



The Role of Individual Purpose in the Workplace

A Link to Engagement
and Performance

A LEAD THE DIFFERENCE REPORT

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Summary

For organizations to obtain sustainable growth and agile practices, they must recognize that in today's knowledge-driven, customer-connected, global business environment, a long-term strategy is imperative. This strategy must be centered around the very humans that create services and products. Emerging research documents a drastic shift in priorities for employees, regardless of their professional endeavors. Employees want to sense a true connection between their place of employment and with their own sense of purpose. We sought to understand more about their connection to Purpose by engaging a group of nurses in study.

Nurses are one of the more remarkable examples of the complex needs in today's valuable employee. As one of the most dynamic and impactful professions, nursing distinguishes itself in an industry that does what no other attempts: it cares for the sick without hesitation and with compassion. With such a responsibility on the shoulders of nurses around the world, organizing their efforts into hospitals, clinics and the like is no small task. Without nurses, such institutions would undoubtedly fail.

In general, organizations seek sustainable high quality, cost reduction, increased efficiency and happy stakeholders. In some cases, they align these objectives through customer engagement driven by employee engagement, retention and attracting top talent. In other cases, their indicators govern their decisions instead of what *drives* those indicators. Organizational priorities are determined reactively and with short-term quarterly thinking against financial metrics.

Equipped with this knowledge and respect for nursing's complexities, we combined our experience in healthcare consulting with a project in which we interviewed and observed how a group of nursing professionals defines, identifies and retains its sense of purpose. We identified five key themes that emerged within their collective senses of purpose. Across organizations and role types, we interviewed members of four generations, though their shared experiences should be seen less as generationally divisive and more as generationally illustrative.

With this information, nurse leaders can begin to re-examine how they build a staff of fully engaged nurses who connect their personal purpose with the medical organization. This information is relatable and applicable to other roles within healthcare and to professions *outside of healthcare*. We hope that additional application and research is considered to confirm this relevance.

Introduction

Our Premise

Across the past 18 months our research and consulting practice aggregated information about what drives human value in healthcare and other industries. We also spent several months studying aggregate information on the current flux among generations in the workplace and the connections to retention, engagement and performance. Through this, we noted a shift in business literature and an increased focus concerning mission, purpose and meaning.

What is the role of purpose in engagement? Though the linkage is crucial, we are not talking about the organizational purpose, but rather an individual's sense of purpose. To answer this question and more, we initiated a research study to describe and interpret from nurses' perspectives the "lived experience" of purpose and the role it plays with their work engagement. Representing the largest segment in the industry, we sought to outline the potential linkage of engagement and employee happiness to overall organizational performance.

Most people in and out of healthcare would argue that great nurses come to the profession with a deep sense of individual purpose and they apply that purpose to the profession. How is this purpose experienced and where did it come from? What builds or detracts from a sense of purpose? Could these aspects of purpose translate across roles? What influence does this purpose have on employee engagement? Do generations experience purpose differently?

From this we developed our hypothesis on which we based our study:

An individual's sense of purpose is derived from or detracted by a variety of sources and is a key influence on their engagement and commitment to what they do.

State of the Workplace

Today's challenges include the realities that our global work environment is more dynamic, increasingly virtual, and includes advancing technology that outpaces even our ability to learn how to use it. We are in the midst of a knowledge economy and base our ways of doing business more on meaning and information than on machines and products.

As organizations employ and develop workers in this state of doing business, they face increasing complexity in communication, development, compensation and benefits. Every well-led organization that employs people understands that getting the best talent, supporting that talent and retaining that talent are among the most important principles of leadership in human resources and across organizational functions. However, organizations are also challenged with demands that detract from these key principles. Demands of documentation, operations, systemization, standardization, financials and stakeholders. Leadership has become reactive and on auto-pilot; they are forced to not only manage and lead, but to also do work themselves.

The organizational mission is neglected or forgotten altogether in this “perfect storm” of business and leadership pressures and the impact they have on the organization and its staff. Instead of employees retaining a sense of personal contribution and mission through a sense of purpose, it is trumped by different priorities, or never confirmed as a path to long-term innovation and growth.

Engagement Endeavors

Since the 1999 best-selling management book on engagement, *First, Break All the Rules*, Buckingham and Coffman note organizations not only incorporated the word ‘engagement’ into their cultures, but they often replaced ‘satisfaction’ with ‘engagement’ because it lacked emotional elements. This rationale with emotional commitment acknowledges that there are deeper needs supported and developed through individual motivation and happiness with their work.

Extensive studies since the mid 1990s continue to confirm the importance of employee engagement as a driver of individual performance outcomes including quality, creativity, productivity and retention. In the healthcare field, Peltier and Dahl recommended, “In addition to what health care workers do, emphasis needs to be placed on how the employees feel about what they do. Patient experiences will not be good if employees are not happy. Organizational initiatives designed to increase employee engagement can generate measurable improvements in patient satisfaction, which can, in turn, generate additional positive business outcomes.” These initiatives also serve

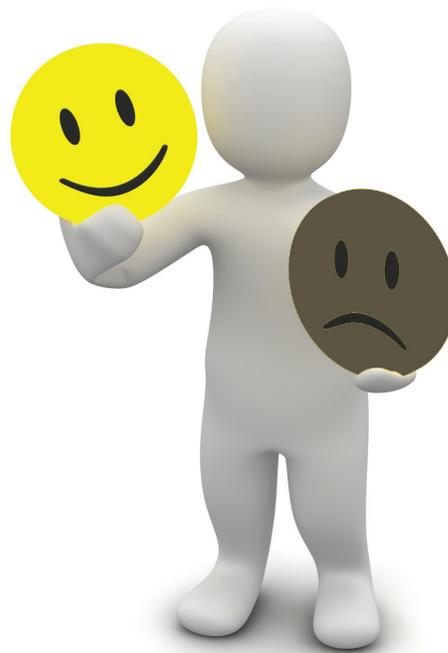
to promote improved organizational performance such as customer outcomes like recommend or readmit rates, and financial outcomes like margin, revenue and profitability.¹

Happiness Creation

Use of the word happiness is on steady decline since the early 1800s with a slight uptick across the past decade.² Through our research and as part of our experience in engagement impact, it is apparent that a trend exists around creating happiness either at work, in community or in life generally. The word is frequently added to discussions and objectives focused on increasing engagement as well as creating paths to greater well-being. Additionally, we have learned about how happiness and individual purpose are linked — that living within one’s purpose supports a longer-lasting, health-creating type of happiness.

After significant challenges and failures faced during his creation of Zappos, CEO Tony Hsieh always maintained an internal and guiding compass to have fun and ensure others did as well. Through his story, *Delivering Happiness*, we can experience his vision and the mission of his company to realize a culture of happiness. As a student of happiness and purpose-based motivation himself, Hsieh duly notes the three types of happiness: pleasure, passion and purpose. Purpose-based happiness — being part of something that is bigger than yourself and has meaning to you — is the longest lasting of all three types. He offers that we tend to chase after pleasure and even passion happiness, but frequently leave purpose happiness as optional, if we get to it.³

Though being happy and finding happiness is no doubt important, “the relentless pursuit of happiness may be doing us more harm than good⁴.” Similar to Hsieh’s idea of different types/depths of happiness, this research offers that happiness as people usually think of it — the experience of



1 Peltier, Jimmy and Dahl, Andy. “The Relationship Between Employee Satisfaction and Hospital Patient Experiences.” April 2009. <http://www.info-now.com/typo3conf/ext/p2wlib/pi1/press2web/html/userimg/FORUM/Hospital%20Study%20Relationship%20Btwn%20Emp.%20Satisfaction%20and%20Pt.%20Experiences.pdf>.

2 <http://www.wolframalpha.com/input/?i=purpose>

3 Hsieh, Tony. *Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profits, Passion and Purpose*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group; 2010.

4 <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704893604576200471545379388>

pleasure or positive feelings — is far less important to physical health than the type of well-being that comes from engaging in *meaningful* activity. Researchers refer to this latter state of “eudaimonic well-being,” as being purpose-based. Examples of engagement in this purposeful way are taking care of children or other family members, finding one’s passion in a kind of work that contributes to a greater cause, or any other meaningful activity.

We might offer that while all of us can find purpose through meaningful work, a nurse’s central role is largely comprised of taking care of others. This research further offers that this focus on living with a sense of purpose throughout life supports strength of cognitive ability, mental health and even longevity than simply focusing on feelings of happiness.⁵

Individual Purpose

My purpose is my sense of resolve, my sense of determination. It is my intention or my objective. It is the reason I do what I do and create what I create. My purpose is the reason I exist. Based on our work on this topic, this is our summation of how purpose is generally defined. Our findings offer depth to how nurses make meaning of having a sense of purpose.

Synonyms for purpose include “calling” and “mission.” With origins in Old French, purpose as a word used in English has been around for more than 700 years. It’s frequency of use has an interesting pattern with nearly non-existent use during the mid 1500s but with increasing use across the decades, noting the highest use in approximately 1829. However, since the spike in the early 1800s its use has steadily declined, which continues into our current century. Interestingly there seems to be a leveling off since 2001 and through 2008.⁶ This could be connected to our recent financial crisis response and possibly indicates an upswing in frequency. Might this be due to a prevalence in the use of the term as well as an indicator of meaning associated with world events? Or might it be due to our post-crisis desire to reconcile our time spent working and from which we derive meaning in life?

Dr. Bill Millard of the Life Calling Institute studied experience and application of purpose and is a leading theorist on calling and purpose. According to Millard, quality of life is enhanced when a sense of purpose is clear in the lives of individuals.⁷ In relation, the word “vocation,” derived from Latin, really means, “to be called.”

5 http://psychfaculty.gmu.edu/kashdan/publications/jrp_beinggood.pdf.

6 <http://www.wolframalpha.com/input/?i=purpose>

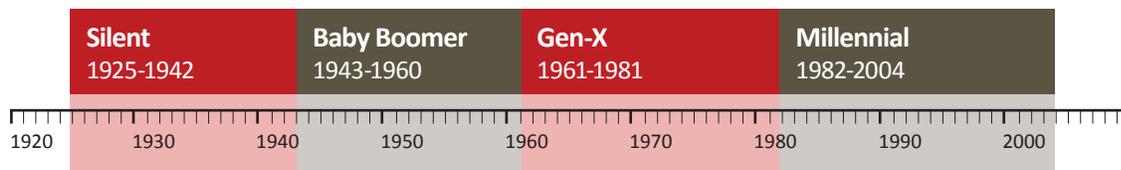
7 <http://clcl.indwes.edu/Display.asp?Page=BillMillard>; Millard, B. (2012). *Explorers Guide: Starting Your College Journey with a Sense of Purpose*. 3rd Ed. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

There are notations from across various religions and secular points of view that relate to the importance of possessing a sense of purpose. It is said to give you direction and a quality life of accomplishment, ability to solve problems and greater social involvement. It makes you who you are and encourages you to move toward fulfilling your goals. Sense of purpose gives you strength and self worth. It is empowering and creates passion and wisdom. Aristotle believed that everyone and everything had a purpose.⁸

After a successful career as a senior leader with Coca-Cola, one of the world’s most trusted brands, Dr. K. Shelette Stewart acknowledged her inner wisdom. She shared with us the following epiphany: “I had an internal feeling that I was living below my potential and that I must honor that calling to do something different⁹.” She began a new role dedicated to research on spiritual purpose and how leaders can integrate this into their roles as leaders and into the fabric of the company mission. Based upon a Christian foundation, she develops leadership purpose and meaning through coaching and organizational change.

Generation Flux

For the first time in history, we have workplaces that include four generations. They are the: Silents, Boomers, Gen-X and Millennials.



With thousands of Boomers planning to retire in the next 15 years, we will experience an “exodus” of sorts when they do. Compound that with 60% of Millennial workers planning to leave their employer in less than three years — at a cost ranging between \$15,000 and \$25,000 to replace each employee — and organizations undoubtedly have a serious situation to consider.¹⁰ The system that supports the fabric of people who make up the workplace is facing significant strain as this new “flux” of generations seeks clarity, stability, legacy and purpose. (See Appendix for more details on generations.)

8 <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/103/aristotle.htm>; Professor Dr. Nick Gier, 2001 Course Content.

