

FINDING MEANING IN WORK

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Work is a fundamental part of the human experience. Most adults say they spend the majority of their time on various work activities. This applies equally to paid work that requires professional training, to unskilled labor, to the unpaid work of maintaining a home and raising children. People also may consider it work to study a new subject or learn a new skill. Work can be a fulfilling source of dignity and can bring us joy; it also can be demeaning, frustrating, and demoralizing. Work can bring meaning to our lives or be something we do primarily to earn money for housing and to put food on the table. It can be something we look forward to each workday, or something we can't wait to escape. Regardless of how we experience work, we spend a large percentage, if not the majority, of our adult lives doing it.

Given this reality—that we spend a large portion of our lives engaged in some sort of work—it seems fair to conclude that people who have work that they experience as meaningful and fairly compensated will be more engaged and more productive, happier and less alienated, in their work lives specifically and in their wider lives more generally. At a time when so many individuals appear to be feeling disconnected and underappreciated (consider the “Great Resignation”) and therefore are susceptible to depression, believing false information, addictions, and even violent behavior, it is critically important that more people have access to meaningful work. Accordingly, it is in the interest not only of individuals but of the nations and communities we live in, the organizations where we work, and the economies to

which we contribute to strive to create such meaningful work opportunities.

Government initiatives and organizational efforts to provide more meaningful work have included increased access to education and training, more apprenticeship opportunities, and so on. But it is also critical to consider how we, individuals and the wider society, define meaningful work and how we can make the work we engage in, by choice and by necessity, more meaningful.

I believe that finding meaning in our work requires that we find ways to be and to express our whole selves in our work. This means finding work that we can believe at least does no harm, but also work that in some way reflects the person we are. This may be a work activity that enables us to take pleasure in our craftsmanship or in

the cleverness of our work product, whether it is a well-prepared meal, a carefully arranged hotel room, a well-argued legal brief, a flawless spreadsheet, or a clever strategic plan. Or, we may find meaning in our work by bringing our own values to bear on the ways we interact with our colleagues and customers or in the impact we have on the organization's decisions. This last is the focus of my own life's work: finding ways to build a capacity for effectively Giving Voice to Values (GVV).¹

The foundational idea of my work in GVV is that acting ethically feels more possible and becomes more likely when we frame it as aspirational—as finding ways to act that are in keeping with our deepest moral values—than when we frame it as limiting or as putting boundaries around what we are allowed to do. Acting ethically becomes even more attractive when we see it as entrepreneurial—as finding creative ways to do what we think is right—than when we see it as a set of constraints on our actions or “thou shalt nots.”

Work feels most meaningful when we see it as a way to express our individual identity, rather than as a constricting framework we must act within for the duration of our workday. Of course, there are

some hugely important factors that are typically controlled by our employers and/or the regulations within which they operate—compensation, working conditions, even the variety of tasks. We cannot underestimate the significance of these factors, and it is essential that we work to find public and private-sector, educational and NGO initiatives and partnerships to address them. Nevertheless, we do have a great deal of control over our ability to frame our work as self-expression. This is where the lessons of GVV can be most useful. GVV is basically a reframing. It reframes the idea of ethics education as being less about rules and more about tools; less about debating so-called ethical dilemmas—as if acting on our values was entirely a cognitive challenge to figure out what the right thing to do may be—and more about action planning and scripting and peer coaching. Acting on our values is often a matter of finding approaches that feel feasible, and GVV is based on three such reframings or reversals: GVV reverses “what” it is we are talking about when we talk about values and ethics in our work lives; it reverses “who” we think we are talking to; and it reverses “how” we have that conversation. Similarly, as I dis-

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cuss below, these three reversals can be useful in finding ways to experience work as personally meaningful, as a true expression of ourselves.

First, GVV reframes the “what” by pointing out that, when we think about values conflicts in our work lives, the typical approach has been to consider thorny situations in which it is difficult to figure out what the right and responsible thing to do may be. GVV reverses this and suggests that it is more impactful to consider those many situations where we know what we think the right thing to do is but may not know how to get it done. In this way, we shift our attention from the endless debate about ethical dilemmas to situations where most of us can agree that one course of action is not appropriate and then move on to discussing strategies and tactics for doing the right thing.

