

WIRED TO BECOME

The Brain Science of Finding Your Purpose,
Creating Meaningful Work, and
Achieving Your Potential



Britt Andreatta, PhD

*Author of *Wired to Grow*, *Wired to Resist*,
Wired to Connect, and *Leading with Emotional Intelligence**

Discover the science behind our quest for purpose and new tools for achieving your potential.

"While the library of books on purpose is large and ever expanding, Dr. Britt Andreatta makes an invaluable contribution through *Wired to Become* by integrating the extant research in this burgeoning field and presenting it in a coherent, compelling, practical, and highly readable way. If you use this brilliant book as a guide, you and your business will be transformed."

**Dr. Raj Sisodia, FEMSA Distinguished University Professor
of Conscious Enterprise, Tecnológico de Monterrey,
and Co-founder of Conscious Capitalism, Inc.**

"*Wired to Become* is an incredibly relevant and thorough examination of the need, not just for purpose, but for meaning in today's world. Dr. Andreatta's book is filled with insights and strategies to help us further embed purpose into our work and lives and is enlivened by numerous stories from individuals finding—and growing into—their purpose. Thanks for the inspiration, Britt!"

**Rick Lozano, author of *Acoustic Leadership:
Develop a Leadership Culture That Resonates***

"There have been major advances in our understanding of purpose and meaning at work over the last five years. Andreatta distills the research down to make it immediately accessible and actionable, so we can find fulfillment in our lives and work."

**Aaron Hurst, founder of Taproot Foundation, Imperative, and
Purpose Mindset, and author of *The Purpose Economy***

Around the world, people's quest for purpose is at an all-time high. *Wired to Become* meets the moment with new findings in the science of becoming our best selves and why purpose and meaningful work are critical for our physical and emotional health. Dr. Andreatta examines the pandemic's cultural and personal impact and crafts a new understanding of why society is forever changed and how to benefit. She offers tools you can use to explore and clarify your own purpose and professional journey, plus concrete strategies for building purpose-driven organizations—the future of work.

Dr. Britt Andreatta is an internationally recognized thought leader who uses her unique background in leadership, neuroscience, psychology, and education to create groundbreaking solutions for today's workplace and personal challenges. She has over 25 years of experience consulting with executives and inspiring all types of organizations.
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Britt Andreatta, PhD



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This book is dedicated to the scientists who
continually strive to expand our knowledge.
I appreciate your commitment to discovery
and dedication to accuracy.

Content Warning

This book touches on the subject of trauma and suicide, which some readers might find difficult. We have placed a trigger warning at the beginning of those chapters.

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INTRODUCTION

*“The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive,
but in finding something to live for.”*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, author

If you picked up this book, you are likely on your own journey of seeking more purpose in your life, or at least have noticed that a lot of other people are. It’s hard to miss given that it’s featured around the world in publications like *Forbes*, *Time*, *Entrepreneur*, and *Fast Company*. Consider these recent headlines:

Employees Want Purpose at Work: How to Deliver on This Top Priority

Finding Purpose at Work and the Growing Need for Corporate Values

Everyone Wants Meaningful Work.
But What Does That Really Look Like?

I started doing the research for this book at the beginning of 2018, after my community was torn apart by a natural disaster. On January 9th, in the span of 30 minutes, a 40-foot-high wall of mud and boulders the size of cabins slammed down, pulverizing cars and wiping away entire homes. The mudslide killed 23 people, including many children.

I saw firsthand that when all sense of happiness is gone, a sense of purpose is the only thing that gets you through. Purpose is also what motivates us to help others. We had this miraculous thing happen—people from hundreds of miles away started showing up to help. A loose volunteer organization formed, calling themselves the Bucket Brigade. They didn’t live here but they showed up to remove the tons and tons of waist-high mud that buried streets and filled homes. They excavated people’s living rooms, they dug out trees so they wouldn’t suffocate, and they found and carefully organized possessions in hopes of returning them to their owners. It was an amazing act of generosity and kindness to witness and receive. It made those dark days a little more bearable.

At the same time, I began reading Aaron Hurst’s book, *The Purpose Economy*, and realized that purpose was playing a far bigger role than what I could see in my own community. It was shifting the global economy.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, scuttling my plans to write this book. My speaking income dried up overnight and I pivoted to supporting my 7th grader who was attending “Zoom school.” As one of thousands of tech leaders charged with migrating a workforce to work-from-home employees in a matter of weeks, my husband’s work intensified.

As we made our way through the lockdowns and worried about our loved ones, I started to notice a shift in my own sense of purpose. I felt a deep need to help in some way but wasn’t sure how I could. At the time, I was recording the

audiobook version of *Wired to Resist* and realized that I was uniquely positioned to help people live through this massive change we were experiencing. My team quickly built and offered a free online course on how to deal with change. I was stunned by the response. Nearly 1,500 people from around the world took the course and we were inundated with comments like: “Thank you for sharing it during this difficult and uncharted time. It’s such a profound way of viewing change,” and “What a blessing. This course was terrific, timely, and helpful!” and “It was an amazing gift to us during these difficult and challenging times. The concepts shared are all life changing!”

As time went on, I was asked to consult with several global organizations. I began to see the incredible toll burnout was taking on workers across every sector. I started doing research on the effects of burnout and realized we were headed toward high levels of disengagement and turnover, which ultimately became known as the Great Resignation.

We were living through a unique time as the whole world engaged in a simultaneous experience of reflecting on our values and clarifying our priorities. I was not surprised to see the many headlines about people’s hunger for purpose and realized it was time to start up my research again. I quickly found that some amazing studies had been done during the pandemic, giving us new data and insights. If I had published this book earlier, it would already be out of date because things have shifted so significantly since 2019.

What is clear is the pandemic has changed us. Permanently. It accelerated what was already in motion, creating distinct pressures that magnified our need for purpose in significant ways. This societal shift impacts all age groups and all industries. There is no going back to “the before times” because we are different now. We are going through an amazing transformation, one that has shifted what we value, how we want to work, and ultimately the good that we wish to create in the world. While it has been challenging, it is also inspiring.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to help you on your own journey to find your purpose and create meaningful work. I will share recent discoveries in neuroscience and other disciplines to give you new information and tools. You can apply this material to your own life immediately, starting today. If you have a role where you help or lead others, you will also gain new strategies for unlocking their potential and building more purpose-driven organizations. This book is organized into five sections:

- I. We’ll begin by diving into new findings about the science of becoming our best selves and why happiness, purpose, creativity, and innovation are all important elements.
- II. Next, we’ll explore the unique combination of forces and pressures driving this global quest for more purpose and how it’s shifting human consciousness.

- III. Then we'll dig into your individual journey toward finding purpose and creating a meaningful work. I'll share several tools and strategies you can use immediately to create more clarity.
- IV. Next, I'll share new findings from research about meaningful work and what gives people a sense of purpose in their jobs and careers.
- V. We'll continue your journey to find your own sense of purpose with additional tips and tools.
- VI. We'll end with looking at purpose-driven organizations as the new future of work and practical strategies for employees, managers, and executives.

Throughout every section, you will find Purpose Stories, first-person narratives from 26 individuals from around the world including Ukraine, Brazil, The Netherlands, Australia, and the United States. They answered an open call for submissions and represent a wide range of industries from finance to manufacturing, from retail to education, and technology to healthcare. Each person tells their own story of finding purpose—sometimes at a young age, but more often discovered over the course of a career, learning what was *not* the right fit before finding what is.

Their journeys were shaped by a host of experiences from success and failure to burnout and tragedy. On multiple occasions, I found myself getting goosebumps as I read them and I hope you will find inspiration in learning how all of us are walking similar paths to finding our purpose. Each story is set off in a box with this compass icon. Consider this powerful story from Uvalde, Texas in the United States:



Purpose Story 1:

Purpose as a Way Through Tragedy

As a professional nonprofit fundraiser, I am driven by helping organizations secure the funding they need to serve communities. I consider myself a professional relationship builder. In this capacity, I matchmake—I match donors to causes that fulfill their deepest values.

Initially, I thought that academia would be the area where I could make the most impact. But after uncovering the deeply impactful work performed by nonprofits, I knew the sector offered a great fit for my aspiration and talents. Nonprofits are entrepreneurial spaces. Success is not dictated by the marketplace but rather by social change.

The work of a fundraiser is unique. You're positioned between the nonprofit and the funder. You're the curator of value-aligned relationships. It is hard work and often goes unrecognized. I have always found the work rewarding and it fulfilled my sense of purpose to help communities thrive.

But in 2022, a tragedy brought this work into sharp focus. My nonprofit organization was tasked with processing public donations after the mass school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. The kicker: I am from Uvalde and attended elementary school there.

This horrific situation made people across the country feel so helpless. I felt helpless. But being in a position where I could help facilitate the public outcry was quite fulfilling.

After the school shooting, everyday people and corporations wanted to help. Honestly, the only thing many felt that they could actually do was give a donation for the survivors and their families. In my role, I facilitated this along with my team. We created donation pages, responded to hundreds of emails, answered calls, and directed inquiries to the right people. We thanked everyone along the way for their light during this very dark time.

I relearned something that I already knew as a fundraiser—every donation matters. Every act of generosity deeply matters. People across the country gave what they could: \$10, \$15, and it added up. Everyone (and I do mean literally everyone) said, “I wish I could give more.” We processed over \$8 million in donations in the matter of a few months proving the collective power of caring.