9 Interview with Dr. K. Shelette Stewart. Author. Revelations in Business: Connecting Your Business Plan with God’s Purpose and Plan for Your Life <https://www.tatepublishing.com/bookstore/book.php?w=978-1-61777-924-4>

10 Workforce.com; <http://www.workforce.com/articles/9338-interview-with-dan-schwabel-how-to-retain-your-millennial-workers>

Our Challenge

Purpose Lacking

We appreciate the work of thought leaders like Rick Warren, Dr. K. Shelette Stewart and Daniel Pink, as they create focus, possibility and adoption of new principles in business. However, very little research or business application exists about the role of individual purpose or even organizational purpose in the workplace. In the healthcare industry, where approximately 83% of healthcare systems are considered non-profit¹¹ with many being faith-based, we believe that there is an ironic disconnect in helping employees deliver on this mission as organizational leaders are often intensely and reactively focused on financials. How might organizations deliver on their bigger mission if every single employee could be hired, developed, recognized and supported to work aligned to their individual purpose?

There is opportunity for organizations when considering both an intergenerational strategy as well as an individualized one. The Boomers were change agents and challenged the business model status quo in the 60s and 70s. Today, nine out of ten Millennials believe it is their responsibility to make a difference.¹² This is without relying on preceding generations — they want to make a new path now. Seventy-five percent of Millennials believe it is their role to serve others.¹³ Imagine their impact if they fulfill their own expectations and integrate this same passion for change into our four-generation workplace, building on each one's lessons and expertise.

We are energized by the emerging research and thought leadership surrounding a more holistic approach to human capital. Our organizational research and modeling believes that in “hiring the whole human” you consider them a real asset, a human value



11 <http://www.aha.org/research/rc/stat-studies/fast-facts.shtml>.

12 T. Rainer, *The Millennials, Connecting to America's Largest Generation*. Publisher: B&H Books (December 10, 2010)

13 T. Rainer, 2010

asset. The “glue” that connects the key human factors of talent, performance, well-being and agility is purpose (see Human Value inset).

Harvard Business Review recently featured a thought leadership blog post by Tony Schwartz, president and CEO of The Energy Project, where he offers: “In a world of relentlessly rising demand, employers need to shift from trying to get more out of people to investing more intentionally in meeting their core needs. If we have no sense that the work we’re doing taps our strengths and our preferences, or provides us with a sense of meaning, we’re likely to be less engaged and productive at work.¹⁴”

When taking this comprehensive lens and applying it to nursing, our challenge becomes more complex. Outsiders looking in would agree — being a nurse is no easy task. But ensuring the success of a nursing staff while keeping patients not just alive, but making them well, requires ongoing strategy and attention. Ask nurses to identify their top priority, and they all respond, “Patient care.” But ask nurse managers, and their answers become less straightforward. Of course patient well-being is a priority, but they must weigh this by equipping nurses to provide their best care while also juggling financial constraints, ongoing education for staff members, policy enforcement and more. Within many of these environments, nurse leaders are constrained by limited resources and the ever-elusive resource, time. Improving the shared experience of both nurses and patients has become the task of a lifetime, and the nursing industry remains confronted by a crisis of engagement and quality — the opportunity for nurses to feel committed in a life-long nursing career is at its most challenging juncture.

Engagement Crisis

Amid nearly two decades of research confirming the links between individual engagement and organizational outcomes, there remains great variance in engagement across workplaces all over the world, as the table at right shows. This is true across role types and industry, which confirms that organizations have yet to consistently create a culture of commitment and engagement.

If, despite years of validation on the effect of even moderate levels of employee engagement on

Engagement Level			
	Global Percentage*	Likelihood to Leave**	Organization Operating Margin**
High “Engaged or Sustainable”	13	18	27
Traditional “Not Engaged or Average”	63	24	14
Low “Disengaged”	13	40	10

*Gallup: <http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/164735/state-global-workplace.aspx>

**Schwartz, T. (2012). New Research: How Employee Engagement Hits the Bottom Line. HBR Blog Network. November 2012.

Top Quartile Unit Performance Difference of the Highly Engaged			
Safety	Quality	Productivity, Absenteeism	Customer Metrics
48%↓ 41%↓ (patient)	41%↓	21%↑ 37%↓	10%↑

Gallup. (2013). Engagement At Work: Its Effect On Performance Continues In Tough Economic Times. Retrieve from <http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/161459/engagement-work-effect-performance-continues-tough-economic-times.aspx>

14 <http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/11/what-would-make-you-more-satisfied-and-productive-at-work/>

organizational performance, we are not sustainably and intentionally improving that engagement, we must rethink and challenge the approaches taken to do so.

Nurse Perspective

Nurses are among the most trusted of all professions and have been for many years.¹⁵ Therefore, it is only natural to assume that their customers — the patients and families with whom they provide a healing service — believe in their abilities more than any other profession. Our lives are in the capable hands of a nurse. We experience that the nurse is our trusted partner in life and death and everything in between. The nurse is the liaison with the physician team, with the specialists and with information that is all too often overwhelming.

What happens when the ability to uphold this trust is compromised? It's possible that this compromise is due to nurses not being fully engaged or not connecting with their sense of purpose due to workplace barriers. Surprisingly, nurses are historically among the least-engaged professionals, along with truck drivers and distribution center workers.¹⁶ Their disengagement is linked to deteriorated performance and is the result of various key factors — lack of manager support, unclear expectations and lack of relevant recognition are just a few.¹⁷

Additionally, substantial research confirms the correlation between nurse engagement, quality of care, hospital ratings (e.g. HCAHPS), customer outcomes (e.g. readmissions) and physician engagement.¹⁸ All of these correlations equal dollars — costs or missed savings opportunity in the care-providing equation. How can the most trusted profession also be one that feels the least committed to what they do for a living?

Could a culture in which my individual purpose is encouraged, supported and developed also create a culture of engagement? As an employee's sense of purpose for the work he does is valued, so increase the opportunities to give of that purpose and realize a higher degree of commitment. Many nurses with whom we spoke said that they did not understand how any nurse could lack a sense of purpose. So how does one gain and develop an individual sense of purpose? And how do organizations tap this purpose to have happy and engaged employees that influence performance?



15 <http://www.theamericannurse.org/index.php/2013/03/01/nurses-retain-top-spot-in-ethics-and-honesty/>

16 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/6004/nurses-may-satisfied-they-engaged.aspx>

17 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/17398/nurturing-hospital-employee-engagement-registered-nurses.aspx>

18 Peltier, Jimmy and Dahl, Andy. "The Relationship Between Employee Satisfaction and Hospital Patient Experiences." April 2009.

Our Findings

Sense of Purpose

We sought to understand the perceptions of purpose among nurses in the workplace today. As we interviewed nurses across all four generations, we drew some similarities and differences across these generations as well. Our findings represent commonalities across key themes that define purpose, with nuances in sub-themes.

Purpose Experienced

As the nurse participants described their perceptions, experiences and beliefs about purpose, meaning and a sense of being, we learned about their very similar veins of thinking. They shared descriptions and experiences about what drives them as people. The nurses freely referred to their sense of purpose as their calling, a place from which they derive meaning. Purpose was part of who they are, their very nature. They also shared clear and memorable stories about their upbringing, childhood and significant life experiences — their nurturing sides. Their sense of purpose came from something bigger than themselves, that it was defined by contributing to the greater good of society.

From our phenomenological research and analysis, five key themes emerged that define a nurse's experienced purpose: *Identity, Service, Mastery, Autonomy* and *System*. We named these themes based upon what we learned, utilizing multiple points of information and multiple reviews across our research team.

The themes were derived from our research analysis of nurses' lived experience of purpose in their work and life. By definition, their prevalence, and the elements that define them, establishes our key themes across generations, roles and experiences. However, we did gain some insight from nuances related to generational perspective within the sub-themes; we outline these within each theme.

Service, Autonomy and *Systems* had the least variance or differences related to generations and how generations defined each sub-theme. *Identity* and *Mastery* varied the most across generations, and those explanations are given. *While it is important to understand how each generation might have influence on the world in which they work, study and live, it is important to recognize that the influences on a generation do not necessarily apply to everyone within. Leadership requires understanding that is best applied from an intergenerational perspective, as another lens into how individuals believe, think and act.*

“ *What companies do for clients, people, communities and society are all interconnected. A culture of Purpose ensures that management and employees alike see each as a reason to go to work every day.*

— Jessica Heine, Deloitte & Katherine DeBerry, MWW Group

The Engagement Link

From an engagement perspective, we asked each participant, “On a one to five scale where five is high, how engaged are you in the work that you do?” The average results by generation are as follows:

Silent	4.0
Boomers	4.75
Gen-X	4.3
Millennial	3.5

As noted, the Baby Boomers collectively had the highest average engagement. We believe that this is potentially because they are commonly in a phase of their lives where they are giving back through teaching, leadership and committees. They also noted that they have achieved maximum *Autonomy* in their lifetime; it was the key aspect they sought. Finally, they shared having a high degree of *Mastery* and felt achievement in sharing that level of knowledge with others.

The least engaged generation of nurses was the Millennials. They listed the following contributors to their lower engagement levels:

- Some went into the profession for wrong reasons, citing the focus and promise by healthcare recruitment of flexible hours and great pay;
- Some are still trying to find a place, a role and a home among so many options and paths within the profession;
- All commented that they are still trying to learn the required skills of the profession, the science of being a nurse, to do what they went in for and contribute to the “art” of nursing;
- Many noted disenchantment with lack of support and feedback across teams, noting cultures that feel like “sink or swim” or “pay your dues”;
- Some feel beat up by negativity, including lateral violence, and are exasperated by the tolerance of such behavior.

The elements that comprise a sense of purpose are similar across generations, and yet there is disparity in engagement levels across generations. While the defining elements are common, the ways in which individuals experience or obtain purpose is unique for each person. So while we will learn that a “sense of *Identity*” is a core component of purpose, the way in which *Identity* is defined, is highly unique. This suggests we have an opportunity to focus on the individual human in order to support the process or actualization of gaining purpose. Focus in these key theme areas may increase individual engagement as part of the outcomes of a purpose-focused strategy.

Intergenerational Reality

We sought to understand the perceptions of purpose in the workplace and to do so we wanted to ensure we were inclusive of all four generations in the workplace today. Our intent was not to conduct a generational study per se, but to focus on the experience of purpose. However, we believed there would be similarities as well as some differences across generations in how purpose is viewed and experienced.

We spoke with all four generations in the nursing profession today about their lived experience of having or understanding their sense of purpose, engagement and commitment. One nurse executive shared with us that two Silent Generation nurses would be retiring by the end of the year. Both are in their early 70s and have dedicated a lifetime of service to the nursing profession. Additionally, we spoke to Silents who are working as consultants and professors. As with a few other professions, it is common to see nurses work well past retirement age — this is who they are, as we will outline.

Our findings represent intergenerational commonalities across all major themes that define purpose, with nuances in some sub-themes. *These nuances are noted within each theme summary in the sections that follow.* The path by which some generations realize their “lived experience” of a purpose-based life, likely varies based more on age or time in the profession versus generational elements, as our discussion on *Mastery* will support.

“ People become leaders by internalizing a leadership identity and developing a sense of Purpose.

— Herminia Ibarra, Insead, Robin Ely, Harvard Business School & Deborah Kolb, Simmons School of Management

Theme No. 1: Identity

When we broadly asked the nurse participants what gives meaning to their lives, what inspires them and what gives them a sense of purpose, they shared experiences that make up who they are and how they refer to themselves. *Identity*, therefore, emerged as a foundational or key theme in connection to a sense of purpose or meaning in work. As the first key theme that was proposed by participants in describing what attributes gave them a sense of purpose, it stands to reason that a sense of purpose is in essence part of the *Identity* of a person.

Our research defines this theme as self-awareness, self-identification, as how one sees herself in relation to society and others — it is as unique as each person’s fingerprint. It is a combination of who they are innately (nature) and their upbringing, childhood and life experiences (nurture). Furthermore, *Identity* can only truly be defined by the individual. As we analyzed the results, six sub-themes emerged within the key *Identity* theme: *Calling, Environment, Work Ethic, Appreciation, Approval* and *Role*.

Having a *Calling* was illustrated by descriptions including an individual being “called” to the work. Distinct elements of this key sub-theme consistently emerged in our conversations with nurses, and they included a spiritual need or an inner drive, a compass and a natural instinct to want to learn how to fix problems. For many, this was known from a young age, and for some this was noted as something they were born to do. This was also true for those entering nursing as a second career. Many nurses we spoke to mentioned that nursing was their *Calling*.

