



# Making Meaning Makes Money

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Economic recessions are often coupled with psychological recessions. Increasingly work has become a universal setting for individual to meet their universal needs for meaning. As organizations emerge from the recession, leaders need to become meaning makers who help employees replace deficit with abundant thinking.

Abundance is not found in circumstances or events—in how big a raise we got or how many people report to us. Abundance is found in the value we place on those events and the way we interpret their impact on us. Meaning is not inherent in events; it is made by people. This is the good news and the not-so-good news. Good news: the meaning of our lives is not controlled by what happens—as Frankl discovered, we can find purpose, value, and also happiness in a wide variety of even unpleasant circumstances. Not-so-good news: we have to work at this meaning-making process. It takes work to determine what work means, at either a corporate or a personal level. Leaders have the primary responsibility for this meaning-making process.

At a personal level, inner dialogues shape and construct this meaning. If I tell myself I'm not paid well because I'm not respected for my skills, I build a different meaning than if I tell myself how glad I am to work for an organization that is fiscally responsible. If I tell myself my boss's criticism means he is trying to help me improve because he values my contribution and wants me to succeed, I build different meaning than if I tell myself his criticism is a forerunner to my getting fired for incompetence. If I see my company as a major contributor to solving the energy crisis, I have a different feeling about the value of my labor than if I am just crunching numbers for someone else's selfish agenda.

As the story goes, I feel differently about the meaning of my work if I see myself as a bricklayer than if I see myself as building a cathedral to God. At a corporate level, leaders can help shape and construct the meaning employees assign to corporate realities, focusing corporate consciousness on opportunities instead of deficits.

For example, when a corporation faces an industry downturn, people generally get nervous. Employees scramble to protect their budgets, make their own job perks sacrosanct, and push someone else between them and the corporate ax. But when leaders in one technology company made clear to employees that every \$50,000 in savings could save one job, people enthusiastically rallied around cost cutting. As a result, employees were engaged, cooperative, and constructive. They had a clear line of sight between how their actions could deliver company goals while saving the jobs of people they cared about.

Because finding meaning at work is itself hard work, and because meaning is very personal, we can't promise leaders easy methods for replacing deficit thinking with abundance thinking. What we can offer leaders is a series of questions, which will begin to structure conversations between leaders and their multiple constituents—conversations about what our organizations are trying to accomplish, why, and what those efforts suggest about the meaning of our lives.

When leaders pose and address these meaning-exploring questions they produce the abundant outcomes:

1. Who am I? Abundance includes clarity about identity and signature strengths and ensures that employees will build on their strengths that strengthen others.
2. Where am I going? Abundance emerges from a clear sense of what we are trying to accomplish and why, sustains both social and fiscal responsibility, and aligns individual motivation
3. Whom do I travel with? Abundance is enhanced by meaningful relationships. High performing teams need to be high relating teams.
4. How do I build a positive work environment? Abundance thrives on positive routines that help ground us in what matters most. While bad habits thrive on isolation and shame, positive routines help us connect with ourselves and others. Routines and patterns driven by our deepest values help us stay grounded in what matters most and available to those who matter most
5. What challenges interest me? Abundance occurs when companies can engage not only employees' skills (competence) and loyalty (commitment), but also their values (contribution). The most engaged employees are generally those whose work gives them the opportunity to stretch while doing work they love and solving problems they care about.
6. How do I change, learn, and grow? Abundance acknowledges that failure can be a powerful impetus to growth and learning. When we face change and take risks to work outside our comfort zone, resist defensiveness about mistakes, learn from failure, and keep trying, we become not only more resilient, but more satisfied with life.
7. What delights me? Abundance thrives on simple pleasures. Sources of delight might include laughing at ourselves, appreciating excellence, relishing beauty, being present in the moment, and having fun at work. These sources of delight are highly personal, depending on the personality of the leader and the requirements of the employees.

Much of what brings meaning into our personal and professional lives can be categorized under through the above questions. When leaders help employees explore these seven

questions they help create abundant organizations with positive individual and organization results:

- higher commitment, better employee health, improved productivity and retention
- a leadership brand that builds investor confidence
- increased customer commitment (because customer attitudes about an organization correlate with the attitudes of its employees)
- increased investor confidence in future earnings and higher market value (based on intangible assets like leadership and quality of employees)
- improved community reputation, merited by stronger social responsibility.

Making meaning makes both sense and cents.