Purpose comes at funny times, revealing itself when you’re not desperately seeking it out. Follow what you love to do—it will reveal itself, in time. And most likely when you least expect it.

My Research Process

While I started researching purpose and meaningful work in 2018, when I resumed research I found many newly published studies had been conducted during the pandemic in every region of the world, showing a universal global experience. Countries included Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Brazil, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Ukraine, Yemen, Turkey, Romania, India, South Africa, Eritrea, Korea, China, Japan, East Java, Indonesia, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Canada, and the United States.

I first focused on neuroscience, reading journals like *Neuron*, *The Journal of Neuroscience*, and *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. Inevitably, these studies led me to other disciplines and studies in biology, psychology, business, and education. I reviewed research from many branches of medicine and healthcare.

I also conducted a content analysis of the personal stories submitted to identify common themes and experiences.

Another important part of my research process is mapping what scientists find in their labs to issues that impact today’s workplaces. I leverage research by data giants like Deloitte, Gallup, Gartner, and McKinsey, as well as professional organizations like the Association for Talent Development (ATD) and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). Many of these global studies yielded fascinating insights about our hunger for purpose and meaning at work.

I also read over 30 books about purpose and meaningful work. I was especially struck by what they all had in common—when I looked at the totality of what the authors said, I saw clear patterns and themes that indicate a shared truth. I’ve attempted to synthesize them into a cohesive whole.

To be clear, I am not a neuroscientist; my PhD is in education, leadership, and organizations, and I have done my own research on the science of success. Because I am an active practitioner, designing and delivering learning experiences out in the field, I can see where lab studies do and do not translate to how people experience these concepts in the real world and especially at work.

I used this research to build science-based training programs that are proving to be exceptionally effective in all kinds of organizations and industries. If you want to learn more, visit www.BrainAwareTraining.com.

So, let’s take a journey together. I’d like to introduce you to the fact that we are wired for purpose—it is part of our biological makeup as humans. We are neurologically designed to experience purpose and that it’s different from happiness. The key to a meaningful life is to have them in balance.

It is also true that finding our sense of purpose is meant to be a journey that unfolds over time and shifts with life’s experiences. Some people find many purposes over their lifetime, and others focus on one. There is no one right way but I have gathered some tools and information that can help you and others along the way. Let’s get started!



Take a Learning Journey

I have learned that before I can write a book, I have to teach the concepts and content to live audiences. I always try to create a learning experience that shifts people’s knowledge and behaviors. Before I wrote this book, I taught some of this content through workshops. In a live presentation, I model best practices in learning design based on the research of my previous book, *Wired to Grow: Harness the Power of Brain Science to Master Any Skill*. This includes having the audience pause and reflect on content every so often, applying it to their current situation.

Engaging with concepts in a personal way helps the brain learn and retain material and, more importantly, it’s where any meaningful shift in actions starts. To help you gain the most from this book, you will find this light bulb icon marking an element called “Your Learning Journey” at the end of each section. Each includes instructions for applying the content to your experiences.

To make this easier, I have created a free downloadable PDF for you to fill out as you explore each concept (www.BrittAndreatta.com/Wired-to-Become). To maximize your experience, I also recommend you find a partner as social learning boosts long-term retention, and when you work in partnership, you gain the insights of each other’s experiences. So, ask a friend or colleague who is seeking more purpose or meaning in their life and explore the content together.

EXPLORING PURPOSE + MEANINGFUL WORK

*“Work gives you meaning and purpose, and life is
empty without it.”*

Dr. Stephen Hawking (1942–2018),
astrophysicist and author,
Brief Answers to the Big Questions
and *The Theory of Everything*

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14. Purpose and Meaning at Work

Given that we spend nearly one-third of our lives at work, it's no surprise that people view it as a major component in their quest for a sense of purpose in life. Behind sleeping, work comprises the next largest use of our time. Consider these statistics:

- One in five adults (19 percent) feel uncertain about their work and one in six (16 percent) feel trapped
- Nearly half (48 percent) feel stressed at work regularly and one-third feel overwhelmed at work
- 26 percent of all employees feel anxious about work (35 percent of Millennials and 40 percent of Gen Z workers)

Studies from many researchers over the past few decades show some consistent findings and frameworks that can help us all. What we know for sure is that meaning matters.

Meaning vs. Meaningful

Researchers distinguish meaning and meaningfulness as two different things.

- **Meaning is largely descriptive and is a mental representation of the relationships among things.** As we navigate our day, we naturally assign meaning to our experiences. For example, how would you answer if I ask you, “What is the meaning of work?” Some of you might say that it's how we earn a paycheck, others might say it's a series of jobs and promotions that make up a career, and others might say it's part of the economic system that provides goods and services to society.

Meaning comes from what we are told by major influencers in our lives like our parents, teachers, and the media. They give us our first frameworks and definitions and an original set of values. My guess is that some of your views of work came from your parents' beliefs about, and experiences with, their own jobs.

- **Meaningfulness is evaluative—it's the amount of significance we give something.** We can think of it as a continuum with meaningful on one end and meaningless on the other. You can place various experiences on that continuum but it's *your* continuum, very personal, subjective, and unique to you.

MEANINGLESS ←————→ MEANINGFUL

So, what you define as meaningful work can be very different from another person, even when you hold a similar job or work at the same organization.

Because it's evaluative, it is also shaped by societal influences. In order to effectively explore this topic, we need to get clear on three concepts and how they are different:

- **Meaning OF work:** How you perceive the overall concept of work
- **Meaning IN work:** How meaningful that work is to you, specifically
- **Meaning AT work:** More narrowly defined as the context of that specific job in that particular organization

We are going to focus on meaning IN work—what makes work meaningful to people—but will explore meaning AT work in section VI.

Elements of Meaningful Work

Before we explore the large body of research on what makes work meaningful, take a few minutes right now to think back over your various jobs and careers. For the ones that were the most meaningful to you, what factors contributed to that evaluation? Take a moment to jot them down.

Studies about meaningful work began in the 1970s and have continued and increased over time—mirroring our human need for meaningful work and the desire of executives and human resource practitioners to find the formula that attracts and retains top talent.

Researchers found four main factors that represent the most robust or consistent findings (presented here in no particular order).

Job design

The first factor is job design, which includes the following elements:

- **Variety:** A range of tasks or skills so work does not become routine or boring
- **Autonomy:** Having some say or influence about how one approaches a task or the job
- **Challenge:** The role offers an opportunity to work at one's edge and helps you to grow or develop to your potential
- **Significance:** The task or role is perceived as having some benefit or meaning (as opposed to being pointless)
- **Status:** The work confers some level of status or influence

Workplace relationships

Several studies find that when we enjoy working with our colleagues it contributes to our sense of meaningful work. One researcher found that today's workers have "increasingly porous work-life boundaries," which means this second factor is taking on more significance over time.

Work can also create a powerful sense of belonging for people. Many find that recognition from their peers is an important element of meaningful work, as is "serving others" or work that impacts others, whether that is on a team, within an organization, or part of society as a whole.

Leadership and management

This third factor represents the influence that leaders and managers play in creating or undermining a sense of meaning that people find in their work.

- **Transformational leadership:** A particular style where leaders focus on inspiring employees to work toward a shared vision, as they celebrate efforts and catalyze change
- **Strong leader/member exchanges:** Frequent and transparent communication that builds rapport and trust
- **Manager/supervisor support:** A focus on authentic conversations and supporting employee success (another body of research indicates abusive or divisive managers directly reduce meaningfulness at work)
- **Manager recognition:** Studies show that recognition and celebrating accomplishments boost meaningfulness and contribute to employees feeling like efforts and time spent are worthwhile

As one study described it, “Managers are people who can destroy or challenge the attempts of individuals to find work meaningful.”

Organization

Finally, we have the organizational level, where work is done to benefit the greater good through a self-transcendent or purpose-driven orientation. For example, organizations in healthcare, education, nonprofit work, spirituality, and the environment.

Benefits of Meaningful Work

Beyond a doubt, the plethora of studies showing robust results on the benefits of meaningful work demonstrate its importance for the well-being of people and organizations. We now have a clear picture that when people have meaningful work, good things increase, and challenging things decrease, as indicated by these compelling findings:

- **Attitudes:** Meaningful work is shown to increase attitudes like job satisfaction and enjoyment, commitment to the organization, engagement, and both intrinsic motivation and reward.

As we learned in chapter 6, engagement is crucial for organizations. International research firm Gallup estimates that one disengaged employee costs an organization approximately \$3,400 for every \$10,000 or 34 percent of their salary.

- **Behaviors:** Researchers find that behaviors change when we have meaningful work, including lowered levels of absenteeism (tardiness or missing work) as well as intention to quit. Absenteeism alone yields significant savings for any organization. According to the US Centers

for Disease Control, it costs employers \$225.8 billion annually, or about \$1,685 per employee. And the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) estimates that turnover costs 50 percent to 250 percent of annual salary plus benefits (the difference being how senior or technical the role).

- **Performance:** Meaningful work also boosts performance across a variety of measures, including customer satisfaction, knowledge sharing, creativity, and organizational citizenship behavior. Any improvement or productivity can yield significant results for organizations. Even a shift by 1 percent can yield results worth millions of dollars.
- **Well-being:** Having meaningful work reaps many rewards for individuals, including an increase in positive self-concept, life satisfaction, feelings of accomplishment, growth, happiness, work-to-family enrichment, and satisfaction in romantic relationships.