One of the earliest nurse theorists, Isabel Adams Hampton Robb (1860–1910), confirms these findings. An author, nursing school administrator and early leader, she stated, “Nursing should be regarded as a profession, not just a vocation. The trained nurse should be regarded as one who has knowledge and is worthy of respect and consideration. As the standard of education and requirements become of a higher character and the training more efficient, the trained nurse will draw nearer to science and its demands and take a greater share as a social factor in solving the world’s needs.¹⁹” More recent research conducted by Dr. K. Shelette Stewart, a business executive who became a purpose-based leadership consultant, determined that leaders

19 The Nurse Educator Blog regarding Isabel Robb (2013). Retrieved October 10, 2013 from <http://thenurseeducator.com/blog/2010/06/13/nursing-as-a-profession/>

define their purpose “as a spiritual calling, as a state of being divinely called, a personal mission of individual ministry and passion.²⁰”

Important factors of the *Environment*, such as overcoming strife, an early age illness or loss of a loved one were also critical to the nurse participants’ lived experience of purpose as part of their *Identity*. Nurturing elements included how they were raised and the influence of family, friends, education, teachers and community. Life events and social norms were also noted, confirming the generational-based influence on *Identity* such as social (e.g. giving back and gender inequality), political, economical (e.g. tough times vs. prosperous ones) and pop-culture. A significant generational influence was that the nurses in the Silent and Boomer generations had few options for careers when they entered the workforce. Nursing was an appealing option out of the few available.

Another sub-theme in how nurses defined purpose within their *Identity* was how they described their *Work Ethic*. With clear illustration of links to the responsibility of nurturing others, this emerged as how they approach and view work; it’s the mindset about how to go about doing something. For most nurse participants, this included a role of contributing to society and all of its people along with a personal mission to practice with integrity. At the close of one interview, a Silent generation nurse quoted Shakespeare: “What is most important is to live a life that matters and has integrity.”

Appreciation for work or service given with the full receipt of *Approval*, were also significant sub-themes of individual senses of *Identity*. To receive physical thanks or positive acknowledgement for service provided, or praise for work well done fostered a stronger sense of purpose. *Approval*, the “yang” of *Appreciation*, was illustrated as a more psychological sense of feeling needed as well as gaining and sustaining acceptance from and the trust of others. This extends well beyond peers and is expressed as being fostered by ongoing and meaningful interaction with patients and their families.

The *Role* performed, or what one does, supports a clear connection to personal purpose within *Identity*. Our analysis showed that the *Role* of a nurse is influenced by both individual perceptions of personal and professional life, as well as how others perceive that nurse’s role. It fosters a clear sense of purpose or alignment to a nurse’s reason for being. Through our research, we learned that to a nurse, the *Role* is almost always lived in all parts of life — they’re confident this is the only job for them. The *Role* is also defined as: supporter, advocate, follower, ambassador and caregiver to people.

20 Interview with Dr. K. Shelette Stewart. Author. Revelations in Business: Connecting Your Business Plan with God’s Purpose and Plan for Your Life <https://www.tatepublishing.com/bookstore/book.php?w=978-1-61777-924-4>

Developing Purpose & Engagement

We analyzed the characteristics that build a sense of purpose within the *Identity* theme among our nurse participants. We heard consistent mention of being accountable to lives, to healing, to helping complete strangers in times of deeply personal need. Through religion, spiritual centeredness and the expectations that they believed others had of them beginning in early childhood, the nurses noted a strong sense of self and purpose, that of filling a need for another human. “The need of any nurse is to feel needed and that we are giving back,” explained one participant. When this is realized as a true purpose it leads to engagement, peace, happiness, and nurses often noted not having to think about it.

Receiving timely feedback and *Approval* from others such as patients, students, peers and managers, validates a nurse’s work and *Role* in the organization. Patient and family *Appreciation* encourages these nurses to have a positive perception of self and their own nurse *Identity*. Much of the nurses’ perceived *Identity* is derived from an *Appreciation* that others have for their service as well as approval for their service. Indeed, sense of purpose is an innate quality for some, but not all. Behaviorists, self-help advisors and religious clergy counsel that for a happier, productive life, finding a sense of purpose is paramount for personal success. It is human nature to desire *Approval*. However, needing *Approval* and *Appreciation* in order to fulfill one’s self perception or *Identity* may be viewed as socially undesirable traits and may relate more to the need of an individual to become socially integrated. Work done through relationships and connections with other humans serves to create a deep support for enhancing meaningful *Approval* and *Appreciation* to derive a greater sense of purpose.

Within *Identity*, across the four generations (see Generations definition box in Appendix), some distinct differences were discovered through our analysis within the sub-theme elements. Regarding the reasons why nurses went into the profession, Silent and Boomer nurse participants either felt they were destined to be a nurse or it was one of a few career options available that provided self sufficiency and accomplishment. In contrast, the Millennial nurse participants either felt that the profession offered significant variety and growth potential, or they felt swayed into the position because of a career marketed with flexible hours and a good source of income. We also would offer that the recent financial crisis and the accompanying desire for job security could also be a compounding element to this line of career decision-making.

The number of years within the profession had an impact on how nurses

aligned *Identity* with sense of purpose. It was more difficult for the Millennial participants to explain or qualify their sense of purpose in life. This unawareness was often followed by a few explanations — either they had not been in the working world long enough to truly know their path, or they were not inclined to be open and flexible about what may be their purpose. For many who have entered the profession as a second career, typically these are Gen-Xers, they can relate to the desire to give back or make a difference.

Consistent feedback from within the workplace was described as a builder of sense of purpose and was discussed more prevalently with Gen-X and Millennials. Receipt of assurance, support and information about progress were all mentioned as helpers in guiding these younger generations to align expectations and remain engaged with team members and the work. The nurse participants noted that these factors contribute significantly to their feeling of purpose. This was validated during an interview with Millennial researcher and guru, Warren Wright. “Millennials are confident, achievement-oriented and socially-conscious, defining themselves with a collective identity. When you combine these traits, you get a generation whose purpose will be to team together to take on the biggest challenges of the day.”²¹ ”

The nurse participants who identified themselves as leaders and noted those leadership characteristics they respect, offered that supporting something bigger than themselves is a “gain” for alignment to a sense of purpose. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the father of flow, used the words of Max DePree to describe the important questions leaders must ask themselves, “Management has a lot to do with answers. But leadership is a function of questions. And the first question for a leader always is: ‘Who do we intend to be?’ Not ‘What are we going to do?’ but ‘Who do we intend to be?’ ”²² ”

Through *Identity* and its various sub-themes, various drivers of engagement were discovered. “A source of engagement for nurses is the perception and validation of progress,” as one nurse shared. This perception came through as feeling energized when everything was accomplished at the right time. The process of “internal performance assessment” serves to define the *Identity* of being a nurse and drives engagement levels. Valuing one’s own job and knowing that it is worth something, that it makes a difference in the world is engaging and purpose-creating. Feeling pride in being a nurse and fulfilling the needs of life and of death, are also significant in developing individual sense of purpose.

21 Wright, Warren. LifeCourse Associates, LifeCourse.com. Executive Vice President. Telephone interview. November 4, 2013.

22 Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Publisher: Harper Perennial Modern Classics; 1st edition (July 1, 2008); Language: English; ISBN-10: 0061339202; ISBN-13: 978-0061339202

Detracting from Purpose

Our research also provided insights about the things that detract from an individual having or developing a purpose within the *Identity* theme. *Environmentally*, the individual nurse participants noted competing priorities. Work-life balance, the needs of family, personal relationship pressures and aspirations within the profession had all detracted from their individual senses of purpose within *Identity*.

Work Ethic perceptions that are developed by older generation nurses and younger generation nurses often create barriers and silos in communication about the changing workplace. *Work Ethic* was a consistent catalyst for having purpose, but every generation defines or experiences it uniquely. For the Silent and Boomer generation, their *Work Ethic* was born out of their upbringing. The strong work-orientation, along with a giving back to society and desiring to make a difference mentality molded their sense of purpose at work. This mentality resulted in their concern for the profession and inability to officially leave it behind. Many retired nurses are still involved in the healthcare world and many continue working through retirement. For the Millennials nurse participants, *Work Ethic* is experienced as being more efficient, “smarter” and more aligned to desired outcomes, challenges and opportunities for improvement and team orientation. The Millennials watched as their hard-working grandparents and parents lost so much during the financial crisis, much of what they had worked hard for. They are living a “balanced” or “integrated” life by choice and believe that working hard should be defined less by the hours and tasks completed and more by the impact made. Further, older versus younger generations in the workplace and the judgment conveyed by both ends of the continuum were noted as a barrier to realization of purpose, further reducing commitment and associated engagement.

For some of the nurse participants, during the times in their lives where they did not have a sense of purpose or were confused about their purpose because of external pressures or influence, they experienced unhappiness and disengagement. Individual participants shared that lacking a sense of purpose stemmed from *Identity* and was also linked to: a) recruitment or hiring of the wrong people; b) individuals went into profession for the wrong reasons; or c) being in the wrong role within the profession. The nurse shortage which was heavily focused on by HR and nurse leadership in the early 2000s²³ created national campaigns focused on attracting new talent to the industry. Some of the most widely used tactics for marketing were messaging based on “flexible hours” and “great pay and benefits.” It is no

23 <http://www.nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/ThePracticeofProfessionalNursing/workforce/Nursing-Shortage/Resources/NursingShortageSolutions.html>

wonder that now, approximately 10 years later, we are hearing from leaders about nurses who seem to have wrong expectations about the profession and are not intrinsically connected to their work.²⁴ Additionally, extensive research has confirmed that the carrot-and-stick methods of the past, including pay and benefits, are not sustainable methods of incentivizing dedicated, high-quality performance,²⁵ especially when quality work equals life, death and everything in between.

Digging deeper into our aggregate research and interview analysis, we learned that “people who do not find purpose in their work don’t do as well as those that do,” as one Boomer participant clearly noted. For nurses, performance includes quality care, patient outcomes and engagement contribution. The emotional stress, physical nature of the profession, shift structure and hours all work against a human’s well-being and ability to sustain *Identity* and sense of purpose. “Leadership identity, which begins as a tentative, peripheral aspect of the self, eventually withers away, along with opportunities to grow through new assignments and real achievements.”²⁶

A clear sense of Identity, how an individual self-identifies and how they view their place in larger society, is foundational to realizing one’s purpose across any role. Please see “Relevance, Any Profession” for more on how each theme might apply to other professions.

24 <http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/25/4/W316.full>

25 *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Publisher: Riverhead Books (April 5, 2011)
Language: English; ISBN-10: 1594484805; ISBN-13: 978-1594484803

26 <http://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers/ar/1>

“ *The only really happy people are those who have learned how to serve.*

— Rick Warren,
pastor and author

Theme No. 2: Service

As we met with nurses and learned about the experiences that define or instill a sense of purpose, we heard “to help people” from every single nurse. The desire for connection to others that have a need is at the core of purpose for nurses. *Service* is the second unique key theme, underscoring the connection between individual purpose and people.

Our analysis defined *Service* as the way in which a nurse provides care, serves the needs of others and approaches relationships with their patients, patient families, peers and those they lead. The key theme of *Service* and how it connects to a nurse’s sense of purpose can be best described by the following sub-themes: *Altruism, Helping, Dedication, Collaboration* and *Performance*.

Nurse participants shared with us that nurses define their sense of purpose through the eyes of others with whom they interact. Nurses have a sincere concern for the well-being of others and consider it their purpose to make a difference in others’ lives. This sub-theme of *Altruism* helps us understand that nurses define their sense of purpose within the ability to contribute to society with the mentality that the sum of all is greater than the individual. One qualitative research study analyzed the association between personality traits of nurses and their reasons for entering nursing. The research team discovered two dominant themes from their interviews: “opportunity for caring” and “my vocation in life.” Similar themes were discovered in stakeholder interviews with nurses and their sense of *purpose*. Nurses offered that “empathetic connections” and “living the mission” were key aspects of this *Altruistic* connection.²⁷

Nurse participants defined their sense of purpose through *Helping* individuals physically, mentally and emotionally. The nurse participants spoke to the fact that they find meaning through interactions with other people: patients, patient families, peers and students. Whether a nurse is healing or teaching, their capabilities of *Helping* others defines the *Service* they provide as core to their individual sense of purpose as a nurse.

