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*Without work all life goes rotten- but when work is soulless, life stifles and dies. — Albert Camus*

Business owners, leaders and CEOs everywhere are talking about the search for humanity in the workplace. These global leaders are examining the role of true meaning and purpose, both on an organizational and individual level.

Steven Covey says there is a “spiritual renaissance taking place in the business world today.” While corporate leaders are searching ways to ignite commitment and performance, for most people this means finding true significance in what they do. The rapidly changing job environment causes us to ask questions such as, “*How does my humanity or significance “show up” in the workplace?*”

Here are four personal questions worth asking:

1. How does my purpose thrive here?
2. How can I bring more significance to my work?
3. Is this the job I am really meant to do?
4. Is there a place for me and my true values to contribute in this workplace?

Most individuals are looking for more from work than just money. Research from the Gallup Organization reveals that less than one third of the U.S. workforce feel truly engaged in their work. The other two-thirds are either just showing up, or actively disengaged. For example, career significance, (being the best for the world) is becoming increasingly important to both men and women. When a person is overwhelmed by work stress, the challenge of commitment at work is highly personal; it calls into question one’s inner sense of humanity that makes work worthwhile. When an employee “feels” insignificant (not “feel” connected or aware of how their talents contribute to obtain workplace goals), his or her work

becomes routine, boring, tiring, and without energy. For some, this leads to irritability and difficult interpersonal relations. For others, it leads to burnout and depression. For few people, there may be violence, disruption of work and/or sabotage.

There is a level of social and emotional connection that must be in place for any relationship to sustain itself and flourish, including the relationship with people at work and with the organization. This level includes mutual respect, self-responsibility, shared values and a climate of respectful engagement. Profound communication arises naturally when these deeper changes are in place. Leadership training and team development programs are helpful tools. However, finding true meaning and commitment at work is about going deeper to reconfigure work life in ways that can bring out the deepest human potential.

## **Essential Human Needs**

Human beings need to feel a sense of belonging in the world, of having a role to fulfill, and of making a contribution. For many people these needs come through work. For most people work is as much about spirit or soul (humanity) as it is about salary. Even when the salary is seen as the biggest carrot, it is often because the money goes toward a higher purpose such as raising a family or providing a life for others.

Abraham Maslow, the renowned psychologist, defined the human “hierarchy of needs” on four main levels: security, relationships, self-esteem, and self-actualization. As one’s basic security needs are met, e.g., food, clothing and shelter, one progresses on to fulfill the other needs. This applies to the workplace as well. Once one’s salary provides for basic survival needs, one seeks to fulfill satisfying relationships, acquire self-esteem, and realize one’s full potential.

Eight out of ten people would continue working even if they became rich enough that they did not need the money. Why? Our basic humanness calls forth a need for service, evolution and connection.

## Humanity Improves the Bottom Line

For workplaces—big or small—the degree that each worker can find meaning in his or her work will be reflected in the quality of commitment and excitement (or lack of it) that is present in the workforce, and ultimately in the bottom line of the workplace.

Behind the grumbling and cynicism found in most workplaces there is actually a longing to find true social and emotional connections, meaning, joy or enthusiasm. We laugh at the cynical humor found in Dilbert, the comic strip that declares, “*All people are idiots!*” At a more profound level, however, we crave proof to the contrary.

When companies offer their people training and workshops designed to rekindle their enthusiasm and commitment, there is often skepticism and resistance. Participants groan about another management fad for “empowerment, quality improvement, team-building, visioning” and so on. Some changes occur after the workshops, but often this change is short-lived. Traditional change efforts are only effective when they address the career significance of one’s work.

Most people are seeking a fuller life at work, one that is consistent with the larger focus of their lives. It is becoming more common to hear workplace discussions of “meaning,” “purpose,” “spirit” and “passion.” These ideas are now seen as vital components of workplace engagement and affect people’s performance and productivity.

## Having a Life at Work

For true commitment to take place in any relationship there must be an alignment of purpose and values. To find true meaning in one’s work is a quest happening at all levels, from the frontline workers to upper level management and executives. People are searching to unlock their deepest capabilities: a sense of service, being in the moment, true community, personal alignment and creativity.

There are things that one can do to awaken a sense of meaning at work. A first step is the

language of significance and humanity. Language is powerful. It does not merely describe but also shapes reality. Language becomes the filter through which we perceive the world. When we talk about finding true meaning at work, we are addressing fundamental and essential human questions about true purpose.

How can leaders and workplaces tap into employees’ deeper level of engagement? Words such as community, meaning, service, contribution, joy, passion, vocation and soul are powerful and meaningful to most individuals. How do you talk about these things without leading to discussions that are no longer appropriate for the work environment? How do companies appeal to people’s deepest aspirations, creativity and convictions without using such words as soul, spirit, and personal values?

Begin with a change in vocabulary. Use words such as “human values” and “career significance or meaning” more than the workplace lexicons of “bottom-line” and “return on investment.” Workplaces need to realize that who you are and what you stand for are as important as what they sell.

## Awakening Humanity at Work

There are things you can do to awaken a sense of humanity at work. If you are an executive or leader looking for ways to rekindle career engagement and enthusiasm, here are some questions for awakening meaning in yourself and others. Using a professional coach will greatly enhance the effectiveness of these thought exercises.

### Ask Three Questions Daily

#### 1. *What ignites my passion in today’s work?*

This first question serves to reclaim attention from the impulsiveness of the urgent and redirect it to what is truly meaningful.

#### 2. *How can I bring true value to this moment?*

The second question serves to disengage from the emotional entanglement and view the issue or person with a “humanity” perspective. This leads to proactive not reactive action.

### 3. How do I want my “brand” to shine in this assignment?

The third question serves to bring more value and meaning to a project. Whenever an assignment begins to weigh heavy and zaps your energy, use these questions to pause, reflect, redirect and recommit. Reflect: If I do this, then:

1. I will be one step closer to...
2. I will free up time for...
3. It will enable us to move forward to...

### True Humanity on an Organizational Level

In the same way that these questions can provide personal energy to everyday work life, a workplace might ask itself these questions:

1. What brings meaning and community to our company?
2. How can this meeting or project be an expression of our highest aims and our workplace humanity?
3. How can we be of service right now?
4. What is our larger human responsibility as a team or organization?

### Reaching Your 150-percent Level in 2011

Eric Klein and John Izzo *Awakening Corporate Soul* (1997) asked people to describe what elements were present when they had experienced meaningful moments in their work—moments when they felt energy, commitment, performance and

satisfaction were at their peak, “at 150-percent levels.”

Four areas of engagement were elicited by this question, which the authors describe as paths toward finding 150-percent levels:

1. **The path of self**, whereby the person finds a personal passion in his or her work, in touch with core values, and then actively brings them into the daily work.
2. **The path of contribution**, whereby the person becomes engaged in the worthy goals of his or her daily efforts.
3. **The path of craft**, which is where the person develops an intense enjoyment in the moment to moment action of his or her work.
4. **The path of community**, when the person finds connection to others that goes deeper than the job description and connects with others to bring out the best of one another.

Whichever path you choose to follow, make a commitment in 2011 to celebrate your humanity in the workplace!

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