

Finding Meaning at Work

Presented to the Kuakini Health System

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You are exceptionally important to the people you serve. Others rely on you to do and be your best. You need to do your jobs very well, and continue to do them very well, year after year, because you are making a huge difference in the lives of those you serve. Nothing is more noble or more sacred than helping people to be healthy and live their lives to the fullest extent possible. That is what you do, and I admire you for it. I also know that it is not easy. You can get frustrated, or worn down, or even worn out.

The workplace has in many ways gotten tougher over the last two decades. We have been through downsizing, and right sizing, and reinventing and restructuring our corporations and government agencies and hospitals and universities. We have been told to do more with less. Because that is hard to do, many Americans are working longer hours than ever before. One result is that people are burning out. There is also a lot of job turnover. This isn't good for employees, their organizations, or the people their organizations serve.

So— the question we will work on today is this: How do you stay motivated? How do you stay energized? The answer is that you can stay motivated and energized when you find a lot of meaning at work. That is our topic— finding meaning at work.

Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation

Let's make some distinctions. Extrinsic motivation applies when people are motivated by something other than the work or activity, while intrinsic motivation applies when people are motivated by the work or activity itself. For example, in school, a student who studies to get an A in order to get twenty dollars from Dad or Mom, is extrinsically motivated. A student who studies because he or she enjoys learning, is intrinsically motivated. A person who does a job he doesn't like, because the salary is good, is extrinsically motivated. A person who does a job that she loves so

much that she would do it for free, and is delighted to also earn a salary at it, is intrinsically motivated.

We know something about people who perform well amidst all the change and stress. They are usually *intrinsically* motivated. We are intrinsically motivated when we do something because we *want* to, not because we have to. We are intrinsically motivated when we do something because it is fun or good or the right thing to do. We are intrinsically motivated when our work is interesting, and fulfilling, and meaningful to us.

Edward L. Deci wrote a book titled, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self Motivation*. The book reports on a study done on six types of life aspirations. Three were extrinsic— the aspiration to be wealthy, famous, and physically attractive. The other three were intrinsic— the aspiration to have meaningful personal relationships, to make contributions to the community, and to grow as individuals. Note that the extrinsic goals are about what one *has*. The intrinsic goals are about who one *is*. That is a big difference. Deci reported:

...[S]trong aspirations for any of the intrinsic goals...were positively associated with well-being. People who strongly desired to contribute to their community, for example, had more vitality and higher self-esteem. When people organize their behavior in terms of intrinsic strivings (relative to extrinsic strivings) they seem more content—they feel better about who they are and display more evidence of psychological health.

The research showed that people who were heavily focused on extrinsic rewards had poor mental health. Those who focused on intrinsic rewards felt better and were healthier.

Most of our workplaces rely on extrinsic motivation and offer extrinsic rewards. This goes back at least as far as the industrial revolution. Factory work was routine, highly prescribed, repetitive, and not very interesting in and of itself. Employers set up the rules, sometimes in great detail, and employees were not expected to exercise any individual judgment or initiative— they were expected to follow the rules. Time and motion studies were conducted, to prescribe each step and physical movement in the industrial process.

Dr. Thomas: Intrinsic Motivation at Work

Take a look at your handout with the excerpts from Dr. Thomas's book, *Intrinsic Motivation at Work*. As he says:

When organizations wanted only compliance from workers, they bought it with money and other tangible benefits. In the language of motivation, these are *extrinsic* rewards. Extrinsic rewards don't come from the work itself, they are doled out by supervisors to ensure that work is done properly and that the rules are followed. They include things like salaries, bonuses, commissions, perks, benefits, and cash awards.

Extrinsic rewards will always be important. We still care about salaries, and benefits, and bonuses, and awards. That's normal. I have never tried to pay the rent by sharing a meaningful experience with my landlord. People want money. Each of us needs money to take care of ourselves and our families.

But research and common sense tell us that we are happier, more productive, and less likely to burn out, if we are *intrinsically* motivated. Dr. Thomas has done a great deal of research in this area. He points out that:

[S]tudies show that the intrinsic rewards are consistently related to job satisfaction and to performance. These findings hold across types of organizations and for managers as well as workers. Studies have also shown that the intrinsic rewards are related to innovativeness, commitment to the organization, and reduced stress.

I assume that you work in a stressful environment. It is therefore very important to note that people who are intrinsically motivated experience less stress and are less likely to burn out or leave their jobs.

The research conducted by Dr. Thomas and his colleagues suggests that there are four intrinsic rewards at work. The four intrinsic rewards are (1) a sense of meaningfulness, (2) a sense of choice, (3) a sense of competence, and (4) a sense of progress. People are intrinsically motivated when they find the work meaningful, they have a choice as to how to do the work, feel that they are competent to do it, and can see some progress as they work.

