

Both individuals and organizations could benefit from a shift in mindset to address inevitable employment changes in a productive and evolving manner.

What Was the Point?

Meaning Flowing From Disruption

Stephen K. Hacker

Tsunamis of change are hitting the shores of workplaces, accelerating the pace of organizational enterprise formations, restructures, mergers, and failures. Certainly, the creation cycle is an essential part of transformation and breakthrough improvement. In large part, society benefits from this organizational birth-death-rebirth dance. Businesses become more robust and numerous, public institutions break open their protective bureaucratic shells, and not-for-profits reallocate resources to current and emerging demands, but the individual contributor can be caught up in the deluge of change. Plant closures, industry declines, downsizing efforts, position eliminations, C-suite shuffles, job downgrades, and leadership renewals can be devastating to the individual. When employment disruption comes, many are left wondering, "What was the point in devoting so much time and energy to this work?" Past investments into building organizations, establishing relationships, and making system improvements are brought into question. A loss of self-worth and even depression can result.

"What was the point?" can be raised whether the separation is couched as a

performance issue or the worker simply becomes dispensable. The question can even arise when an individual has retired from an organization. Recently, a Kansas City food manufacturing plant of some 80 years was shut down and converted into loft condominiums. People had spent their entire careers building and improving manufacturing processes of a system no longer in existence. Notwithstanding the knowledge that nothing lasts forever, life's work vanished, leaving the same question, "What was the point?" The discarded equipment or working space displayed no residual attachment to the previous use as a manufacturing plant, but human beings did.

Much of the popular advice for employment disruptions centers on replacing outdated skill sets and methods to land a new position. Educational institutions, placement firms, and governmental agencies work to ease movement into what is hoped to be an employment transition. These are valuable services. However, the individual is often taken back by the experience, making transition very difficult. Identity is wrapped up in the old organization; questions and emotions remain. It would be wonderful

if time would always heal, but the deep cuts of such employment disruptions need more attention.

Mindset shifts are needed by both individuals and the organization to address the inevitable employment changes in a productive and evolving manner. Individuals can transcend the past attachments by moving to a deeper understanding of their life's purpose, taking away learnings from life's storms. Furthermore, organizations have the opportunity of moving from a clinical, mechanistic view of workers to seeing individuals as human spirits, crafting policies accordingly. The mindsets of both entities deserve deeper exploration.

The Individual

The primary mental shift is from work giving meaning to expressing purpose through work. The first orientation is to see work as the definer of life's meaning. This is in error, for the workplace is not designed to provide life's meaning. Its purpose is found in the organization's mission statement, which speaks to the collective will. The responsibility for defining life purpose falls on the individual. As Viktor Frankl stated in the seminal book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible."¹ The liberty of defining life's purpose is the individuals' responsibility, one that should be jealously guarded. Having

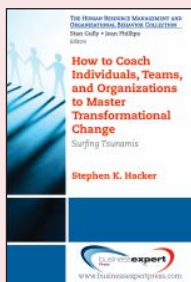
the organization fill in the answer is dangerous to the state of being human.

The re-orientation to having a purpose and then expressing that purpose within the workplace permits deeper, present-day engagement; thus, seeking an organization with alignment to individual purpose is the task at hand. The level of alignment depends upon the consciousness of the individual and the organization in clearly defining purpose and mission respectively, and opportunity to find a connection.

Of course, during formative years providing for basic needs through employment is high on the list. Maybe initially, strong alignment is wanting—the individual wants a job that pays, the organization has a job and is willing to provide compensation. This is the reality of the beginning for many. Then the waves come forth. Organizational requirements are altered; resource needs modified; job positions come and go. Concurrently, the individual expands the alignment criteria beyond a paycheck. Ego investments can progress to the point of, "I am my job." Money for work no longer is sufficient for some. The need for meaningful work arises; fulfillment is sought. Although obscure at the beginning, a sense of life's purpose emerges. Given the inevitable movement in society, the organization, and the individual, alignment is altered over time either strengthening or weakening, and the forecast of future disruptive waves of change is assured.

Viewed another way, the individual has embarked upon a discovery journey of meaning, growing in

How to Coach Individuals, Teams, and Organizations to Master Transformation: Surfing Tsunamis



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Abstract: This is the first book to present the science and art of transformational coaching across all domains—self, others, teams, and organizations. This pragmatic, yet powerful practice already has led scores of organizations, leaders, and employees to achieve breakthrough results. The comprehensive approach sits at the crossroads of

several leadership and management disciplines—individual and organizational development, transformational leadership, change management, organizational effectiveness, employee engagement, and the growing interest in spirit in the workplace.

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understanding of life's purpose and finding places to express this creative energy. To work on purpose as a sentient being, experiencing other opportunities with better alignment promotes both contentment and performance.

Richard Rohr² employs the concept of discharging your loyal soldier. He recognizes the importance of being loyal and serving as a productive member of society and organizations. Success in the work world gives dignity, identity, direction, significance, and boundaries. This leads to a level of discipline and effectiveness, allowing success in formative years, but the need is to move beyond the security and validation. There comes a time to respond to a deeper, grander voice. Yes, to add to the intellectual and emotional development—to include a spiritual development. In this case, a profound sense of purpose and self-awareness.

