November 2006 – Purpose and Passion

As we drift into what's turning out to be a very warm summer (hello to our Northern Hemisphere readers!), consider what your work might be like in 2007 if you could improve your sense of purpose and meaning. Do you generate passion, purpose and pride at work for yourself, your staff and colleagues? Are you, as some clients recently put it "moving from banality to purpose" and "finding passion which leads to our desire to stick around"?

People are motivated by meaning and purpose, and this includes not only the kind of work they do, but the people they work with, their leaders and managers, and their clients/customers. When your work is connected to the mission of your team or organisation, there is an increase in satisfaction, self-direction and engagement. A loss of purpose leads to high burnout rates and depression, and this in turn demoralises the people around you (Dr Russell D'Souza, Senior lecturer in Psychiatry at Melbourne University - Bulletin Magazine, "Down with Work", 7 June 2005).

Meaning and purpose at work are important factors in increasing employee engagement. An article in this month's Australian Financial Review Boss Magazine discusses the psychological levers to get more out of employees: "meaningful work, and a workplace we can identify with and feel a respected part of, is far more of a motivator than was once believed." Research from the many organisations which measure employee engagement reveals that when people have meaning and purpose in their work life, they know what's expected of them at work; their opinions count; the mission and purpose of organisation make them feel that their job is important; there is a clear connection between their work and the organisation's mission.

Leaders are increasingly turning to "the concept of meaning, where people want to identify with something bigger than themselves - beyond the profits - and contribute to that" (Professor Roger Collins, Australian Graduate School of Management, "Companies Where People Want to Work", Australian Financial Review, Weekend Perspective Section, 4 March 2006; see http://www.amandahorne.com.au/pdf/AFR/AFR_BestCos.pdf). Effective and influential leaders help each employee to find their purpose and passion. At the Gallup Leadership Institute Summit in Washington D.C. in October 2006, a CEO panel discussion emphasised the importance of not only helping existing employees to find a deep attachment to the organisation's core issues, but to also do this during the recruitment phase.

Economists are also interested in the connection between employees' meaning and purpose and the productivity of an organisation: employees who have a strong sense of identity at work have increased satisfaction and reduced turnover; they have a greater commitment to their organisation. "Having a job is important, but more important is the type of job people need to have a sense of meaning in their work" (Lord Richard Layard, London School of Economics, quoted in Australian Financial Review Boss Magazine, September 2006).

Is your work a job, a career or a calling? Your sense of meaning and purpose will emerge when you get the connection right between you and your work. The fields of Positive Psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship reveal that knowing your strengths, and knowing your moments of flow are just some of the ways to help you find purpose. Once strengths are engaged, this leads to increased gratification and an improved mindset, enabling you to see the bigger picture - this creates an upward spiral of connection, engagement and commitment (Jonathan Haidt, "The Happiness Hypothesis", 2006).

Finding purposeful, fulfilling roles at work is critical. As we move into a new year, take some time to reflect on what you can do to help you and those around you to be more fulfilled at work.

Wishing you all a peaceful, relaxing and enjoyable festive season.

This article…
…aims to provide you and your teams with information for your professional and personal development. Topics are based on areas of interest raised by clients and colleagues, with material drawn from journals, books, articles and shared experiences.
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"Thriving, Positive People & Workplaces"
Executive Coach | Facilitator | Adviser | Trainer
P: +61-2-6239 4566 -- M: 0402 892 698

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