The intrinsic reward that we will be working on today is a sense of meaningfulness or purpose. Thomas says:

A sense of *meaningfulness* is the opportunity you feel to pursue a worthy task purpose. The feeling of meaningfulness is the feeling that you are on a path that is worth your time and energy— that you are on a valuable mission, that your purpose matters in the larger scheme of things.

This is very fundamental to our nature as human beings. Thomas says:

... There is a great deal of evidence that people are hardwired to care about purposes. We seem to need to see ourselves as going somewhere— as being on a journey in pursuit of a significant purpose... There is also much evidence that people suffer when they lack purpose. Clinical studies show that people deteriorate in various ways without purpose.

Self-Survey

If meaning is a powerful intrinsic motivator, where does one get the most meaning at work?

Well, that's the purpose of the survey...to find out where *you* get the most meaning at work. I'd like to stop here, and make sure each of you has had time to fill out your own survey. Please rate each item, each potential source of meaning, from 1, which is low, to 10, which is high. Don't worry about ranking them— just rate each item individually. You can have a lot of identical ratings— a lot of 7's or 5's or 9's or whatever. We will tabulate your results and send them to you in a couple of weeks...

Thank you for filling out the surveys.

My Research

Let me share what I have learned about meaning in life and meaning at work. The most profound account of the importance of meaning and purpose that I have read is Viktor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who survived the Nazi labor camps. He

discovered that those who survived tended to have a reason to live— a purpose, something that gave their lives continuing meaning. Frankl broke with Freud and Jung, and argued that the primary motivational force in human beings is not sex or power, but the drive for meaning. He developed *logotherapy*, a kind of therapy designed to help people identify the meaning in their lives.

For the past four years I have been conducting research on sources of personal meaning. I began by asking people about all the sources of meaning in their lives in general.

I have surveyed several thousand people, so far, of different ages and backgrounds. I found that the highest-rated sources of meaning in life were family, giving and receiving love, intimate relationships, doing my personal best, living my values, and a sense of accomplishment.

Recently, I have begun surveying people about meaning at work. I have used a survey form like the one you just filled out. Each group I have surveyed is different, but their highly rated and lowest-rated sources of meaning tend to be the same. At the top you have:

- Always doing my personal best
- Supporting my family
- Living my values
- A sense of accomplishment
- Always doing what's right
- Being a good leader
- Setting a good example
- Using my knowledge/expertise
- Making a difference

Notice that almost all of these are intrinsic motivators— actually, all but “supporting my family.” These are wonderful sources of meaning at work. At the bottom of the chart, you find:

- Recognition by superiors
- My salary/wage
- Winning
- Accumulating wealth
- Having power/influence

Fame

These are mostly extrinsic motivators. Nobody is against these things, but they are not nearly as important as sources of personal meaning.

Eight Sources of Meaning at Work

Based on my own experience and research, I want to point you toward eight sources of meaning at work. What I like about these sources of meaning is that most of them are in your control. They depend on your attitude and your values— your own decisions about who you are and how you work with others.

#1 The impact of your organization

The first place to look for meaning is in the impact of your organization. Think about all the children and teens and adults and seniors and families and communities that your organization touches. That can be a tremendous source of personal meaning for you. Every time you heal somebody, you heal their families and friends. Every time you improve the quality of somebody's life, you improve the quality of life of their family and friends. So you and your colleagues are truly making a difference in the lives of thousands and thousands of others. That should be a big source of meaning for you.

#2 Your job or role within your organization

Another source of meaning is your particular job or role *within* your organization. Your job is essential, or it would not exist.

Not only is your job essential— your job has a noble purpose. You're saving lives and improving the quality of lives of your patients. Nothing is more noble or sacred than that. You are making a huge contribution to the welfare of your patients and their families, and therefore, to the welfare of our society as a whole.

Now, here's a truth that is worth remembering. Finding meaning in your daily work is up to you.

There is a well-known story that makes this point. It is a story about two men who were chipping stone in a quarry near a cathedral in the Middle Ages. A monk from another country was traveling by the quarry. He walked up to the first man and said: “Good morning, kind sir. Tell me— what are you doing?” “I am chipping stone,” the first man said. The monk thanked him and walked a little farther until he came to a second man. He said to the second man, “Good morning, kind sir. Tell me— what are you doing?” The second man stopped and looked up with a smile. “I am building a cathedral,” he said.

Now obviously, the two men were doing the same thing, but they didn’t look at it the same way. The first man didn’t find a lot of meaning in his work. The second man found a lot. The point is simple: there is a lot of meaning available to us every day, if only we look up, and see the cathedral.

