

DISCOVER YOUR PURPOSE

“THE TWO MOST IMPORTANT DAYS IN YOUR LIFE ARE THE DAY YOU ARE BORN AND THE DAY YOU FIND OUT WHY.”— MARK TWAIN

Why do you do what you do? What unique contribution can you make in your organization and your world? What would not be done unless you did it? Why are you on the planet? These are not trivial questions. These are the questions of purpose.

For many, the questions above, and others like them, remain unsolved riddles – a Rubik’s Cube they cannot solve, a puzzle without a solution; purpose has become their Gordian knot -- one that cannot be loosened.

I understand the challenge and the potential pressure associated with answering the “Purpose question.” For some, it may feel too big, too unknowable. Sometimes there can be fear that sounds something like this: “If I declare my purpose, what if I get it wrong?” This risk aversion would be completely justified if you could declare your purpose only once in your life. However, that is not the case... you can revise, update, or change your purpose as often as you like! Don’t deny yourself the opportunity to live a more focused and fulfilling life while looking for your perfect purpose.

For others, the dilemma is not fear-based, it is more tactical in nature; they don’t know where to begin the quest. This simple resource is intended to help you regardless of where you are today on this issue.

I am writing this at an interesting time for me personally. While we are in the final stages of the **Smart Leadership** project, our team is also doing work on culture in organizations. In a future book entitled **Culture Rules**, I’ll have an entire chapter on purpose because so many leaders use it to help clarify their cultural aspiration. Unfortunately, that chapter has not yet been written. When it is finished, I will update this resource if we discover any helpful tips or techniques that may be helpful as you and I consider the topic of our personal purpose.

For now, I want to draw your attention back to some of the core questions I raised in **Smart Leadership**. They are a great starting point as you seek to create the first, or next draft, of your purpose.

- What would you pursue if you had no fear of failure?

- What would you attempt if your success was ensured?

- If income were of no concern, what would you do and why?

- What do you think you were born to do?

- What do your unique talents, experiences, and passions prepare you to do for the world?

- What do you want to be remembered for?

Now, assuming you have thoughtfully answered all the questions above, I want to share a few more and then some recommended next steps.

- What work or activity have you been involved in that brought a deep sense of personal satisfaction?

- What work or activity have you completed in the past that was extremely successful?

- In what areas of your life or career do others seek your counsel?

- If you were to ask ten of your closest friends and colleagues to complete this statement about you:

“You were born to _____.”

What do you think they would say? Have you ever asked them? Why not?



- If you were writing a fictional account of your life, what role would you play? What would be the motivation for your character to do what she or he does?

- Imagine for a moment you could do anything for a vocation, what would you choose?

- If someone stuck a microphone in front of you and asked, "What's your calling?" What would you say?

- What advice would you give someone who came to you and asked you to help them discover their purpose?



- Look back over your adult life and identify the bright spots – in life and work. What themes or patterns emerge? (e.g. The activities that bring you the most joy involve helping others succeed. Or, your greatest achievements have come when leading teams of people).

- Look back to your childhood – fourth grade to be specific (if you can muster that level of memory clarity). What did you really enjoy doing? What were you good at during this season of your life?

- What do you care passionately about?

- What would you like to do to serve others?



NEXT STEPS

Although the process of clarifying your purpose is extremely personal in nature, I will recommend a few steps. Do not consider the following activities as a rigid set of action items to be completed – rather, consider them a guide to lead your discovery process.

- 1.** Answer all of the previous questions in an unhurried setting or over a series of sessions. If you find difficulty carving out time to reflect, assess, think, create, and plan, go back to the second Smart Choice: Grow Capacity and read or re-read the chapter entitled Stop and Think. The potentially life-altering topic of your personal purpose is the quintessential example of the type of activity that deserves and demands your undivided attention and your best thinking.
- 2.** Sit with your answers for a few weeks, revisiting them periodically. You can even change your answers as you review your initial responses. The statement you ultimately create should be considered a first draft of a living, dynamic aspiration. As you grow, mature, and have new life experiences, your sense of purpose could change. If this happens, do not consider your revelation a setback; rather see it as a new level of clarity or insight. A refined sense of purpose is always a good thing. You don't want to invest your life and leadership on something that used to captivate your heart and mind. Do your best to keep your purpose current.
- 3.** Draft a single statement that represents a distillation of all you have captured in the questions above. A purpose statement can take many forms. Here are a few examples:

I exist to _____

My purpose in life is _____

My greatest contribution to the world will be _____

I was born to _____

4. Share your first draft with a few close friends or family members for their reaction. You can frame this any way you would like. You could say, “I have been working on clarifying my purpose. Here’s a first draft – what do you think?” Or “I’m trying to decide how to focus my impact on the world. I have created a draft of a personal purpose statement. I would love to hear your reaction.”

A word of caution is in order here. If you have complete clarity on your purpose, you can skip this step in the process. Also, prepare yourself for potential push-back. If you do share your purpose with others, do not forfeit your future because others think it too bold, aggressive, or ambitious. Never let anyone diminish your vision for your life and legacy.

5. Armed with the feedback of trusted voices, you may choose to edit your aspiration. Again, I would encourage you to land with a single sentence. If you cannot find comfort in a specific purpose (e.g., I am on the planet to cure cancer), look for a broader, directional statement – I am here to help others be successful.

6. Live your purpose. I would suggest a daily review – literally. Years ago, when paper planners were all the rage, I had a rubber stamp made with the question: Why am I here? I stamped every page in my planner. Whatever mechanisms work for you, use them. A purpose you don’t reference is most likely a purpose that has little power to change your world.

7. Finally, although I recommend a daily review, a more thorough evaluation is probably warranted on an annual basis. Each year, when I craft my annual development plan, I always begin with a soul-searching exercise in which I wrestle with my purpose. Is it time for a change? Do I have any new insights that would lead me to modify or change my purpose? If I were going to change it, what would I change it to? I have changed my purpose significantly only once over the last few decades and tweaked it one other time. Both these instances gave me new clarity and new levels of energy.

According to Mark Twain, **“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”** I hope this simple resource will serve you as you discover your why.

If you would like to share your purpose with me, I would be delighted to see it.

You can email me at Mark@SmartLeadershipBook.com.