

# The power of working with a purpose



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I spent the first 25 years of my career working in the manufacturing industry. It was reassuring to most of my co-workers and me that our product made the world a better place.

OK, we weren't curing cancer, but we also weren't building bombs. Most everyone would agree that the machines that used our products to build better roads and harvest crops were a good thing.

I enjoyed the fact that we had a very worthy global competitor and a handful of lesser rivals to keep us on our toes. There was a mutual respect among the competitors.

That competition led to an entrepreneurial atmosphere both in terms of the products we offered as well as the processes used to design, manufacture, sell and service them. Things were constantly changing, predominantly for the better.

There was a great deal of satisfaction in knowing that we were one of the two best organizations in the world at fulfilling a somewhat specialized, but important, market niche.

Best of all, every employee was encouraged to contribute to the continuous, positive change by solving problems and making improvements within their respective spheres of influence. With the exception of a few departments with poor managers (that were not tolerated for long), the opportunity existed for employees to make a difference by contributing their unique skills to meaningful work.

There were times I felt a little sorry for those working outside the industry. I misperceived that there must be a lack of purpose, no competition and resulting stagnant processes. Then I started working with local (municipal and county) governments, health care and nonprofits as a consultant.

Talk about working with a purpose. These are folks who, for the most part, understand that they directly influence others' quality of life daily. Those impacted often are known individuals from workers' communities, not faceless customers located in another state or even

country. In some cases, they not only impact the quality of lives but also whether others continue to live.

Spend some time with staff at the Emergency Residence Project, a nonprofit that battles both the effects and root causes of homelessness, and you'll find some passionate workers. What about competition? The folks at ERP understand that their competition ranges from the polar vortex forecasted to drop temperatures into

life-threatening ranges this weekend to government policy changes that will make housing unaffordable for those on the fringes.

Unfortunately, many for-profit organizations make profits the purpose for their existence. That's a big mistake.

Let's be clear — there's nothing wrong with profit as it ensures the sustainability of the organization. But profit makes for a lousy motivator. Very few employees leap out of bed in the morning for the sole purpose of making profits.

Worse yet, if profits aren't perceived as being fairly distributed, they become a means for demotivating employees. A review of the relative growth rates during the past three decades of corporate profits (and thus, shareholder returns) versus that of wages suggests a clear

and lopsided winner.

Fortunately, most organizations have an altruistic purpose. It should be a consistent component of official communications, daily conversations and (most importantly) actions.

Let's say we run a sit-down restaurant. While the product is meals, the purpose might be creating a special place where patrons make memories. An effective leader will point out to employees:

- The couple reconnecting on their fifth anniversary after a stressful week of work and caring for two toddlers.
- The group of workers celebrating the retirement of a beloved co-worker.

## RICK SAYS

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• The gathering of old friends sharing stories during their 40th high school reunion.

While a bad meal can certainly ruin the evening, creating positive memories involves the entire staff. Helping patrons to make memories that last well beyond them remembering what they ordered is a more compelling purpose than simply feeding people.

Make sure that everyone understands the competition. That's especially important with government and nonprofit organizations where competition is frequently not another organization but rather forces working against its goals.

Finally, be true to that purpose. According to an August 2017 article by BusinessWeek, Facebook had the longest average employee retention among the 10 largest tech companies at just more than two years.

Since that survey, we've learned that the seemingly positive purpose of connecting people had a dark underside of gathering personal data and selling it to shady characters. The latter is hardly what one would proudly tell friends when they ask what they do for a living.

I highly doubt that they'll be on top of the next employee retention survey.



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