Another study found when we experience meaningful work we experience that state of flow where time seems to stop, as opposed to meaningless work that feels like it's wasting our time and energy. Several studies show that meaningful work contributes to our overall well-being and leads to reductions in stress and depression levels.

Considering the incredible damage caused by mental health struggles, ensuring that more people experience meaningful work could generate incredible benefits for organizations and society as a whole.

Models of Meaningful Work

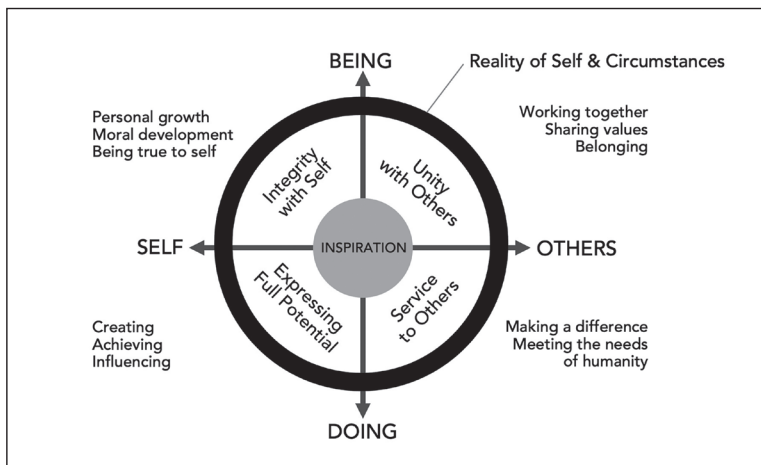
From several researchers exploring meaningful work, six useful frameworks have emerged. As you read these summaries, consider which shed light on your current and past experiences.

Map of meaningful work

Let's start at the individual level and how we perceive or define meaningful work. Dr. Marjolein Lips-Wiersma, a professor at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand, studies the nexus of meaningful work, sustainability, and well-being. She found four sources, or areas, that contribute to us feeling that work is meaningful:

- Developing and becoming our full self, which includes personal growth and being true to ourselves and our integrity
- Expressing our full potential through creating, influencing, using our strengths, and achieving our goals
- Unity with others by working together, sharing values, and having a sense of belonging
- Serving others by meeting the needs of humanity and making a difference

The four can be placed on two axes: one ranging from Self to Others and the other from Doing to Being. A meaningful life, then, is about finding the right balance, which is unique to each of us. In the center is our sense of purpose, or what inspires us. From her research, Lips-Wiersma created this map of meaningful work, which we can use in several ways.



Lips-Wiersma's Map of Meaningful Work

First, she recommends reflecting on the past couple of weeks and placing your experiences in the various quadrants. What insight does it give you about how you are spending your time?

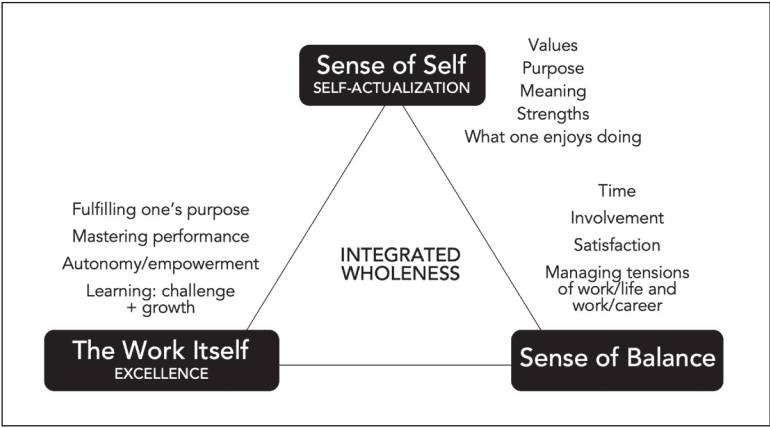
Next, is there an appropriate balance between self and others or is one more actively expressed? What about being and doing—are any adjustments needed? Finally, explore how your sense of purpose influences the four zones. Are the connections strong and clear or do you need to refocus anything?

Davin Salvagno, in his book *Finding Purpose at Work*, adds some more insights: “When we focus on our purpose, we fulfill our potential and experience high performance in all that we do, and we experience joy.” He believes that the intersection of our potential and performance creates four zones. (1) When performance and potential are high, we are on purpose and experience joy. (2) When performance is high but potential is low, we experience indifference. (3) When our potential is high but our performance is low, we experience frustration and, (4) sadly, the outcome of low performance and low potential are feelings of depression. What feelings do you have in these four zones?

Meaningful work triangle

Dr. Neal Chalofsky, a renowned scholar in the study of meaningful work, has published many academic studies and authored the book, *Meaningful Workplaces: Reframing How and Where We Work*. His model emerged from a multiyear study and takes a larger view of meaningful work as the interplay between three areas:

- **Sense of self** is our path to self-actualization and includes our values, what we enjoy doing, our strengths, and what gives us a sense of purpose or meaning in our life.
- **The work itself** is the job and our path to excellence. It includes elements like how much autonomy or empowerment we have in our job, if we have opportunities to learn and grow that allow us to show mastery in our performance, and if it gives us a sense of fulfilling our purpose.
- **The sense of balance** is how we feel in terms of our time, involvement, satisfaction, and ability to manage the natural tensions of work and life, and also the job and our career.



Chalofsky's meaningful work model

Ultimately, Dr. Chalofsky claims, meaningful work is about achieving integrated wholeness between these three parts of the triangle.

Again, you can treat the model as a tool for assessment. Take some notes about your experiences in the three parts of the triangle. What do you notice? Do any areas of your sense of self or the work itself need attention? What areas are strong? And how do you feel about the sense of balance? What is working and what needs to shift?

Multilevel factors

Meaningful work doesn't just happen out of the blue—it's the result of several factors. One cornerstone study was conducted by researchers from Purdue University, Colorado State University, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and the University of Florida.

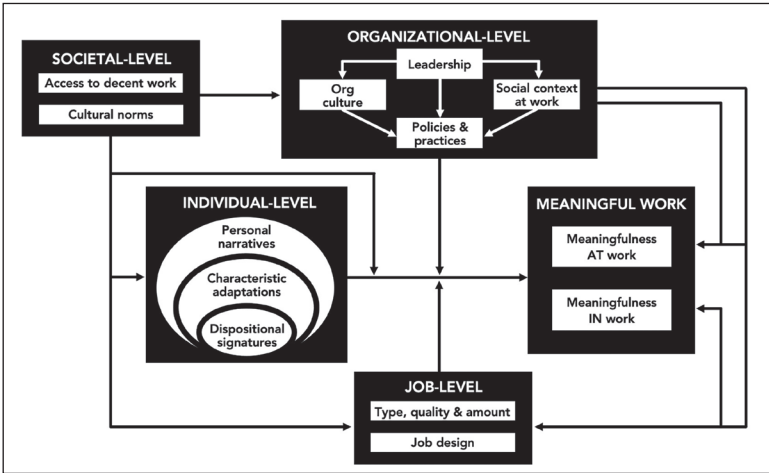
They identified four different levels at which meaningful work can be influenced: the individual, the job, the organization, and society. They synthesized the results of many different studies within each level and noted what factors positively influenced meaningful work and which ones detracted or decreased it.

For example, individual factors included disposition (positive attitude, conscientiousness, strengths), characteristics (intrinsic motivation, motivation for service, and greater good), and personal narratives (shared experiences, autonomy, and identity).

Job level factors include type, quality, and amount of work. This also included things like safe and fair conditions, and whether resources and development opportunities felt limited or restricted. Another factor was job design, including task significance, autonomy, and the ability to customize one’s job thorough job crafting.

There were four factors at the organizational level:

- **Leadership:** Using transformational leadership practices, behaving ethically, communicating the organization’s mission, and creating a sense of meaning
- **Culture:** This includes elements that support employees, are ethical in nature, and encourage innovation
- **Policies and practices:** Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and volunteering live here, as do HR practices that focus on engaging and developing employees
- **Social context of work:** Good or positive workplace relationships and a social and moral climate



Factors that foster meaningful work

Finally, the societal level included whether people had access to “decent work,” which included elements like access to healthcare, adequate compensation, and hours that allow for free time and rest. The other factor was cultural norms, which included whether there was an emphasis on, or pathway for, individual fulfillment and well-being.

This analysis allowed them to build a framework showing how these elements influence each other, so individuals and organizational leaders have a way to see and understand how these elements are interconnected, as well as starting places to introduce change or interrupt unproductive patterns. More importantly, we can explore the concept of “fit” between the person and the job, as well as the person and the organization. For example, a person might find great meaning in their job because they enjoy the tasks they work on and/or the people with whom they work. But they may still struggle because the organization’s culture is insensitive to their needs. Consider these comments by the authors:

When individuals seeking greater challenge at work find themselves under-employed in their current job (that is, doing tasks or jobs that do not match their qualifications), they might experience lower work meaningfulness.

Individuals high on prosocial motivation working in jobs that do not allow them to make an impact on the lives of beneficiaries (for example, coworkers, supervisors, clients, or customers) may also experience challenges in their work meaningfulness.

Individuals concerned with the conservation and protection of the natural environment or with high moral identity are likely to experience greater meaningful work in organizations that implement CSR policies and practices.

To summarize, meaningful work is an individual experience that tends to occur when someone’s motivations, values, and goals are congruent with those of their environment (job, organization, and society). Look at the model and review which elements have contributed to and detracted from your experience of meaningful work.

