

The Development of Purpose for Leadership and Sustainable Wellbeing

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Abstract

The development of purpose is central to wellbeing, leadership and sustainability. Individuals and organizations with a clear purpose are more likely to act in ways that are consistent and authentic. Those that lack a sense of purpose are likely to be unnecessarily influenced by external factors and 'blown off course'. The development of individual and organizational purposes that contribute to a sustainable world are, therefore, crucial.

"Can purpose be developed?" - I believe it can. At least I believe that it's possible to help people discover or reconnect with their sense of purpose. In general there are three categories of leader - those with a clear purpose to contribute to a sustainable world, those with an alternative purpose (e.g. to make money), and those who are yet to connect to their purpose.

Leadership development interventions, therefore, need to be multi-targeted in their approach. We need to work with those leaders in the first category to help them be the most effective they can be. We also need to provide immersive learning experiences for the others to help them reconnect with themselves, with others and with the natural world in order to develop purposes aligned with what the world really needs.

Introduction

The intention of this paper is firstly to explore the notion of purpose in relation to leadership, sustainability and wellbeing and then to propose an approach to leadership development that maximizes the opportunity for leaders to connect to a purpose aligned with sustainability.

It will address number of key questions:

- What is meant by purpose?
- Why is purpose important for wellbeing, leadership and sustainability?
- Can purpose be developed?
- If it can, what leadership development interventions are required to develop leadership for sustainability?

This scope of this paper is the development of purpose in individual leaders, rather than the development of organization purpose; it is about the leadership development required for leaders who don't already have a purpose to contribute to a sustainable world, rather than for those who do. The recommendations are specifically designed for the type of leadership development programmes that are offered to leaders outside a business school setting, although I do believe that the principles that underpin the recommendations also apply in a business school context.

"What is meant by purpose?"

The notion of 'purpose' and its relation to how we live our lives has been a focus of discussion, research and contemplation throughout the ages. Debate on the 'purpose of life' is plentiful and opinions on purpose range from ego-centred to society-focused. Throughout this paper the concern is with the societal end of the purpose spectrum as, in my opinion, this type of purpose is needed to help leaders build organizations that contribute to a sustainable world. Purpose, therefore, is an "intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (Damon *et al.*, 2003, p.121), it's the sense of purpose that people have when

they're in service to the common good, where their personal sense of meaning intersects with what the world needs.

“Why is purpose important for wellbeing, leadership and sustainability?”

On an individual level having a clear sense of purpose or meaning has been strongly linked to personal wellbeing. Martin Seligman, the founder of the Positive Psychology movement, describes “Meaning” as one of the five elements of wellbeing (Seligman, 2011). The Action for Happiness Movement has identified “Ten Keys to Happier Living”, one of which is “Meaning”. They claim:

“People who have meaning and purpose in their lives are happier, feel more in control and get more out of what they do. They also experience less stress, anxiety and depression”.
(Action for Happiness, 2010)

In a 2013 global poll, people were surveyed on what were identified as five elements of wellbeing under the headings of ‘purpose, social, financial, community, and physical’. Those who responded as ‘thriving’ in response to the purpose questions were nearly eight times as likely to evaluate their current and future lives highly than those who indicated they were ‘suffering’ in relation to their purpose (Gallup Inc. and Healthways Inc., 2015).

It can be argued that this connection between purpose and wellbeing, in a business context, means that leaders whose purpose is aligned with their work are likely to experience greater personal wellbeing than those for whom this is not true. Indeed there can be a negative effect when leaders are required to do work that seems contrary to their purpose, leading to anxiety, stress and a feeling of disconnection. This highlights the importance of leaders working in organizations that are in alignment with their purpose so that they maintain their wellbeing and are able to be authentic in speaking up for what they believe to be right. When faced with what Bennis and Thomas (2002) describe as “crucible experiences” i.e. those experiences that test leaders and force them to question who they are and what really matters to them, these leaders will be able to respond with strength. Leaders who maintain their wellbeing are inevitably going to be able to help and lead others more effectively than those who are uncertain about their purpose or are caught up in their own anxiety, low moods or overthinking.

However, it doesn't necessarily follow that leaders who are authentic and aligned with their purpose will make business decisions that focus on sustainability – this is only likely to occur if the leader's purpose is also aligned with what the world needs.

