

The why of work

Business leaders who tap in to employees' reasons for fronting up to work each morning can unleash deeper levels of engagement and help create more energised workplaces.

When earlier this year Marjolein Lips-Wiersma and Lani Morris published their groundbreaking book *The Map of Meaning*, they were sharing decades of study and insights into one of management's most vexing questions. Why do some workplaces hum like beehives while others appear stuffed to the gills with reluctant clock-watchers?

Lips-Wiersma is an associate professor at the University of Canterbury's Department of Management. Morris is an organisational behaviour practitioner and the founding director of the Holistic Development Group.

Their research shows people yearn for personal meaning through four key ways. We all want unity with others and an opportunity to provide service to them. We also want to be able to express our full potential and an opportunity to develop our full selves.

In *The Map of Meaning: A guide to sustaining our humanity at work*, Lips-Wiersma and Morris posit that leaders are

routinely destroying employees' ability to fulfil themselves in these ways.

Many business leaders try to solve the problem of lack of engagement, for example, by setting up yet more systems with which employees must comply. Not surprisingly, many of these culture, vision and engagement management initiatives alienate people even more.

Yet leaders who can help create what Lips-Wiersma and Morris call meaningful workplaces are rewarded with greater productivity. Their people are more creative and have a deeper sense of accomplishment. There's less stress, less absenteeism and more commitment to work. Challenges are faced constructively as people find energising ways of working together on what is important.

Marjolein Lips-Wiersma explains.

How does meaningful work help business leaders better manage the talent in their workplaces?

Meaningful work answers the question of

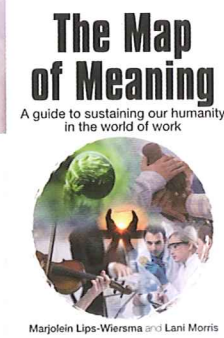
why we do something. It addresses the point or purpose of our activities and asks "why is this worthwhile"? When we look for talent, we look for skills. But we also

look for a deep engagement as people who have this are more likely to collaborate, innovate, look for multiple solutions to a problem, and seek out the best one rather than the easiest.

These are the people who take ownership and are the people you want. Ask current and potential employees not only how but also why they do what they do, and look for that spark, because when people know why they do something, they can answer almost any question around 'how'.

Isn't meaning a luxury that we can't afford?

This question assumes that we can do away with meaning or take it off the shelf when it benefits the organisation. However, our research shows that people, by their very nature, already know what



Marjolein Lips-Wiersma.



is meaningful and adjust their discretionary effort accordingly. The human need for meaning is inescapable. When people stand in a place of meaning they reclaim their strength and become responsible.

After the Christchurch earthquake, we saw that people naturally sought (comm)unity and found ways to serve. We saw workmen as well as artists rejoicing in expressing their full potential in fixing, removing and beautifying things and that people's inner selves were developed as they behaved decently and responsibly. This is not a luxury, it is the very fabric of human organising.

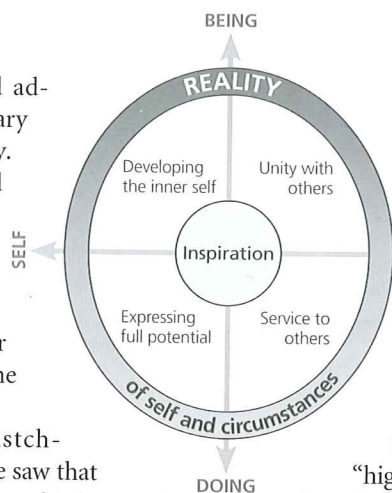
You talk about meaning in a very concrete way, so you are not talking about "the meaning of life"?

Of course we are. Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor, found that people function much better when they have an answer to, "what makes my life worth living?" When we ask people what makes their work worthwhile we find the same dimensions of meaning always emerge regardless of worldview or occupation.

If we know what is meaningful, why do we need a map?

People often talk about meaning but in a negative way: "I don't see the point of this meeting, paperwork, this course." As a result they withhold their effort or ideas or find ways to distract themselves at work.

The map makes meaning visible. When it is made visible, it becomes legitimate to ask "why are we doing this?" Does it create more unity, more service, more opportunities to use our talents, less conflict between our personal and organisational inner selves? This way it can be taken into account in decision making and we can create more of it and stop destroying it.



How do we connect personal meaning to organisational vision?

We always start with inviting people to write their own version of the map. So, for unity, for example, one person may speak about "being with my mates", another about "high quality connections", another about "supporting each other".

Organisations often end up using words that are too abstract or too corporate to mean anything to anyone. When people have the map they can see what they share with others (unity makes work meaningful) and what personally commits them to this meaning (working with their mates). This creates individual and collective responsibility for creating and maintaining meaningful work.

You write that leaders routinely destroy meaningful work. How?

Leaders do not get out of bed in the morning to destroy meaning, but it does indeed happen too often. Meaning can be destroyed unintentionally.

Leaders too often try to go it alone. You may think – or have learned in leadership training – that you should provide meaning. Meaning requires and encourages participation. Ask people at the coalface what is meaningful to them; don't tell them.

Leaders ask too often how they can move people. They may use a variety of, often disconnected, techniques, such as various forms of engagement, culture or leadership training to answer that question. A more useful question might be "what obstacles can I remove so people move naturally?"

The next layer of managers often translates leadership objectives into more measures, more bureaucracy and more meetings. Be clear that these need to be kept to a minimum at all times because they take people away from the core tasks which give meaning to their work.

Leaders too often assume that they are

clear on why change needs to take place. Yet change initiatives are often started and abandoned in quick succession. This leaves employees with the feeling that nothing really matters. If you do not have an answer to the question of "what is the point of this?" or cannot communicate that answer clearly, ask yourself if the change is really necessary.

Leaders too often create a context in which inspiration and reality are separated. This way, ideas can be off the planet and when reality intrudes it becomes negativity. It's important to work skilfully with both as they address both the human need for hope and the human need to be real and not pretend.

What practical steps can business leaders take?

It is precisely because meaning is often unintentionally destroyed that it needs to be kept visible. Start by simply putting a poster of the map of meaning in your office and check your decisions against it.

Does decision X create or destroy your employees' ability to experience service, unity, and the development of inner self and full potential? Does it allow for times to be and reflect, and time to get things done? Does it enable people to look after their own needs while they help others? Does it address both the human need for hope and the need to stay real and grounded?

You can ask yourself and your employees how some standard organisational practices such as performance reviews can become more meaningful by evaluating them through the map. You can use it as a guide to have a meaningful conversation with your teenage kids or you can do a bottom up vision and values exercise using the map.

The map is used in diverse areas such as policy, curriculum, and board and leadership development and has proven to be a very useful tool for those who want to go deeper without getting lost.

Meaningfulness speaks to the depth of being human and it is here that we find constructive contribution, active participation, integration and responsibility. **M**