

## What is the Purpose Gap | 089

Two thirds of U.S. employees are reflecting on their purpose in life, and nearly half are reconsidering the kind of work they do. That's right. Let's talk purpose at work.

Welcome to Lean Leadership for Ops Managers, the podcast for leaders in Ops Management who want to spark improvement, foster engagement, and boost problem solving - AND still get their day job done. Here's your host, Leadership Trainer, Lean Enthusiast, and Spy Thriller Junkie, Jamie V. Parker.

[00:00:42] I want to tell you a story to kick off this conversation. But before I do that, I'm going to tell you who asked me this question recently and why it's on my mind. So I was recording a podcast as a guest recently. It was a podcast for like an internal podcast just for their team members. And so shout out to Brett Smith and Latoya Moore. It was an absolutely fantastic conversation. Super fun, super energetic. I really feel like they raise the bar for me about, you know, kind of what a podcast episode needs to sound like. So really, really excited. It was just great activity and great experience.

But in our conversation, we were talking about command and control management and my transition from command and control management to kind of more people leadership. And they asked about like, well, what changed? Like what changed for you, not just organizationally, how did I change the way I was leading people? But you know what changed for me personally as a leader or as a person?

You know, when I was thinking about that and I've told this story many times, but there were several different things happening at the same time. And so it wasn't just one thing, it was a combination of several things. But one of those was a very specific conversation I had with my boss at the time, and I remember that I was sitting in L.A.

We were actually in L.A doing a site visit, and so we were in a rental car. So my boss had gone, had met me there. So both of us were in the same market and we were in a rental car in LA, which probably means sitting in traffic. And I was having this, I don't know what you want to call it, like Third Life kind of meltdown about my impact and my work.

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And I thought, you know, and this is why I told Greg, I said, you know, I just I thought I would be doing more with my life, with my career. I thought I would be, you know, changing the face of public education in the United States. Or, you know, I don't know what I thought I was going to be, but I thought it was going to be really meaningful, really impactful. And having a leading, you know, a change like having a noticeable change in the world because of the work that I did.

And, you know, now I'm really struggling because I'm like, that's not what I'm doing. You know, I feel like I'm coming in and I'm managing plans and it's okay, it's fine. But I'm kind of meant for more, don't you think? And, you know, Greg took the time at that in that conversation to reframe some things for me. And I said, Jaime, you know what? Hold on.

I want you to think of this differently. And he told me about Jorge, who was a team member in L.A. and he said, you know, think about Jorge and think about how much his life has changed as a result of the work that you've done with him directly and indirectly through his leader. You know, he came from a family where, you know, three families living in, you know, an apartment together. His mother didn't speak English. He, you know, worked, just worked, worked, worked really, really hard. And he thought that he was going to have a certain lifestyle for his kids. But because of the growth he's had, because of the development he's had, he's had this career progression. And of course, because of all the hard work he has done as well. Right.

It's his his accomplishment. But he's had this career progression. He's put himself in a position to give his kids a different life than he ever imagined. He's giving his kids opportunities in education and in hobbies that he never thought he would be able to give them. And then he talked about the next team member and the next team member and the next team member. And in each of these cases sharing, you know, their personal lives and how their personal lives were changed, you know, and I think back to, you know, years later as I was leaving and getting notes from managers who said, you know what? Working with you didn't just make me a better leader. It made me a better, you know, husband and father.

[00:04:19] And so but it was in that moment where Greg was reframing that. And that was really a big part of the shift that I had personally in my own personal beliefs about what my impact was. And I say that because, you know, the pandemic has prompted a lot of reevaluation. And one of the things that's

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happened is McKinsey and PWC and some other organizations have gone and done some additional studies on purpose and how purpose shows up at work.

And one of the things that they found is that two thirds of, I guess, U.S. workers are reflecting on their purpose in life, and nearly half are reconsidering the kind of work that they do. I thought this was really interesting because we do talk a lot about purpose at work and find your why and you know, what is this impact? But I don't know that we're having the types of conversations we need to have in order to make a change.

Because here's one of the things that that the studies found is that 70% of people's in general. Right. This is a generalization, but 70% of a sense of purpose is largely defined by work. Right. So 70% of the people surveyed that their sense of purpose is largely defined by work. And it's not just executives, not executives were at 66%. So almost the same percent for non executives. And non senior leaders.

[00:05:43] And I thought that was fascinating because for me one of the things that I thought is that I thought for a lot of people their purpose comes from their families and raising their children or the volunteer work they do, but particularly especially for parents, you know, raising their families. And I hear that from parents right now. I'll see that. And people will post a picture of their kid and say, this is my why. And, you know, I don't have children and I don't feel my purpose in this world is any less because of that. You know, not being a parent myself, I thought that for parents they got their purpose fulfilled through parenthood.

And it wasn't they didn't have a strong of a purpose need at work, as I did. And it turns out that that's not true, including parents. Parents also. Right. 70% of parents are saying that their sense of purpose is largely defined by their work. And so this is really fascinating when we start to think about the relationship between individual purpose and work. Right. And so I want you to think and of course, we'll put an image of this on our show notes at process results dot com forward slash podcast.

But I want you to think of a circle, right? And we're going to think actually I look at three concentric circles, but you've got this circle. This is the big circle on the outside, if you will, and that is kind of that personal purpose that's outside of work. So that's going to be your family, your hobbies, your volunteer work, all of

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the things that just really drive you individually outside of work. And so you've got that kind of in the background.

