we don’t know and demonstrate through word and action that we appreciate and value the diverse perspectives of the colleagues who allow us to lead.

It’s risky to admit you don’t know, you were wrong, or you’re worried. And it’s uncomfortable to take action when a team member’s performance is taking a costly toll on team morale and synchronicity. But risk leaders who are brave and willing to admit their mistakes and acknowledge inevitable uncertainty are arguably best equipped to *lead* with purpose and *inspire* purpose. In the wake of a crisis, it’s easy to forget or push aside the ‘why’ you do things and focus on only making it through. That ‘why’ – that ‘purpose’ – can become the guide star for realigning yourself and your organization on the path to resilience and resumption. Don’t let the ‘why’ get lost in all of the ‘how.’

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your reflections and insights on finding your purpose and leading with purpose at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.