

The Eighth Element of Great Managing

If you want the most from employees, they must feel connected to a larger corporate mission

by Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter

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In 1922, the Pacific Ice Cream Manufacturers Association issued what it called a "Declaration of Principles" -- a sort of mission statement. It began: "We believe in ice cream."

It ascribes lofty ideals to an unusually common product. "We believe," it continues "in the great future that lies before the industry, because ice cream is the one product which contains all of the life-giving, body-building properties peculiar to milk, combined with a variety and palatability found in no other milk product." Beyond its 1920s-style boosterism, the declaration of the Pacific Ice Cream Manufacturers Association reveals a much deeper and older feeling -- not about what it means to make and sell ice cream, but to be human and looking for meaning in the mundane.

Ice cream is a strange thing in which to believe. It's just a dessert, after all, and just one of many at that, something hardly worth glorifying. But to someone who buys the cream, runs the factory, agonizes over the right flavors, and gets a thrill out of seeing a little boy or girl savor a double-scoop cone, being in the ice cream business is a way to make a small contribution to the quality of life -- the happiness -- of his customers. So when Blue Bunny Ice Cream calls its flavor mixers "colossally creative artisans" who work not just in the small city of Le Mars, Iowa, but in "The Ice Cream Capital of the World" making "America's favorite treat," most of them really mean it. People cling to greater purposes. Ice cream makers "believe" in ice cream.

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The need to feel this kind of connection to some larger purpose is not limited to one industry. It's a primary motivator of employees on the job and therefore emerged as the Eighth Element of Great Managing, captured by the statement "The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important."

As with the rest of the 12 Elements, the degree to which a team agrees with this statement is predictive of its performance on a wide array of measures. For instance, business units in the top quartile of Gallup's engagement database on this element average from 5% to 15% higher profitability than bottom-quartile units. Mission-driven workgroups suffer 30% to 50% fewer accidents and have 15% to 30% lower turnover. Employees who feel

connected to the mission of their company are also more likely to report that humor or laughter plays a positive role in their productivity.

Why the extraneous is integral

The strange thing about the Eighth Element is how extraneous it is to the job itself and the employee's material well-being. The absence of many of the other elements -- job clarity, the proper equipment, a match with one's talents, consistent feedback -- can create real obstacles to actual production. It's easy to see why they are required to get the job done. The same cannot be said for the Eighth Element, which is strictly an emotional need -- and a higher level one at that -- as if the employee can't energize himself without knowing how his job fits into the grand scheme of things.

The data say that's just what happens. If a job were just a job, it really wouldn't matter where someone worked. A good paycheck, decent benefits, reasonable hours, and comfortable working conditions would be enough. The job would serve its function of putting food on the table and money in the kids' college accounts. But a uniquely human twist occurs after the basic needs are fulfilled. The employee searches for meaning in her vocation. For reasons that transcend the physical needs fulfilled by earning a living, she looks for her contribution to a higher purpose. Something within her looks for something in which to believe.

Companies routinely adopt high ideals as part of their mission. Lowe's Home Improvement stores aim not just to sell lumber and hardware, but to offer "practically everything customers need to build, beautify and enjoy their homes." Kodak doesn't just sell film; it "continues to expand the ways images touch people's daily lives." Kellogg's aspires to do more than make cereal; instead, "we make the world a little happier by bringing our best to you." Siam Commercial Bank in Thailand seeks to "dedicate ourselves to the quality and righteousness of our work, to work as a team so that we shall provide the best of services, to respect human values, and to participate to the best of our ability in our society and nation."

As in the Ice Cream Declaration of Principles, there are large dollops of marketing syrup in these statements. There is also a reason why such statements appeal to customers and, when backed up by the company's culture, why they strongly motivate employees. Workers thirst for something noble in which to believe and invest themselves.

Claremont Graduate University Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi tells a story of teaching seminars on midlife crises to high-level executives, employing "the best theories and research results in developmental psychology." The seminars were well-received, but something was missing. "I was never quite satisfied that the material made enough sense," he wrote.

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Dr. Csikszentmihalyi decided to try starting the sessions by reviewing Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the more-than-600-year-old poem that begins, "In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark forest, for the right way I had completely lost." The professor hoped that instilling his discussions with greater meaning would help with the teaching.

"I was rather concerned about how the harried business executives would take to this centuries-old parable. Chances were, I feared, that they would regard it as a waste of their precious time," he wrote. "I need not have worried. We never had as open and as serious a

discussion of the pitfalls of midlife, and of the options for enriching the years that would follow, as we had after talking about the *Commedia*."