Dedication to this purpose of helping and contributing to society creates a personal sense of mission and purpose for the nurses we interviewed. Long working hours, shared knowledge and skills in and outside of the profession and continued work as educators or consultants post-retirement, all reflect their *Dedication*. They do this quite naturally, and it serves to uphold their whole self in *Service* to the role.

²⁷ *Why Did I Become A Nurse? Personality Traits And Reasons For Entering Nursing*. Eley, D., Eley, R., Bertello, M., Rogers-Clark, C. (2012). *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 68 (7), 1546-1555.

Support for sense of purpose through *Service* was also described through *Collaboration* and *Performance*. *Collaboration* in the sense that nurses believe in working toward a common goal at work and *Performance* from having a sense of accomplishment in the way in which the goals are achieved. This is often experienced through direct patient care where nurses note feeling their greatest sense of contribution. As one nurse participant offered, “My purpose is to let people know they are valuable; it does take more minds than mine to come up with good ideas.”

Developing Purpose & Engagement

Nursing science is based on theory and one such theory that looks at how nurses’ care is Dr. Watson’s Caring theory. Dr. Jean Watson is a contemporary nurse theorist whose work on Caring Theory has spanned several decades. Her carative factors are applied in hospitals worldwide. Carative factors are spiritual, emotional and human caregiving factors that are connected to clinical care factors.²⁸ There is a transpersonal caring relationship between the nurse and patient where they mutually search for meaning and wholeness. If the nurse is to give spiritual and emotional care-giving, the nurse must either have or must develop a transpersonal relationship with the patient. “Transpersonal caring calls for an authenticity of being and becoming, an ability to be present to self and other in a reflective frame; the transpersonal nurse has the ability to center consciousness and intentionality on caring, healing and wholeness, rather than on disease, illness and pathology.²⁹” It is reasonable to conclude that in order to encompass the wide aspect of humankind that is necessary to develop transpersonal relationships through this *Service*-orientation, a personal sense of purpose to connect meaningfully with others.

Service can build and develop an individual’s sense of purpose with the personal recognition to “make a difference.” The reward that comes with giving back to society and helping others is what our nurse participants contended repeatedly, to maintain and build their sense of purpose. Nurse participants expressed that they were able to understand themselves better through serving and *Helping* others. Further engagement was created through connections and interactions with their patients or their students. Watching the transformation and progress of their patients was validation of their purpose. The Silent and Boomer generation of nurses who are now actively teaching stated that, “Losing a student is worse than losing a patient,” lending to the fact that they define their purpose within the betterment of their society in which they live.

28 <http://watsoncaringscience.org/about-us/caring-science-definitions-processes-theory/>

29 *Ibid*

Our analysis showed that the nurse participants link their engagement to the camaraderie within their team work and the ability to accomplish goals together. Silent and Boomer generation nurses expressed that teaching is rewarding in the sense of building teams and connecting like-minded people together to succeed. The Millennial nurses offered that organizational support helps them maintain their sense of purpose at work with the reassurance from co-workers and superiors on the quality of their work.

Detracting from Purpose

For the Millennial generation of nurse participants, some of their perspectives about going into the profession were formed out of a large network that marketed great pay, flexible hours and opportunities for growth. This may be one of the reasons that aspects of *Service* detract from the younger generation's sense of purpose to the field of nursing. In instances where the younger nurses felt they did not make a difference, they noted that the great pay and flexible hours do not outweigh the non-financial costs associated with the profession, such as lack of management support, unclear expectations and patient-to-nurse ratios.

Across generations, participants shared that negative patient interactions such as complacency in getting better or abuse of staff, detracts from a nurse's sense of purpose. They feel they aren't making the difference they set out to make. Many nurses also explained that working in teams with others who were disengaged or with others who did not have a strong work ethic and service-orientation, detracted from their ability to work with a *Service*-driven sense of purpose.

Giving of oneself in Service to a person in need or greater cause serves to define core elements of purpose, no matter the role.

Theme No. 3: Mastery

Through our analysis we heard various versions of becoming or being an expert, excelling at different stages of one's career, drive to continuously improve and *moving from a skills orientation to a systems orientation*. *Mastery* is the third unique key theme we discovered in understanding the pivotal importance of being valued according to knowledge and expertise.

Our analysis revealed that nurses define their sense of purpose through *Mastery* in their abilities to learn from interactions with work, those they lead, those they teach, those they heal and those who also lead them. Growth gained through interactions with other humans is at the heart of how *Mastery* is defined. From our research, *Mastery* is further expressed through five sub-themes: *Learning, Knowledge, Critical Thinking and Developer*.

Learning was considered a two-way street as our nurse participants not only found purpose in teaching students, patients and other colleagues, but also learning from them as well. Nurse participants alluded to an endless curiosity by expressing desire for new opportunities as well as exposure to new information, skills and/or challenges.

Knowledge stems from experience and intuition. Amidst chaos, our nurse participants expressed that they rely on information and their skills at hand to help fulfill their sense of purpose through a system of quality of care. *Knowledge* is also something that is sought to help master “work flow.” Mihaly Csikszentmihályi outlines this in his well-supported theory that “people are happiest when they are in a state of flow — a state of concentration or complete absorption with the situation.”³⁰

Nurse participants often described themselves as an “investigator, problem solver or analyst.” This type of *Critical Thinking* guides them to understand, analyze and solve complex problems. It includes a creative element in which thinking is stretched beyond the normal; applying creativity to investigative, problem-solving and analytical situations is especially engaging.

As the nurse participants experienced *Learning, Knowledge* and *Critical Thinking*, the role of *Developer* seemed to emerge and was noted as highly important to creating a sense of purpose through *Mastery*. Our analysis showed that guiding and teaching others, helping others find their full potential and individual purpose, along with leading by example, all encompassed a *Developer* mentality.

“ *The happiness of a man in this life does not consist in the absence but in the mastery of his passions.*

— Alfred Lord Tennyson, poet

³⁰ *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Publisher: Harper Perennial Modern Classics; 1ST edition (July 1, 2008); Language: English; ISBN-10: 0061339202; ISBN-13: 978-0061339202

Though uniquely represented for each individual, our research demonstrated that *Mastery* as a theme can serve to build or detract from sense of purpose once *Identity* and *Service* were considered. *Mastery* is related to *Identity* in that it supports development of the purpose that nurses felt they innately possessed.

Developing Purpose & Engagement

Within the sub-themes, there were several shared experiences that helped build a nurse's individual sense of purpose and support their engagement. Our interview analysis revealed few generational differences. This theme was largely defined by tenure in the profession as *Mastery* was described as often developing over time.

Patricia Benner's conceptualization of the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition, "Novice to Expert" describes five stages of perceptual growth that nurses pass through in order to develop skill acquisition. Benner conceptualized that nurses develop skills and an understanding of patient care over time as a result of a quality educational base and a variety of experiences. Benner believed that a novice nurse who possesses an innate ability and who has the opportunity to obtain adequate experience gradually becomes an expert. She describes the five levels of experiences as: Novice, Advanced Beginner, Competent (usually a nurse with two to three years of experience), Proficient and Expert.³¹ It is important, if not required, to include this option for development as nurses grow in their performance through experience. Millennials and second-career nurses all should be honored on this path from an individual level, or purpose may become lost amidst never-achieved competencies.

Nurses noted that when *Learning* was a "two-way street" and they received positive, constructive feedback, it helped lead to a perceived positive experience. Continuous feedback and *Learning* was strongly favored by the Millennial nurse participants as the majority mentioned they were excited to learn and often thrived off innovation, new ideas and concepts. Having the opportunity to move between different roles and the process of learning itself also contributed to individual senses of purpose. Millennials noted that they are excited by change and the unknown aspects that compose the nature of their work. While older generations noted that this stemmed more from enjoying the process of *Learning* and using their *Knowledge* to help others. Furthermore, through discussion and personal experience, a few Boomer and Gen-X nurse participants searched out nursing as a second career choice to continue *Learning* and develop their purpose.

31 Expertise in Nursing Practice (2009). Benner, Patricia E, Tanner, Christine A., Chesla, Catherine A. Springer Publishing Company. New York, New York.

Over time and through experience, *Knowledge* is obtained that aids nurses in growing from a novice to an expert, or stated differently by a nurse participant, from “practicing medical care to nursing care.” The Millennial nurse participants really stressed this through their desire of the necessary time to care for patients thoroughly without needing to make exceptions. *Knowledge* provides the nurses with a tool to help fulfill their sense of purpose both within their profession as well as in their personal lives. A significant part of building a sense of purpose through *Mastery* was not only about developing oneself, but developing others by sharing *Knowledge*, skills, mentoring and helping them find their own purpose.

As self-proclaimed problem solvers, the opportunity to be challenged and future-oriented allowed for *Critical Thinking* to be nurtured. New challenges, new learning, new information and new creativity-based opportunities are exciting for Gen-X and Millennials. They believe in the freedom to explore and add value within a flexible environment as an important environment in which to provide holistic and innovative care.

Silents and Boomers were motivated by developing others, especially the younger generations because they feel that there are current limitations in who can provide this instruction with the background, experience and *Knowledge* to pass down to the nurse students. This confirms why there are several Silent nurses still working part-time as nurse educators or consultants.

Detracting from Purpose

Though some tasks and jobs within a hospital setting are becoming more routine due to technology and the practice of silos, there is a strong need for inquisitive, curious minds to innovate around complex problem solving on a daily basis. To achieve this nurses as well as physicians and other staff need to feel engaged to pursue *Mastery* and support their sense of purpose. However, this type of engagement is currently lacking not only in healthcare, but across other industries as well. “Unfortunately, despite sweet-smelling words like ‘empowerment’ that waft through corporate corridors, the modern workplace’s most notable feature may be its lack of engagement and its disregard for mastery,” as Daniel Pink noted in his book on motivation, *Drive*.³² As supported in previous noted research, engagement levels remain a challenge for leadership and are clearly connected to improved performance.

There were aspects within the *Mastery* sub-themes that detracted from purpose. For *Learning*, the lack of opportunity to grow and try new things was daunting to some nurses. Nurse educators, mostly Silents and Boomers, were disappointed when they had a student whose “heart was not in it” and they

32 Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books; 2011., p. 109

were unable to get through to or develop them. One Gen-X participant also mentioned that “having a very sick patient who dies or does not want to get better” worked against her sense of purpose, even though she added that it should not.

Silents, Boomers and Gen-X shared that underutilization of their *Knowledge* negatively challenges their purpose, while Millennials noted frustration in having expectations placed upon them that are too high based on *Knowledge* level and *Critical Thinking* capability. This out-of-balance experience can be explained by lack of flow within the individual during their most important work. Csikszentmihalyi offers the world a framework with the point when one will experience flow, noting it is typically when challenge and skills are higher than average, which is unique to each individual.³³ Daniel Pink builds on this with what he calls the “Goldilocks tasks” — when there is a mismatch between what one must do and what one can do, there is either anxiety or boredom. “When the match is just right, the results can be glorious.³⁴” This is flow. Our discussions highlighted the well-documented complexity in the patient care setting today. Our designs work against flow in our hospitals and we reward a practice of multi-tasking, micro-managing and process-driven systemization. Might we reconsider the things that create “noise” in the ability to more frequently enter a “flow state” when it comes to our most important work?

Knowing when and how to move forward with *Mastery* and how that would interact with other areas of importance in their lives is challenging for some nurse participants, those who are nearing the end of their career as well those considering which path to take next within the profession. As one participant shared, “We have an aging workforce, and a lot of our very talented, seasoned nurse managers are starting to think about retirement. We also have difficulty attracting people into the job.” She goes on to explain that “the nurse manager is the accountable person with 24/7 on the front lines of care with patients and families, with staff and administration. Having done it myself, I can say it’s definitely one of the most difficult [hospital] jobs; and with only incrementally more pay in many cases, being in management seems like it only brings more headaches.”

Our research and research by others demonstrate that Mastery is a key theme in motivation, engagement and performance. We extend that this is not profession-based.

