

Ulrichs' Argument for Meaning

The Why of Work by Dave and Wendy Ulrich argues that leaders should devote a lot more attention to helping employees find *meaning* at work. This takes us far beyond the usual realm of what leaders are asked to do. Is this a realistic idea or wishful thinking? If it is not a fantasy, then what does it entail?

Is Meaning a Luxury?

Let's start off with an optimistic scenario – you are in a well-run organization, employees are engaged, and you are wondering how to take things to the next level. In this case Ulrich absolutely has nailed it; meaning is fundamental to human existence and it's a topic most management theorists have ignored—so it represents an untapped opportunity. Furthermore, the book offers actionable ideas such as “Great leaders help employees build skills for professional friendships between people” not just philosophy. It might sound strange rolling out a “Meaning Program” the way you would roll out an ERP; but if you are serious, the book gives you the specifics you need to make enhancing meaning a part of organizational processes and culture.

However, if you start off with a more difficult scenario—an organization that seems to be flailing about—then being told you should spend time on ‘meaning’ seems airy-fairy. Leigh Branham, author of *Re-engage*, points out that many managers do not even buy the idea that they should be responsible for engaging employees; can you imagine the challenge in getting them to buy into the idea that they should be creating meaning? We usually think in terms of Maslow's hierarchy which posits self-actualization comes after more basic needs are fulfilled. But contrary to that scepticism, it strikes me that if an organization hasn't been able to get things together, maybe a focus on creating meaning is just what's needed to blow past all the roadblocks that have mired the organization in Dilbert-land.

In fact, the classic book on meaning is “Man's Search for Meaning” by Victor Frankel and it was inspired by his experiences in a concentration camp; hardly a top of Maslow's hierarchy kind of place. So this latter idea, that it's organizations in real difficulty that most need to help employees find meaning, has real weight.

The *Why of Work* talks a lot about abundance thinking. With an abundance mindset you would never accept “we don't have enough time for meaning”. An abundance mindset promises “there is always time for what matters”.

You'll need to make your own judgement, but there is a good case to be made that meaning is an essential nutrient and if you take care of that, you'll find it helps with everything else you are trying to do.

The Fallout of the Enlightenment

If you get past the idea that meaning is a luxury, you may still trip over the notion that it is somehow an illegitimate topic, a taboo. The Enlightenment project in hacking away our ties to ‘superstition’ over the past few hundred years, hacked away the legitimacy of ‘creating meaning’. This intellectual trend reached its apogee in neo-classical economics, where it is an abomination to see man as anything other than a ‘rational’ profit-maximizing automaton and organizations as anything other than profit-maximizing machines.

You can’t convince people to violate a taboo through argument, so you simply need to be aware that this is a challenge you’ll face if you choose to follow the path laid out in *The Why of Work*. However, I like to ask people, “Who would you rather work for: the MBA who skipped the economics classes to study meaning in the workplace or the one who aced their economics exam?” An appeal to the heart may be required to help people get past their fear of meaning.

Some Specifics from *The Why of Work*

Moving from philosophy to operations let me give you a better taste for the book by sharing a couple of specific recommendations:

- **Leaders help employees build professional friendships.** This follows from the insight that people derive meaning from their relationships. Building professional friendships is a learnable skill, for example employees need to learn how to ‘make and respond to bids’. Making a bid can be smiling, asking for help, or offering a compliment; responding to a bid is simply reacting positively to any of these bids. It’s simple, but this is an important technique for creating professional friendships and where this skill is lacking workplaces are cold and impersonal.
- **Leaders meld personal strengths and organizational capabilities.** HR professionals are familiar with the idea of building on strengths, and the Ulrichs suggest “People find a sense of meaning, even abundance, when they are in an organization where they fit and feel valued for doing exactly what they do well.” There are various formal and informal techniques for assessing an individual’s strengths; the manager who takes time to do so and finds the link from those strengths to the organizations capabilities will have created the soil from which meaning can grow.

What you notice when the Ulrichs get into specifics is that creating meaning sounds like something good managers would naturally do; you don’t need your leaders to become Zen masters.

A Personal Experience

I’ve been discussing *The Why of Work* as if this were a typical business book but it is a rather personal book both in how it is written and how you will experience it.

It invokes frequent pauses for personal reflection. It's also more fun that many management books and I have to include one story that really made me laugh:

"Dave once did some consulting for Harley-Davidson, and the company kindly gave him a Harley-Davidson signature leather jacket. The jacket embodied all it meant to be Harley-Davidson: tough, fast, wild, and hard around the edges. Dave had fun wearing the jacket because it changed how others perceived him. No more Mister Nice Guy! Then our quiet, academically oriented 16-year-old daughter found the jacket. She wore it to school one day. She came home and said, 'I met guys today I never knew existed before.' We hid the jacket!"

So "leadership of meaning" is a serious topic, but oddly it's a light-hearted one at the same time. The Ulrichs do a nice job of tying the pragmatic world of organizational processes and leadership behaviours to the profound world of meaning in our lives.

Getting a Copy

If you want the book and pre-order by May 1 you'll receive a free webinar (\$100 value)

The Why of Work: How Great Leaders Build Abundant Organizations to Deliver Value by Dave and Wendy Ulrich

<http://www.thewhyofwork.com>

"Principled, timely, and engaging, *The Why of Work* teaches that building a culture of abundance and common purpose is essential to organizational success. Without it, scarcity mentalities can easily destroy the unity you seek."

-Stephen R. Covey, bestselling author of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

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