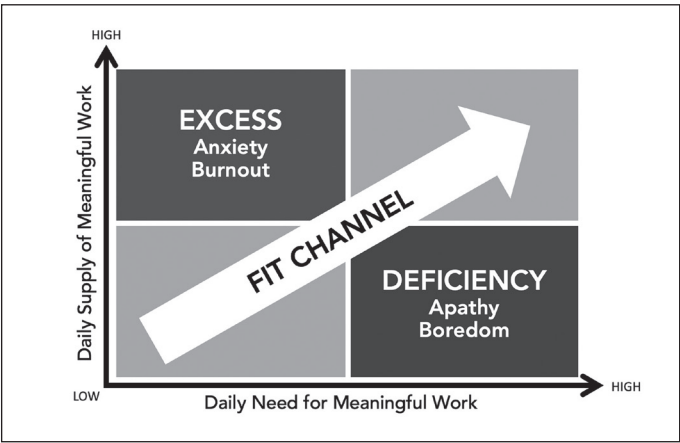
Fit and flow model

Not surprisingly, many other researchers find that when people have a good fit between their needs and a job, as in either person-job or person-organization fit, they experience greater meaningful work.

Another study, published in the 2020 *Journal of Applied Psychology*, did a deeper dive into the impact of a poor fit between a person and the organization. The researchers wanted to test what happened when there was a misalignment between a person’s needs for meaningful work and what they could access in their job, which they termed supply. They particularly focused on people’s responses, assuming that meaningfulness would capture people’s attention, and they would be aware and psychologically present to their experience and the work. The opposite reaction would be fatigue or a lack of desire for continuing the task at hand because it drained the person’s energy.

They found that the match or fit consistently predicted people’s responses. When our needs for meaningful work match the supply we have access to, people are highly attentive and engaged. But when the fit is wrong, we experience

boredom (from too little meaning) or burnout (from too much supply). This implies there is an ideal zone or window where people gain the most benefit, like Goldilocks tasting the porridge that is “just right.”



Fit and flow model of meaningful work

Another study identified that meaningful work fit impacts our mental health, which exists on a continuum from languishing to flourishing with moderate mental health in the middle. It’s clear that finding the right fit is critical for us to enjoy work and for our well-being.



The concept of meaning “fit” is relevant to our experience of the pandemic. Healthcare workers are known for having a high sense of purpose in their work and, generally, a good fit with their need for meaning (the ability to help people heal) and its supply (the regular load at a hospital or clinic). But the pandemic significantly overloaded the supply of meaning, especially in the early days before there were vaccines or treatments. Healthcare workers all over the world found themselves facing the extraordinarily difficult task of caring for people who were dying in record numbers and for which their normal skills and tools were woefully ineffective.

Many caregivers spoke of how disheartened and depressed they felt (languishing) along with the extremely high levels of burnout they experienced. Even a one-time event can be impactful. One ER nurse who worked during the 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas said, “I loved being a nurse. But I just couldn’t work in the ER anymore.”

It’s clear that the fit between a person’s sense of purpose, their job, and their organization plays a vital role. Consider the fit you have had with previous jobs and organizations. Was there a balance between the supply and your own needs? If not, what was out of balance and how did that imbalance impact you?

Also consider the times you have been in the flow state. What does that tell you about the fit you were experiencing?

Spirituality at work

Many scholars focusing on religiosity and spirituality have explored this concept but a clear model has not yet emerged. The topic is just so broad. However, we do see an emergence of three common themes in the research so far: meaningful work, a sense of community, and the person's "inner life."

While scholars are not aligned around one shared definition, they are exploring potential benefits for employees, including intuition and creativity, honesty and trust, commitment, organizational performance, job satisfaction, intention to quit, organizational citizenship behavior, ethics, stress, and well-being.

Even though the research is still too varied to share a concrete model, those of you who identify as spiritual or religious may want to explore the research. I recommend the article "The What, Why, and How of Spirituality in the Workplace Revisited: A 14-year Update and Extension" by Dr. Jeff Houghton (West Virginia University), Dr. Chris Neck (Arizona State University), and Dr. Sukumarakurup Krishnakumar (Keck Graduate Institute), published in the *Journal of Management, Spirituality and Religion* (2016).

I also recommend these books written with a focus of spirituality:

- *Spirit at Work: Discovering the Spirituality in Leadership* by Jay Conger
- *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* by Rev. Rick Warren
- *Your Purpose Is Calling: Your Difference Is Your Destiny* by Dr. Dharius Daniels
- *You On Purpose: Discover Your Calling and Create the Life You Were Meant to Live* by Dr. Stephanie Shackelford and Bill Denzel
- *A Life at Work: The Joy of Discovering What You Were Born to Do* by Thomas Moore
- *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* by Parker Palmer
- *The Four Purposes of Life: Finding Meaning and Direction in a Changing World* by Dan Millman

Ikigai model

The last and most holistic model comes from Japan and represents a philosophy of life as well as a way to create meaningful work.

Ikigai (pronounced "eye-ka-guy") translates to "reason to live" or "reason for being." This concept is woven into the very fabric of Japanese culture and aligns directly with eudaimonic well-being. In fact, one study by Dr. Michiko Kumano explored how ikigai compared with another core value of shiawase, which aligns with happiness. She states, "This study verifies that, for Japanese, feeling shiawase is close to hedonic well-being and feeling ikigai is close to eudaimonic well-being."

Like the studies on purpose we reviewed, many scholars have explored ikigai's benefits. Studies included participants from Eastern and Western

cultures, showing that it's not about the person's culture or ethnicity but whether they embrace the ikigai concept.

One 2022 study by Dr. Juliet Wilkes and colleagues, found that ikigai was positively correlated with participants' well-being and negatively correlated with depression and anxiety. Another study of 50,000 participants discovered that ikigai reduced risks for cardiovascular disease and its related mortality. A separate study found that ikigai reduces age-related dementia and cognitive decline.



Purpose Story 15: **The Path to Ikigai**

I was a recruiting manager and had been leading my first team for a little over a year. I realized that my purpose and my work were not aligned, and every day I dreaded going to work. There were many aspects of people and branch management that I did not like. I took this time to take a step back and rate my job responsibilities based on what gave me the most joy and the least.

At the top of the list were coaching and developing my team, and I realized if I could do this at a larger scale I would be much more connected to my purpose. At the time I was also working for a nonprofit as a director, where I not only led a team but taught dance classes and had to come up with fun and creative ways to engage large groups of people on a regular basis. I started looking for opportunities to coach and develop others in fun and creative ways and this led me to take a step back in my career to join the learning and development team in my company. I immediately connected with my purpose and it showed through the way I facilitated classes and thought about the learner's journey. That step back in my career ended up being a gigantic leap forward because when my purpose connected to my work, my passion and commitment was clear to everyone around me.

When I was coaching or facilitating I felt and still feel myself go into "the zone." I could do what I'm doing for hours (and I often do). At the time when I was first discovering this, I would get excited about the challenges around coaching and creating memorable learning experiences, and that was a huge indicator to me that I should be doing more of that.

I actually didn't immediately move to learning and development. I first piloted the career of a college professor by becoming a research assistant. This helped clarify to me that it wasn't just about teaching, it was the act of spending the majority of my time helping others grow and develop that was core to my purpose. Turns out I don't get joy from doing research but taking the research that others do and making it digestible and using it to help others grow is more aligned with my purpose.

I would not be nearly as happy or successful as I am today if I hadn't taken the time to actually figure out my purpose and how to do more of it. It wasn't until recently that I had a manager who actually had a purpose

conversation with me, and thinking about it now, I feel like this is going to be something even more important for leaders to do as the nature of management evolves. My purpose has thus evolved to not just coaching and developing others, but helping other leaders to do the same.

I don't have research to back this up, but I think often people get stuck believing that they can only have one purpose. This is just one example of a purpose I've found a way to live in my life. I have two businesses that each help me live another purpose I've discovered and connected for myself. My husband and I have put together a family crest to represent our values as a family and help members of the family connect their purpose to how they contribute to the family and the world. I find the concept of purpose, or *ikigai* in my culture, fascinating because it can connect so many aspects of our lives.

Finally, *ikigai* helps people heal from tragedy and loss. One study of the victims of the 2011 earthquake and resulting tsunami that devastated Japan—leaving 20,000 people dead and nearly 500,000 homeless—found that *ikigai* helped people cope with stress, grief, and trauma.