33 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Tedtalk 2008

34 Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books; 2011., p. 117

Theme No. 4: Autonomy

For the lived experience described by nurses, *Autonomy* is the state of being independent, free and self directing. It is exerting one's power to influence. We found that *Autonomy* is a defining key theme of a nurse's sense of purpose at work and encompasses self-defining qualities that serve the nurse experience of purpose in what they do and who they are.

While not directly asked, the questions about what creates purpose yielded thinking and experiences aligned mostly to professional *Autonomy*, likely because we were intentionally seeking understanding about purpose at work. From our analysis of purpose driven from a sense of *Autonomy*, the characteristics or sub-themes that manifest when a nurse feels autonomous at work include: *Agency, Independence, Responsibility* and *Accountability*.

Being self-made, self-sufficient and self-reliant were descriptions offered about the experience of *Agency* as a significant component of *Autonomy*. There was a thread of entrepreneurship as nurses described a stepping stone mentality, in which each position becomes another opportunity. From the descriptions, we heard about how individuals use this "power" to get closer to their individual goal, by creating their own entity within healthcare organizations. "When I felt that I didn't have power, I didn't have job satisfaction, and so I transferred to a different region of hospital until I had that power again," offered one participant.

Silents and Boomers noted that through experiential learning and awareness they learned that as nurses they cannot control everything, but that it is in their power to make the best out of a situation. "To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to himself. He has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances," as Csikszentmihalyi would note as the type of mindset that helps one find flow through *Autonomy* and supports purpose.³⁵ Boomers noted seeking mission work and health crisis events to take them back to basics on giving care to those in need with little bureaucracy and barriers that block or restrict their desire to do what is needed to save lives or ease suffering.

We discovered that *Independence* is one of the main characteristics of being a

“ We should have less management and more leadership in nursing.

— Nurse Participant

³⁵ *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Publisher: Harper Perennial Modern Classics; 1ST edition (July 1, 2008); Language: English; ISBN-10: 0061339202; ISBN-13: 978-0061339202

nurse. The freedom from outside control, embodying self leadership, making decisions in the workplace without advice from others helped fuel purpose in their work. This desire for *Independence* also extended to reasons nurses mentioned going into the profession — to earn a good living that would allow them to support themselves across all potential circumstances. The ability to independently take matters in their own hands and decide an outcome solidified the nurse participants' purpose in the role as a nurse in the larger organization of healthcare.

Similarly, having a sense of *Responsibility* in the workplace created a sense of purpose. According to the respondents, feeling responsible as a nurse included taking ownership of patient priority, student enrichment and finding creative solutions to unexpected complications. Taking on such responsibilities can be seen as a self imposed duty, as many nurses described the natural instinct to want to help remove pain and illness even outside of the hospital setting. They had a natural desire to address the problem and were driven autonomously to do so.

Having *Accountability* to these commitments is another defining element of the key theme of *Autonomy* for nurses — being trusted and responsible with their nursing skills and duties. Throughout the interviews nurses expressed how they set a daily plan with very high expectations for which they held themselves accountable and thus gave meaning to their work. Their mentality was such that they have no purpose if there are no achievements, and *Accountability* is an attribute that can ensure these goals were met. *Autonomy* is a capstone-like theme in defining sense of purpose for nurses because it reveals that individuals derive meaning from accomplishments of which they achieve by their own means. *Autonomy* also relates to *Mastery* as an inherent component in the growth of a nurse.

Developing Purpose & Engagement

Autonomy is achieved best if social conditions that support it are set in place.³⁶ Professional Nursing has fought hard to put those conditions in place. Nursing has its own body of professional research, standards of practice for every level of nursing education from the associate degree to the practice doctorate degree. Nursing is regulated through licensing, certification and accreditation, which rather than taking away from *Autonomy* as viewed by some, actually provides *Autonomy* to the profession.

Our research showed several other ways in which *Autonomy* builds and develops an individual's purpose at work. For the Millennials, *Agency*

³⁶ Sherwin, S. *A Relational Approach To Autonomy In Health Care*. In: Sherwin S ed. *The Politics Of Womens Health: Exploring Agency And Autonomy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Presee, 1998: 19-47

is a prominent motivator that builds their sense of purpose. With an entrepreneurial mindset, this generation of nurses has stepping-stone mentality in which the power they have in their current situation is used as a means to get to the next level at work. Gen-X and Millennial nurses expressed that they felt more purposeful when they had more power in their position. “Although Millennials are purpose-driven, they uniquely combine the idealism of the Boomers with the practicality of Gen-Xers to arrive at a place where mission meets action.³⁷” Furthermore, they cited actively switching positions or even departments until they found that *Agency* again. In a work environment such as a hospital, nurses understand that they can’t control every outcome, but being able to have power within their own actions and position in the workplace helps build their sense of purpose and solidifies the meaning of their work.

One way that nurses mentioned maintaining a sense of control and building on their sense of purpose at work was the ability to independently create their own plan of action at work. From our interviews we learned that nurses considered themselves “program people,” essentially building their purpose from a confidence in their ability to plan and control outcomes within their day. They appreciate having the freedom to contribute opinions and guide change where they see fit, built upon their purpose and validated by the value of their work.

Being responsible for life or death situations carries significant weight in the development of a nurse’s purpose. The awareness of this influence on the patients’ lives contributes to their purpose with a realization about their *Accountability* as a nurse. Nurses voiced that they felt an ownership and *Responsibility* to help others in need, working throughout each day with a “people need people” mentality. The Millennial generation did add a different notion of how they search for more *Responsibility* at work by affirming their position or role and the ability to develop and grow. With this sense of *Responsibility* comes the dedication and *Accountability* to follow through with pride, on all of the tasks and obligations of which these nurses maintain. The ability to do so and lead by example is another source of engagement and development of purpose for nurses.

Though our analysis did pull these specific sub-themes out of the main experience of *Autonomy*, underlying drivers of these was more about choice and voice, or having the perception of these within their work environment than just having general independence. Nurse participants’ relationships often supported their *Autonomy* and influenced the choices they made, which

³⁷ Wright, Warren. LifeCourse Associates, LifeCourse.com. Executive Vice President. Telephone interview. November 4, 2013.

can be easily observed through their *Accountability and Responsibility*. This is supported by the work of Ryan and Deci (1980s) that showed *Autonomy* to really mean “acting with choice” and not about individualism. “We can be both autonomous and happily interdependent with others.³⁸ “

Both past and current research has shown the connection between a sense of *Autonomy* and improved engagement and performance. *Autonomy* encourages conceptual understanding, better grades, enhanced persistence in activities, higher productivity, less burnout and higher levels of psychological well-being. *Autonomy* was also shown to support greater job satisfaction, less turnover and ultimately stronger organizational growth than organizations that practiced a more control-style work environment.³⁹

With *Autonomy*, as well as the other key themes, it is important to remember that a “one size fits all” approach will never be successful, as each person will thrive on different aspects of what creates purpose for them. As Tony Hsieh shared with Daniel Pink, “Studies have shown that perceived control is an important component of one’s happiness. Different individuals have different desires, so the best strategy for an employer would be to figure out what’s important to each individual employee.⁴⁰ “

Detracting from Purpose

The aspects of *Autonomy* that detract from a nurse’s sense of purpose are the ones in which *Autonomy* is challenged and results in a feeling of incapability. Many nurses expressed that asking for help or not knowing the answer to certain pressing situations at work made them feel like they were lacking in *Independence* and detracted from their strong sense of purpose in their position. Similarly, having superiors or other co-workers micromanage how a task is accomplished took away from their individual purpose at work. The inability to complete the task on their own resulted in a drain to the individual’s sense of purpose. Furthermore, when nurses felt they could do as much as they expected with the capacity given, they felt a lack of *Responsibility*, which resulted in a loss of purpose at work.

What is not well documented is the acknowledgement of nurses themselves on the meaning of their personal *Autonomy*, much of which relates directly to their *Identity* and *Mastery* and what may be perceived as their lack of social integration. It is possible that professional *Autonomy* will likely never be satisfactory until the personal *Autonomy* issues of nurses are resolved.

38 Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books; 2011., p. 89

39 Ibid, p. 85-108

40 Ibid, p. 106

Chris McDonald viewed nursing *Autonomy* through the lens of relational *Autonomy*. This type shifts away from the older meaning of *Autonomy* as described by our findings as *Independence*, control over self and making decisions without the input of others. Rather, relational *Autonomy* is a view toward seeking meaningful self-direction within a milieu of interdependency. With components of independence, relational *Autonomy* views the person as never completely independent and looks to find ways to facilitate meaningful self-direction within the framework of interdependency.⁴¹ Professional *Autonomy* finds its sources in supportive social relations and is threatened when those relationships are not present. This may well be the case with our respondents. In particular, the older-generation nurses conveyed a feeling of powerlessness. *This remains a complex area of study but one that continues to be prevalent in the search for understanding about engagement, connection and purpose.*

As systems within healthcare, as well as across other industries, become more standardized, the sense of *Autonomy* will likely be negatively affected. “The balance between autonomy and compliance is shifting perhaps most radically and visibly in healthcare. Whatever the balance has been, it is moving now toward more standardization, ironically driven in large part by the need for more collaboration.⁴²” This is true for nurses and other healthcare staff as well. Based on our findings and the extensive research being conducted, this remains a significant proverbial “step in the wrong direction,” not only related to employee engagement and well-being but for the performance and growth of organizations as well.

Through both our primary and secondary research outlined, having a sense of Autonomy, personal ownership, self-direction and independence are agnostic across professions.

41 McDonald, C. (2009). Nurse autonomy as relational. *Nursing Ethics*. 9 (2) 194-201.

42 <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/08/how-do-you-enable-people/>

“ *Is the system going to flatten you out and deny you your humanity, or are you going to be able to make use of the system to the attainment of human Purposes?*

— Joseph Campbell,
American writer and
lecturer

Theme No. 5: System

Throughout our discussions and time with nurses, we heard about elements that represented supporting aspects of what we would suggest is the “purpose ecosystem” within an organization. It was repeatedly the attributes of the *System* that facilitate or prevent purpose from being part of individual engagement. Based on our findings, we define *System* as a group of related parts that work together to create and maintain something — the people, duties, customers, diagnoses and processes that happen within the organization. *System* is the final key theme that we analyzed. *System* is further expressed through six sub-themes defined based on responses from nurse participants: *Mission*, *Structure*, *Leadership*, *Management*, *Culture* and *Profession*.

Mission was described as an impetus for care of creating outcomes with value and impact. It is why the organization exists, who it serves, how it serves, all shared through a statement. When related to the individual, it was often mentioned to mean something bigger than oneself though most differentiated *Mission* from sense of purpose. *Mission* was described as more of a guide to fulfilling the organization’s or one’s sense of purpose.

Structure was analyzed to include how a group of people is organized, the arrangement of those people and their respective roles that build and sustain the organizational system while empowering individuals to work from a sense of purpose. It includes physical space, design, hours design, how people work (e.g. shifts, patient ratios) and how leadership teams are arranged.

Leadership was defined by participants as someone or their approach who is trusted by others to provide guiding principles by which work or teams operate. It is considered to be a role, a title or unstated position, as well as both informal or formal. *Leadership* can stem from anyone in any position. Leading others and leading oneself contributed to a sense of purpose.

Management as a sub-theme covers descriptions given by nurse participants as an official formal role or title. It was commonly noted as one that held supervisory duties, task and project management, as well as go-to source for information and expectations.

Consistently used beliefs and practices, environment, management philosophies and practices, norms of a group and organization — all these encompass the traditional components that define *Culture*. Communication expectations, mood of the team or unit, tolerance levels of behavior and openness were all defining aspects of *Culture* as we heard it as a core

component of *System*. How transparent is leadership? How transparent can staff be? Is bullying ignored? How is creative and critical thinking considered, and to what extent are individual needs considered? How does all of this connect to the mission and purpose of the organization and the patient? These and more are questions organizations should ask when reviewing and determining their ideal *Culture*.

The *Profession* sub-theme stemmed from how the nurse participants viewed themselves as nurses as well as the current and future state of nursing in general. This includes the many elements that define nursing and the various roles and duties in the healthcare environment. It also related to how the *Profession* is seen from the outside, its relevance in healthcare and decisions about education, selection and development.

