Can Higher Purpose Help Your Team Survive and Thrive?

By Brad Wolfe | March 10, 2015 | 1 Comment

A conversation with Twitter's Niki Lustig about how the social media giant fosters a sense of purpose among their employees.

A **study** published last year in *Psychological Science* **suggests that having a sense of** purpose can literally add years to your life. This raises an interesting question: if employees feel that their work has purpose, might that add years to the life of their organization?

Given that the life expectancy of organizations has precipitously declined over the past 20 years, this question isn't just an academic one. In fact, more than 50 percent of new business in the United States now close their doors within four years. Employers need to find effective ways to help their organizations survive and for their employees to thrive in their roles at work.

Niki Lustig, a leader of the Learning and Organizational Development team at Twitter.

This is where purpose comes in. Simply put, having a sense of purpose in your job means that you feel that your work makes positive contributions to the world, beyond earning yourself a paycheck or improving your company's bottom line—you feel a commitment to something bigger than yourself.

A 2007 study published by the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* suggests that managers can effectively boost the work experience and well-being of their employees by helping them connect to a job-related higher purpose.

What's more, there is evidence that purpose is tied to positive financial performance for an entire organization: Deloitte's 2013 Core Beliefs and Culture Survey revealed that 91 percent of respondents who believe that their company has a strong sense of purpose also say their company has a history of strong financial performance. By contrast, among those who report that their company doesn't have a strong purpose, only 66 percent say it has a history of financial health.

So how can organizations foster a sense of purpose among their employees or members?

To answer that question, I turned to Niki Lustig, a leader of the Learning and Organizational Development team at Twitter. She is responsible for boosting organizational effectiveness by helping managers and employees grow in their roles and develop the skills they need to be successful.

Lustig believes that a sense of purpose is crucial not only for Twitter as a whole, but also for the individual teams that comprise it.

"One of the things we get challenged with all the time is helping leaders and managers define the purpose of their team's existence," says Lustig. "What does that look like in terms of anchoring teams' objectives to the work they're doing, and how does that tie to the broader vision of the company?"

To tackle this challenge, she introduced an initiative at Twitter to help managers define the

unique purposes of their teams. She facilitated this process by creating a scalable workshop focused on drafting team purpose statements. It has now been rolled out to 120 employees at the company but was first prototyped on Lustig's own team.

She started by creating an internal "Purpose Pre-Work Survey," which had nine short questions. Each person on her team took 10 minutes—no more, no less—to respond to them. The first three questions engaged people at an individual level:

> **1. What excited you most about taking your job at Twitter?**
> 2. What gets you out of bed every day to come to work?
> 3. What impact do you personally want to have on Twitter?

The next three questions asked employees about their teams:

> **4. What do you want our team to be doing that we aren't?**
> 5. Describe what our team does that no other team at Twitter can do or does do.
> 6. In three words, what is the essence of our team's purpose for existence?

Finally, the last three questions expanded to consider the relationship between the team and the Twitter organization as a whole:

> **7. What is one thing you wish that everyone at Twitter knew about** our team?
> 8. What would an ideal partnership look like between our team and the business?
> 9. What are some ways we can educate Tweeps about how to partner with us and leverage our team more effectively? ["Tweeps" are how employees refer to themselves internally at Twitter]

Before attending a Purpose Statement Workshop, each team member must read every one of their colleagues' responses to the survey. Lustig finds that a sense of unity develops when employees learn why their fellow team members were initially sparked to join the company.

"Even though we encounter challenges and frustrations," she says. "Remembering why we came here and what we set out to do, and hearing it from peers and colleagues, is so inspiring."

Listen to the full interview with Niki Lustig on Culture Champion Radio, presented by Delivering Happiness in collaboration with the Greater Good Science Center. This is the first in a new series about applying positive psychology insights to the workplace!

Replace "Twitter" with the organization you work for, or another organization to which you belong. How do you answer those nine questions about purpose? Do you think that you, your team, and your entire organization have a strong sense of purpose? Do you know what drew your teammates to your organization?

At the Purpose Statement Workshop, Lustig guides teams through the messy process of consolidating differing opinions into a single concise purpose statement. Lustig believes that these statements should be "inspirational and aspirational." At this stage, she thinks it's most important to consider "internal fit," or the degree to which the statement fits tightly and cohesively with other aspects of the organization's environment and product/service offerings.

In that vein, Lustig links the purpose workshops to Twitter's core product: Since Twitter's tool is focused on sharing small bursts of communication with a maximum of 140 characters, Lustig makes sure the

purpose statements do not exceed this length. (She even takes this theme one step further by making all workshops 140 minutes!)

"We've leveraged a lot of the Twitter platform principles," explains Lustig. "Real time, talking about real issues that managers are facing in their day-to-day, real conversation, nano-learning moments." Lustig's team came up with their own statement of in their 140-minute session, boiled down, naturally, to 140 characters:

> **Setting Twitter up for Success, Setting Tweeps up for Life: Designing** opportunities to grow + learn everyday. here [at Twitter]. and in the world.

All too often, executives and leaders assume that it's enough to define one overarching purpose statement for the entire organization without paying attention to teams and individuals. Yet research suggests it's crucial to follow Lustig's approach and create purpose statements at different levels of the organization.

For instance, in a study by Olivia Kiriakidou and Lynne Millward of the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom, the researchers measured the level of commitment employees feel to their organization; the results suggest that "organizational members in separate divisions or functional departments may have distinct sub-organizational identity beliefs that are internalized in different levels and degrees." In other words, what resonates for one group of employees may not resonate for another.

As a result, the authors conclude that management should not bolster employee commitment to an organization by "presenting employees with monolithic solutions." Indeed, it makes more sense to meet employees closer to where they are, by bolstering their identity around their own teams and divisions.

In any case, defining purpose is only the first big step. Next comes the tricky process of helping organizational members actually live out that purpose every day. You can learn more about how Niki Lustig has tried to foster a sense of purpose at Twitter by listening to our full conversation.

We also welcome your questions and comments below about how to identify individual and organizational purposes, as well as how to make them come to life at work. After all, purpose may be a matter of life and death.

About The Author

Brad Wolfe is the Sultan of Content at the culture + happiness consultancy, Delivering Happiness, and a contributing writer to the Greater Good Science Center. He graduated with an M.A. in Organizational Behavior from Stanford University and received his M.B.A. from Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley, where he has recently served as coach/lecturer on the topics of creativity and innovation.