If we were to apply this reframing to the question of “what” to focus on in our efforts to make our own work, whatever it may be, feel more meaningful, the question becomes less about the individual actions we engage in and more about the wider, deeper purpose of our work. For example, I remember the waitress in Studs Terkel’s classic book *Working*, who explained that she took pride in her work, which she saw as “bringing food to people”—a noble undertaking. Interestingly, although we might assume that this strategy is most relevant for repetitive or so-called unskilled labor (“Unskilled” is really a misnomer. Any activity can be done well or poorly, with great or little mindfulness.), it is just as important for professions that require a higher level of formal education. Often the biggest errors and most devastating ethical infractions occur when the worker involved, despite their level of education or professional credentials, loses sight of the wider impact and purpose of their endeavors—such as the manager who focuses only on the next quarterly results rather than on the long-term viability of the firm

and the impact they have on their customers.

Second, GVV reframes the “who” we think we are talking to when we talk about ethics and values in our organizations. It points out that we typically assume that ethics training is about focusing on bad actors by changing them or weeding them out. GVV then reverses this by suggesting that our development efforts should focus on the majority of us who would like to act in accordance with our ethical values but who either do so incompetently or not at all because we are not confident, skillful, or practiced enough to be effective.² If we were to apply this reframing to whom we should focus on in our efforts to make our own work feel more meaningful, the question would be how we find the other colleagues—perhaps a silent majority—who care about the work, want to enjoy it, and want to do it well because they can see the wider purpose, or because they simply take pleasure and find self-respect in doing a job well. Finding and connecting with those colleagues and making the wider objectives clear to them can make our work experience more satisfying. GVV starts with the assumption that we are not alone in wishing to act on our values, but we often don’t know that until we start making our values more apparent through our voice and our actions. We also won’t discover who wants to see their work become more meaningful until we begin to talk about it.

Finally, GVV reframes the question of how we can act on our values more often and more successfully by asking a new question. Instead of asking “What is the right thing to do in any particular situation?” GVV asks, “How can I get the right thing done and done effectively?” The idea is that we are more likely to say and do things we have practiced, especially if we have practiced them with others who stand in for the individuals we will encounter in the actual situations. This is about building

a new habit, a “moral muscle memory” if you will. If we apply this reframed “how” question to making our own work feel more meaningful, it becomes less about focusing on the limitations of our work and more about looking for opportunities to have a wider, more positive impact on our customers and clients or on our co-workers—and on ourselves. It also becomes about looking for positive experiences and positive examples to learn from and to multiply.

The GVV curriculum³ offers hundreds of materials, including case studies that describe how individuals around the world and across professions have effectively voiced and acted on their values. GVV has been shared and/or piloted in over 1,400 educational and business settings on all seven continents, including the United States, Europe, Africa, India, China, Australia, Canada, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates.

Designed for use in graduate business school curricula, the GVV approach has moved well beyond that. It has been used in undergraduate, MBA, and executive education in business schools around the world and has been a featured part of the United Nations Global Compact Principles for Responsible Management Education programming, which supported a GVV curriculum development initiative on anti-corruption in India. A similar region-specific curriculum development initiative in Egypt was supported by the German University of Cairo and the International Labor Organization. GVV is increasingly being adapted for educational purposes beyond business, including the military, medicine, nursing, engineering, law, accounting, and the liberal arts. Many companies and organizations have piloted or invited presentations on the GVV approach, including Lockheed Martin, Unilever, the Aspen Institute, and the Mayo Clinic.

In presenting GVV, we do not mean to suggest that the task of making work meaningful falls solely to the individual worker. This is emphatically not the case. However, we will not be able to provide truly meaningful, fulfilling work if we do not help workers—all workers, at every level—begin to feel empowered and able to take control of their own experiences. No degree, no organization or government policy, no regulatory framework can ensure that work will satisfy the human need to have a purpose and a positive impact if we do not know what work can mean, if we do not understand the degree to which we have control, if we do not realize that we in fact have more choices than we may think we do. GVV is about helping individuals to see those choices, and to see that one of the most direct ways to find meaning in our work and in our wider personal lives is to feel that we are living in accord with our deepest values. GVV helps to build that ability.

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- ¹ Gentile, M. C. (2010). *Giving voice to values: How to speak your mind when you know what's right*. Yale University Press; (2012). Values-driven leadership development: Where we have been and where we could go. *Organization Management Journal*, 9(3), 188-196.
 - ² Dees, G., & Crampton, P. (1991). Shred bargaining on the moral frontier: Toward a theory of morality in practice. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 1(2), 135-167.
 - ³ See <http://store.darden.virginia.edu/giving-voice-to-values>.