Developing Purpose & Engagement

For some of the nurses, knowing and connecting to their organization's *Mission* was important to them. Others noted that the organization's *Mission* did not influence their personal sense of purpose and were able to connect to their work on a more individual level. Having a flexible and transparent *Structure* with supporting resources (e.g., technology that improved quality of care, enough space to properly care for patients, etc.) was important to many interviewees. Millennial nurse participants often favored technology, finding it to be empowering, allowing them to spend more time with their patients.

When asked how leaders and *Leadership* support individual sense of purpose, common answers focused around empowerment and encouraging action in finding that sense of purpose. Others included the expectation that these leaders should model the standard behavior. *Management* would ideally be direct yet constructive with their communication and feedback while also creating a space and place for nurses to be with the patient. When a *Culture* of shared governance and future orientation was in place, nurses felt more in tune with their sense of purpose. Within the *Profession*, having the ability to improve the field of nursing while also having the option to move within various areas of care and across the industry helps build sense of purpose. We found this to be true across all generations.

Because of the shortage and challenges in turnover, Gallup studied the profession and state of the industry with consistency beginning in the late 1990s and continued into the 2000s. Their data contains robust information about trends and correlations to performance including mortality and complication rates. The following outlines key connections noted in separate

2002⁴³ and 2005⁴⁴ Gallup polls between their research on nurse engagement and our sub-themes:

- Profession — “While it’s been well documented that one of the best sources of new employees is referrals from current employees, the majority of nurses that Gallup surveyed, 71% said they would not recommend their organization to other nurses.”
- Structure, Management and Leadership — “As a group, nurses have among the lowest overall engagement levels of any category of workers Gallup has studied. Nearly 1 in 4 nurses are actively disengaged, compared to only 16% of the U.S. working population.”
- Structure — “Low scores on ‘materials and equipment’ as a key driver of engagement often relates to staffing shortages and a lack of necessary supplies. Broken processes also prevent nurses from doing their best work.”
- Management and Leadership — “The engagement level of nurses has the strongest impact on complication and mortality rates.” From loyalty and psychological commitment to the organization and the role, to hiring practices that emphasis talent for management rather than technical competence in nursing, Gallup challenges that if hospital administrators can’t provide conviction in these areas, “patient care quality in their organization is at risk.”

“Senior managers of today’s large enterprises must move beyond strategy, *Structure* and *Systems* to a framework built on purpose, process, and people.” This is the first key imperative offered by a purpose-based strategy piece featured in Harvard Business Review⁴⁵. Creation of organizational identity for employee connection, define the company “what and why,” and further, “if people are to put out the extraordinary effort required to realize company targets, they must be able to identify with them.” Employees must know what the organization stands for.⁴⁶ This organizational purpose must clearly be connected to *Mission* and serve as the foundation upon which individual purpose can be connected.

Finally, *Leadership* with *Identity* serves a crucial role and function to create a system that upholds a culture of purpose. There is much support regarding *Leadership* of intangible assets through emotional intelligence, behavioral

43 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/6820/how-attract-retain-great-nurses.aspx>

44 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/17398/nurturing-hospital-employee-engagement-registered-nurses.aspx>

45 Bartlett, C., & Ghoshal, S. (1994). “Beyond Strategy to Purpose.” Harvard Business Review Magazine. November 1994. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/1994/11/beyond-strategy-to-purpose/ar/1>

46 *Ibid*

economics and what Frank Lloyd terms “Fourth-dimension leadership.” “This type of *Leadership* is oriented externally, but permeates organizational and interpersonal relationships and is rooted in self. These leaders map their personal values against the organization’s fourth-dimension leadership concepts enabled a large healthcare system to achieve improved business outcomes.⁴⁷ “

As individuals become leaders either through intent or accident, they can either facilitate, prevent or ignore their role to facilitate purpose-driven development of others. They can only do so authentically if they lead from a place of purpose. “Effective leaders develop a sense of purpose by pursuing goals that align with their personal values and advance the collective good. This allows them to look beyond the status quo to what is possible and gives them a compelling reason to take action despite personal fears and insecurities. By connecting others to a larger purpose, they inspire commitment, boost resolve, and help colleagues find deeper meaning in their work.⁴⁸ “



47 Lloyd, F. R. (2013). “Building Fourth-Dimension Leaders.” Chief Learning Officer. Retrieved from <http://clomedia.com>

48 <http://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers/ar/1>

Dr. K. Shelette Stewart coaches leaders on their role of connecting the organizational purpose to individuals through a process of grounding their individual purpose first. “There is frequently a disconnect [between an individual leader’s personal mission and the organizational mission] and ensuring they start with their own helps them to understand whether or not they are in alignment or can be. Leaders whose purpose is not aligned are doing a disservice to the organization as well as to themselves”

Detracting from Purpose

Systems are more focused on metrics through the introduction of quality programs such as TQM, Six Sigma, extensive and well-funded healthcare quality programs as well as national quality mandates. These were unanimously noted as distracting from purpose and simply focusing on patient care. Additionally to this noted purpose-blocking movement, across the industry, we still are not seeing consistent quality within most or across all systems.

Regarding technology, Silents and Boomers experienced the opposite of Millennials. They experienced advancements in technology like electronic medical records, to be frustrating, time consuming and less accurate as they caused barriers to the methods they had learn and mastered. Gen-X views their role as one of catalyst between the generations. They have been exposed to education that bridges both the physical paper methods along with the newer technology methods, such as charting.

Silos within organizations along with layoffs, poor planning, poor hiring, short-term thinking and bureaucracy all create barriers to purpose-full direct patient care. Expectations were often not met for the younger generations as some believe that what they learned in school is very different from what really happens. They often feel unprepared or overwhelmed. *Management* has fueled detraction when important decisions are made without the input of the staff and when poor performing nurses and practices are tolerated. A culture of negativity, whether across nurse colleagues or from leaders and *Management*, weighed on the minds of those we talked to. False expectations, negative patient interactions and disengagement of other staff all foster a culture where purpose has no place. One study that looked at nurses working outside of the *Profession*, found that nurses entered the *Profession* for altruistic reasons but left the *Profession* due to workload, unsafe work environment and workplace harassment.⁴⁹

While we heard that nursing is a *Profession* of diverse roles and opportunities, we should not discount the turnover within nursing due to poor *System*

49 Duffield, L., Pallas, L., Aitken, L. (2003). “Nurses Who Work Outside Nursing.” *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 47 (6), 664-671.

focus, design and accountability. With some Boomers retiring unhappy and Millennials entering the profession without the right expectations, both groups are torn between what they went in for and why they should stay. Those who may have gone into the *Profession* for wrong reasons, (e.g., good pay, flexible hours, excellent technical education) are now a source of concern to those nurses who believe their sense of *purpose* stems from the right reasons defined by a desire for patient care vs. process orientation. Some participants also noted the lack of work-life integration and the difficulty to maintain their own well-being due to long hours and the general nature of work that is nursing.

Since every organization is built as a System of processes, functions and people, basic elements of this theme translate across industry.

Opportunity

Realizing Engagement

Organizations are interested in improved financials, especially during constrained times. Costs, efficiency, productivity and innovation are all outcomes that can be positively managed to create organizational return to stakeholders and mission. This is true for non-profit or for-profit business models. The largest cost to the majority of organizations is human capital. Not the cost of salary, but the cost of untapped talent, innovation and leadership. Unfortunately, most organizations do not think this way. From our experience, the most significant causes of variance to this expenditure are 1) disengagement among staff, held predominately with the direct supervisor and 2) inconsistent hiring practices with an emphasis on technical skills and competencies.

We illustrate that engagement contributes to personal performance outcomes. These, in turn, contributes to overall organizational performance indicators, including growth and customer engagement. This growth comes from the ability to reduce costs, reduce variance and create a meaningful experience for the customer. Yet, the majority of organizations of all types, continue to struggle to achieve high, increasing or even stable levels of engagement. We must be open and agile to create paths for the motivators that drive engagement and challenge ourselves and our leadership to seek this from an individual level.

Most organizations have a mission statement, however, not all remain

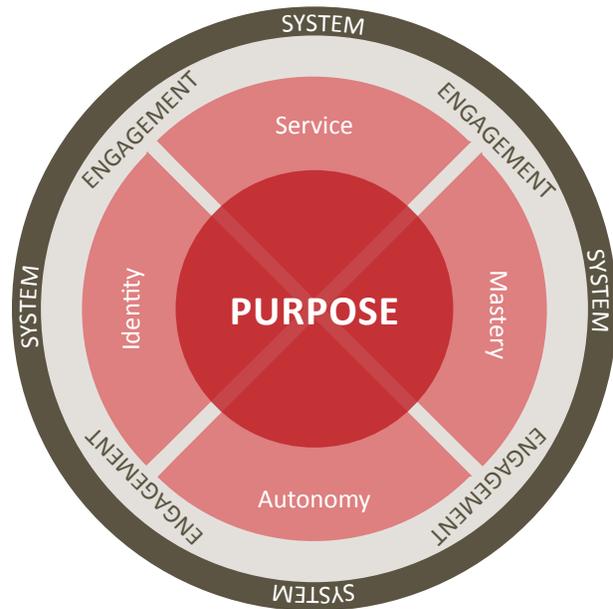
“ *There is an empirical financial benefit to organizations that instill a Purpose-driven culture.*

— Bruce Rogers,
Forbes' Chief
Insights Officer

connected to it. This connection only partially addresses the focus needed to tap these motivations. It is a place to start but not the place for meaningful change. Each individual has or should be encouraged to have a personal mission, a sense of purpose from which they create, deliver, support and respond to the things they do. They must have their “why” clearly answered. If living in a society that has never encouraged this, we must facilitate that discussion.

Purpose-Driven Operations

“If you help your employees, managers, leaders, increase their job satisfaction and career engagement you are going to help to drive productivity, performance and bottom line profitability for your organization, that is the key.” Dr. K. Shelette Stewart confirms this link between individual purpose and individual performance extending to the organization’s performance outcomes.



Purpose Driven Engagement ModelSM

To foster thinking, discussion and ultimately strategic shifts about what this means for the top and bottom line, we outline some strategic areas aligned to building a business based on purpose:

- **Selection: Attract and hire the best talent, reduce costs, increase outcomes.**
 - Education Systems, Policies, Procedures, Outcomes
 - Holistic Human Focus and Strategy
- **Engagement: Retention, productivity, quality and safety to drive organizational performance.**
 - Happiness Fostered
 - Performance Expectations and Patient Experience
 - Culture of Caring
 - Profession Reinvented

- Tolerance and Transparency
- **Leadership: Human-to-human practices, patient-centricity to outcomes.**
 - Empower Purpose in People
 - Measurement, Tracking, Impact

Are these opportunities based on purpose being met within your organization? What areas are strongest? Weakest? Why is this important to the sustainable growth of your organization? Answering these questions and more while reflecting on the three strategic areas above will help you discover the purpose-driven opportunities within your organization, department or even team.

Theme-Level Potential

There are various opportunities within each key theme discovered in our research study. The following suggestions foster additional focus and commitment to a purpose-based Leadership Strategy:

IDENTITY

- Mission Realization: Individual Identity alignment to mission and purpose builds strategic and dynamic comprehensive quality care.
- Patient Outcomes: Purpose-based culture increases patient appreciation resulting in increased likelihood of customer engagement amidst untimely, unkind and uncomfortable health care processes.

SERVICE

- Employment Brand & Retention: Hiring for purpose allows individuals to work from passion, rarely burn-out, create, innovate and contribute. This begins with selection for education programs.
- Customer Service & Patient Experience: “Great nurses equals great performance,” as one participant shared. Excellence in Service provided and experienced, yields performance and quality of work.

MASTERY

- Productivity: Value placed on contribution and meaningful interactions will foster *Mastery* and *Autonomy*. Zero tolerance of lateral bullying fosters transparency, trust and collaboration.
- Innovation: Redesigned work settings support creativity and relieve key stressors that inhibit learning and ideation.

AUTONOMY

- Productivity: Balance of support with delegation, especially for new nurses, creates increased engagement.
- Performance: Recognition is predominantly objective over subjective. Promotions based on performance beyond task achievement and tenure develop *Autonomy*.

SYSTEM

- Well-being: Healthy care providers can provide healthy care. Fatigue, lower alertness, sleeplessness, stress, obesity prevalence and heart disease are all associated with the 30-year-old 12-hour shift.⁵⁰
- Profitability: Supervisors hold the “key” to engagement. Highly engaged work units are more productive. Achieved through clear expectations, compassion, recognition and fostering productivity from purpose.
- Quality: Metrics serve to demonstrate care quality and events for the overall institution and inform change initiatives. Relevant metrics that depict bedside-based impact stem from nursing.