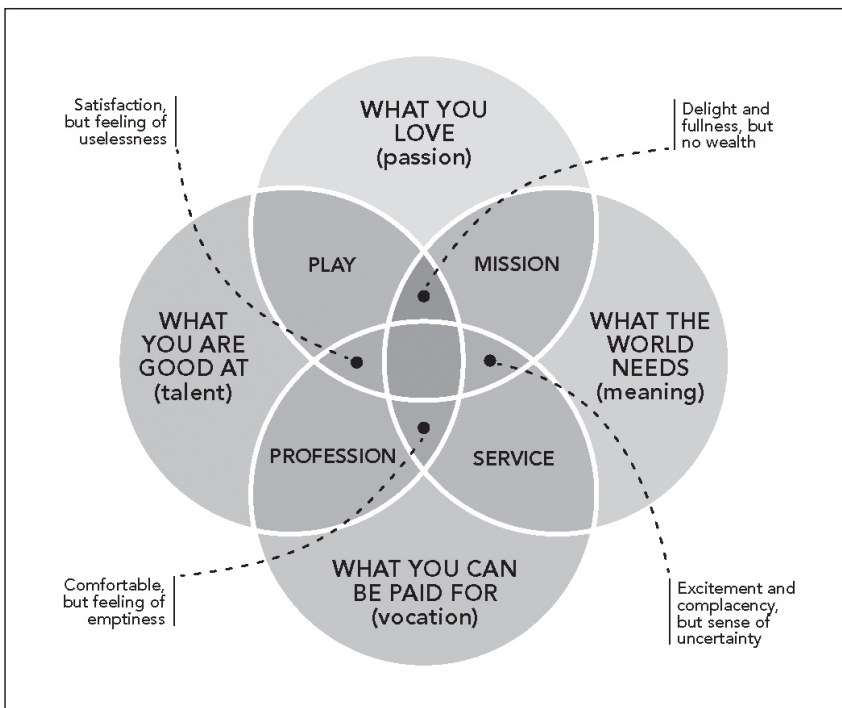
Dan Buettner, in his book *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living from the People Who've Lived the Longest*, specifically calls out *ikigai* as a source for why Okinawans have such long life spans. Japan has seen its share of tragedy, especially during World War II, but *ikigai* allows a person to see beyond their current situation, even if it is fraught with misery, to look forward to the future.

While purpose or reason for being is at the heart of *ikigai*, from it springs many aspects of purpose in life, including meaningful work. And perhaps this model's greatest contribution is to expand the range of sources through which we all can find and express a sense of purpose.

The model is a Venn diagram where *ikigai* sprouts out into four overlapping areas: what you love (passion), what you are good at (talent), what the world needs (meaning), and what you can be paid for (vocation). These four areas create four intersections: (1) The intersection of what you love and what you are good at is play. (2) The intersection of what you are good at and what you can be paid for is your profession. (3) The intersection of what you can be paid for and what the world needs is your service. And (4) the intersection of what the world needs and what you love is your mission.

Finally, those four segments—play, profession, service, and mission—overlap to create four more intersections of challenges we'll face if we don't have *ikigai*, or purpose, at the center.

The goal is to live a life that has all of these elements so that you have a full and holistic sense of completeness. I especially like that our work life is one aspect but not the *only* aspect of a full life.



The ikigai model

I encourage you to use this diagram as a diagnostic tool and write down where your experiences land on the model. Consider the fullness of your life: work, hobbies and interests, volunteerism, family and friends, neighborhood and community, etc. What did you notice? What can you build? Are there any areas that need your attention?

Together, these six models give us a more complete picture of meaningful work and the role it plays in helping us develop a clear sense of our purpose in life. Use them to inform your reflection of past work experiences and to guide your choices around future work opportunities.

15. The 5 Paradoxes of Meaningful Work

Trigger Warning: This chapter touches on the subject of suicide, which some readers might find difficult.

As we continue to explore the concepts of purpose, having a purpose in life, and meaningful work, we clearly see several myths and paradoxes at play. These can alter our perception of what is possible, and our own journey of discovery.

A paradox is when two seemingly opposite ideas are both true at the same time. The paradoxes of meaningful work arise so often in the research that the *Journal of Management Studies* devoted an entire issue to exploring them. As we look at the most common ones, consider which have impacted you over the course of your career.

Paradox #1: What we define as meaningful is personal, yet shaped by others.

We have already discovered that what we perceive to be meaningful, significant, or worthy is a deeply personal definition. And yet, those definitions are strongly influenced by others. Our families of origin and childhood cultures bathed us in messages about what jobs were worth doing and what careers were respected. That can create great challenges when we find ourselves unfulfilled by the path we were encouraged to pursue. Or worse, when we find great joy in the one that we were told to avoid.

Part of the journey to and through adulthood is developing *our own* set of values and beliefs based on our life experiences, so it's a natural part of the process to diverge from those who influenced us early on. But that doesn't mean it is easy or comfortable.

In addition, because of how history has unfolded thus far, all of us are influenced by societal values that are primarily male, white, Western, and Christian. This adds layers of value judgment onto careers. For example, jobs that have been gendered, labeled “women's work,” like teaching or nursing.

Jobs have also been “mainstreamed” to fit the values of the predominant culture. Many children of immigrants feel pressure to pursue careers that their parents perceive will best set them up for success in the new homeland. The powerful pressure to assimilate pushes people away from their traditions to the careers that are seen as most profitable or respected in the new country.

Economic factors also play a role because of the wages or salaries assigned to jobs and even industries. Feeling that your work has value or worth in the eyes of others is shaped by many factors, including how much you are paid, the kind of support and benefits you receive, and the safety you feel.

Essential and nonessential workers

Even during the pandemic, employees were categorized as “essential” or “non-essential.” “Essential” employees were pushed into an intensive time of high productivity, asked to work longer shifts in dangerous conditions. Getting

breaks and downtime was difficult, if not impossible. Many even chose to live separately from their family for fear of exposing them to the coronavirus.

While many essential workers felt that their work had purpose and meaning, the overwhelming pressures of the pandemic caused many to experience significant amounts of exhaustion, burnout, and other mental health challenges.

Those deemed “nonessential” experienced another kind of toll: Many were laid off entirely, losing income and medical insurance during a global health crisis. Many of those who kept their jobs still questioned their value under a label that suggests low level of importance. According to one study from the Netherlands, these labels affect people’s perceptions of their own work: “The study found that employees who were not working during lockdown, or whose work hours were reduced sharply, perceived their job as contributing less to the greater good, identified less strongly with their organization, and experienced more job insecurity compared with those who retained a large percentage of their work activities.” In addition, the longer people were in lockdown, these perceptions continued to grow.

Interestingly, the authors also found that when people felt that they didn’t matter, the more they engaged in cyber-incivility against the organization and coworkers. Several studies show that experiencing incivility at work creates emotional exhaustion and decreases our motivation. While having a sense of meaningful work can buffer this effect, it can only do so much.

Feeling valued means that you matter and it further shapes what we perceive to be meaningful.

Paradox #2: We are each on our own path of fulfillment and self-actualization, yet it requires the support of others to make happen.

While finding and living one’s purpose is largely about finding inner alignment, we often cannot get there without the support and even direct approval from influential people along the way, including parents, teachers, and managers.

If you knew at an early age your purpose was to work with animals, you’d still have to run the gauntlet of parental approval. (“That won’t pay very much, so you should do something else.”) Or teachers who might shape your view of your skills and options. (“That career requires a lot of math and science, which you’re not good at. You should pick something else.”) Or managers or bosses who evaluate your performance and set your career on a trajectory. (“We think you are better suited to this other role” or “We don’t think you have management potential.”)

Fulfilling one’s purpose, then, is often a journey of fighting against all these forces rather than just tuning in and listening to what feels right. That fight can be exhausting and overwhelming, and may take decades.

Interestingly, research shows that while *all* the working generations seek purpose and meaning at work, they define it differently. One study by doctors Kelly Weeks and Catilin Schaffert found these differences in how members of the different generations define meaningful work. (Note: Members of Gen Z

were not included because they were just entering the adult workforce when the study was conducted in 2018 but I have added definitions from a different study to this table.)

Generation	Definitions of Meaningful Work	
Gen Z (1997-2012)	Purpose Serving others and social good	Values-driven work cultures Equality and environment
Millennials (1981-1996)	Nice coworkers Serving others	Seeing lives improved Personal happiness
Gen X (1965-1980)	Working with good people Work-life balance	Pursue individual goals
Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Success Helping others achieve goals	Reaching personal goals
Silent (1928-1945)	Challenging work Self satisfaction with work	Helping others Org values align with own values

Generational definitions of meaningful work

More importantly, the researchers found that members of each generation perceive the other generations negatively for not sharing the same view, and often held assumptions in error. For example, Millennials perceived that Baby Boomers “just work for money” while “helping others achieve their goals” is in the top three for Boomers. And Gen Xers perceived that Millennials “are more concerned with their personal life” when “serving others” and “seeing lives improved” were part of their top four.

These definitions and misperceptions can play out within families, among coworkers, and between managers/leaders and their employees, impacting how fulfilled we feel and how much we support others.

Paradox #3: We must find our own sense of meaning at work, yet leaders control the conditions.

Meaningful work, while defined by the employee, is heavily influenced and even controlled by the organization’s leaders. They communicate whether a role or project is meaningful in numerous ways: It’s given a title that indicates some aspect of meaning, as do the pay and benefits or resources. It’s conveyed by where it sits in the organization’s hierarchy, whether it warrants an office, and its level of influence on projects or budgets.

The organization’s overall vision, mission, and values also play critical roles. Are they clearly articulated and easy to find? Do they even exist? And how easy is it for the employee to make a direct connection between their role or project and that vision?

A big part of finding meaning at work lives in the day-to-day interactions with your direct supervisor. Do they treat you with kindness and respect? Do they care about you as a person? Do they have the skills to create psychological safety? Or to coach you so you can reach your highest performance and fullest potential?

Policies and practices also matter. One aspect concerns corporate social responsibility (CSR), but other policies also matter. Are employees trusted to make decisions and given access to resources or do leaders view employees with suspicion? Are managers given training on how to provide coaching or build psychological safety? How often are managers evaluated and how is their success measured? If the organization is not analyzing employee engagement, turnover, and performance and tying them to the manager's performance, then they are not creating a culture of accountability.

