



awaris



## EMBEDDING PURPOSE IN OUR VIRTUAL CULTURE

### Key points

1. Humans survive because they collaborate for a greater purpose
2. Purpose will need to become more palpable as other dimensions of corporate life fall away
3. Purpose must provide multiple types of orientation, from long-term meaning to daily motivation
4. We need different levels and phases of purpose – first survival, now integration.

### Re-focusing on purpose

One of the most pressing shifts in moving to more virtual work will be refocusing on purpose. We are human beings, and we survive because we collaborate – not because we compete. For this reason, throughout our evolutionary history we have learnt that collaboration brings big rewards. Think of a group of hunters hunting a mammoth together. Alone this would be impossible – together the reward is a bounty of food that might last a month for a tribe.

Thus, we have evolutionary mechanisms which encourage collaboration – and which in the last 10,000 years of our cultural history have been modified and expanded on to allow us to collaborate based solely on stories we tell each other. This is the basis of religions and many other large ventures that have defined our human and cultural history. We are inspired by stories which point to a deeper or more lasting reward than the immediate present.

## Navigating by the stars

The last 10 years have seen increasingly quickly shifting corporate landscapes, and at the same time an explosion of possibilities about how to create and deliver value. The question of how to orient ourselves in this landscape has meant purpose has become much more important. When the currents are shifting, navigators need to navigate by the stars. We need a long term and meaningful goal, something connected to a deeper source of value – in business or in the hearts of our teams – to navigate by.

A company without purpose can make up for a lot by having a flash office, excellent office perks, a canteen and so on. This is not to say that humans are shallow, but simply that such excellent facilities are palpable signs that we are part of something big and good. This activates our reward mechanisms and can contribute to a feeling of bonding for a company. Perks have to be physically experienced – they work through the senses. The same is true for the physical presence of our colleagues. We enjoy spending time with our colleagues – physically this affects us. However, we might not choose them if we were to choose them as social partners. But for now, they are fine – we are simply human and being with other humans can be comforting.

When the physical falls away two big shifts will emerge

- The story and purpose of our organisations will become more important
- The community of colleagues will be more influenced by the purpose – and this will become more of a selection characteristic and thus palpable in the character of the colleagues.

## Purpose to guide our culture

It is important to briefly touch on purpose – for it has multiple roles. In a distributed environment everyone has to work in a more self-directed manner – control or frequent guidance is harder or less forthcoming. In addition, motivation is more individual – based more on the individual's habits of positivity and engagement. Thus, purpose serves four roles:

- As a long-term orientation in a shifting landscape – as we respond to crisis X, where are we really heading?
- As a logical/cognitive form of guidance on where to direct my energies on a daily basis
- As an emotional connection to the story of the organisation
- As a daily motivation for getting my work done

Purpose has to be clear not just on the level of the company but on three levels:

- What is our organisation's purpose?
- What is our team/unit's purpose?
- What is our personal purpose?

The latter two are the ones we experience on a regular or even daily level. These are the ones we connect with that will help us when we begin to lose our orientation in a virtual world.

## Purpose must be palpable

In our experience it is not just important to have a purpose – but to make purpose palpable. Thus, a purpose statement – which may even be respected by senior management in their strategic decisions – will not alone suffice. Purpose has to show up in team discussions, in the reflections of management, in feedback sessions – otherwise it will not serve as the new glue for distributed organisations. And purpose will cause a new form of selection of staff – and increasingly flavour the character of the community.

Remember: people join online communities based on a clear purpose and intent, not because they have to. Thus, people's involvement in their distributed work communities will be driven by purpose – and they will then resonate emotionally with the people they are with. If they do not have a shared purpose, they will resonate less with each other – and the collaboration can become entirely functional or transactional, with an associated loss in engagement and loyalty.

For some companies, purpose might be usurped by the simple need for survival. This is effective in the short term – but keeps people stressed and does not really motivate them in the long term. It is important to not just focus on survival but embed this in the larger arc of what the organisation does and is striving to do – and what this particular time can mean. If a leader clearly states that they see the next period as an important time to build a caring, inclusive and meaningful culture this will inspire most in the organisation and give a sense of meaning to what they are doing.

## Embedding purpose in our new emerging culture

The new work reality is a great chance to make conscious choices about the cultural rituals of an organisation. We have already spoken in previous articles about the anchoring of conscious habits into the teams and leadership. We now want to dig deeper into building the culture of an organisation.

### Culture as a competitive advantage

The culture of an organisation is an emergent phenomenon – invisible at first sight, but soon enough deeply palpable at the emotional and bodily level. This is hard to create and manage for entirely logical and rationally-driven leaders – the type of leaders that might become more blind in the task-focused environment they find themselves in. But the more we cultivate our sense of feeling and connecting, the clearer the need for a powerful virtual culture will be – and the associated rituals that make it come alive.

Organisations will have to reflect on building these cultural rituals, giving them time and conscious attention. Some of them will include:

- Rituals for how we welcome people on board
- Rituals for how we share information about the state of the company
- Rituals for how we connect and socialise
- Rituals for how we celebrate events and successes
- Rituals for how we appreciate people and their part in the work
- Rituals for how we address conflicts and build trust.

These could include:

- Daily rituals – team standups, end of day check-outs
- Weekly rituals – social time, end of week appreciation and thanks, end of week updates, celebrations
- Monthly rituals – temperature and stress gauges, formal updates and progress reports, pain points, hangouts, purpose reflections, joint activities for the environment and other causes

Culture deeply affects many aspects of people's motivation, performance and collaboration.

### Purpose inseparable from compassion

And finally, it is important to remember that purpose is ALWAYS connected to others. Fundamentally, purpose is a biological concept: what function does our organisation serve for others in the complex adaptive landscape we are in? What biological niche do we fulfil – what are we needed for? Understanding what we serve will thus become ever more important. For this reason, empathy and compassion are central components of developing a purpose. Developing a purpose which only serves ourselves inspires no one else, and thus does not lead to any shared sense of purpose.