A few years ago, I saw a TV ad for the United States Air Force which had a similar message for me. The ad began with a mother and her children playing in their living room. Then the scene froze, with the mother and children facing the camera, smiling. The camera drew back, and you could see that it was a photograph attached to a wall. The camera drew back farther, and you see that the wall was the side panel in the cockpit of an airplane. As the camera continued to draw back, you saw the pilot, the husband and father, flying at night, with the photo of his family there next to him. And you knew that he wasn’t just flying a plane. He was protecting the family and the country that he loved. He was on a mission.

If you think you just work at Kuakini, you’re just chipping stone. If you think you’re just doing health-related work, or administrative work, or personnel work, or financial or information technology work, you’re just flying a plane. You’re missing the bigger meaning. What you are really doing is healing and saving and improving lives. That’s your mission. That’s your cathedral. And it should be a tremendous source of meaning for you— every day.

#3 Focus on your contribution

Third, focus on your contribution. Day after day, year after year, keep asking yourself: What can I contribute?

Can you suggest a new product or program or service? How about a way of cutting costs while maintaining quality? Can you develop new relationships with patients and their families that will help your organization to serve them better? Can you spot a potential problem far enough in advance that you can solve it before it becomes a big problem, or can you find a solution to a problem that has been around for a long time? Think outside your particular job or department to the needs of the entire organization and your patients and their families, and look for a contribution you can make. When you focus on contribution, you are likely to make a difference, and that difference will be a wonderful source of meaning.

#4 Focus on helping your colleagues

Next, focus on helping your colleagues within your organization. You can help others to get the work experiences they need to build their careers. You can help them get the training they need to enhance their performance. You can be a mentor. Whether the organization chart shows them as your subordinates, equals, or superiors, there are things that your colleagues need, and if you pay attention, you will find appropriate ways to help them. That will give you a lot of meaning.

#5 Focus on pitching in to get the work done

Next, focus on pitching in to get the work done. There's an old saying: "It's amazing how much we get done around here when nobody cares who gets the credit." That's what your life should be like— just pitching in to get the work done, without worrying about anything else.

The simple fact is that your work is not about whether the boss likes you, or what others are saying about you. It's not about whether you're on the inside track, or the outside track, or nowhere near the track. It's not about those knowing glances across the conference room table, or the whispering at the water cooler about you-know-what. Your work is about what needs to get done. Your job is about meeting the needs of your patients and their families. So focus on just pitching in to get the work done. That's where the meaning and satisfaction are to be found. The meaning isn't in the rumor mill, it's in the work.

#6 Always do what's right

Next, always do what's right. Things can change quickly in the world of work. The environment can change inside and outside your organization. Sometimes, it is a change in leadership; other times, the rapid rise of a competitor; still other times, a new government rule or regulation or budget. When the work environment changes, you will need to adapt and respond.

But the change in the world of work shouldn't change who you are as a person, and what you know to be right and good and true. You need to have core values, and you need to live those values. If you do, you won't get lost. Even when the world around you becomes foggy and unpredictable, you'll know who you are and how you want to live. You'll find personal meaning when you live your most cherished values, day after day, no matter what happens in the world around you.

#7 Always do your best

Next, always do your best. You know, when it comes down to it, that's all you control— your own time and attention. You don't control what everybody else does. You should work with people and influence and inspire them to bring out their best, but you only control your own time and attention— your own performance. So it's your decision, and you should decide to always do your best. That should be what defines you. One of the questions I like to ask people is this: *If you aren't giving the world your best, what world are you saving it for?* This is the work we are given, these are the people who need our help. Why would we want to hold back? Every day, each of us can give our very best, and enjoy the personal meaning that comes to us when we do.

Peter Drucker tells a story in his book *The Effective Executive*. The story is about Nurse Bryan, who had served at a hospital for many years. When the nurses and doctors sat down to discuss the care of one of the patients on her floor, she would ask: "Are we doing the best we can do to help this patient?" Usually, they would have to continue working on it until they had hammered out a new and more ambitious solution to the problem. However, over time, it was noted that patients on Nurse Bryan's floor did better and got well sooner. Gradually, the whole hospital adopted what came to be known as "Nurse Bryan's Rule." Whenever they thought that they had settled an issue, somebody would ask: "Would this have satisfied Nurse

Bryan?” Ten years after Nurse Bryan retired, the standard she set was still having an impact. Nurse Bryan’s legacy was to remind her colleagues to always do their best.

#8 Be ambitious—for your organization

Finally, be ambitious— but be ambitious for your organization, not yourself. Think beyond yourself, to the greater good of your organization. If your organization succeeds, so will you. If your organization grows, your own opportunities will grow. So think ambitiously about what your organization needs to do and be to succeed and grow.

What are your ambitions for your organization next year? In five years? In ten years? What can you do to help your organization fulfill those ambitions? Think big. Being part of an ambitious future will be meaningful and satisfying.

The Paradoxical Commandments

The great thing about finding meaning is that you can find meaning not matter what is happening in the world around you. You and I know that the world can be a very difficult place. But even when times are tough, we can find personal meaning and deep happiness.