All these factors contribute to an organization's overall culture and climate and are largely in the hands of the senior leaders. The good news is that leaders can take many actions to create a phenomenal workplace where employees are happy and fulfilled. We'll dig into this more in section VI.

As employees, it's our responsibility to know what we need to thrive and seek out the right fit as we apply and interview for a job. We'll explore more tools and strategies for finding the right fit in chapter 22. But we can only learn so much through that process. Once we start on our first day, we experience the *actual* organization and not just how it advertises itself to job seekers. It's on us to notice any discrepancies and our raise concerns. And, ultimately, to make the choice to leave if we need to.



Purpose Story 16:

Know When to Cut Your Losses

A couple years ago, I took a new job that perfectly aligned with my sense of purpose. I left a comfortable, well-paying job for something completely different, running an NGO in another country for almost no pay but with a mission that truly called to me.

For the previous 10 years, I funded my vacations by volunteering with medical and dental NGOs; so why not flip my life and live my vacation?

The team I was leading at the NGO was comprised of 25 foreign fellowships—staff who filled roles in logistics, medicine, pharmacy, and hospitality for multi-month assignments. Our daily work was to plan and execute medical clinics in remote villages spread out across an archipelago, providing acute illness/injury treatment, ongoing family planning, chronic disease management, and referrals to the Ministry of Health for conditions that needed more advanced intervention.

If this would have been the actual work, I would have “found my calling” and be living a life where my work and individual values aligned in harmony—advocating for and assisting a community to thrive in health. Instead, what I experienced was managing of an international team of short-term employees whose individual purpose was hedonistic and selfish in nature.

Each Sunday evening, as the team returned from the local tourist town to our base to prepare for the week, I was sure to have HR issues to address

from the team's weekend escapades. The issues ranged from physical and sexual assault to arrests by the local police, or an injury from a drunken tumble out of a second-story window. During the week, while operating clinics, the team had a hard time adhering to World Health Organization standards of practice or conducting research.

Needless to say, I was not living my purpose. Instead, I was spending 90 percent of my time addressing the immature, unprofessional, and unethical behaviors of my colleagues.

I worked hard to communicate the misalignment with the board of directors. They said they heard the issues and would address them or support me doing what I could on my end. We developed an action plan and timeline to move the work toward the mission, but staff continued to undermine the efforts. I thought that if I was able to address the bad behavior by turning over the staff, new staff whose values aligned with mine would take their place and I could do the real work that the organization intended. But after six months of trying and no movement on the action plan, my purpose floated farther and farther away.

This experience helped put the context of insider versus outsider into context when it comes to community service. Being an outsider played a significant role in my feeling unsuccessful in this job. As an outsider, your role is to advocate and assist the inside community to lift themselves lest you run the risk of acting the "colonial white savior." But when everyone on our team did not see this view, the infighting and conflict took its toll to the detriment of the organization.

Ultimately, I had to make the difficult decision to leave the organization. My values are intact and my purpose to serve my community has never been stronger. It's just done in a different way than I envisioned when joining the NGO. But I learned that I was capable of some incredible things: making unpopular decisions, being the sole dissenting voice in a conversation, delivering tough messages and, maybe most importantly, that there are some key values I can't bend on like integrity, responsibility, and advocacy.

Paradox #4: We have an innate drive to seek meaningful work and purpose, yet this same drive can push us to harmful excesses.

I found it interesting that several researchers commented on "the dark side" of purpose, with many studies even using this term in their title.

One set of studies found that people who feel deeply connected to their sense of purpose, believing that it is their "calling," are willing to endure significant hardships, both physical and mental. For example, frequently overworking and not being able to create or hold appropriate boundaries. This leads to physical exhaustion and burnout, both of which harm physical and mental health.

Another study found that people with a deep sense of purpose have a high level of work devotion, but can be willing to accept poor, unsafe, or abusive working conditions in pursuit of making a difference. These can also lead to physical and mental harm and a decrease in overall well-being.

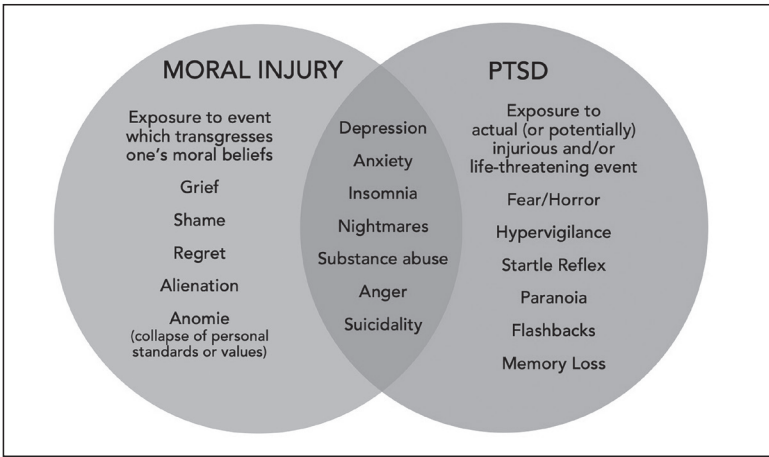
Not surprisingly, having a deep sense of purpose can sometimes take a toll on personal relationships. Dr. Carrie Oelberger found that overworking and the inability to hold work/life boundaries often creates conflicts about time and trust at home with loved ones. This can be worsened if the partner doesn't share the same value for, or find the same meaning in, the work. She states, "This disconnection-based conflict compounds the time- and trust-based conflict and engenders an emotionally agonizing situation—a context I call work-relationship turmoil." However, when the partner shares the same value in the work, it can foster emotional connection.

Finally, there is a significant body of research on the damage done when our sense of values or moral beliefs are violated. It's called moral injury or moral harm and it can lead to serious consequences. The National Center for PTSD has this to say:

In traumatic or unusually stressful circumstances, people may perpetrate, fail to prevent, or witness events that contradict deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. Moral injury is the distressing psychological, behavioral, social, and sometimes spiritual aftermath of exposure to such events.

The hallmark reactions of moral injury are guilt, shame, disgust, and anger. Moral injury is the wound but it can manifest as PTSD, impacting physical and emotional well-being and even increasing the risk of suicide.

Moral injury can show up in many ways. It can harm a person's self-concept, driving negative self-talk of fault or failure. It can harm relationships by creating disconnection, loss of trust, "unforgivability," and ultimately severing ties. It can cause a range of difficult emotions and a loss of self-control or the ability to calm down. And it can lead to questioning our sense of good in the world or believing that life has no meaning.



The relationship between moral injury and PTSD

Many purpose-driven careers have a risk for moral injury, including military service, social work, refugee/international aid work, teaching, and healthcare. For example, veterinarians have a high risk for moral injury because of the high rates at which they are asked to euthanize healthy animals. They also must euthanize animals for which they have provided long-term care and manage the grief of their clients, their staff, and themselves. This leads to a high rate of suicide among vets, as well as coworkers in nonclinical roles.

Many healthcare workers on the frontlines of the pandemic suffered moral injury. The deadly, fast-moving virus, coupled with a lack of resources (PPE, treatment options), led to daily difficult decisions and high death tolls.

One Duke University study found that during the pandemic healthcare workers had similar rates of moral injury as military combat veterans. Suicide among healthcare workers, particularly nurses, is also on the rise. Many healthcare organizations are focusing on employee mental health including reducing and preventing moral injury.

Having a lack of purpose can harm us too. As doctors Frank Martela and Anne Pessi wrote in an article for *Frontiers in Psychology*, “Human beings are hardwired to seek meaning and a lack of meaning is seen as a serious psychological deprivation associated with depression, mortality, and even suicide ideation.”

While suicide rates have declined 5 percent since 2018 in the US, they had risen 36 percent from 2000 to 2018. During that period, suicidal thoughts and behaviors had doubled for 18- to 34-year-olds and tripled for youth under 18. Another area of concern is among middle-age white women whose rate of suicide increased 82 percent for those ages 45 to 54 and 92 percent for 55 to 64. Native Americans have the highest suicide rate of all groups in the US and men commit suicide at a rate of 4 times greater than women.

I realize this section is difficult to read so it feels important to remind us all to reach out for help when we are struggling. There are services, both local and national, like the US National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988lifeline.org or the international website Befrienders.org.

Also, it's important to reach out and check on others, even if they appear to be doing fine. In fact, some of the people who are struggling the most are the ones who appear to be the happiest. Those same resources provide support to anyone concerned about someone else.

Finding and living a sense of purpose and meaningful work is important for our well-being but it must be balanced with appropriate boundaries and an abundance of support.

Paradox #5: Meaning and purpose create a pervasive sense of value, yet ebb and flow over time.

While our purpose might shine like the North Star, guiding us in a constant direction, there are days when it's covered by the clouds and harder to see. Or we're blown off course by strong winds, despite our desire and best intentions to stay on track. In particular, our experience of meaningful work can shift day

by day, and even hour by hour, depending on the nature of the tasks, who we are working with, the organization's culture, and our own needs that day.

For example, I absolutely love researching and writing so I am quite happy as I type this sentence. But, tomorrow, I have to check all the citations to make sure they are accurately formatted. Ugh. Next week, I will deliver a keynote on my research, and I absolutely love connecting with an audience. But waking up at 3 a.m. to catch that flight east, not so much. Overall, my work is highly meaningful to me (I'm so grateful for that!), and that makes the annoying bits easier to manage. But if I had a high annoying-to-meaningful ratio, I might consider another path or make tweaks to my current one.