The business leaders who are commonly perceived as doing the most to create sustainable business models all have a strong sense of purpose that is both “meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon *et al.*, 2003, p.121). The late Ray Anderson of Interface, Paul Polman of Unilever and John Mackay of Whole Foods all made a connection between their personal purpose, their role in their organization and their organization's role in the world and created visions for their organizations that operate at the intersection of what is good for business and what the world needs (Interfaceglobal.com, 2015; Unilever, 2015; Whole Foods Market, 2015). If we work on the basis that we need more leaders who are willing and able to operate at this intersection then, surely, this needs to be our focus for leadership development.

“Can purpose be developed?”

Yes, I believe it can – at least I believe we can help leaders discover or reconnect with their own sense of purpose. The more important issue is whether or not the type of purpose that leads to leadership action for a sustainable world can be developed. The realization of or connection to purpose is usually the result of an insight or series of insights into what really matters to a person. Our challenge as leadership development specialists, therefore, is twofold:

1. to create environments that will maximize the chances of an insight around personal purpose occurring, and
2. to help leaders make the connection between their purpose and what the world needs.

To achieve this I believe we firstly need to help leaders to reconnect to themselves and then to reconnect to others and the natural world.

Reconnection with Self

The first step in helping people connect to their sense of purpose is to raise their awareness of how our experience as humans actually works and to expose the myth of the ‘outside-in world’. We live in a society where the prevalent view is that external circumstances and conditions are the key factors in creating our experience of life; a society where we strive to achieve goals, to become secure and to own possessions in the belief that only by doing so we will be happy. However, life doesn’t work like this – it works from the ‘inside-out’ – and by pointing people back to their own inner wisdom I believe we can help them connect with their own individual sense of purpose.

To understand this ‘inside-out’ concept it’s worth looking at the Three Principles defined by Sydney Banks (1998). These principles of “Mind, Consciousness and Thought” were described by Banks as a “psychological trinity” (p.21) through which “all human behavior and social structures on earth are formed” (p.23). The principles are described by Michael Neill:

- There is an energy and intelligence behind life. This is ever present but is not ‘in control’ – it has no inherent morality or apparent point of view. It simply ensures that but for the interference of external circumstance, acorns become oak trees, cuts heal and life begets life (*The Principle of Mind*).
- The capacity to be aware and experience life is innate in human beings. It is a universal phenomenon. Our level of awareness in any given moment determines the quality of our experience (*The Principle of Consciousness*).
- We create our individual experience of reality via the vehicle of thought. Thought is the missing link between the formless world of pure potentiality and the created world of form (*The Principle of Thought*) (Neill, 2013, p.17)

Once we help people to realize that their experience and feelings are created through their ‘thought’ then their relationship with the outside world fundamentally changes. No longer do they believe that happiness needs to be found through external factors such as possessions, career status and relationships. Instead they become open to the realization that wellbeing and happiness is their natural state, that peace, security and clarity are their ‘factory default settings’. Living from this place of “Mind”, of innate wisdom frees people to be who they want to be. It provides them with the strength to be authentic, to live the life they want to live, to reconnect to their purpose, their ‘why’.

Reconnection with Others and the Natural World

In order to help leaders reconnect to a purpose to create a sustainable world, there's also another set of experiences that need to unfold so that they can connect to what the world needs. Along with the misunderstanding that we live in an 'outside-in' world, we also live in a society where an 'illusion of separation' is prevalent.

Charles Eisenstein (2013) tells the "Story of Separation", the evolution of humans and our society as a process of apparent separation - separation from others and from the natural world. Giles Hutchins (2014) also tracks this evolution and outlines how, particularly in the western world, we have moved from an animist culture where we believed we were at one with nature to a culture where individualism and separation dominate. In doing so we have lost our connection with others, with the natural world and with our inner wisdom. In the words of Sydney Banks:

"With wisdom people see *beyond* the filters and biases of race and culture, to realize the beauty in everyone. Such understanding enables people to stop fearing and distrusting those who are different, to see the commonality of human beings regardless of cultural differences. Wisdom applied to society would do more than anything else to halt the ethnic clashes and wars the world suffers from today". (Banks, 1998, p.136)

It is this universal wisdom that also connects us to the natural world, that recognizes the dependence we have on nature and that values the life giving power of the air, soil and water; it is what helps us recognize what Satish Kumar (2013) describes as "Soil, Soul and Society – a new trinity for our time".

