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By

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High-Stake Interventions

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While I agreed with and share many of the observations that Christopher Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal made ("Changing the Role of Management: Beyond Strategy to Purpose," November-December 1994), I was disappointed with many of their solutions and recommendations. Not that there wasn't a trickle of truth in each of the solutions they suggested -- there was, which made their suggestions seem plausible. Instead, the problem I had is that they reinforced the patriarchal contract they were saying was at the root of the problem of lack of purpose in corporations.

As an employee, I'd be scared to know that my manager is trying to DO these things TO me, and I'd be distrustful that anyone in the world could even do these things if I wanted! Each of the phrases named above has a ring of the ones higher up DOING it to the ones down below. The prescription they lay out sounds a lot like the cause of the problem. Even when they say benignly that "(managers) must establish a link between the company and the employee" there remains this undertone and assumption that somehow management can single-handedly make a link between itself and its workers. Relationships that work are based on mutual consent, and not on one party deciding to "establish a link." This "one way romance" has the unfortunate effect of placing employees in the role of passive, weak recipients of a patriarchal management's favors.

Real purpose does not come above, and neither does the bulk of the responsibility for creating it. Instead, real purpose comes when each employee proactively creates their own, singular life purpose and then pursues it with passion. In short, there is no substitute for personal enlightenment and a personal commitment. The sad fact is, most corporations are deathly afraid of allowing each of their employees to find a purpose outside of the corporate definition. The fear is that they will all run off to either live on a Caribbean island or, worse, stay and wreak havoc in the "ranks." At the very least, they might lose a valued employee. At worst, they might experience a mass exodus.

If this sounds dangerous, consider the alternative. Do we really want a company full of people who have blindly adopted the company motto, mission, song, purpose and values as their own? Either they are extremely dependent and not much use in a risk-taking environment or they are empty and rely on the company to fill their lives.

To rephrase the authors and take their point another step, I'd say: Purpose is not primarily the reason an organization exists, it is primarily the reason an *individual* exists. As such, anyone from the CEO to the mail clerk can infuse an organization with purpose, simply by knowing their own and acting from it each day and in every way. By merely sharing it openly and asking other people what their own purpose is, they can begin to help people answer questions for themselves that should be the result of a question they are allowed to answer for themselves.

The fact that the corporation has no lived out purpose does not mean that one should be created by explicitly trying to define it. To put it bluntly, the corporation has no purpose because it has routinely employed purpose-less people. Corporations are in the business of hiring people who have taken great pains to trade their true selves for the latest corporate look. And corporations routinely create environments in which it is not safe to espouse values, vision or mission that are different from either those that are published or in-use.

The solution to lack of corporate purpose is not to expend energy in developing one. Instead, it is to assist each individual in developing a strong, positive personal purpose that incidentally, may or may not fit in with the company's vision. And the result may be that some will leave after they discover that they don't want to be there. Those that remain, however, will be committed and more committed than ever before because they have now fit their jobs and careers in with who they aspire to be as human beings, and not just as lawyers, engineers or accountants.

The alternative to not doing so is more management frustration. It is easy for every employee to learn how to pay lip service to the vision, mission, purpose, dogma, operating principles and purpose. It is maddeningly difficult, however, to take concrete steps that result in its authentic manifestation. In fact, it is so difficult that some, including IBM's Lou Gerstener, have said that their company does not need a vision or any of that stuff. While they're in the minority they do have a point -- it is a farce to talk about themes like empowerment and then suggest ways to implement it that dis-empower people. It is equally ridiculous to talk about corporate purpose when the corporation creates and promotes an internal environment of "non-purpose."

If we are truly to be free of the tendency to "create cogs in the perpetual motion machine" then we must stop trying to *make the cogs have purpose*. In a discussion about purpose, the organization looks to me to be more like a family than a machine. Lack of a corporate family purpose means thousands of cases of a lack of individual purpose. Period. The solution is to do more of what the authors credit Andersen Consulting with doing.

Develop people who, once they find and act out their purpose, could work here, anywhere or for themselves.