Relevance, Any Profession

As research has shown, having a purpose is a significant driver of engagement and performance. We are confident that additional projects that focus on what builds purpose in other professions in this human-based behavioral economy will discover similar key themes and sub-themes.

We offer some ideas about how the themes discovered in our study could be generally relevant. *Whether each area supports a sense of purpose for an individual will depend on personal reflections and decisions associated with working from a place of meaning. In all areas, leaders and individuals are encouraged to experiment to determine purpose-based motivators and connections.*

IDENTITY - *Calling, environment, work ethic, appreciation, approval and role*

The defining characteristics of career-aged persons are present and unique. While development and experience contribute, natural tendencies and preferences define who a person is. Passions, life-changing events, upbringing, what the human needs to be appreciated and doing things that matter — these are all attributes that span professions and are likely to contribute to a sense of purpose.

50 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22324559>

SERVICE - *Altruism, helping, dedication, collaboration and performance*

Providing opportunity to do good or be a part of something that helps the greater good spans many professions, to varying degrees. As noted in our generational research, this is strongly expected by the Millennials. Most, if not all organizations, have a customer. Those that thrive are clearly aligned to customer needs as delivered upon by employees. Every single role has a connection to the contribution of Service.

MASTERY - *Learning, knowledge, critical thinking and developer*

In order to survive in this dynamic, knowledge economy all organizations must be agile. Those that experience sustainable growth are adaptive, learning organizations that change faster, stronger and smarter through continuous improvement and innovation. As noted, Mastery is part of the new science of business and in this knowledge economy, when purpose aligned, Mastery embraces individual growth directly and through the development of others.

AUTONOMY - *Agency, independence, responsibility and accountability*

Whether working at a fast food chain or a high-tech space company, the freedom to tackle responsibilities and address outcome-based demands, builds an employee's individual sense of purpose. Feeling confident in decision-making depicts that trust is present, permission to fail is granted and ownership of performance can exist.

SYSTEMS - *Mission, structure, leadership, management, culture and profession*

The opportunity for Identity, Service, Mastery and Autonomy can only be possible if the System allows for them to be present and to thrive. In any organization, leaders guide strategy, operations and financial processes aligned to product or service delivery. Across professions, the relevance and impact of purpose on engagement and mission, can only be realized through a System of leadership vision, support and accountability.

Call to Action

“ *Our current business operating system— which is built around external, carrot-and-stick motivators— doesn’t work and often does harm. We need an upgrade. And the science shows the way.*

— Daniel Pink, author and thought leader

Nursing, the focal profession of our research, is a pivotal part of the healthcare industry. The healthcare industry is one of the more dynamic and fastest growing industries across the globe. It is also one of the most regulated or unregulated industries depending on which country you are in. Furthermore, at the core of the nursing profession, is the human connection of helping and healing. All of this calls for a different approach to how the systems in which nurses operate function. This needed “upgrade” is currently not happening, or only doing so on a small scale.

As Daniel Pink and other thought leaders and researchers have mentioned, what science shows is that effective business practices and how businesses currently operate are two very different approaches. What was assumed to work in the past did not always work then, and more often than not, it fails in today’s knowledge-driven, human-centered, dynamic and global work environment. With our research, we hope to add to the science that will guide this shift within not only healthcare, but other organizations as well to engage and drive performance through their humans in a more effective, efficient and agile way.

We believe this shift within healthcare, as well as other industries, can start to happen *now*. Might we reconsider the things that create “noise” in the ability to more frequently enter a “flow state” when it comes to our most important work? Can we move beyond what is to what could be? Is it possible to let go of our long-held assumptions and practices and follow the science and thought leaders that are relevant for today and our potential future?

Building Purpose Into Your Leadership

An organization and its leaders, both inside and outside of healthcare, must be very clear *why* they exist and must know their purpose. This goes beyond creating stakeholder value. The *why* can be documented through a mission and/or vision statement, but leaders of the organization need to be accountable for maintaining and clearly communicating this purpose throughout strategy so it can create the culture.

Individual sense of purpose begins with leaders and managers so that they are then prepared to support and develop the individual employee’s sense of purpose. Then all individuals are able to better connect the organization’s purpose through their own.

Finding Purpose

Dr. K. Shelette Stewart, author, thought leader and researcher on connecting your true purpose to your profession, offers the following guiding principles:⁵¹

1. **Start from within:** pray, contemplate, meditate your sense of purpose, passion, calling; marketplace method does not work for maximizing personal fulfillment.
Aligns to the Identity theme.
2. **Recognize the clues:** skills that come naturally, your innate talents, interests; pay attention.
Aligns to the Identity theme.
3. **Connect the dots:** products and services that interest you the most and why; what problem do I most want to solve in society; for what is my life the answer.
Aligns to the Service theme.
4. **Quench your thirst:** for intellectual, spiritual, organizations, ventures that align with your values, interests, passions.
Aligns to the Mastery theme.
5. **Execute your plan:** develop a plan, execute the plan to pursue your passion and connect your profession with your purpose; benefits you and advances the broader society.
Aligns to the Autonomy theme.

To learn more about how individual leaders and employees can develop an individual sense of purpose, we provide a guided framework in a follow-up module to this paper. Please contact us for more information.

Case for Social Responsibility

Currently the bulk of the Sustainability movement is environmental with a focus on carbon emission, energy use, waste and recycling. Extensive reporting initiatives are fostering a more transparent look into how businesses do business in consideration of their negative impacts. This environmental focus is true in the healthcare industry as well, although, healthcare remains behind most other industries in efforts to focus in these areas⁵² and has come largely from “forward thinking” organizations. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is commonly defined as an organization’s responsibility of actions regarding social, ethical and environmental impacts.⁵³ Social includes the human effects, the impact on humans, their interactions,

51 *Revelations in Business: Connecting Your Business Plan with God’s Purpose and Plan for Your Life.* Dr. K. Shelette Stewart; <https://www.tatepublishing.com/bookstore/book.php?w=978-1-61777-924-4>; dallasnews.com, Small Business Buzz, February 14, 2013. Hanah Cho.

52 <http://www.beckershospitalreview.com/lists/50-of-the-greenest-hospitals-in-america.html>

53 <http://ombo.berkeley.edu/name/questions/glossary#S>

their livelihood whether we are speaking of employees, stakeholders, customers or those that are not being served. While key thought leaders have made the connection of employee engagement to CSR⁵⁴, this is a largely unaddressed area of focus. It is not surprising, as things that are external and more measurable are also more visible to society, so they receive the most attention and it is needed.

Well-being, engagement, contribution to community, long-term happiness are all areas of employee or social-based responsibility that organizations are only beginning to consider as part of a long-term strategy. Organizations that address social responsibility holistically, we predict, will outperform others against existing and new indicators of success. The primary being that their work contributed to the creation of a better world and its people and the profitability and performance followed.

System Reflection

While purpose resides within the individual, the relevance of individual purpose on the System must be enabled and fostered through leadership and System redesign. Based on all this information, what does the information about purpose mean for your organization? Our analysis and experience offers solid insight into the significant influence of individual sense of purpose on organizational performance. The following theme-level “reflections” selected from our applications offer insight into how leadership aligns to purpose.

Theme	Select Reflections
Identify	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who are you as a leader? Who are your employees as individuals? How is individual meaning supported in the workplace?
Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does Helping others, and Collaboration add value to your operations? Are none, some or the majority of these intangibles measured in a tangible way?
Mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are employees given the opportunity to Develop themselves as well as others? Do employees experience diverse and challenging opportunities?
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a leader, do you tend to provide rules and boundaries or act more as a guide? Are employees given a high level of Responsibility and permission to fail?
System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do employees know, understand and connect with the organization’s mission? Are managers and leaders respected and admired or the cause for attrition?

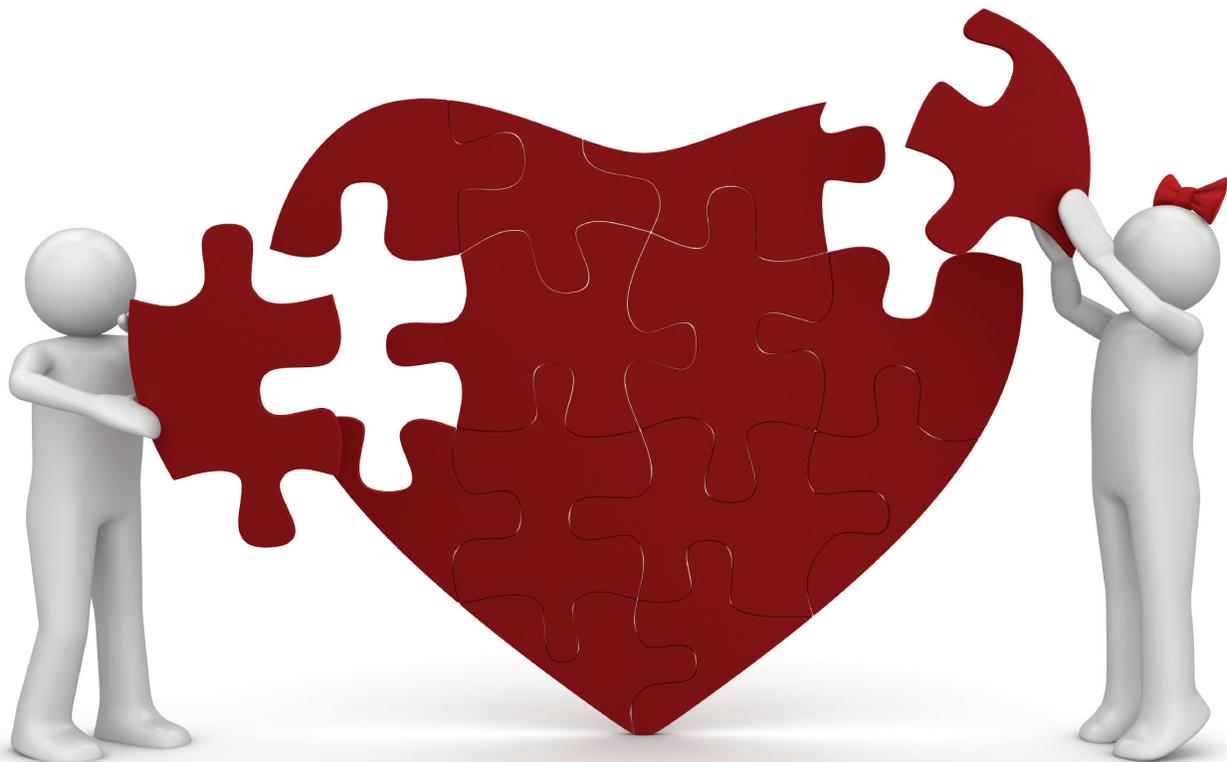
54 <http://www.ekosi.com/index.php?page=engaging-employees-in-sustainability>

Through consideration of these reflections, leadership can begin the transformation to a more purpose-driven, human-centric organization. While this is a long-term shift, we are confident that your employees will be happier and more engaged and your organization will develop a strong foundation supporting a more agile and sustainable growth strategy.

To more deeply apply these five areas to the unique status of your organization and leadership, and to map out possible actions to take to facilitate a shift, contact us to discuss your goals and to receive an electronic version of our first module on “Leading with Purpose.” ■

“ *People will change behaviors for something they believe, something that captures their hearts and minds, and appeals to aspirations. Think of Purpose in terms of enabling change.*

— Valerie Keller,
Founder of Veritas



Our Purpose

We answered “Why Do You Do What You Do?”

To encourage a leadership movement in business to work from our heart with soul so we live a life with meaning and give to a life of Purpose.

Steph Sharma

To help make the world a little happier, healthier and more connected by shifting our mindset to consider the human first.

Kori Joneson

To encourage, strengthen and bring clarity to others, as they are my conduit to wisdom, guidance and understanding.

Shirley Hosler

To make connections with others to foster learning, development and growth, and through research, enable sustainable development of rural regions of the world.

Tawny Saez

Lead The Difference is a research-based strategy consulting firm that collaborates globally through an open-source model that advances strategy for objective performance metrics, organizational agility, leadership readiness and organic growth through realized human value.

