



## Exploring Personal Purpose

### Do You Have a Defined Sense of Personal Purpose?

January is a great time to think about purpose. Although, exploring purpose is not like making New Year's resolutions. It is a deeper and ongoing process. We have just completed one of the most challenging years in most of our lives. In 2009, the financial markets reached 12-year lows, companies experienced significant upheaval, home foreclosures escalated and many people lost their jobs. As you reflect upon the past few years, can you say that you are living a life that matters?

As Americans, we don't necessarily focus on purpose. We are busy living in a quick-fix, instant-gratification society. I never thought about the subject of purpose until I entered The Hudson Institute Life Launch program in 2002. I decided to enter this program and the professional coaching certification program because I knew I wanted more from my work. I had everything I thought I wanted including a well-paying job and a great deal of autonomy. However, I still had a nagging feeling inside that something was missing.

### What is Purpose?

Purpose is the reason you are here on this earth. It is the inner motivation, which gets you out of bed in the morning. Once you satisfy your basic needs of survival and earning a living, purpose is what provides meaning to your life. Richard Leider, the author of *The Power of Purpose*, says that we ask the following questions in our quest for purpose – “Who am I? What am I meant to do here? What am I trying to do with my life?”

### Why Does Purpose Matter?

Purpose gives you a sense of direction in life. It provides you with energy and inspiration. When you are clear about what matters to you and what moves you, you are more likely to live a fulfilling life. You can more effectively manage the challenges and surprises that come your way because you have a clear sense of what you want.

Leadership and business experts like Bill George, Bob Anderson and Dan Pink have identified purpose as an important factor in successful leadership. The more a leader can relate his or her personal purpose to the purpose of the organization, the more effective his or her leadership impact is likely to be. The desire to perform goes beyond short-term results and lucrative compensation plans.

Bill George highlighted Andrea Jung, CEO of Avon Products, in his book, *True North*. Over time, she recognized that her personal leadership purpose was to “empower women.” Her purpose ties in with Avon Product’s vision of being “the company that best understands and satisfies the product, service and self-fulfillment needs of women globally.” In his article, *The Spirit of Leadership*, Bob Anderson of The Leadership Circle states, “Leadership is fundamentally about realizing our higher purpose and taking actions that make that purpose real in the conditions of our life.” Bob’s work highlights the importance of combining personal development with organizational systems change efforts. Dan Pink, author of *Drive*, highlights purpose as one of the three elements of true motivation. He says, “The most deeply motivated people – not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied – hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves.”

### **How Do You Identify Purpose?**

Exploring purpose requires you to slow down and reflect. Put away the blackberry and cell phone. Take yourself away from your daily routines, so you can eliminate distractions. I find it very helpful to get out of my office. Periodically, I will take a note pad and one book to a coffee shop. When I relax into those moments, I feel inspired, spacious and alive. I generate all kinds of thoughts and ideas. My creative juices start flowing.

Once you enter a space of quiet and reflection, I encourage you to consider one or all of the following exercises. You do not need to ponder them all at the same time.

- 1) **Think of the times when you have felt most alive or in the flow.** What was going on during that time? What did you love about those experiences? What did you learn about yourself and what matters to you? For me, the best times revolve around interactions with people and spending time in nature. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes about “flow” experiences in his book, *Finding Flow*. **Conversely, reflect upon the times when you felt out of alignment or in a state of conflict.** What was going on? What did those experiences have to teach you about what you want out of your life? One of my most difficult challenges was in a former job. That experience reminded me that I want to be part of a team that values collaborating, developing people, appreciating differences, embracing conflict and focusing on truly serving the customer. The phrase, “that’s just the way it is” is not acceptable to me. I also became aware of my reactive tendencies when I am shocked by other people’s behavior.
- 2) **Another way to explore purpose is to pay attention to the frequent clues, signs and synchronicities that show up in your life.** Gregg Levoy discusses synchronicities a great deal in his book, *Callings*. These signs show up in a variety of ways including book titles, articles that come across your desk, dreams, conversations you overhear, physical symptoms, music, art, and poetry. Notice what resonates with you. During my stressful job situation, I decided to tell a colleague that I was going to resign.

She tried to convince me to stay. When I got home that evening, I felt sick. Every bone in my body told me that I could not stay. A month or two before my resignation, I went to my doctor for a physical. While I waited in the exam room, I looked up at the magazine rack. On the cover of the March 29, 2004 issue of *Business Week* was the headline, “ACT TWO: Ann Fudge’s two-year break changed her life.” I had several other signs that confirmed my decision to pursue a different direction in my career.

- 3) **A third approach is to create a list of things you want to do, have or become in order to be happy.** Take a look at each item on your list. Why does it matter to you? What about it inspires you? How would you like it to be part of your future? Some of the things on my list include interacting with people, building community, lifelong learning and development, spending time in nature, laughter and integrity.

### **Write a purpose statement.**

When you have completed these exercises, identify the common patterns and themes. I have gone through all of these exercises during the past eight years. The same patterns show up over and over again. Finally, create a purpose statement that captures the most important themes. It should be simple and inspiring. Post the statement in your office or a place where you will view it frequently. Use this statement to guide your decision making, the priorities in your life, and your professional and leadership development.



## References

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