

## Employee Commitment

By Susan de la Vergne

In his book *Authentic Leadership*, former Medtronic CEO Bill George makes an obvious point that business leaders rarely say out loud: “Missions motivate, dollars don’t.”

What he means is that purpose is what drives people at work, not the financial rewards that come to others. Workers don’t get up in the morning and say, “Gee, I can hardly wait to get to work today to maximize shareholder profits.” Even when employees are shareholders who can benefit from improved financials, what draws people to their chosen careers is the work itself and its purpose in the world, more than the profit possibilities.

Mr. George goes on to say, “I find there is universal agreement (among middle managers) that you cannot inspire employees by urging them to help management get the company’s stock price up.”

There is, in fact, quite a bit of literature on this subject. In *Awakening Corporate Soul*, authors Eric Klein and John Izzo say that an employee’s commitment to the job requires knowing “the purpose of our work; it means recognizing the purpose our organization fulfills that goes beyond the bottom line; and it means articulating to others how their (workers’) efforts contribute to a larger purpose.”

In *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and James Porras spend an entire book explaining their five year research study of major companies that led to this conclusion: *Purpose within a company is what sustains it; profit is important, but when it’s the prime directive, companies falter.*

Despite the evidence, and how well this idea resonates with just plain common sense, the idea that employees want meaning in the work they do isn’t a topic that businesses seem to be keying on. Employee satisfaction is generally viewed as the employee’s feelings about their salary, working climate, and the training opportunities offered to employees for their own professional growth. But fulfillment? That’s not up for discussion.

### Why We Don’t

There’s a reason for that: Corporate management likes measurable objectives. “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it!” We’ve all heard that.

So far, we don’t have the math to calculate “fulfillment” or “sense of purpose.” Unlike the many ways the General Accounting Office has given us to calculate financial success, there is no Federal Accounting Job Satisfaction Board to define how we would even approach the problem.

Since there are no generally accepted metrics for “employee commitment,” it’s unlikely employee commitment objectives will end up as goals on the company’s operating plan.

### The “Soft” Side

This is one of many aspects of management now called “soft” because they’re not quantifiable in hard dollars in any traditional way, nor are they supportable by hard facts. Employee commitment to a job’s purpose is certainly one of those “soft” management characteristics. You can’t take “sense of purpose” to the bank and deposit it like you can revenue.

Whether one’s commitment level to the job translates in some way into a hard dollar return is something that hasn’t been explicitly addressed yet. But it’s hard to imagine that it wouldn’t. Disenfranchised, suspicious, discontented employees who resent the time they spend at the “salt mines” can’t be as productive and conscientious as those who love what they do and respect why they do it.

### Employees Align with Purpose

Studs Terkel’s 1972 masterpiece, *Working*, a collection of narratives as told to Terkel from workers all across America, recounts this same timeless point over and over: That work, when it’s satisfying, is about purpose, that success is based in what we do, not how much money comes from it.

In one section, Terkel quotes a young editor who says, “You throw yourself into things because you feel that the important questions – self-discipline, goals, a meaning of your life – are carried out in your work.”

Others he talked to echo the same sentiment. The pharmacist says, “I never cared about being rich ... I like to feel needed.” The piano tuner says “Why are we tuners? Because we like to hear good sounds.” The factory owner says, “I like making things. I love my work. It isn’t the money.”

Work, then, is about work. Employees want to engage in the meaning and the contribution of the products and services that are the fruits of their company’s labor. If we make it all about the money, we’re missing the point.

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