This is true for each of us. We must assess what we need to thrive and find the best ratio or mix for us. Living on purpose is not all rainbows and puppies 24/7—sometimes the work is hard and the challenges are overwhelming. But a strong sense of purpose and meaning carries you through.

Your own journey needs to include regular moments of assessment and reflection. When things are going well, take note of your emotions and what makes the work feel meaningful. Also consider how it expresses your sense of purpose. And when things dip, take an even closer look at what shifted. The levels we discussed in the last chapter are helpful:

- **Individual:** Is anything going on in your personal life that might be impacting how you're feeling?
- **Job:** Have your tasks or duties shifted? Has there been a change in the people you work with or the person you report to?
- **Organization:** Has there been a change in the organization's goals or future? Has a new leader brought a different tone to the culture?
- **Society:** Has something occurred on a larger level that is impacting norms, values, and priorities?

As we learned from Hudson's work in chapter 11, our sense of meaning and purpose goes through natural cycles over our lifetime, which influence how we feel about any particular job. I have seen this play out in my own life and Hudson's model has helped me separate a natural cycle of highs and lows from knowing when I need to take action. The burnout I felt from the pandemic put me into the "Doldrums" but I intentionally embraced cocooning and resting and I've cycled around to feeling on track again.

16. The 11 Myths of Purpose

As we grow up, we gain ideas about what purpose is and isn't. It's to be expected that along the way we all pick up a few misconceptions. Let's delve into the most common ones and see which have influenced you on your journey.

In his book, *The Purpose Economy*, Aaron Hurst identifies five common myths:

Myth #1: Your one purpose is about a worthy cause.

Hurst argues that our views about purpose have intertwined with the idea of a destiny. Storytelling has long followed the formula of the hero's journey. That the hero must find their one true purpose, the great and noble cause that will change the world. We've grown up with this idea that we each have one true purpose, just like we only have one true love.

It makes for a great movie or book plot, where life ties up neatly in 200 pages or 90 minutes. But in reality, there are lots of causes that need support, and many ways you can embrace purpose. "Purpose isn't a cause," he writes, "it is an approach to work and serving others. Purpose is a verb, not a noun."

Myth #2: Only the wealthy have the luxury of finding their purpose.

This myth perhaps again comes from media, as the stories we often see about people contributing to a cause are celebrities like movie stars and famous athletes. Leonardo DiCaprio and Zac Efron followed in Al Gore's shoes and are now ambassadors for the environment. Oprah Winfrey champions education for girls, even building her own school in South Africa. Princess Diana used her fame to break down the stigma of AIDS and Prince Harry is doing the same for mental health and veterans.

These are all wonderful efforts, but may lead us to believe that only the rich and famous can do purposeful work. Hurst shares data that purpose is inversely correlated with wealth, with the poorest Americans donating 3.2 percent of their income to charity while the wealthiest donate only 1.3 percent.

Everyone needs to have a sense of purpose and the path to purpose is open to all people.

Myth #3: Our purpose comes to us in a sudden revelation.

Again, this is influenced by media and the quick journey every hero must make to move the plot along. While this happens to a few people, it is more the exception than the norm, largely because most people don't just have one sense of purpose. We can have many over our lifetime and our life experiences contribute to the journey of discovery.

I had a clear sense of purpose when I was nine years old. I was going to be a competitive ice skater and win the Olympics. While I did skate for ten years, no medals are hanging on my wall. But wait! At 16, I realized I was born to work with the orcas at SeaWorld! After attending a show, I set my sights on becoming a marine biologist. While I did get a job at Sealand in British

Columbia, playing with the orcas and caring for the octopus, my marine biology degree never made it past freshman chemistry. And I've since learned things about the park industry that don't align with my values or ethics.

My sense of purpose became more clear after college and, since then, coalesced around helping others achieve their potential. But I have had many different jobs and worked for different types of organizations within that frame. Each one gave me some new skills as well as valuable information that informed my next choices.

My journey, it turns out, is pretty typical. We learn as we go and grow, changing over time. We're witnessing the reality of that right now with the pandemic forcing the world into a new reflection of what matters. It doesn't mean that people's sense of purpose was wrong before. It just means that we have been changed by facing our mortality and have entered a new phase of our lives. We just happen to be doing it together, which makes this a unique time in history.

Myth #4: Only some work generates purpose.

In his research, Hurst found that many people think only certain jobs truly bring a sense of purpose. As you can guess, they are the more visible or universally acknowledged "noble causes," like saving lives or fighting for justice. In fact, research shows that people believe many jobs, like administrative or janitorial work, could never possibly bring someone a sense of purpose.

But in reality, the majority (two-thirds) of people in *any* occupation, including administrative and janitorial roles, find purpose in it. Only about one-third see it as "only a job." Another study finds that 75 percent of people agree that we can find meaning in any type of work. As Hurst puts it, "What we do is not nearly as important as how we do it and what attitude we bring to the work. What we get from work has more to do with us than the work itself."

Remember, we can find purpose in many areas of our lives and our work is only one of them. Some people want to have the "just a job" experience so they can hold firm boundaries and fulfill their sense of purpose in their personal time. Others want to live and breathe their sense of purpose during those 40 to 50 hours per week and then just relax when they're off.

And as we learned in Myth #3, these desires can change over our lifetime, so we don't have to pick the perfect formula forever. Just ask yourself, what is the right formula for me now?

Myth #5: Living your purpose is easy.

Hurst's final myth is people believing that once they are living their purpose, everything will be easy. In reality, our purpose often asks us to dig deep and work hard. We will have to face difficult challenges and stumble along the way.

The good news is that when you have a sense of purpose, we perceive those challenges as less difficult, and those stumbles are easier to recover from. Having a North Star makes it easier to navigate the waves and winds simply because our eyes stay locked on where we are headed.

Other authors have also explored myths of purpose. In their book *The Purpose Factor* (2020), Brian and Gabrielle Bosché identified four others:

Myth #6: Purpose is about setting big goals.

You can't reach adulthood without learning about the value of setting and achieving goals. We set goals, translate them to our to-do lists, and even invest in fancy planners and apps to color code and track them. At work, we set goals and make sure they track to objectives and key results (OKRs) and key performance indicators (KPIs).

We even have an annual tradition of setting goals as New Year's resolutions. But the Boschés found that only 8 percent of people follow through, "That's 147 million people setting goals each January and 135 million giving up."

Goals are important and can certainly be a tool for getting things done. But achieving goals does not mean you have a sense of purpose. In fact, they state, "You can live an entire life of achievement and completely miss your purpose." They believe that purpose is about using what you have (skills, innate talents, and passion) to help others.

Myth #7: Pursuing passion is how you find purpose.

The Boschés state that 85 percent of people agree that to find your calling, you need to follow your passion. But they argue against that, claiming that the word passion has become synonymous with happiness or enjoyment. But really, passion is an intense emotion, defined as being barely controllable. While passion can certainly give you hints about your purpose, it's not the same as purpose. They define purpose as about who you can help.

Further, they argue that passion grows as you discover your purpose, gain experience, and develop your skills. They share examples of famously passionate people, like Walt Disney and Steve Jobs, who only became passionate over time, by pursuing their purpose. They state, "Passion is something that pulls you. When properly identified and given the time to grow, it inspires you. It drives you to do better, grow faster, and live longer."

Myth #8: You should find your purpose after you take care of your responsibilities.

This common myth keeps many people shackled with "shoulds" and "supposed tos." We tell ourselves, "I need to finish college first" or "I should get a higher paying salary" or "After the kids are older, I can look into that." Entire lives can pass waiting for the next good window until suddenly there is no time left.

The Boschés argue that we each have a purpose and to neglect it models to your family that "purpose is not compatible with life." Instead, they argue that you have a duty to discover your purpose and use it help others. It is not either/or but rather both/and.

Your one purpose is about a worthy cause.
Only the wealthy have the luxury of finding their purpose.
Our purpose comes to us in a sudden revelation.
Only some work generates purpose.
Living your purpose is easy.
Purpose is about setting big goals.
Pursuing passion is how you find purpose.
You should find your purpose after you take care of your responsibilities.
Happiness is not the same as purpose.
Once you find your purpose it will carry you, always.
There is a right way or best method for finding your purpose.



The 11 myths of purpose

Myth #9: Happiness is not the same as purpose.

The Boschés find that as society has become more and more concerned with finding happiness, we are actually getting more miserable.

I found data that supports their claim. Recently, diseases of despair (anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts) have risen sharply. Twenty percent of Americans have some type of anxiety disorder and one-third (33 percent) of the world's population is struggling with loneliness.

As we learned in chapter 1, happiness and purpose are two distinct experiences that even show up in the brain differently. Happiness is that fleeting sense of joy that focuses on the self while purpose is that self-transcending experience of focusing on being of service to others. We need a balance of both in our lives. If we focus too much on happiness, we lose sight of the thing that brings us real fulfillment and peace.



Purpose Story 17:

Shifting the Trial-By-Fire Experience

I worked in the call centers at a dental company as a customer/technical service representative. When I started the job, I didn't care about the industry or what the company did—I just needed a job. The job was a far-cry from my ideal job. I felt stupid since we had to speak to doctors on the phone, and I felt less than qualified to give them any sort of information. The first six to eight months were miserable. It was trial by fire as I didn't know what I didn't know. It was as frustrating for me as it was for my customers. I considered quitting weekly. As I continued, I started embracing my curiosity, which helped me learn, master, and thrive in the most technical and fastest-growing department in the company. As I became more

competent, my day-to-day work felt easier and I began enjoying it. By the time I finished my sixth year with the company, I was handling the majority of the escalated calls and the most complex dental cases. I had dentists calling asking to speak to me only, over all the other registered dental assistants and dentists who worked with me.

