



Book The Why of Work

How Great Leaders Build Abundant Organizations that Win

Dave Ulrich and Wendy Ulrich
McGraw-Hill, 2010

Recommendation

Dave and Wendy Ulrich’s book about abundance is itself an example of abundance. Dave, a business writer, and Wendy, a psychologist, sweep you up in a tide of leadership ideas, processes, quotations and stories that hammer home a thesis so right and true you might mistake it for common sense: Workers who care about their jobs and understand why they work will exceed your expectations and break the boundaries of their job descriptions. They will better serve customers who, in turn, will bind themselves to the thoughtful firm that produced such an enlightened staff. If this sounds like the yellow brick road, the authors cobble together ample gold paving stones to build a solid path toward fulfilling your firm’s potential. They explain how every person and organization can change for the good, while earning a profit. Along with positive psychology and happiness research, you will find useful grids, summaries and assessment tools to help you shift staid cultures and motivate stale staffers. Some of the advice is soft and general; the authors acknowledge that they skim the surface of various disciplines. Yet when the Ulrichs become specific about how to build relationships or cultivate creativity, they show you concretely how to nurture a firm where business results and human development work together. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to executives, managers and human resources personnel who hope to serve their customers and the world through deeper service to their employees.

Take-Aways

- People in an abundant organization “coordinate their aspirations and actions to create meaning for themselves, value for stakeholders and hope for humanity.”
- Work is more than a way to earn money; it is a way to find “abundance.” To make work meaningful, consider seven questions about why and how people do their jobs:
 - “What am I known for?” Identify your strengths. Help your employees build theirs.
 - “Where am I going?” People’s work should fulfill their needs and the firm’s goals.
 - “Whom do I travel with?” Encourage people to develop warm workplace friendships that add meaning to their work.
 - “How do I build a positive work environment?” Establish a culture of values.
 - “What challenges interest me?” Identify tasks that help people grow and relish work.
 - “How do I respond to disposability and change?” Instill flexibility and resilience.
 - “What delights me?” Understand the need for “creativity, pleasure, humor and delight.”
- When meaning flourishes and staffers know why they work, abundance follows. People in abundant organizations add value to customers, shareholders and the world.

Summary

The Meaning of Work

Work is a way people earn money, but it’s also a potential launch pad for human development and the exploration of real meaning in life. Work takes up a good chunk of most people’s waking hours. It often defines them. This quest for definition gives leaders the opportunity to connect with their staffers and shape the underlying meaning of their jobs, so they can contribute more of who they are or want to be. However, finding meaning is also another way of finding profit. Meaningful work is inherently good for the people in your firm and it’s good for business.

“When leaders make work meaningful, they help create abundant organizations where employees operate on a value proposition based on meaning as well as money.”

In the workplace, meaning wrestles with tedium, and the outcome matters, particularly for the workers whose quality of life is at stake. Amid the mind-boggling complexity of the modern world, more people are struggling with personal and professional issues, ranging from depression to a lack of connection to their jobs to an off-putting, “me-first mindset.” As a result, “deficit thinking” – a negative sense of pervasive mistrust and self-protection – quickly and easily becomes the workplace’s prevalent mode. Staffers driven by such thinking give less effort on the job because they are filled with stress and fear.

“Great leaders recognize the vital importance of abundance and meaning to everyone in their organization. Including themselves.”

In contrast, meaningful work with a clear, compelling reason for being – a “why” at its core – creates a virtuous cycle. Employees want to do work that matters and aligns with their company’s *raison d’être*. People care more about work that’s meaningful and they do a better job. They come to relish genuine challenges, on-the-job problems that ask them to marshal real skills and talents. The potentially greater financial rewards of a meaningful work environment are just one facet of an “abundant” organization, “a work setting in which individuals coordinate their aspirations and actions to create meaning for themselves, value for stakeholders and hope for humanity.”

“Abundance emerges from the growing conviction that what we are about ‘makes sense’ – that it contributes to something larger than ourselves and that it is grounded in our deepest values.”