So, when the tsunamis of change hit, the individual is grounded in purpose. Self-image is cast in that purpose, and the inevitable search for the next challenge takes over, as opposed to an overpowering loss of what came before. This mindset shift allows for the release of unhealthy attachment and leads to the charge by Dr. Seuss, "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." Not a loss, for your purpose has not diminished. Smile because of the opportunity experienced and the resolve to move forward. Work becomes an expression of spirit, an investment into the soul.

Big concepts, yes? You zoom out from the storms of life to grasp a bigger picture—a picture where the water and waves are not the focus, but where attention is placed upon individual spirit within the tempest. This is a calling for a mindset shift—from an emphasis on the pounding effects of change waves to one of making the individual storm-ready though the muscle of defined purpose.

Some steps to aid in this mindset shift include the following:

- *Listen.* In his book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*,³ Parker Palmer puts forth the concept that vocation (Latin for "voice") comes more from listening than forcing a pronouncement. The truth of who you are comes not from an organizational perspective, but rather from listening to an inner calling. It may be hard to listen to this voice. Needing to fit in, meet external expectation, and succeed in society

cause our listening to train outwardly. The drumbeat of the external voices may have dampened your listening for a greater voice—the inner self and a greater universal voice.

- *Embrace vulnerability.* When the tsunamis hit, you probably will swallow some water. The storm surge may knock you off balance, challenge you, and cause you to struggle. This is life, and gaining real knowledge about vulnerabilities and limitations is a valuable achievement. What are you learning about self? What insights have you attained from prevailing in rough waters? Wholeness demands the embrace of the entirety of self—the good, the bad and the ugly. All experiences can serve as clues to self-understanding and, if processed without shame, can provide light on your unique calling.

There are many historical heroes to study, such as Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Abraham Lincoln. Their biographies are written not just to declare their accomplishments, but also to show how their tumultuous journeys and embracing vulnerabilities led to a strong inner voice. Then, from following a distinctive calling, greatness was achieved. Greatness is present in all, whether a biography is written or not. This greatness emerges not by compliance or temporal approval, but by living on purpose.

- *Seek purpose in the now.* Flowing from deep listening, define your life purpose—capture your best response to life's questioning at this point. Write down your present understanding for your purpose in life by answering the question, "Why am I here?" Over time as you live into this purpose, your understanding and revelation will evolve, growing in wisdom. View work as a worthwhile undertaking within the context of life purpose, the gift of vocation. Even amid finding new employment, recall your life purpose. An increase of consciousness of how work aligns with a larger life purpose leads to asking "What is the point?" as opposed to the reflective inquiry of "What was the point?"

Worry less about the storm surges to come and focus on being on-purpose at this moment. Begin living fully into a life of meaning. This means moving away from having the organization or a particular job define you. Don't let a perceived injustice



at work become your focus. The actions of an organization, employment circumstances, reporting hierarchy, or external judgments do not define you. If they don't, you are left to answer the question of who you are.

- *Cast a robust vision.* If purpose is the answer to “Why are you here?” then vision is the answer to “Where are you going?” Vocation is but one facet of life. A vision captures a point in the future, say three to five years out, and paints the future state of the entirety of life. Often included are aspects of family and relationships, community involvement, physical being, knowledge acquisition, spiritual development, and vocation. A written vision of but a few paragraphs helps define direction. Of course, life tends not to proceed in a linear fashion. Doors will open and will close, but with an image of the future state, many paths can be found to the destination (principle of equifinality). Ensure that your vision is aligned with your purpose. Also, spend some time defining one to three key values that will serve as uncompromising borders on your journey.

The Organization

Rationalization of labor is unavoidable, caused in large part by the societal forces of accelerated change and increased complexity, but, the harshness

in which individuals are often treated is alarming. It is not atypical for an individual to be ordered to a short meeting where the news of employment separation is delivered, then directly escorted out of the building in plain view of others. Without the opportunity to return to their workplace, gather belongings and converse with co-workers, many emotions are experienced—shame, anger, loss, and bewilderment among them. Although understandable given the twists and turns of employment law and liability, nevertheless it is disconcerting to all. This is an example of doing the wrong thing right—executing a process within a flawed system.

Disconcerting management practices are seen in reassignments, relocations, changes in responsibilities and leadership charges, and removal from leadership teams. For example, finding out about being relieved from a high governmental position via a newscast—does this really happen? Or, being dismissed from a volunteer board assignment discovered by reading a general announcement ushering in new directors. Or, isolated with the hope that the employee will quit and the separation will be “voluntary.” Or, shunned after being removed from a leadership team. The number of actual accounts of discourteous and thoughtless employment practices abound. Although this is but a slice of the existing environment, what was once seen as outrageous appears all too common.

