



How to Know If You're Working (and Living) With Purpose

Who doesn't want a deeper sense of purpose? Ask these four questions to discover your path to more meaningful work.

By Shelley Prevost | Aug 13, 2013

"If you deliberately plan on being less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be unhappy for the rest of your life." --Abraham Maslow

Living with purpose is one of the most [self-actualized](#) activities we can participate in. Unfortunately, it eludes many of us. I get asked many questions about happiness and the meaningful life--but by far the most frequent one is, "*How do I know my purpose?*"

To better understand if you're living a life with purpose, begin by asking these four questions:

Is the work I'm doing exciting and/or satisfying?

Not all of us are hard-wired to be enthusiastic and ebullient when we're happy. For some of us, happiness resembles a more sedated state of satisfaction or contentment.

Regardless of your neurological wiring, when you're living with purpose you should be feeling one of these two ways--excitement or satisfaction--most of the time. Your moments of exhilaration, curiosity, and contentment should *far* outnumber your moments of boredom, frustration, or despair.

Feeling excitement and/or contentment is how you know when your body and mind are in harmony. Some refer to it as being in [flow](#)--or a psychological state of immersion, focus, and energy where you concentrate fully on the task at hand. Developers feel it as they code; artists feel it as they paint; ideators feel it as they brainstorm; speakers feel it as they orate.

When you're living with purpose, you feel it, too--either excitement, contentment or both. To better understand if you're living with purpose, don't ask what you *do* most of the time, ask yourself how you *feel* most of the time.

What keeps showing up in my life?

Life has a way of showing us our purpose--if we'll only listen. These indicators show up in certain ways: What do others consistently seek you out for? What kinds of activities get assigned to you? What do you keep volunteering for?

Examine those activities and find the common thread. Most of us have a few activities that we truly love doing.

I believe that we each have a purpose that spirals around a certain style of interacting with the world: [Doing, Leading, Loving, or Learning](#). Although I label them working styles, these styles really represent four simple ways that we can understand our purpose.

For those who know me, this is no secret--I'm a Lover. I feel most purposeful when I'm helping someone discover new insights about him or herself and then use these insights to *wake up* to the urgency of their lives. I enjoy helping them become happier and more connected, and get more clarity about why they're on the earth.

Am I using my gifts in service to others?

Chris Sacca, accomplished investor and advisor, gives a great [interview](#) where he contends that you must "create value before you ask for value back." He goes on to say that the only way to expand your network in the start-up community (either as a no-name founder or a deal-seeking investor) is to be helpful to others *first* with little regard for what you'll get out of them.

I suggest that it is only in the process of *giving to others* that we can really live with purpose. Service to others is the bedrock of success, but it may very well be the foundation of a meaningful life, too.

[Adam Grant](#), Wharton professor and author of [Give and Take](#), makes a case that giving to others is THE strategy for getting ahead in business.

I make the case that giving to others gets you ahead in *life*. [Research](#) supports the idea that giving to others makes you happier, is good for your health, promotes social connectedness, and evokes kindness and gratitude in others.

Is the work I'm doing elevating others in some way?

You cannot be living on purpose while simultaneously bringing other people down or exploiting them for your own gains. That's inconsistent with the nature of human creativity and development. Humans are wired to survive, but we are also wired to [connect](#).

There's mounting research to support the idea that we grow in adaptive ways *because of* our ability to collaborate, play, compromise, and even love. Outdated business philosophies will tell you that only competitive victors win, but more and more data show us that this is just not true.

Your purpose is intricately tied to the elevation of others around you. If you are promoting others and acknowledging their contributions, then you are more than likely living within your purpose.

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