So how do organizations stop being havens for deficit thinking and become “repositories of abundance?” How can you be sure your firm focuses on meaning in good times and bad? It takes leadership, of course, but leadership of a certain stripe. Executives have to acknowledge a responsibility that goes beyond achieving great outcomes. Certainly business results are pivotal, but bosses who understand the importance of the “why of work” will push past their traditional leadership roles and expand on their workforce’s capability to learn, to grow and to hope – in short, they will help their companies become abundant in their service to their staffers and customers.

The “Seven Drivers” of “Meaning Making” Leaders

Leaders “drive the abundance agenda” by asking seven crucial questions of their employees, their organizations and themselves. These questions will challenge your staffers and give you the in-depth information you need to set them up with assignments that matter most to them. These questions become drivers and motivators when they unite individual purpose, organizational goals and customer satisfaction. These queries – and some of the attitudes they address – are:

1. “What Am I Known For?”

When you ask yourself this question (or encourage others to ask it of themselves), you venture into the territory of identity and its many side paths. Identity includes a person’s “signature strengths,” values and skills. Staffers with a strong sense of self bring more clarity and energy to their work, and know how to make the best use of their talents. When you understand individual employees, you can more effectively create assignments that will help them flourish, build on their strengths and grow beyond their comfort zones. As a leader, you are also charged with figuring out your organization’s persona and greatest abilities, and aligning individual employees’ targets with the company’s goals to serve your customers better. As you parse the identities of your employees, customers and even your investors, rethink or reinforce your corporate agenda. Do you have the right people in the right jobs? Are the firm’s priorities and capabilities clear? Are you enabling workers, teams and the whole company to work in a unified way to make your corporate identity resonate in the minds of your customers and investors?

2. “Where Am I Going?”

Employees have different goals. The leader who wants to build abundance encourages all employees to link their personal drive to one of four motivational categories: “insight, achievement, connection or empowerment.” Each category leads to very different outcomes. For example, an employee who is interested in insight would be more likely to prefer quiet research than an employee who is interested in empowerment. Leaders must align employees’ proclivities with the organization’s tasks for the good of the whole. At the same time, they must help employees to “satisfice,” that is, to meet “minimal criteria” and to complete tasks “that are worth doing” but may not be worth doing all that well. For instance, at home you might satisfice on yard work to optimize time with your family. Satisficing means achieving a valid “return on time invested” by balancing priorities – putting in maximum effort on tasks that really help the company versus doing the bare minimum of work on tasks that just keep the business running without transforming it. If handled intelligently, satisficing provides “direction and purpose.”

“Leaders invest in meaning making not only because it is noble but also because it is profitable. Making sense can also make cents.”

Leaders should review each of the four motivational categories in light of the whole organization, so they can help it stretch toward the insights, relationships, achievements and connections that create a purposeful, sustainable direction.

3. “Whom Do I Travel With?”

Many leaders who are accustomed to formal corporate relationships are wary about cultivating real friendships at work. Yet people who have even one good friend at work are more engaged and more satisfied. Leaders should pave the way for collegiality. Rethink your “relationship playbook.” Never reject a “request for attention” from anyone in your firm. Reach out to others to generate “meaningful encounters.”

“The work environment outlasts any individual leader in shaping how employees and customers respond to the company.”

This is not just a matter of building seemingly soft skills. You want to ease conflict and cultivate “abundant relationships” because they produce great results. Guide your employees to listen intently so they understand each other. Train them to “restate” information to assure that they’ve processed it correctly and appropriately. Ask them to share their experiences and ideas, and to think about the impact of their actions and moods. As a leader, you may need to force some issues by engineering

opportunities for people to get together or by modeling positive interactions. The most difficult step – especially since liability-conscious attorneys often caution clients to avoid apologizing – is creating a climate where people admit they’re wrong, say they’re sorry, take responsibility and rectify their mistakes.

4. “How Do I Build a Positive Work Environment?”

Like the other traits of abundant organizations, a “positive work environment” serves employees and customers and, so it also serves the bottom line. Positive employees get things done and stick around. They draw both customers and investors into the organization’s orbit.

“Organizations that survive in recessions and thrive during recovery will have leaders who consistently offer employees both economic well-being and an abundance of meaning and purpose.”

