

Leading at the Purpose Level

by Lawler Kang, Mobius Consultant and Executive Coach

“I have been working with these people for years and I realized I didn’t know a thing about them.”

-Cisco workshop participant

Over the last seven years my work has focused on helping individuals, leaders, teams and organizations connect at the ‘Purpose Level.’

What is the ‘Purpose Level’? Quite simply, it is the underpinning of our humanity and what binds us as a species. It is our common core. And regardless of whatever may be on your resume or from where you come, there are distinct and predictable similarities between all of us at this level.

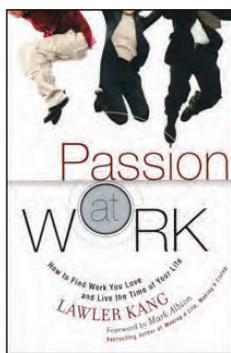
The Purpose Level is an amalgamation of your purposes, passions, talents, values, priorities and dreams. It is always present, lurking in your unconscious, yet I’ll bet the vast majority of people reading this article have never actually written down these drivers. You may have a good idea of a few, but we all understand – and to some degree fear – the powerful commitment of transcription.

Why has the Purpose Level been absent in the workplace?

Historically, organizational cultures, which have been predominantly male-based, have not been open to addressing this territory, corporate tag lines aside. Sharing at the Purpose Level with yourself and others has not been part of leadership mindsets and budgets. You are hired into a function and are expected to meet certain goals and metrics. So long as you produce and your Key Perfor-

mance Indicators don’t start blinking red, everyone is happy (right?).

You may have received prolific amounts of assistance and corporate support to strap on your Six Sigma black belt, get your CFA or a cornucopia of other ‘certifications,’ or to understand and apply your MBTI classification. These tools and achievements are fine and serve a very good purpose. Ongoing learning and development is critical



to workforce productivity. This said, there has been scant interest in understanding the emotional requirements of that same workforce, of which roughly 70% are ‘disengaged’ or ‘actively disengaged’ per a recent Gallup survey. To quote feedback from my work with Cisco’s Corporate Marketing team, “This is the first time in 10 years we have taken the time to focus on us, who we are as individuals, and what is really important to us.”

Another reason is a dearth of available tools that elicit these drivers and are geared specifically for the business community. Many organizations have skirted the Purpose Layer but there are only a few who have actually developed and iterated exercises within processes that can deliver it. Without an environment conducive to sharing with yourself and others, and easy-to-use tools that can deliver immediate gratification, the whole effort breaks down rather quickly.

A final reason is fear. Fear of knowing yourself in a deeper way, what might emerge in the process, and that irascible feeling that what you write down will differ dramatically from where you are.

What are the benefits of connecting and leading at the Purpose Level?

I will focus on four primary applications: *individuals, teams, clients, and leaders.*

Individuals:

Understanding your personal Purpose Level can be incredibly insightful and empowering. It essentially provides you with some very useful filters to assess whatever opportunities – from promotions and new work, to volunteering and partners – that will come your way. To what extent does this opportunity help you meet your personal purposes? Draw on your passions? Leverage your talents? Adhere to your values? Mesh with your priorities? How does this choice help you realize your dreams? Career paths (many at the same employer) can be re-charted, retirement desires crystallized, and financial planning to realize your dreams can rapidly come to the forefront of your personal operating budget.

Conversely, understanding yourself at this level may also provide some excellent developmental next steps both personally and professionally. Are your talents what your desired functions demand (from Director of Product Development to parent) and customers require (from your matrix responsibilities to spouse/kids)? And if you are absolutely horrible at and/or dislike any of these characteristics, where can you find others with complementary skills to support you?

A final benefit that cannot be ignored is the positive repercussions of giving individuals the “gift” of understanding themselves at the Purpose

Level, on corporate time and dime. Why? For most, it is the first time in their professional, and even academic, careers where someone is truly making an investment in them, as people (versus classifications, which I will get to in a bit). It is simply this indication of interest in them at a human level that triggers positive, and sometimes wildly positive, responses and results. This demonstration of care for others is also a big contributing factor to the retention of the vast majority of participants post-workshop for a common and quite expected question I field is “Well, what if my employees realize they don’t want to work here any more?” From my experience, the vast majority want to stay.

Teams:

The benefits individuals accrue from connecting with their own Purpose Level are magnified when shared and aggregated in a team context. Contrary to the popular aphorism “There is no ‘I’ in team,” I believe teams are indeed made up of ‘Is’ and if you can’t identify and align each member’s Purpose Level with themselves, their careers, their colleagues, and their leader, that team will never function optimally. Note I do not include an organizational Purpose Level here. If that kind of alignment can be instilled organization-wide, and it can be with multi-pronged effort, fantastic! From my experience and research, alignment between colleagues and leaders is equally as important to the team’s happiness of productivity and should receive first focus before trying to expand. This dynamic is especially important in executive circles as passion and purpose run downhill.

There are oftentimes very surprising overlaps among team members’ outputs which can really bring the group together. We did some work for an administrative function at one

of the world’s leading strategy consulting firms who was experiencing communication issues. People in the predominantly female team came from completely different backgrounds, pedigrees, and geographies. Everything from a relatively recent war veteran from Ohio, to a classics major from Germany, to a technology wonk, to a female Harley-rider.