As placards pronounce the virtues of respect for individuals and their contributions, the reality often is a disregard for the human spirit—for the human being impacted. Organizational leaders through human resource department policies have become engrossed in engaging the intellect and recently the emotional relationship aspects of work. Often overlooked is the spiritual component.

Without consideration of the spiritual being, all that is left is to address the emotional and physical. How to dampen the blow, soften the news, and safely remove the individual from the workplace become the important. Although separation in body will be successful, the mourning cycle often turns from an expression of “What was the point?” by those affected instead into anger and acts of retribution.

Some organizations claim that they appreciate the human spirit at work. Indeed, team spirit and the creative spirit are encouraged. Grasping the value of spirit in the workplace is not to say there is a valuing of the individual spirit in total. One can lead to a mindset of spirit manipulation, the other an appreciation of the human-spirit enterprise. Indeed, some organizations have had the revelation of emotional quotient (EQ), or emotional intelligence. This term EQ was made popular in Daniel Goleman’s book, *Emotional Intelligence*.⁴ The book speaks to the ability of developing self-awareness of emotions and the actions that emotions promote. This concept has been employed by organizational leaders to create productive relationships and culture; however, spiritual intelligence goes beyond EQ in recognizing that the human spirit informs the emotion or social interactive nature of the workforce. Self-awareness grounded in individual purpose is a much more powerful component of the individual from which true creativity flows.

Not all organizations are without appreciation of the individual human spirit. Many are forging ahead to first shift mindsets and then policies to create a culture of spirit enlivened. A few pointers for organizations and their leaders are listed below:

- *Honor the human spirit.* From retirement rituals to exit procedures, the opportunity to honor people and their life spirits is available. Handing out certificates of service or accomplishment can be obligatory or honoring. The material certificate

is of little importance if the spirit of honoring is absent. Take the time to speak to the individual, their spirit. Employment separation can be done in a mechanistic, callous fashion or in a manner that honors the individual’s journey. The challenge is to meet both wise employment guidelines and see the individual spirit in the equation.

Honoring can be tremendously impactful as displayed in the informal setting and spontaneously expressing appreciation of a person, a human spirit, in the moment. Superior to praise, honoring recognizes the individual spirit behind the work. Honoring the creativity, level of engagement, acts of responsibility, or reflections of an individual can encourage the spirit.

- *Value the joint creation endeavor.* How the workforce is defined makes a difference. More often than not, it is seen as a grouping of various skilled workers focused on a process through the efforts of leadership; however, when viewed as a collection of human spirits engaged in co-creation of value, the organization goes beyond a social/technical endeavor. Instead of machines/systems interfacing with labor, the co-creation stance broadens to the prospect of transformation. Individuals can release job security or even employment security and seize upon the infinite possibilities offered by transforming the operation in providing products and/or services. Willingness to risk comes with a creative outlook.

Great operational gains have been made in the quality movement by involving the insights and intellect of the broader workforce; think Lean or Six Sigma. Seen more as an unexpected consequence of this involvement has been increased ownership and morale. Now, what if the original involvement design had targeted enlivening spirits joined for co-creation with the expectation that process improvements would flow forward? It would look different. Leadership with a focus on co-creation can be found outside the arts industry—and where it is utilized, it is impactful.

- *Seek a culture of self-actualization.* Organizations must work hard to transcend the parental nature of yesteryear’s culture. “We take care of our people” has led to cases in societies where employer-based medical care has become a burden, a point of contention, and where

support turns into dependency. Where individual responsibility gives way to following the rules and nonsensical behaviors. Where the individual stands tall only when standing in good stead with the organization. A culture of self-actualization promotes individual responsibility and purpose awareness. It speaks to finding fit through discovering purpose alignment—from the hiring process, to career planning, to separation. Many organizations are implementing policies designed to help individuals become more self-aware. The payout for these organizations is having a workforce composed of firmly grounded, self-aware, purposeful, resourceful, and creative individuals. Of course, leaders helping others become conscious of individual purpose requires coaching skills—which are very different than the skills associated with giving direction. Simple as it may seem, just asking people why they chose (and continue to choose) to be part of the organization can spark meaningful reflections long after the conversational engagements.

Conclusion

Storms and tsunami-size waves are part of life, along with success and achievement. Troubled times are not to be discarded for their learnings. They offer the chance to deepen awareness of purpose and enliven spirit. How organizations and individuals address the accelerated pace of the organizational life cycle can be transformative in nature. In disruptive times as well as good times, the answer to “What was the point?” is found in the maturation of the individual spirit in a social setting. Put simply, as ascribed to Tony Bennett, “You don’t sing to get to the end of the song.”

The spirit informs the mind, and mindsets drive the bus. So, paying attention to the quality

of spirit, to the purpose informing our mindsets, is critical to both organizations (leaders) and the individual. All else flows from this consciousness—or from the unconsciousness of the animal human; thus, as Hillel the Elder (30 BC-10 AD) warned, “Watch your thoughts; they become your words. Watch your words; they become your actions. Watch your actions; they become your habits. Watch your habits; they become your character. Watch your character, for it will become your destiny.”

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