That’s the message of the Paradoxical Commandments. I wrote the Paradoxical Commandments back in 1968 as part of a booklet for student leaders. Here they are:

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.

5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.

And finally:

10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

Ten Paradoxical Commandments. The Paradoxical Commandments are guidelines for finding personal meaning in the face of adversity. That's why the first phrase in each commandment is about adversity, or difficulty, or disappointment. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Those things are difficult.

But each statement about adversity is followed by a positive commandment: Love people anyway. Do good anyway. Help people anyway.

The paradox is this: Even when things are tough— even when the world is crazy— we can still find personal meaning and deep happiness. We do that by facing the worst in the world with the best in ourselves. In the end, it's not about what the world does to us, it's about how we *respond* to what the world does to us. And that response is always up to us.

You and I get to decide who we are going to be and how we are going to live. And we can live our values, and we can stay close to our families

and friends, and we can do what we know is right and good and true— no matter what. *No matter what*. And the good news is that that is where people have been finding a lot of personal meaning for a long, long time.

So to be productive and committed and happy, you need to be intrinsically motivated. Personal meaning is an important motivator. And finding personal meaning is not about how others judge you or reward you or appreciate you. Finding personal meaning is about you— your attitude and values. It is about who you are and how you work with others. It's about how you respond to what happens in the world around you. That's why you can always find personal meaning, no matter what.

I'd like to stop for a few minutes for questions and answers, and then I'll have some concluding remarks...

Conclusion

Let me conclude with these thoughts. You are leaders. You set the tone. You model the organization's values.

You have a lot of tasks. One of the most important tasks is to be a *meaning maker*. You can identify and articulate sources of meaning for yourself and your colleagues. You can build the meaning and intrinsic motivation of your organization. By doing that, you can make a difference in your own lives, the lives of your colleagues, and the lives of your patients.

You have a handout with a few paragraphs from a book by Kouzes & Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*. Let me read two of the paragraphs:

No matter what term is used— whether *purpose*, *mission*, *legacy*, *dream*, *goal*, *calling*, or *personal agenda*— the intent is the same: leaders want to do something significant, to accomplish something that no one else has yet achieved. What that something is— the sense of meaning and purpose— has to come from within. No one can impose a self-motivating vision on you. That's why, just as we said about values, you must first clarify your own visions of the future before you can expect to enlist others in a shared vision. To create a climate of meaningfulness, first you must personally believe in something yourself. Before you can inspire others, you have to be inspired yourself.

So take the time you need to clarify your own sources of meaning, and listen to your colleagues to learn about theirs. Tap into intrinsic motivation. Kouzes and Posner make it clear that this is an important function of a leader. The last paragraph in your handout says:

Leaders must foster conditions under which everyone will do things because they want to, not because they have to. One of *the* most important practices of leadership is giving life and work a sense of meaning and purpose by offering an exciting vision.

The good news is that when you find meaning in your work, you will radiate it. You will exude it. It will be in the tone of your voice, the spring in your step, your positive attitude, your enthusiasm for the challenges and opportunities at hand. Your colleagues will notice your sense of purpose and energy and happiness. It will rub off on them. Patients and their families will notice it and appreciate it. And your family at home will notice it and be grateful for it.

“Supporting my family” gets a very high rating on most surveys. Many people find a lot of meaning in working so that their families can have the things they need. One thing your family needs is a happy *you*. That is one of the greatest gifts you can give them.

A person who goes home from work each day, drained and bored and frustrated, is not likely to be a joy to his or her spouse and family and friends. A person who goes home from work each day, perhaps tired, but happy and fulfilled, is very likely to be a joy to his or her spouse and family and friends. Even if you go home tired, you can go home *tired and happy*. That is one of the most wonderful feelings in the world— you are tired, but you are tired because you gave it your all, and it was meaningful, it was worth it, so you are also very happy.

In short, when you find a lot of meaning at work, there is a positive impact on you, your colleagues, your patients, and your family and friends. I know that you care about those people, and I know you want to have a positive impact on them. So focus on finding meaning.

You have many things to think about, many tasks to accomplish, many goals to reach. But finding and acting on sources of meaning at work

can lift you and your colleagues to a new level where there is a lot less stress and a lot more happiness, energy, productivity, innovation, and commitment. That's where you want to be. That's where you *need* to be, to stay motivated and produce the results that are so important to your patients, their families, and our larger community.

There are a lot of benefits to focusing on meaning, but let me leave you with this one. If you focus on meaning, then, when you look back at the end of your life, you won't have a lot of regrets. You may not have any. You'll look back on a life filled with meaning. Even more important, you won't wonder why you have lived. You'll know. *You'll know*. And that may be the greatest blessing of all.

Thank you.