Yet, even within this vast expanse of characters, 75% of the team shared a common purpose, 94% shared a common passion, and over half the team shared three similar values. Impressive given none of these entries were selected from a list. When these results were presented to the team, there was a collective gasp. They already knew how different they were at a Life Level, but the fact their Purpose Levels were so similar was remarkable. This was a large contributing factor to the construction of a layer of understanding that met the desired objective of increasing communication and reducing tension.

What happened here was essentially a breakdown of stereotypes into something much more human. It is natural to accumulate stereotypes of people based on relatively superficial data points. “She is a classic Gen Y-er, she must be lazy and self-centered.” “He is Asian and in finance, he must be a geek.” “He is my boss, all he cares about is his own career, bonus, and getting the spotlight for our work.” And to some degree, stereotypes are based in reality, particularly in cases where classifications get involved, such as the afore-mentioned MBTI four letter acronyms, and other similar tools such as Strength Based Leadership characteristics, color wheels, etc. These classifications can unfortunately support irrational stereotyping.

This reality should stop where your interactions with people begin.

Applying old schemata, and ways of dealing with past templates, is often where a good portion of workplace friction begins and distressing spiral of self-deceiving assumptions (per The Arbinger Group’s brilliant work) can easily follow. This is not to say classifications don’t add value though from personal experience, trying to remember how to optimally mesh my outputs with those of others on my team – regardless of system – was considerably more difficult than negotiating my divorce.

These classifications should be used more for personal reflection and development efforts than applied to group settings. Merely knowing the person in the next cubical is an Introvert who Judges can quickly lead to unfounded impressions that support a self-serving intent. Understanding people at the Purpose Layer is a critical relief because it neatly undercuts all associations with external characteristics and functions and focuses on the human behind them.

Common feedback we receive from teams who have discovered and aligned their Purpose Levels reflects this sentiment. “I have been working with these people for years and I realized I didn’t know a thing about them,” from the Cisco engagement. This understanding breeds increases in eased communication, collaboration and productivity emblematic of rejuvenated engagement. Above all, the Purpose Layer builds trust amongst all who come into contact with it. This will be further fleshed out in a bit.

A final benefit of connecting teams (and organizations) at the Purpose Level is the power of aggregating data. Team-wide patterns can be a great source of discussion for generating mission or cause statements, the latter proving to be more effective in attracting and retaining

younger demographics. Group values, which can be used throughout the talent value chain from recruiting to promotions, are also a natural application. The big plus here is that research shows getting people involved in the generation of these devices has a significant impact on them walking their talk. These mechanisms don't have to be corporate-wide either. Teams or groups can always develop their own internal elements. And for folks who join the party after the initial bubbly has been served, the culture they are entering will be markedly engaged and accepting and sets a distinct tone for the length of their tenure.

Clients:

A few words on engaging your clients at the Purpose Level. I define 'client' as anyone who you need to help you, your team or business drive and sustain revenue. They can range from internal customers, to channel/marketing partners, to key decision-makers at other firms, to retail customers – specifically those buying a service from you (and yes, you can also include a spouse in this category). And guess what, the same trust-related dynamics that cause tension and breakdowns in team settings – stereotypes, lack of understanding, lack of communication, lack of connection, etc. – apply in this realm as well.

Imagine understanding the purposes, passions, experiences, values, priorities, experiences, and dreams of your buyer, sharing yours with them and noting the overlaps. You can't align interests and connect any better than this! Taking it a step further, the information generated can be extremely useful in growing the relationship (and referrals). As a financial services provider, understanding your client's experiences and dreams can give you meaningful con-

necting points and valuable data for product selection and development. When was the last time you received a communication about something important to you personally from your broker or insurance rep?

In this context, the impacts of bringing the Purpose Level to high net worth clients and their families can also be profound as, per a Managing Director of such a firm, "Money doesn't solve problems. It only exacerbates the characteristics, good and bad, of the people who have it." Helping them as a team, and individually, realize their dreams and build supporting career paths for progeny to these ends can have distinct societal impacts.

Leaders:

I had the distinct honor and pleasure of seeing General Colin Powell present a few years ago. What a riveting treat! He shared three principles of leadership he has used throughout his career that, by his reckoning, enabled him to rise from an Army grunt to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State:

1. Give your team a noble purpose that draws on their passions.
2. Look out for your team's best interests; get to know them as people.
3. Be honest; praise in public, improve in private.

Aside from the obvious overlaps with the Purpose Layer, if you were to integrate these principles in an organization of whatever size, what one value would be brilliantly burnished in the common perspective? *Trust. From my experiences, trust may be the most important characteristic with which a leader can grace their team and which will boomerang with extremely positive results. Trust*

impels engagement, can punch politics in the nose, takes a big whack out of unwanted attrition, breaks through stereotypes and is the cornerstone of successful relationships of every sort. Trust requires connecting at the Purpose Level and again, there is a tremendous amount of connection at this level, regardless of what you do.