The question here is, how can we develop purpose in leaders that is seen through the lens of connection rather than separation? Connection that will lead to a world that, as described by Charles Eisenstein's "Story of Interbeing", has "its reunion of humanity and nature, self and other, work and play, discipline and desire, matter and spirit, man and woman, money and gift, justice and compassion" (Eisenstein, 2013. p.13).

"What leadership development interventions are required to develop leadership for sustainability?"

In a *McKinsey Quarterly* article the authors, after talking with hundreds of chief executives, identify four main reasons for the lack of results seen by leadership development: 1) Overlooking context 2) Decoupling reflection from real work 3) Underestimating mind-sets 4) Failing to measure results (Gurdjian *et al.*, 2014). I would add to these four failings one more – that leadership development is also typically focused on what Lynda Gratton, in an interview with Jo Confino, describes as the 'outer journey' i.e. on business strategy and how to do accounts but not on the 'inner journey' where leaders find "their voice, their courage, their authenticity" (Confino, 2012).

To develop leaders who are able to create organisations that contribute to a sustainable world I believe we need leadership development that:

- Integrates the outer and inner journeys of leaders – that still pays attention to logical and emotional development whilst also creating space for deeper personal development and the realization of purpose.

- Is immersive and relevant – development leading to total engagement, connecting people to a deeper sense of themselves, connecting them to others, to the natural world and to what the world needs; development that is rooted in a context that is relevant to the participants.
- Is ongoing – insights, realizations and purpose can't be guaranteed at any particular time. Sometimes our experience is cumulative and so we need to create leadership development that is ongoing, where the responsibility for learning, development and curiosity is firmly with the individual learner.
- Is accessible and available to all leaders – at the start of 2014 SMEs accounted for 60% of UK private sector employment (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014) however often leaders in these organisations don't have access to the 'leading edge' development available to those in large corporations.

Integration of inner and outer journey

This leadership journey needs to start with a foundation of awareness of where our experience as humans comes from – a grounding in the Three Principles of Mind, Consciousness and Thought will form a strong basis for the development of purpose. In a recent *TedX Talk*, Steve Taylor defined four types of purpose: personal accumulation, altruistic/idealistic, self-development and transpersonal, describing the last one as where:

“We actually step aside and rather than direct our purpose let it start to direct us, where we let go and allow the purpose to flow through us”. (Taylor, 2015)

This echoes Bank's notion of living from Mind – it's about going with the flow and being open to what emerges and as such is contrary to much of the current focus of leadership development that is about taking action based primarily on logical reasoning.

This approach might, therefore, be hard to sell to the predominantly left brained, logical-rational organizations that we have created. However, as already discussed, insights or realizations about our purpose can't be achieved on demand and so we need to create the time and space for leaders to reflect on what's important to them, to engage in dialogue with others and to carry out experiments to see what happens when they 'let go' and follow their inner wisdom.

If our goal is to develop leaders who take leadership action to create sustainable business models then this 'inner journey' needs to take place alongside an 'outer journey'. What is needed from leaders in the future is an integrated approach to the challenges, an approach that employs all our human capacity and potential. Leadership development programmes, therefore, need to mirror and role-model this type of approach.

The most integrative approach that I have come across is Theory U, as described by Scharmer and Kaufer (2013). Theory U has emerged from the need to help people make a shift from what they term an “ego-system awareness” that cares about the well-being of oneself to an “eco-system awareness” that cares about the wellbeing of all, including oneself. Theory U leads people through a process of observing and immersing themselves in the places that matter most to their situation, then retreating and reflecting, allowing the inner knowing to emerge and finally exploring the future by developing a prototype that forms the springboard for future performance. As explained on the Presencing Institute website: “Theory U has come to be understood in three primary ways: first as a

framework; second, as a method for leading profound change; and third, as a way of being - connecting to the more authentic of higher aspects of our self" (Presencing.com, 2015).

I believe that programmes that apply the idea, tools and techniques of Theory U combined with an understanding of the Three Principles will result in leadership development that is the best of both worlds – an integrated and simultaneous approach to the development of the inner and outer journey.

Immersion and Relevance

Experiential leadership development is based on creating immersive experiences for leaders. To develop leaders who will create sustainable organizations I believe that these immersive experiences need to engage leaders directly with what the world needs.