Stories like Dr. Csikszentmihalyi's hint at why quantitative studies are finding that the motivating power of salary, commissions, and even awards is limited. "The most recent evidence suggests that money is losing its power as a central motivator, in part because the general population is realizing, in greater numbers, that above a minimum level necessary for survival, money adds little to their subjective well-being," wrote researcher Amy Wrzesniewski. It's not uncommon for employees of highly engaged workgroups, from entry level to senior executives, to mention having turned down higher pay to join or remain with a company they believed would provide more meaningful work with a more enjoyable team.

The need for a deeper connection

Why people gravitate toward a larger purpose is a mystery. One is unlikely to get an acceptable reason for it outside of religion (which may be why religions last longer than businesses). The need appears to be nearly universal. When respondents to a 1990 Gallup Poll were asked, "How important to you is the belief that your life is meaningful or has a purpose?" 83% said "very important," and 15% said "fairly important."

Belief that one is doing something meaningful is important to a person's psychological and even physical health. It's not necessary for managers to understand why people need to dedicate themselves to an endeavor greater than themselves, only that they appreciate and work to fulfill this need.

Just how deep these connections go has surprised even professional researchers of "meaningfulness" in the workplace. In 1993, University of Utah doctoral student Melissa M. Koerner conducted interviews with healthcare workers who helped the underprivileged in an unnamed western United States city. As she talked to the physician's assistants, nurse practitioners, and a doctor, she found that their connection with their job bordered on feelings of "sacredness."

"The study's original focus was to explore the nature of the relationship between healthcare providers and their patients; the presence of sacredness in the relationship was not initially an area of inquiry," wrote Koerner. "However, during the investigation, anecdotes and comments with religious undertones were so prevalent among informants, that sacredness eventually became the centerpiece of the study."

A 41-year-old nurse practitioner named Linda described how helping a family get through several crises created a deep affection for them and made her feel that her job was important. "I met her family when her husband came in very sick. He ended up having pancreatic cancer and dying within about three or four months of the time I met him. She was pregnant with their first child. I took care of her little girl after she was born, and then I took care of her. I just really liked her. I enjoyed the whole family," said Linda. "To be involved in the whole dying process, and the whole birth and life process of other folks -- it makes you feel like what you're doing is really useful and good."

Koerner found that patients and healthcare providers routinely mentioned many of the aspects of good service traditionally observed: responsiveness, empathy, and assurance, for example. "In contrast, when describing their most positive medical experiences, both provider and patient-informants' descriptions often emphasized sacred, rather than secular, qualities," she wrote. "They discussed 'special relationships' based on 'real, deep, basic human connections.' One told 'a magical kind of story'; others talked about 'really making a difference.' . . . One patient-informant repeatedly used the word 'weird' to describe her unusually positive relationship with her healthcare provider. Both providers

and patients viewed their best healthcare experiences and relationships as extraordinary, significant, and meaningful."

It is not difficult to understand how healthcare workers could see their work as important. They are, after all, in the business of preserving lives, delivering babies, and directly improving the quality of life for their patients. Because of this, healthcare organizations typically have higher scores on the Eighth Element. So do schools, environmental quality organizations, and people working in the justice system. What's puzzling is how someone working at a clinic or hospital could feel like their job is not important. And yet some do: One-third of hospital workers give a low score to this element. Less than half of workers in any industry feel strongly connected to their organization's quest.

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Equally surprising are the high percentages of workers in less than life-and-death careers who feel a strong connection to the goals of their organizations. In the Gallup database, one quarter or more of the workers in the retail trades, in finance, and in chemical manufacturing strongly agree that the purpose of their company makes them feel their job is important. While it is somewhat easier to find a mission-inspired employee in stereotypically altruistic vocations such as teaching and healing, a sense of meaning in a job is less a function of the industry than of the work environment itself.

It can happen in any job, no matter how seemingly common. Recently, a businesswoman reported that when she had a flat tire on the road, a Good Samaritan stopped to help her put on the spare. "I used to be a tow truck driver," he said while loosening the bolts on the flat. "I miss it. It was great to be in a job where you knew every day you would get the chance to help people."

Conversely, high-profile professionals sometimes find that perks and high pay are not enough. "I have been an experienced hire in consulting firms that have no culture," the leader of an international strategy firm complained. "They have no culture because they are composed of experienced hires who have built no connection, commonalities, or common processes. They are, in fact, cultures of cohabiting independent contributors. . . . You do not feel that you fit because there is nothing to fit into."

