



Why You Should Think of Passion as a Verb — Not a Noun



Summary. Employees everywhere experience, from time to time, a tension between their passion and the job before them. We often seek work that fuels our passion or holds interest for us. But we have the most positive impact when we use our passion to fuel the work...

“Do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life.” You’ve probably heard this career advice. Its origin is unclear, and its verbiage varies from version to version, but the message is consistent: Follow your passion.

When I graduated from business school, I knew what I was passionate about — leadership and teaching leadership. I set my sights on a job at a top management training company. In my interview with the president, he looked at my resume and offered *me* some advice: “You should probably get some management experience before trying to teach other people how to manage.”

He clearly didn't get me or my passion; he also didn't hire me. So, I took my back-up job offer with Oracle — a young (at the time), rapidly growing software company.

After a year of working as a program manager, I had an opportunity to transfer to the internal training department. The group ran the bootcamps for new college grads. It was mostly product training, but I was hoping their charter would expand to include leadership training — my passion! You see, most managers were young, had no experience, and were wreaking havoc on their teams. Everyone could see it, so in a meeting with the VP, I raised the issue.

His reaction was priceless: "That's great, but your boss has a different problem. She needs to get 2,000 new hires up to speed on Oracle technology this year. It would be great if you could help her figure out how to do that." His message was clear: Liz, make yourself useful. I was woefully underqualified to be teaching coding to hot-shot programmers from the likes of MIT and CalTech, but it was the job that needed to be done.

I channeled my ambition to where it could have the greatest impact and partnered with a coworker who had real technical chops. She taught me how to think like a programmer, which didn't come naturally to me. But with her guidance and some very late nights, I figured it out. In turn, I shared a few ideas about teaching, and together we earned awards for outstanding technical instruction and taught many people who became pioneers in Silicon Valley.

By being willing to put aside my passion and, instead, work passionately at the job that needed to be done, I built a reputation as someone who understood the business and worked on what mattered most. I had built some influence. Within a year, I was promoted to be department manager, and naturally, I advocated for building a world-class leadership development program. This time, I knew my passion was in line with the organizational needs. My proposal was approved, funded, and fully supported by the senior executives. I finally had the credibility and power I needed to make an impact.

Use Your Passion to Get Work Done

Employees everywhere experience, from time to time, this tension between their passion and the job before them. Like many shortsighted professionals, I also began my career seeking work that held interest for me. But I learned that we have the most positive impact when we use our passion to fuel the work that needs to be done, rather than using the work to try to pursue our personal passions. Today, I get to research and teach leadership to executives and rising leaders around the world. It's important work that I find deeply fulfilling — and it's an opportunity that arose because I made a habit of working on what was important to my stakeholders.

The research my team and I have conducted suggests that this outcome is not unique to me. We interviewed more than 170 managers and contributors (both through one-on-one interviews and a survey across the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa) to understand what differentiates extraordinary, impactful contributors from peers who are equally smart and hardworking, but whose work seems to consistently have less influence. We call these individuals impact players.

In our interviews, managers rarely described impact players as being passionate about a specific topic (e.g., “He’s passionate about artificial intelligence”). They described them as being passionate about their work (e.g., “He’s passionate about solving problems”). In other words, impact players channel their energy, strengths, and passion into how they go about their work rather than into the type of work they do.

So, what’s the takeaway? More of us should be thinking of passion as a verb — not a noun. While following a passion certainly seems honorable, and makes for compelling commencement speeches and motivational posters, when you are on a team, it can lead you off course. You may see yourself as off and running, but your team probably sees you running in the wrong direction.

I recommend thinking of the bigger picture. Consider your passions when choosing or renegotiating a career path. Follow your passion to find the right job. However, once in a role, be careful not to relentlessly pursue your own interests. Instead, figure out what is valued and needed inside the organization, and then work passionately to achieve it. As a first step, identify what is important to your manager or your clients (be they external or internal), and then make that work important to you. Here’s how to go about it.

Get on the right agenda.

Most leaders and organizations have an agenda, a collection of issues or objectives that they care about. Sometimes these agendas are in the form of mission statements, strategic initiatives, or priorities for a particular period.

But in fast-paced environments, tactical goals require adjustment as conditions change and new information emerges — meaning, the stated agenda is rarely the *real* agenda. The real agenda is what’s important right now, and it defines what is relevant and essential for your success.

Though the real agenda is rarely written down, you can ascertain what’s important by paying attention to what your leaders are spending their time on, what is being talked about, what has momentum, and what is celebrated. *That’s* the agenda. Here’s a pro tip: If you aren’t working on your boss’s top three priorities, you probably aren’t working on the agenda.

Talk up the agenda.

Find the connection between your stakeholder's agenda and the work you are doing right now. Let them know that you are the *how* to their *what*. Try crafting a short statement that captures how your work will help them achieve the priorities on their agenda. If you send a periodic status report, consider revamping it to communicate two critical points: 1) What you understand to be the most important work and 2) How you are working on what's most important. You're sure to get a different reaction.

Remember, the most impactful professionals don't contort their job to fit their personal passion, but they also don't just do their assigned job. They do the job that's most needed, and they do it with passion. By working on the front line of important problems, they are given a steady stream of high-profile assignments. Meanwhile, those who are in hot pursuit of work that fits their passion can get unintentionally sidelined from the real action.

If you want your work to land with impact, worry less about whether people "get you" and worry more about whether your leaders and stakeholders know you understand what's important — that you "get it" — and are willing to work energetically on what matters most.