Foster a positive work environment by exercising humility (this is also known as being a “servant leader”) and making sure that the firm’s values bleed into its daily interactions. Abundance demands promoting service to others over “self service.” This means teaching people to welcome, discuss and vet ideas, and ensuring that they support one another. Leaders should work hard to understand multiple points of view – the employees’, the customers’, and so on – while establishing accountability practices that help people see the precise ways that they are meeting (or not meeting) expectations. Finally, the workspace is a clear articulation of what matters to the organization. How your physical environment looks and functions is a message in itself. Equip it as such.

5. “What Challenges Interest Me?”

To each his own or her own, the saying goes, and the same holds true for challenges at work. Given the choice, each person would select a certain “type of challenge” and a certain set of conditions in which that challenge would unfold. As you learn more about your employees, try to understand the result they desire most deeply.

“Work is a universal setting in which to pursue our universal search for meaning.”

Leaders generally know what they hope to see from a given group, project or individual staff member. They understand each person’s powerful drive to solve problems that matter, and know that every employee has a different definition of a task’s inherent value and appeal. People seek work that is “easy” (not simple, but comfortably within their talents), “energizing” and “enjoyable.” A leader who knows the objectives and results that matter to people can “help employees get what they want, not just what the leader wants.”

“Before you ask, ‘Why aren’t my employees working harder?’...ask yourself, ‘Why are my employees working?’”

When a task aligns with a problem that employees want to solve and with skills they already have, they enter a “zone of opportunity” where they can do great work while feeling good about their jobs. Other factors that affect an individual’s ability to enjoy the benefits of intrinsically motivating work include the environment and the “work condition” (for example, work that is creative or that allows the employee to stretch his or her talents). A boss who is committed to abundance will keep these factors in mind.

6. “How Do I Respond to Disposability and Change?”

A leader intent on building an abundant organization has a very particular attitude about change: Whether change leads to success or failure, it always offers an opportunity to learn. What matters most is “learning agility – the ability to inquire, experiment and extrapolate in flexible ways.” In organizations that prioritize learning agility, individual flexibility and “resilience” become the norm. Resilience has allowed great people, from Abraham Lincoln to Dale Carnegie, to flourish, regardless of the dilemmas before them. Lincoln’s “emotional strengths” included “empathy, humor, magnanimity, generosity of spirit, perspective, self-control, balance and social conscience,” which added up to deep resilience, a necessary trait for strong leaders. Think about your company’s resilience and flexibility. Do your staffers know how to apply lessons learned on the job to many different fields or problems? Do they “turn what they know into what they do?” Do they bounce back from frustrations or disappointments? How well does your organization learn and exceed limitations? How well does it change and grow?

7. “What Delights Me?”

Four elements – “creativity, pleasure, humor and delight” – provide the underpinnings of an abundant organization. When leaders tap into the small things that make people happy on a daily basis, they promote a culture that is undaunted by new ideas, unafraid to cultivate authentic relationships and unwilling to settle for the rigidity that breeds intolerance. When was the last time you wrote a thank you note by hand? Served cookies? Asked people at a meeting to share good news? Laughed heartily with your colleagues? Such small actions cost little – but doing these kinds of things now and then can be very significant, and omitting such nice touches can cost a great deal in lost good will. Inculcate civility – including appropriate dress, language, manners and attitudes – to help people work pleasantly together. Leaders – from boards of directors to CEOs to human resources professionals – set an organization’s tone and maintain its culture. If you do that effectively, you can motivate and inspire employees to do their best in spite of any hiccups.

Bringing All Leaders On Board

Work can be much greater than the sum of its parts – more than the hours you put in and the money you earn as a result. Organizations that cannot fulfill their responsibilities and meet new challenges, or that fall behind in the race to innovate or learn, often are suffering from a lack of meaning. Employees do not know why they are working; instead, they just show up. The firm does not know why it exists; instead, it just plods along. Leaders can and should prioritize “meaning making” throughout their company. People in abundant organizations add value to customers, shareholders and the world, and that’s just good business.

About the Authors

Dave Ulrich, a professor at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan and a partner at the RBL Group, has written 23 books. Psychologist **Wendy**