Finding meaning in the dirt

A small group of sociologists specializes in the study of occupations they call "dirty work." These messy, distasteful, or stigmatized jobs are on the other end of the spectrum from the astronaut, doctor, athlete, and scientist answers that kids commonly give to the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Dirty work typically includes jobs such as sanitation workers, prison guards, hotel maids, shoe shiners, and psychiatric ward attendants. One might think that type of job would diminish a person's self-image and be largely lacking in meaning.

Arizona State University Professor Blake Ashforth thought that among those doing dirty work, he would find a subculture of depressed and angry employees. Instead, he was surprised at the strength of their drive to make their jobs meaningful. These workers often throw off the social stigma and see the everyday value of what they do. "When somebody's stopped up," said one septic service owner, "they're pretty happy to see you."

One woman told a New Jersey newspaper that she quit a personnel job she'd held for

seven years so she could work at an animal shelter, despite the fact that she must euthanize many dogs and cats. "The paycheck (at the old job) no longer was enough. I wanted more," she said. Because of the heartbreak, she said, "There are days I go home and hug my dog for dear life. Every single day you come back fighting again." A corrections officer told *The Wall Street Journal* that he knows "it's not smart" to work in a prison, but he likes the mission "to protect the public and protect your coworkers and protect the inmates from themselves."

There is no such thing as an inherently meaningless job. There are conditions that make the seemingly most important roles trivial and conditions that make ostensibly awful work rewarding. "One implication of the motivated and socially embedded desire and search for meaning is that any task, job, or organization can be imbued with meaningfulness. The desire spawns the reality," wrote Ashforth and fellow researcher Michael G. Pratt.

One view of this phenomenon separates people's views of their employment into three categories. The least engaged group sees their work as simply a job: a necessary inconvenience and a way of earning money with which they can accomplish personal goals and enjoy themselves outside of work. The second group sees their work as a career. They enjoy the increased pay, prestige, and status that come as they work their way up the corporate ladder. The third group considers its work a "calling."

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"In callings, the work is an end in itself and is usually associated with the belief that the work contributes to the greater good and makes the world a better place," wrote researcher Amy Wrzesniewski. As with Koerner's research on "sacredness," the term "calling" doesn't necessarily have a religious definition. Each person filters the world through his own lens. "It is the individual doing the work who defines for him- or herself whether the work does contribute to making the world a better place," Wrzesniewski stressed.

No matter how the employee makes sense of the world and her role in it, if she sees a connection substantial enough to consider her work a calling, she gets more out of work, and the organization gets more out of her. "Only for those with callings is work a wholly enriching and meaningful activity," wrote Wrzesniewski.

Because of this connection, those with callings more strongly identify with the team, have less conflict, trust management more, are more committed to the team, work through things better, and put in more time at work, whether they are compensated or not. Here too, the job itself doesn't determine its meaning. "A schoolteacher who views the work as a job and is simply interested in making a good income does not have a calling, while a garbage collector who sees the work as making the world a cleaner, healthier place could have a calling," wrote the professor.

The data do not indicate that every employee wants his or her job to be filled with cosmic interactions. For many, it will be enough to know that their work helped the company make a better batch of cattle feed, deliver millions of packages on time, or sell a new line of clothing. However, having large proportions of employees who are there just to draw a paycheck and who don't care about the larger purpose of the business can be a tremendous drag on retention, customer attitudes, safety, productivity, and -- ultimately -- profitability.

In general, and contrary to many senior executives' overestimation of their influence,

companies do not have a homogenous culture. Company leaders don't have as much influence on workers as do front-line managers. The Eighth Element is the most dramatic exception to this trend. How executives feel about the company's mission is strongly correlated with the assessments of mid-level managers. How those managers feel about the Eighth Element is strongly correlated with the assessments of front-line employees. Unlike most of the other Elements of Great Managing, this one cascades from the top down, losing strength along the way, but is still closely tied to how much commitment to the corporate mission exists at the top.

The second half of the Eighth Element statement -- the company's mission or purpose "makes me feel my job is important" -- requires more than just persuading employees that their employer is in a worthy line of business. The most highly motivated and productive employees push hard because they feel like their work makes a difference to attaining those worthy goals. Despite the high correlation between senior leadership and front-line commitment to the mission, more than any other element, this one loses the most power along the way. While two-thirds of executives in a typical company strongly agree with the mission item, less than one-third of street-level associates do. The employees are plugged in, but they frequently find that little juice reaches the outlet by their cubicle.

Given that a customer is far more likely to see a front-line worker than a member of the senior team, this loss of power makes it difficult for an enterprise to convey its passion to customers. What the customer sees is never as good as when employees have something in which to believe -- even if it's just ice cream.

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