[00:07:21] Then you have a middle circle that we're going to talk about in just a minute, and then you have the front circle, and that's what I want to talk about next, because that front circle and again, you know, it's kind of a smaller concentric circles, but that front circle is the organizational level purpose. Right. And so I think a lot of the work about purpose at work has been done in this area, but it's still a problem. And so, you know, I have a client who literally makes life saving drugs.

If they can make one more personalized medicine per month, that is one more life saved. And so at an organizational level, they are doing highly purposeful work in the sense that it is literally a life or death outcome. Now, I also have a client who does the operations for Parks and Recreation, like all the parks and green spaces in a city, you know, for them it's not like life or death outcomes. I mean, there might you might be able to make a connection about safety and automobile accidents or something like that. If the medium median and the road isn't kept up or safety of the park equipment. Right, the playground equipment, that kind of thing.

But for the most part, what they're doing is they are it's still important work, right? I mean, the athletic fields think about how much of so many people's lives are made up of their sports experiences as children. And so keeping up those athletic fields and and this is, you know, the parks where people have birthday parties and their kids play. And so it's still, you know, important work, but it may not have that organizational purpose of that first client where it's life or death.

Now, my story with Greg, if we go back to L.A. sitting in that rental car, what I told Greg is I said, you know what? Like, we print stuff, right? I mean, we I mean, like, we're not even keeping up with playground equipment for kids. So it's safe. We print stuff for companies primarily, maybe. I mean, not even our work. You know, there are parts of the organization where they would print work for like a funeral service or something, and they might make the poster of the the person and that kind of thing, you know. So that kind of, I guess, gets to an emotional place. You know, maybe there's baby shower announcements, you know, at the retail level.

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[00:09:38] You know, it's again, a kind of a stretch, but maybe at our level we're printing stuff for companies. And I just I didn't feel it. I'm like, I just don't feel it. And so it was really that shift that Greg helped me to make that helped me to think of it differently. And the reason I'm bringing this up is because it actually doesn't matter if you're saving lives or not, if your organizational purpose is saving lives or not.

In the next episode, I will talk about specific steps that you as a leader can take to help people feel more aligned with the organizational purpose. But what I want you to realize is that that is that you can influence that this is not dependent on having some pretty organizational purpose statement that everyone can recite, and it just feels so good.

You know, sometimes when organizations, you know, kind of stretch to that that purpose statement that they're trying to, like, make it aspirational, it feels so far away that it doesn't even really inspire anybody. So this work, this impact that you can have is completely independent of whatever your organizational purpose statement is.

So it doesn't mean that purpose organizational purpose doesn't matter for someone, you know, they need to be aligned with their values and things like that. So if there's an organization that is doing that, like kind of what the work they do is is misaligned with my values, then it probably won't work. But for most organizations kind of in that middle gray now I told you we would get back to this middle circle, kind of the one that's in between the front organizational circle and the personal purpose.

[00:11:18] So the organizational purpose is on the very front circle. The personal purpose is in the very back. And then we have this middle circle. And this is where I think managers are feeling and falling down the most and really where we're not honing in that we should.

And this is about your feeling of purpose with your everyday work, about engaging with and making progress on work activities that provide energy and meaning. So this is the what I'm doing right now, my work day to day, my work that I am doing to day, my work that I am doing right now. How do I feel about that? Do I feel connected with that? Do I feel it's purposeful? Do I feel it's meaningful? Is it advancing things forward?

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And this is really interesting because this is, again, completely independent of the organizational purpose. It's also independent of the personal purpose. Think about my client who makes life saving medicines, right? So if I am in whatever role, maybe I'm in I.T or I'm in manufacturing or I'm in accounts receivable or accounts payable or I'm in HR or whatever role I might be in in that organization. I can appreciate the life saving medicine, but on a day to day, I'm doing this work that oftentimes can feel menial or menial or it doesn't feel like it's having a big difference.

[00:12:38] And I may not feel connected, right? Like in my day to day, I get it. Like, I'm all here for saving lives. But in my day to day, I'm not saving a life. Right. And that it can feel that way, particularly when you get into the grind. Right. I'm busting my butt right now to hit this deadline. I'm working in the parks and I'm taking the trash out at the picnic shelter on a monday, which is right after a weekend and sucks.

All of these activities that we're doing day to day. The question is, do we find purpose in that? And you know, again, in a future episode, we'll talk about what do we do? But I think right now what I want you to recognize is that this is a problem and this is a gap that we can address. There is a purpose gap.

What the studies found and the McKinsey study in particular identified a purpose gap. And it said that there was a statement that said, I can live my purpose in my day to day work. So let me say that again. I can live my purpose in my day to day work. Well, guess what? 85% of upper managers, senior managers, executives, people in senior level positions. 85% of them answered in the affirmative and said, yes, I can live my purpose in my day to day work. How many of the front line managers and front line team members do you think answered Yes. 15%.

85% of senior managers said yes. Only 15% of frontline managers and frontline team members said yes to I can live my purpose and my day to day work. This is what Mackenzie identified as the purpose gap and I think this is unacceptable. Carrie Siggins and I actually talked about this in her executive series interview, so we'll link that to in the show notes. You can go back and listen to it. And she talked about kind of the autonomy of decision making and being involved in, you know, there are some things that senior leaders are doing. The thing is, it doesn't have to be that way.

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When I think about your next step and what do you need to do? We'll talk about what specific actions you can do in the future episodes. But right now, what you want to recognize is that this purpose gap and the way people feel about their work is 100% in your influence as a manager, as a non manager leader. You can influence this and you have to decide is it acceptable to you that we have this gap between senior leaders and frontline leaders. It's not acceptable to me. But I want you to think about it. What's happening at your organization? Is it possible that that purpose gap exists in your organization with your team? And are you going to consider it acceptable?