To learn more about our research and consulting supporting Purpose-driven engagement, contact us at Inquiries@leadthedifference.com.

For more detailed biographical information, please refer to the Appendix.



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RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Aim or Intention

The intention of this study was to describe and interpret from a nurse's perspective the "lived experience" of purpose and the role it plays with workplace engagement. We further wanted to link this engagement of the largest share of employees in healthcare to the overall organizational performance. To investigate this intention and contribute to the current body of research available, we focused on our hypothesis: *An individual's sense of purpose is derived from or detracted by a variety of sources and is a key influence on their engagement and commitment to what they do.*

Additionally, we want to use our findings about the nursing profession and healthcare industry to relate to other industries, professions and individual leadership to help drive the science of purpose and engagement into practice.

About the Participants

For this study, we conducted sixteen individual interviews and one focus group of eight people for a total of twenty-four participants. The participant pool consisted of the following nurse roles: educators, consultants, nurse managers, practicing RNs, nurse students, active volunteers or a combination of these roles. All nurse participants were female and span four generations: three Silent, six Boomers, eight Gen-X and seven Millennial. These participants live and practice in the United States and currently reside in either New Mexico, Washington, Wisconsin or Minnesota.

This study focuses on perceptions in the workplace. It utilizes contacts in the marketplace and is not human subject research. Our intent is to learn about the linkage between purpose, engagement and performance through volunteered interviews.

Approach

The Creswell research strategy is the method we followed to organize, execute and conclude this study. This approach incorporates a thorough outline, which ensures that the research is ethical, framed within multiple sources of data collection, led by a single focus/concept as well as the use of evolving research designs as new discoveries are made. It also requires a defined data analysis approach, of which we picked the phenomenological method.

Phenomenology was the qualitative research method used to address our hypothesis. Phenomenological studies search for the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon by an individual or a group

of individuals. Essentially, this approach unveils the “invariant structures” of a phenomena and details the essence of experience. We used this strategy in testing our hypothesis by finding the commonality, the shared purpose (or lack thereof) of how nurses experience the connection to their job function and purpose.

These methods we used to collect this data incorporated aggregate research of primary and secondary sources, structured yet open-ended interviews, a focus group and personal observations. The interview questions were designed through the aggregate research and personal observations. As the interviews progressed, cycles of edits and reform to the questions occurred as we continued to see new themes emerge that we could explore deeper with new interview questions. This is on par with existential investigation and phenomenological reflection within the phenomenology method.

The bulk of our interviews were conducted over the phone, with the exceptions that one interview that was conducted in person, and the focus group conducted through Google Hangout. Interview responses were recorded with typed notes by the interviewee and transcribed afterward into content analysis.

Analysis

The process we used to analyze our interview data can be best described as categorization, which is a common method used in phenomenological studies that extrapolates key themes or sub-themes to describe the phenomena under study. Each interview was analyzed so that every piece of pertinent information to our hypothesis was categorized into themes and then all individual interview themes were synthesized to create the overarching themes of the study. We then were able to use these themes to articulate how the nurse participants experience a sense of purpose at work.

For our primary and secondary aggregate research we started by reading and reviewing relevant documents on purpose, meaning, engagement and performance within healthcare and outside. Then we analyzed the literature for themes, years published (timely) and generational aspects. Next we compared these themes with the developing interview themes and allowed them to evolve into matching key themes and sub-themes.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Though the phenomenological research approach allows for thoughtful and deep reflections of participants' lived experiences through the topic at hand, we acknowledge that there are additional research and applications that would further the understanding and support of individual sense of purpose and its influence in the workplace. We offer some areas of focus.

Within Healthcare Facilities

Further research within various hospital settings can help support similarities and differences across the industry. Are there differences between magnet and non-magnet facilities? What does purpose mean for supportive and maintenance staff and how does it influence the productivity of an overall hospital? What drives and detracts from a Physician's sense of purpose? Further insight will help healthcare organizations of all types to develop stronger synergy and effectiveness in their day-to-day operations through purpose in people.

Outside of Nursing

We believe that working with an individual sense of purpose is a significant driver of engagement and performance outside of healthcare as well. Similar studies will serve to discover and support what builds and detracts from an individual sense of purpose within various organizations and within similar industries, including across cultures. Because of a human nature focus, we believe similar if not the same key themes and will emerge.

Gender and Culture

As the majority of nurses globally are female, our sample ended up with only female participants. To examine the similarities and differences across genders, both males and females should be researched. Our project included only nurses who practiced within the United States, outside of some individual volunteer efforts internationally. Though some have experience practicing outside the U.S. and a few were immigrants or first-generation Americans, similar studies with nurses as well as other professions would provide cross-cultural understanding.

Quantitative and Objective

Phenomenological research by design is a qualitative methodology of collecting and analyzing information. Additionally, we used supporting research that included quantitative information. This approach provided us with rich information about the perceived lived experience of the participants' individual sense of purpose. To bring even more support to this topic, additional quantitative links across individual sense of purpose,

engagement and performance would provide more depth and objectivity.

Pilot Programs

Research can only take us so far in shifting the culture and strategies of organizations. Real action and shifts within organizations will be the catalyst to creating significant change in how organizations operate. Utilizing the data from this study along with other research available on purpose, engagement and performance can help organizations design pilot programs that allow them to experiment, learn and measure impact. Case studies will highlight results, practices and lessons of purpose-driven organizations from which others can learn.

GENERATIONS

Extensive research exists about the unique attributes that support to understand a generation. We encourage an intergenerational approach; this conveys collaboration and acceptance so leadership can deliver change into the world that is versus the misconceptions created by our own lens on society.

Generation	Years	Age & Number Alive Today	Defining Events & Characteristics
G.I	1901- 1924	88-111 3,367,206	“enjoyed good kid reputation as the beneficiaries of new playgrounds, scouting clubs, vitamins, and child-labor restrictions; sharpest rise in school achievement ever recorded; facilitating upward mobility, erecting suburbs, inventing vaccines, launching moon rockets”
Silent	1925- 1942	70-87 25,800,797	“grew up as the seen-but-not-heard Li'l Rascals of the Great Depression, the Shirley Temples of World War II; least immigrant generation in American history; came of age too late to be war heroes and too early to be youthful free spirits; spending elderhood with hip style, generous benefits, higher living standards relative to young than prior generations”
Boom	1943- 1960	52-69 66,070,955	“grew up as indulged youth during the post-World War II era of community-spirited progress; the proud creation of postwar optimism Coming of age, they loudly proclaimed their contempt for the secular blueprints of their parents; Crime rates, substance abuse, sexual risk-taking all surged, academic achievement and SAT scores declined; Millions are now being forced to put retirement on hold in an “age of austerity” that none prepared for.”
Gen-X	1961- 1981	31-51 87,905,343	“grew up as the children of the Consciousness Revolution, the welfare of children was not a top social priority; learned young to distrust institutions, including family, as the adult world was rocked by the sexual revolution, divorce epidemic, a shift to a more explicit pop culture; Xers dated cautiously, married late; have begun to reconstruct the institutional strength of family they missed; embrace risk, prefer free agency over loyal corporatism”
Millennial	1982- 2004	8-30 98,452,970	“arrived after the Consciousness Revolution, “Baby on Board” signs first appeared; abortion and divorce rates ebbed, the popular culture began stigmatizing hands-off parenting styles, recasting babies as special; Child abuse and child safety became hot topics in the 80s, books preaching virtues, values became bestsellers; tobacco, alcohol use, violent crime, pregnancy, suicide declined, SAT, ACT scores are rising; gravitate to large institutions, government agencies, seeking teamwork, solid work-life balance.”

LifeCourse Associates provide research and thought leadership about generations and are advisors to our generational research.

Along with their pioneering work depicted in *Generations*, Strauss and Howe have helped us view generations according to “turnings.” “We can think of these turnings as the seasons of history. In America we have entered a Fourth Turning, which began during 2007 and is expected to end during the late 2020’s. This turning is marked by a new sobriety about unpaid debts at home and unmet challenges abroad. As visionary Boomers replace the Silents as elder leaders, they are rejecting caution and compromise and acting on moral absolutes. As pragmatic Gen-Xers replace Boomers in midlife, they are manifesting a new toughness and resolution as hands-on managers. As group-oriented Millennials replace Gen-Xers in young adulthood, they are getting ready to mobilize behind some new model of public authority with collective action and social discipline. All generations are likely to view the recent Third Turning as an era of drift when public problems were allowed to accumulate—problems that must now be tackled head-on. In business, government, marketing, HR, strategic planning, education and other areas, the people who succeed in a Fourth Turning mood will be those who understand how history creates generations, and generations create history.† ”

† Howe N. The Generational Constellation. Lifecourse Associates. <http://www.lifecourse.com/about/method/the-generational-constellation.html>. Published 2013.

RESEARCH AND REPORT TEAM

Steph Sharma, MBA, Director, Consultant

Steph is energized by the shared value possible in business and an influencer of how we lead change. She seeks to challenge the executive imperative, to motivate for managing from the heart and is a student about how business strategy achieves greater viability when inclusive of socially responsible objectives. She upholds that by being future-focused and agile, the change needed for tomorrow can be created today. Steph's professional background includes global strategic management consulting and executive coaching, spanning all industries. She spent more than 20 years focused on employee engagement, customer engagement, selection and leadership development. Currently, she serves as a researcher and consultant in advancement of practices that are centered in a human value creation strategy. Her key contributions to this research study include research design, analysis, advising and writing. Steph holds a Global MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management, a Certificate in Global Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability, Master's credits in Human Resource Development and a Certificate of Leadership from Gallup University. Steph also serves as faculty in Strategy and Implementation at Bainbridge Graduate Institute.

Kori Joneson, MBA, Director, Consultant

Kori is highly inspired by the impact shared value can bring to the world through organizations and the people who work for them. Through her purpose, she is dedicated to sharing, learning and co-creating the shift to a human-first strategy and culture within organizations around the world. Kori's professional background includes healthcare consulting and auditing in several complex, million-dollar projects. Currently, she is focused on research and strategy consulting in the area of purpose-driven Engagement and Human Valuation. Her key contributions to this research study include research design, analysis of interview data and supporting research, advising and writing. Kori holds a Global MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management, a Certificate of Completion in Global CSR and Sustainability course and a B.S. in Business Administration with an emphasis in International Business and a minor in Psychology.

Shirley Hosler, MSN, RN, Educator

Shirley's purpose is inspired by her nursing students: To guide her students, help them achieve their highest potential and to assist them in navigating the real world of nursing. Currently, her students at Breckinridge School of Nursing in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she instructs medical-surgical and critical care nursing, provide the fuel to live her purpose. Her key contributions to this research study include nurse perspective thought

leadership, advising and writing. Shirley has been a Registered Nurse since 1976. She was the recipient of a HRSA grant to educate emergency medical personnel in three southwestern states of the United States, and she designed and wrote curriculum for an online hybrid critical care paramedic course for Creighton University. She received her BSN from the University of New Mexico and MSN from the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Tawny Saez, BA, Intern, Researcher

Tawny's sense of purpose is centered on the connections she makes with others and the ways in which those relationships can foster learning, development and growth in our daily lives. I find meaning in researching the ways in which this concept can be applied to sustainable development of rural regions of the world. As a recent recipient of a Bachelors of Arts degree in Anthropology and International Affairs from the University of New Hampshire she continues research of global development practices. She acquired multi-faceted research skills through conducting ethnographic fieldwork of a community-based tourism project in a rural Amazon River village in Brazil in 2011. I was selected to present my research of this case study at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies "Conference for Human Development" at The University of Notre Dame. I have also won two of the Presentation Awards of Excellence at the UNH Undergraduate Research Conference for this research project.

THE ORGANIZATION & SPONSOR: LEAD THE DIFFERENCE

Lead The Difference champions human value and seeks partners with organizations who see their employees as an inextricable foundation to success. Using an open-source, research-based approach, Lead The Difference looks at each organization through a Human Value Strategy model and highlights common strategies among four primary factors including Talent, Performance, Well-being and Agility. Lead The Difference brings more than 25 years of qualitative research and change-consulting practice. Through key engagements, our consultants have led research-based initiatives in myriad organizations, from Fortune 500 to some of the largest non-profit healthcare systems in the nation.

Lead The Difference, LLC
PO Box 9302
Seattle, WA 98109
1.206.486.2414
Inquiries@leadthedifference.com

