



Meaningful Work

Find meaning in your job.



by Alex Pattakos

WHERE DO YOU LOOK TO find meaning in your life? The obvious answer usually relates to your personal life—your relationships or your religion. But what about your job—can you find true meaning at work?

Drawing upon the logotherapy system of Viktor Frankl, the Nazi death camp survivor and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, and upon my experience, I have derived seven principles for finding personal meaning at work and living an authentic life:

1. Exercise the freedom to choose your attitude. The cornerstone of Dr. Frankl's philosophy is freedom of will. No matter how desperate you may be, you always have the freedom to choose your attitude. Choosing a positive attitude during stressful times—such as working with a difficult manager or co-worker, dealing with a budget reduction or job lay-off, and meeting quality standards—influences your performance and well-being. A negative attitude accentuates your stress. You can't always control what happens, but you can choose to respond in a positive way.

2. Realize your will to meaning. You need to commit authentically to meaningful values and goals that only you can actualize and fulfill. You need to find a connection between your work (and workplace) and your personal values and goals. If you find that interacting with others is an important personal value, then you must find a way for your work and workplace to offer meaningful encounters. If you value your creativity, you must find a way for your work to offer opportunities for creative expression. You are unique, so your values and goals will be unique. It is your responsibility to clarify your values and goals and find ways to actualize them in your work and life.

3. Detect the meaning of life's moments. Detecting the meaning of life requires that you see both the trees and the forest of your work and life. Only you can answer for your own life by detecting the meaning at any given

moment and assuming responsibility for weaving your unique tapestry of existence. Ultimately, you alone are responsible for your personal job, career, or work path, and for detecting the meaning of each situation or experience. Exploring the deeper meaning behind losing a job or moving from one kind of work to another enables you not only to learn from each experience but also to grow in ways that make work more fulfilling and life more meaningful. By staying attuned to such potentialities, you may also visualize your work path more clearly over time.

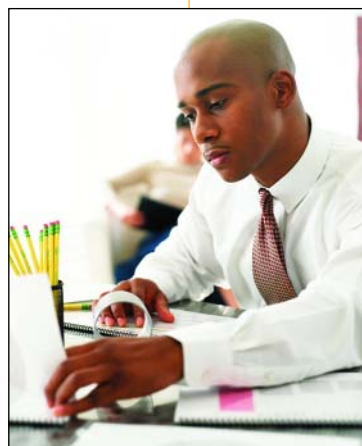
4. Don't work against yourself. The principle of *paradoxical intention* asks that you avoid becoming so obsessed with or fixated on an intent or outcome that you actually work against the desired result. People who micro-manage often have good intentions, even though their behavior usually results in the opposite effect desired. By focusing so intensely on monitoring and controlling the actions of others, they hinder peak performance. Likewise, the more you obsess in striving for your objective—for example, the more you become fixated on receiving recognition, such as a raise or promotion—the less likely you are to achieve it.

5. Look at yourself from a distance. The principle of *self-detachment* underscores the fact that only human beings can look at themselves out of some perspective or sense of humor. Even when you closely identify with your job, you need to remember that you are not your job. Being able to laugh at yourself, even at work, is an effective way to “free” yourself from your job, gain perspective, and see more clearly the situation. Maintaining a sense of humor during hard times helps to unfreeze you for action. Viewing yourself and circumstances from a distance also opens up new opportunities for personal learning and development.

6. Shift your focus of attention. The sixth principle is the notion of *dereflection*, the ability to shift focus from the problem situation to something positive, to build your coping mechanisms for dealing with stress and change. When burdened by a difficult situation, you can increase your coping skills and capacity to resolve the situation by shifting focus to a more positive situation or experience, or even to the positive attributes of the situation. Focusing on a problem situation directly often immobilizes your ability to act and constrains your view of how best to deal with or resolve the situation. In any situation, you benefit from focusing on the opportunities, rather than only the problems.

7. Extend beyond yourself. The principle of *self-transcendence* allows you to manifest the human spirit at work by relating and being directed to some-

thing more than yourself. Ideally, there is more to your work than simply a paycheck. To make work meaningful, make a difference in some way. You need to look at your work in a larger context to see that it brings value beyond your personal needs. Ask: “How is my work contributing to our customers, co-workers, and society?”



The Search for Meaning

By applying these seven principles, you will find that the “search for meaning” can elevate your spirit at work. These *meaning-focused* principles can be used to address a wide range of work-related issues, such as job loss, underemployment, fear, stress, conflict, and career transition.

Viktor Frankl's legacy was one of hope and possibility. He saw the human condition at its worst, and people behaving intolerably. He also saw people rising to the heights of compassion, caring, and self-transcendence.

There is something in you that can rise above and beyond everything you think possible. Your instinct for meaning, at work and in your daily life, is yours right now—as long as you do not allow yourself to become a prisoner of your thoughts. PE

Alex Pattakos is founder of the Center for Personal Meaning and principal of The Innovation Group. This article is based on his book, *Prisoners Of Our Thoughts: Viktor Frankl's Principles at Work* (Berrett-Koehler). 505-820-0254 or alex@prisonersofourthoughts.com.

ACTION: Find more meaning at work.