Most leaders in business are probably aware of the challenges the world faces, however, being aware of something and being connected to it are two different things. Confino talks about the triggers for transformation in business leaders – “It is often an epiphany rather than greater knowledge that leads to the raising of consciousness as well as concrete action” (Confino, 2012). Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) believe that these types of transformational moments can be facilitated by getting people to “explore the edges” of the system and of the self. In my experience the on-the-edge experiences that take the form of field trips to sites of ecological devastation and visits to communities that are struggling or are under threat in some way can have huge personal impact on people and have been described by participants as ‘life changing’. Not only do they elicit an emotional response but also help to shift perspectives as people are challenged to see a situation from a viewpoint other than their own.

There’s much debate in the field of sustainability on how to engage the non-engaged in sustainability issues – at the activist side of the spectrum there’s often a desire to shock people with horrific facts; at the other end of the spectrum the desire is to sell the dream of a brighter future. Macy and Brown (2014) offer a spiral that covers different parts of this spectrum, a spiral of Gratitude, Honouring the Pain, Seeing with New Eyes, Going Forth. On our leadership development programmes we need to help leaders follow this spiral (a spiral that is similar in its flow to Theory U) – they need to be able to quieten their minds and experience the beauty of the world and also feel the suffering caused through unsustainable business practices. Our immersive experiences then need to provide the space for leaders to move on to sensing the emerging future and ‘seeing with new eyes’ so that they can ‘go forth’ and in Theory U terms, prototype and perform.

Whilst full immersion is the ideal, it might not always be feasible in terms of time, travel or budget. If this is the case then we need to be creative about employing other methodologies that get as close as possible to the immersive experience, for example, through partnering with local community groups or social enterprises that have similar issues to those of the participants, or running simulations that re-create the real world in an engaging and immersive way.

Whatever the experience, if it’s not considered relevant then its impact is likely to be low. If experiences aren’t seen as relevant then, as leadership development specialists, we have to work hard to help leaders make the connection to their world. In my experience this is often a difficult process and has limited results. Therefore, where possible, the experiences should directly relate to

the challenges of the organization and leaders by being positioned in (or based on) their local communities, supply chain or industry networks.

Ongoing Development

It's time to review our traditional notion of a leadership development programme that might be delivered by an external provider and takes place in a number of two or three-day modules over a period of months and then ends. As already said, you can't guarantee insights – they don't come on demand. So leadership development needs to be an ongoing process of enquiry, practice and reflection, where the responsibility lies firmly with the learner. We need to find new ways to keep people connected and committed to their realizations on a programme when faced with the 'real world' challenges back at work. If we are able to help them connect strongly to their purpose then this is likely to be easier. However, I think we also need to reconsider where the typical locus of responsibility for learning lies in our leadership development. Where it exists, we need to switch what is sometimes a parent/child focus of leadership development programmes where development is 'done to' someone to an adult/adult focus where as learning development professionals we are responsible for creating a space where leaders can, through different experiences, experiment with and pursue their own learning.

Accessible Programmes

We need to embrace technology and social networks to both support ongoing learning and to enable those leaders who do not work in large corporations to have access to the same development experiences as those that do. For leaders in organizations with limited budgets where the cost of face-to-face programmes or the type of immersive experiences described is prohibitive, we need to be creative in finding ways to replicate these programmes using virtual technology. This is already being seen with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and the liberalization of university education online. However, there is still much scope for the development of organizational leadership programmes that have the potential to connect people at a global level and to facilitate cross-country, cross-sector and cross-industry collaboration through virtual projects that have real-world impact.

Conclusion

In this paper I have put forward the case for a new type of leadership development focusing on both the leader's inner and outer journey, helping leaders connect their inner purpose with what the world needs. I feel that these ideas are still outside the scope of much leadership development at this point in time and, I believe, that unless we start to focus on them, we will simply perpetuate what Eisenstein (2013) describes as "the old story". We need to make sure that leadership development really counts, that it helps to change perspectives, that it challenges the status quo and that it creates situations for leaders where they realize for themselves what's important.

My request is that leadership development specialists think big, are bold in their proposals to organizations and creative in the solutions that they offer so that they can successfully help leaders in all types of organizations to develop leadership that is purposefully aligned with the sustainable wellbeing that this world needs.

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