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How can leaders help employees find meaning at work?

Organizations spend considerable resources on corporate values and mission statements, but even the most inspiring of these — from Volvo's commitment to safety to Facebook's desire to connect people — tend to fade into the background during the daily bustle of the work day.

What workers really need, to feel engaged in and satisfied by their jobs, is an inner sense of purpose. As Deloitte found in a 2016 [study](#), people feel loyal to companies that support their own career and life ambitions — in other words, what's meaningful to them. And, although that research focused on millennials, in the decade I've spent coaching seasoned executives, I've found that it's a common attitude across generations. No matter one's level, industry or career, we all need to find a personal sense of meaning in what we do.

Leaders can foster this inner sense of purpose — what matters right now, in each individual’s life and career — with simple conversation. One technique is [action identification theory](#), which posits that there are many levels of description for any action. For example, right now I’m writing this article. At a low level, I’m typing words into a keyboard. At a high level, I’m creating better leaders. When leaders walk employees up this ladder, they can help them find meaning in even the most mundane tasks.

Regular check-ins that use five areas of inquiry are another way to help employees explore and call out their inner purpose. Leaders can ask:

What are you good at doing? Which work activities require less effort? What do you take on because you believe you’re the best person to do it? What have you gotten noticed for throughout your career? The idea here is to help people identify their strengths and open possibilities from there.

What do you enjoy? In a typical workweek, what do you look forward to doing? What do you see on your calendar that energizes you? If you could design your job with no restrictions, how would you spend your time? These questions help people find or rediscover what they love about work.

What feels most useful? Which work outcomes make you most proud? Which of your tasks are most critical to the team or organization? What are the highest priorities for your life and how does your work fit in? This line of inquiry highlights the inherent value of certain work.

What creates a sense of forward momentum? What are you learning that you’ll use in the future? What do you envision for yourself next? How’s your work today getting you closer to what you want for yourself? The goal here is to show how today’s work helps them advance toward future goals.

How do you relate to others? Which working partnerships are best for you? What would an office of your favorite people look like? How does your work enhance your family and social connections? These questions encourage people to think about and foster relationships that make work more meaningful.

It’s not easy to guide others toward purpose, but these strategies can help.

Kristi Hedges is a senior leadership coach who specializes in executive communications and the author of [The Inspiration Code: How the Best Leaders Energize People Every Day](#) and [The Power of Presence: Unlock Your Potential to Influence and Engage Others](#). She’s the president of [The Hedges Company](#) and a faculty member in Georgetown University’s Institute for Transformational Leadership.