As a leader, sharing your Purpose Level with your reports can be an exhilarating, and sometimes disquieting, exercise. Opening your kimono takes courage. But the impacts on how you are perceived by your peers, reports, and even clients can be profound. You are showing them your human side, whose underlying purposes, values, priorities and dreams will correlate with those of the others in the room. This correlation, best done visually with the leader providing talking points, is what drives the connection, breaks through tainted mental templates hardened by years of self-deceiving observations, and rolls this dead log over, exposing a rich and fertile ground in which the seeds of trust and compassion can be sown and nurtured.

I say "can be" because from this point onward, it is the leader's game to lose. First, they must review their reports' outputs with them, understand them, and then, most importantly, use the information in the team member's best interests, per Powell's principles. This can be done individually and/or looking at patterns across the team/organization. For example, a very common dream is "sending my kids to college" (which I interpret as 'paying for college'). Do they understand the latest 529 plans and other ways they can save? Imagine the impact of getting some reps in to talk about college planning with your team and kicking in \$100 to start or augment an account? Whatever is spent will be

well worth the investment. You are helping your employees realize their dreams, not just career development.

Here is another phenomenal example of the power – and profitability – of understanding your employees' dreams. I was recently working with a group of CEOs and one of them shared a story about a company he helped found and had just sold. It was a call center business focused on doctors. They did an excellent job getting business but the delivery-side was suffering. Attrition was in excess of 100% per year, including the six-month ramp-up time. A partner in the business suggested they start an 'I have a dream' program, whereby employees would share their dreams, or the dreams of fellow employees who they knew could use one, with management.

At first, the CEO said he saw no benefit from the idea at all. His partner persisted. Over the course of time, more than \$200,000 was channeled into employees' dreams, everything from giving a daughter a very special birthday the employee couldn't afford, to making a house payment for an employee who was facing foreclosure. The most touching dream though, was that of an employee's husband, who had Stage 4 pancreatic cancer and was told he had a few months to live. Not only was he limoed to see his favorite team (the Eagles) play and provided tickets on the 50-yard line, but he was allowed onto the field post-game, slapped hands with all the players as they entered the locker room, and had a sit down, one-to-one chat with his favorite player for 20 minutes. He subsequently, against all odds, beat his cancer. Coincidence or causal, I do not pretend to know. What I do understand though, is the power of someone caring for me, on my terms, with dignity.

The impact this program had on the company's financial performance,



Lawler Kang, Founder, Passion at Work Mobius Consultant

After 15 years of corporate and entrepreneurial leadership, Lawler was on vacation and being a recovering consultant started doodling a process that became the genesis of his current work. Soon thereafter, he walked away from empire building, wrote *Passion at Work* (Pearson Prentice Hall), and eventually founded Passion at Work Partners, whose mission is unleashing the profitability of emotional engagement by connecting leaders, teams, and talent at the Purpose Level. He has worked with leading organizations such as HP, Cisco, Ernst & Young, Oracle, Microsoft, Booz Allen Hamilton, Pfizer, Vistage, Stanford School of Medicine, and most top-tier business schools. He leverages a history of strategy, technology, incubator and turnaround consulting and is a graduate of The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and Vassar College. He resides on the North Shore of Boston where, when not serving as a human jungle gym for his three hooligans, he loves to love his spouse, ski, surf, and play bridge.

and underlying culture, was profound. Attrition dropped to 25%. Employees made a YouTube video extolling the program in which they gleefully refer to their employment at this company as a "lifetime commitment." From the CEO's data points, he probably got an additional 2 to 3 times EBITDA on the sale valuation because of this investment. In fact, he recounted he knew the deal was going to happen the moment when the buyers saw the YouTube video as part of their due diligence.

Looking forward...

We all become leaders when our Purpose Levels are tapped. This could explain why leadership is in such short supply as most of us haven't taken the time, energy, courage, or had access to tools that can elucidate the Why and the How we bring to What we do. From my experience, Why + How has a far greater impact on your happiness (a.k.a. performance) than merely the What. In truth of fact, the Why + How (your Purpose Level) should drive your What to significant degrees. To quote a key figure from the masterful HBO series that serrat-edly explores the heart of leadership, *Game of Thrones*, "We can only get

what we want if we know who we are."

*I ask you now to think of Leaders who have struck you as **legendary** from whatever corner of our global society and history. Three or four will suffice. Now ask yourself, "What is it about these people that gives me such a charge? What is it that solidly positions them in a different league from all the rest?" A pattern might emerge here. Chances are these legends have a lucid purpose, impenetrable values, palpable passion for their cause, and a dream. It could be something small or huge, but they have one and they aren't afraid to share it with the world. They know themselves. Even with all their human baggage, they still aren't afraid.*

Do you want to be a legend? Maybe not to the scale of a Martin Luther King, Jr. or Ghandi. It could merely be a legend in your community, your working circles, or even just your family. I believe we all want to be remembered for something good, something noble, something in which we believe, something at the Purpose Level.

It takes courage to be legendary.*

**A rallying tagline from my days at Scient, the fastest, organically-grown services firm in US history. ■*