



How to tie your everyday work to a greater cause, increasing employee engagement, satisfaction, and happiness.

Purpose Traceability

by Fred Jewell



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Millennials—and how they’re different—are trendy. Making a difference in the world is trendy. Getting at the “why” is trendy. “Conscious business,” the idea that companies can exist to do more for the world than just make a profit, is trendy.

What do all these trendy things have in common? They all anchor back to purpose, which, consequently, is also trendy. And in this case, trendy is a very good thing.

But haven’t we always had purpose? Even if most organizations don’t define “purpose” explicitly, don’t most have a mission, vision, values, or some combination of all of those that they post on their corporate walls, stick on their breakroom refrigerators, or proudly post on their websites to show the world they care deeply about what they do?

Of course, every self-respecting company has a set of what I’ll call “purpose statements” (mission/vision/values/guiding principles) that

define who the company is and what it does, and sometimes even why it does those things. But how often do we take the time to tie the everyday work of the call center, the shop floor, the agile scrum, or even the well-appointed offices at headquarters back to those purpose statements?

Not often enough.

It’s one thing to fashion our purpose statements. It’s another to actually live them by helping everyone in the organization understand how their work ties back to that purpose. Purpose traceability—the idea that the things we do every day should trace back to our purpose statements—can help you, your team, and your peers get more satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment out of the work you do.

For purpose traceability to succeed, an organization needs purpose statements that are specific enough to be meaningful to everyone in the organization. Something like “We strive

Purpose traceability:

The idea that the things we do every day should trace back to our purpose statements, which can help you, your team, and your peers get more satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment out of the work you do.

Relationship

How did we help people create or improve relationships with their customers, co-workers, suppliers, colleagues, community, or families?

Environment

How did we improve the environment this week? Did the project we just completed reduce the number of miles our customers drive to do their jobs? Were we able to recycle something that would have otherwise been thrown away? How did we reduce the amount of space we use and, therefore, the gas and electricity for heating and cooling?

Teaching

How have we helped someone learn to do something they couldn't do before? Did we enable someone to perform a task that allowed them to accomplish something they're proud of?

Ethics

How did we right a wrong? In what way did we make our world more fair?

Health

What did we do to improve the health of one of our stakeholders, reduce pain, treat injury, or inspire better fitness?

Leadership

How did we inspire someone to pursue something with a specific, intrinsic reward or purpose for them? How did we make someone believe they could accomplish something they didn't think was possible? What decisions did we make to focus our organization on what's important? How did we communicate and celebrate successes and learn from our mistakes?

Emotion

How did we help get someone out of a funk, improve someone's spirits, make someone laugh, help someone through a difficult situation, or create joy?

Creative

How did we affect the organization by developing a new idea, a creative solution, or a new piece of knowledge?

Resources

How did we help someone gain the support and resources to accomplish something meaningful?

Management

What rules, measurements, or structures did we implement to keep things on track? How did we help someone stay on track toward achieving their goals?

Clarity

What did we do to communicate and clarify some aspect of the work that we're doing?

Organization

What did we do to organize a group of people to accomplish something meaningful? What was our role in facilitating that sense of accomplishment and achievement? How did we provide clarity for someone on their role in the organization?

Aesthetics

How did we make something more pleasant to look at, comfortable to wear, comfortable to sit in, or easier to use? How did we improve the environment we work in to be more inspiring?

Planning

What did we do to clarify our purpose, goals, or strategy that will help us move forward?

Process & Tools

What processes did we build, or tools did we implement, that helped the organization accomplish a task more efficiently or effectively? What did we do to eliminate tedium for someone?



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to assertively provide access to scalable resources so that we may continue to enthusiastically coordinate unique deliverables while promoting personal employee growth” probably isn't going to cut it. OK, that's not a real mission statement. But let's face it, it could be—after all, it came from the Mission Statement Generator at www.cmorse.org/missiongen (it's fun; check it out). We've all seen bad mission statements before. Hopefully yours can't be randomly generated by a tool.

Leaders, don't get too hung up on the difference between a mission statement, a vision statement, core values, guiding principles, etc. Just make sure your purpose statements are clear and aspirational. Make sure they describe who you are, what you do, and why you do it, and that they anchor the work done throughout your organization. (And, as Stephen Covey pointed out years ago in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, it's a good idea to write a purpose statement for yourself. I'm going to focus on purpose traceability for organizations, but these ideas translate equally well for individuals.)

A good set of purpose statements leads to a focus on the core “goods” (as in “positives”) we do for business stakeholders and the world at large. Avoid the subject of money, be it in

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earnings, bonuses, compensation, etc. Of course, money is very important. Businesses and institutions can't exist without money, and people can't live well without money. But money isn't the end. It's a byproduct of the good you're providing to the world and a way to store the capacity to do good for the world in the future.

Organizations that do more than generate financial returns, that recognize and highlight the broader “goods” they provide to the world, are more successful, more inspiring, and happier places in the long run. Paradoxically, they often make more money.

Once you have a solid collection of purpose statements, purpose traceability is possible. These “goods” are the ideas we need to trace back to. These remind us—and our people—how our work ties to the bigger purpose of the organization or, indeed,

to the higher purpose each of us wants to achieve in the world. Consistently reminding ourselves and others that our work is making a difference is a huge motivator and a powerful source of engagement.

I have developed or facilitated the development of dozens of sets of purpose statements over the course of my career. I've observed that, to varying degrees, they can be mapped back to a core set of accomplishments that take place every day and every week in an organization.

To use these types of accomplishments for purpose traceability, it's useful to step back and map the accomplishments to the components of the purpose statements they affect. This should not be especially difficult. It can be a lot of fun and very eye-opening as a team-building exercise. Then, take your organization and the roles of the people within the organization, and map their tasks and their work back to these kinds of accomplishments.

At that point, when the organization achieves a milestone or completes a task, you can note how that event ties back to its purpose statements. This clarifies how everyone's work connects to the bigger purpose of the organization. Knowing how you are making a



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difference can have a tremendous effect on work satisfaction and overall engagement.

At Jabian, we have a tradition of “ringing the bell” to celebrate a special accomplishment. The tradition began when we were smaller. We would actually ring a bell that hangs in the office, but we’ve scaled that up across all our offices. Now, we send out an email that “rings the bell” for a person or a team that accomplishes something special. To further amplify the effect of these “bell ringings,” we’ve started tying the accomplishment back to some aspect of our purpose statements to create purpose traceability.

In the end, purpose traceability provides a structure for us to reflect on the work we’ve done to gain a sense of accomplishment. It is important to stop and reflect on what you’ve accomplished and why it matters. We too easily forget or even fail to recognize the difference we’re making in the world as we plow through our work.

Status reports, self-evaluation documents for reviews, and daily journaling are all sources of reflection. I’ve become a huge fan of journaling for 10 minutes every day on what I did the previous day. I’ve recently added purpose traceability into my reflection process. It’s tremendously reinforcing and motivating. It also improves my

memory. Almost every day, I uncover an idea or two I would have lost without that look back.

Maybe you’ll find that you have trouble tracing back to your purpose statements. That could indicate that your purpose statements need improvement, or that you or your team aren’t focused on the right things. That discovery could save your organization or your team in the long run if you take the time to fix it.

But it’s likely you and your team are making a bigger impact than you think. Think of Jimmy Stewart’s character, George Bailey, in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. I’m sure many of you have seen it, and if you haven’t, I won’t spoil it for you, but take the time to watch it to get a dose of purpose traceability in action. ●—●

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