At the same time, I observed the difficulties and stress that my coworkers experienced. I got the opportunity to train new employees. I didn't consider myself as much of a teacher, but to my surprise the trainees were really getting it. Given a few weeks of time, I could get anyone to speak coherently to dental cases.

Fast forward a few years and I get hired on as an instructional designer. One of the senior executives was pushing for a training program for new hires with the sole purpose of "one call resolution." The company's purpose finally aligned with my purpose! I saw an opportunity to help everyone get on the same page.

My boss knew about my previous work in the call centers and put me in charge of a small team to create the training program. We designed and implemented a six-week course for new hires that could take someone out of high school and teach them the interpersonal, software, dental, and specific technical skills to thrive at their job. Even though it was a massive pain in the ass to get this program up and running, I was driven by the knowledge that our new hires would never have to endure the trial-by-fire style learning that I experienced.

Following the launch of the program, I produced on-demand videos of the content for the rest of the company. I provided our legacy employees with the same learning opportunity as our new hires. I still receive messages from coworkers who are just now seeing these videos for the first time—they share their excitement about their new "aha!" moments.

I learned that having a shared purpose that's clearly communicated is so incredibly powerful. It made the work personally fulfilling for me and also allowed us to achieve more together.

From my research, I have identified two more myths to add to this list.

Myth #10: Once you find your purpose it will carry you, always.

The pandemic has shown us that this is not true. Even the most purpose-driven people can be pushed too hard, becoming exhausted and burned out. People living their calling can still experience a moral injury that changes their views. And all of us will be shaped by life's experiences and our own journeys toward and through purpose.

Again, you don't need a big epiphany or one noble cause. Just focus on where you are now and your next step. What is your sense of purpose now, for you, at this stage of your life and this moment in our history? Don't worry if you don't know, yet. We'll spend section V exploring more tools and strategies to help you gain some clarity.

Only time will reveal the whole picture of your journey to purpose, but you can trust that it will.

Myth #11: There is a right way or best method for finding your purpose.

There are lots of ways to explore and find your purpose. This book gives you some frameworks, tools, and strategies—you just need to try them out until you find the ones that work for you. I also encourage you to read some of the books I’ve mentioned so that you can benefit from their deeper dive into the various topics. These are from a more secular perspective—you’ll find more spiritual books listed on p. 106:

- *The Purpose Factor: Extreme Clarity for Why You’re Here and What to Do About It* by Brian and Gabrielle Bosché
- *Life On Purpose: How Living for What Matters Most Changes Everything* by Dr. Victor Strecher
- *The Purpose Economy: How Your Desire for Impact, Personal Growth, and Community Is Changing The World* by Aaron Hurst
- *The Path Made Clear: Discovering Your Life’s Direction and Purpose* by Oprah Winfrey
- *What Color is Your Parachute? Your Guide to a Lifetime of Meaningful Work and Career Success* by Richard Bolles
- *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life* by Dr. Arthur Brooks
- *Think Like a Monk: Train Your Mind for Peace and Purpose Every Day* by Jay Shetty
- *Awaken: The Path to Purpose, Inner Peace, and Healing* by Dr. Raj Sisodia

This section introduced you to robust research on meaningful work as well as paradoxes and myths about purpose. Hopefully, they give you information and context about your past experiences and help you as you look to the future.



Your Learning Journey

Take a few minutes to reflect on your own experiences with the concepts from this section.

- Thinking back over the various jobs and careers you’ve had, what factors contributed to it being meaningful to you?
- Reflect on the six models of meaningful work. Which ones gave you new insights about your own experiences? Write down some of the details.
- How have you experienced the five paradoxes of meaningful work? Have any been particularly impactful, positively or negatively?
- Which of the 11 myths have influenced your beliefs, purpose, and meaningful work?

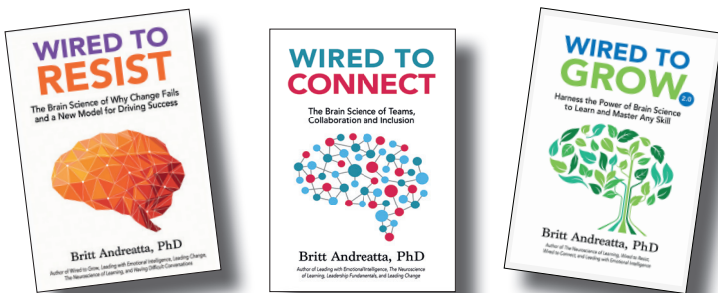
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Britt Andreatta is an internationally recognized thought leader who creates science-based solutions for today's challenges. As CEO of Brain Aware Training, Britt Andreatta draws on her unique background in leadership, neuroscience, psychology, and learning to unlock the best in people and organizations.

In 2022, she was named a Top 10 Influencer in Learning. In 2021, she was a Top 20 Learning Influencer and a Top 20 HR Influencer for Leadership Development. Britt's industry accolades include the Global Training & Development Leadership Award from the World Training & Development Congress, and the Gold Medal for *Chief Learning Officer* magazine's Trailblazer Award. *Talent Development* magazine featured her as an "outstanding thought leader and pioneer."

Britt's other titles include *Wired to Connect: The Brain Science of Teams and a New Model for Creating Collaboration and Inclusion*, *Wired to Grow: Harness the Power of Brain Science to Master Any Skill* and *Wired to Resist: The Brain Science of Why Change Fails and a New Model for Driving Success*.



She is a regular contributor to *Entrepreneur*, *Training Industry*, *Chief Learning Officer*, and *Talent Management* magazines.

The former Chief Learning Officer for Lynda.com (now LinkedIn Learning), Britt is a seasoned professional with more than 25 years' experience. She regularly consults with businesses, universities, and nonprofit organizations

on leadership development and learning strategy. Corporate clients include Fortune 100 companies like Comcast and Apple, and also Ernst & Young, John Deere, Microsoft, LinkedIn, Domino's, Franklin Covey, Evergreen-Health, Splunk, DPR Construction, Rust-Oleum, Zillow, Pacific Life, SHI, and Dell.

Dr. Andreatta has worked with major educational institutions like the University of California, Dartmouth University, and the University of New Mexico, and nonprofit organizations like the YMCA and Prison Fellowship's Warden Exchange Program. She has served as professor and dean at the University of California, Antioch University, and several graduate schools.

Her courses on LinkedIn Learning, Skillsoft, and Cornerstone On Demand have received over 10 million views worldwide. Titles include Leading with Emotional Intelligence, Advice for Leaders During a Crisis, Increasing Collaboration on Your Team, Creating Winning Teams, Organizational L&D, and 20 Questions to Improve Learning at Your Organization.

A highly sought-after and engaging speaker, Britt delivered a TEDx talk called "How Your Past Hijacks Your Future." She regularly speaks at corporate events and international conferences, receiving rave reviews and awards for "best session of conference."

Due to popular demand, Dr. Andreatta now offers certifications in her brain-based training programs. These award-winning programs drive sustained behavior change at organizations across a wide range of industries like technology, healthcare, finance, food, media, and manufacturing. Learn more at BrainAwareTraining.com.

Dr. Andreatta regularly consults with executives and organizations on how to maximize their full potential. To learn more, visit her website and social channels:



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Dr. Andreatta's robust, science-based training solutions feature her ground-breaking research, trademarked models, and uniquely effective learning design that drives real behavior change. Signature products include:

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PRAISE

Speaking

“You were not only the best keynote we have had for this annual conference, you were the best keynote I have seen, EVER.”

Mark Walker, Board Member at Technology Affinity Group

“The top two sessions were Britt Andreatta and President Barack Obama” + “Your research/presentations are THE BEST! Thank you for pouring your passion and curiosity into your work and sharing it with us.”

Attendees, Association for Talent Development’s (ATD)
International Conference and Expo 2023

“Britt, sending a ton of thanks for your support of the Leader meeting last week—a TERRIFIC experience. The talk you gave spirited people in such a positive way AND your delivery was flawless. Thank you for helping us to get our leaders into the “think differently” space. Loved it!”

Martha Soehren, Chief Talent Officer at Comcast

Training

“When a company has a major culture shift, you can rarely look to one person. Britt was an exception to this. What looked like company-wide management training became the foundation for the conversations, relationships, and plans to positively impact the culture. She was the rock star in the organization making sure the culture was solid.”

Hilary Miller Headlee, EVP of Global Sales & Customer Success,
Insight Partners (formerly Altryx and Zoom)

“You have powerful influence in our field and a whole generation of Learning & Development professionals is hungry for your message. People are better because of what you do.”

Cory Kreeck, Executive Director for Training and
Development, Beachbody

Executive Coaching

“I absolutely credit Britt’s executive training and coaching for helping us to change our culture. As a result of working with her, we were able to have critical conversations, build better trust, and become a peak-performing team.”

Tim Tully, Chief Technology Officer at Splunk

“I have partnered with Britt on several major initiatives. She rapidly assesses a business situation and is able to apply the perfect concepts and craft a learning journey that enhances participants’ capability to achieve their goals. I can’t imagine taking a company through rapid growth or major change without her.”

Dr. Kelly McGill, Chief People Officer at Lighthouse
(formerly Amazon, Avvo, and LinkedIn)