


LEAD STORY

The Power of Purpose

By Dr. Andrew Johnston | Your “Why” transforms busywork into worthywork.



Three big questions circulate at the center of interactions between leaders and their teams: **WHY?** **WHAT?** and **HOW?** and of these three, **WHY** is the shyest. **WHAT** and **HOW** are noisy by nature, prominent on To-Do lists and timecards and boisterously asserting themselves in the midst of other conversations. **WHY** is a wallflower, always waiting for someone to invite it in and make space for it in the hubbub. It often gets left out of the conversation altogether as **WHAT** and **HOW** rattle on.

If you want your people to thrive, you can't let this happen. **WHAT** and **HOW** may be the wheels of your organization's progress, but **WHY** is the fuel on which its people run. If the **WHAT** and **HOW** drown out the **WHY**, your people will find themselves busy but purposeless, and that's a bad combination. God made us creatures of conviction, so we run on a sense of purpose. It's our fuel, and when we lack it, we break down, and the fire that inspires and animates us goes out.

Viktor E. Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist, recognized this during his internment in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II and wrote about it in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. In that horrible and hopeless place, he discovered that having a purpose could transform suffering and make the difference between whether a person lived or died. Prisoners with a connection to a greater purpose could reframe their immediate circumstances and transcend them, but prisoners who became disconnected from a greater **WHY** lost hope, became discouraged, and quickly perished. In the less dire world of your own work, you can see this same principle playing out. When team members have a clear sense of purpose, they are fully-fueled, resilient, and capable of extraordinary contributions and accomplishments. In short, they thrive. The **WHY** draws them forward even when the **WHAT** and **HOW** may be daunting or uninspiring, and team members will give generously to the work and each other. But when the sense of purpose is lacking, it's a different story and they are different people. The days seem filled with Busywork and team members are fearful, fragile, and prone to derailment or disillusionment by little things.

Busywork is bad news for any team. It's universally-deplored and uniformly depleting and if you want your people to thrive, you need to drive it out of their experience. But what is Busywork, exactly? It seems to refer to a shockingly diverse array of activities. That's because Busywork isn't defined by a particular task; it's determined by the purpose behind the task. Busywork is the term people use to describe any engagement whose purpose doesn't justify what it takes to achieve it, any situation where the return doesn't merit their investment. This means that if you want to minimize Busywork in your team, you need to think more about the **WHY** than the **WHAT**, and manage the worth more than the

work. It's about helping your team members see that their personal efforts are meaningful and instrumental to accomplishing things that are truly worthy of their best.

Here are three strategies for turning Busywork into Worthywork and helping your team thrive.

Illuminate the Purpose

Illuminating the purpose is simply about leveraging the **WHY** into as many conversations as possible. **WHAT** and **How** will always get their due, because you can't delegate tasks or contribute to a project without engaging them, but the **WHY** needs your help not to be neglected. It's ironic and insidious: the thing your team members need most to thrive is fragile and easily drowned out by the noise of their everyday activity. In fact, the busier your team gets, the more likely it is to become preoccupied with the details of the doing and to lose track of the purpose behind it all. When this happens, Busywork can seem unrelenting, and your team members will trade thriving for merely surviving. In this situation, it's not actually the abundance of the work that's debilitating, it's the lack of purpose. Contrary to conventional wisdom, people don't burn out because of too much to do, but from too little reason to do it. So, to save your team, and help them thrive, you can't just lessen their load; you need to pump up the purpose. You need to constantly articulate the **WHY** in the midst of the whirlwind.

People are Creatures of Conviction—when their WHY is strong, they can deal with almost any WHAT and How.

In my experience, I find most leaders think about the **WHY** because they're strategic-minded, but they often fail to say much about it in their daily interactions. They save it for speeches, team retreats, or kickoff meetings, and leave it out of daily direction and detail work. That's a mistake because when you omit the purpose, you're skipping the best thing you can offer to strengthen your people and inoculate them against burnout. So, don't let the purpose get left out or float around separate from the daily doing in your team. Illuminate it and link it to action at every opportunity. Practice multiple ways of invoking it. Audit and adjust your communication to include a **WHY** with every **WHAT** and **How** you share.

Elevate the Purpose

If illuminating purpose is about making the **WHY** visible, elevating the purpose is about making it compelling. Think of it this way: since purpose is the fuel on which your people run, you want to refine it to be as high-octane as possible. Don't be shy of offering lofty and laudable reasons for apparently low or unimpressive tasks, because it's your ability to connect the two that will actually transform potential Busywork into Worthywork. Remember: the power of the purpose behind a task determines its worth more than the experience of the task itself. There is an apocryphal story told of two bricklayers, one thriving and one merely surviving, that illustrates the impact of a truly compelling purpose. These workers were doing the exact same tasks but the "survivor" was far less productive and happy than the "thrifer" and the quality and quantity of his work was less as well. One day, a little girl passing the worksite asked the two of them what they were doing and their responses were revealing. The "survivor" grumbled, "I'm stacking bricks", but the "thrifer" declared, "I'm building a cathedral!" It was the purpose they saw behind the activity that made the difference in their workmanship and experience.

In our organizations and ministries, we have our own bricks to lay: everyday tasks like setting chairs, arranging tech, managing meetings, handling food, and a million other mundane and potentially uninspiring tasks that will certainly become Busywork if we cannot link them to something more worthy. Your challenge is to connect these things to purpose and to push that purpose as high as you can. Don't settle for pedestrian purposes; give people a **WHY** that'll preach, something compelling to serve. As a leader of a Christian organization or ministry, you know your daily work has

eternal consequences. So, don't be afraid to link the minutia of a typical workday to that lofty purpose. You're not arranging the chairs simply to keep people from sitting on the floor; you're enabling participants to engage the content and each other in ways that are transformative. You're not just running this meeting to check off another list; you're doing it to power up the people and processes that will advance the kingdom of God.

Motivate with the Worthload not the Workload

Once you understand that your team members' ability to thrive rests largely on the relationship between what they're doing and why they're doing it, it's tempting to reduce this principle to a simple calculation of investment and return and

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to reframe motivation as the art of pitching a "good deal" in which the investment is less than the return. Leaders who think this way often try to enlist others by making any changes and investments sound as minimal or manageable as possible. "There won't be too many extra hours required." "The project won't last all that long."

"There'll be new synergies that offset any increased demands." "The change isn't really that big, and the transition won't take that long."

It isn't crazy to think that people might respond to this kind of good deal, but this technique focuses on the wrong side of the equation. It tries to sweeten the deal by making the investment seem less consequential instead of by making the return seem more worthy. It entices people to do what you've asked, but without increasing their recognition and regard for the purpose behind it. So, if they act, it's not because they've genuinely bought-in or found the purpose worthy or compelling; it's because what you've asked isn't troubling enough to resist at the moment. This kind of motivation might get things moving, but it also makes the "deal" fragile and prone to failure as soon as things get uncomfortable or demanding. Without a bigger, better purpose, a compelling and animating **WHY**, Busywork is just biding its time.

If you want your team members to thrive and give generously of their time and talent, tune your motivation to focus more on the **WHY**-side than the **WHAT**-side of the equation. When you need them to step up, don't tell them why it won't cost very much, tell them why it's worth everything they've got. Lean in to the power of purpose. This moves your team in the moment and prepares it to dig deeper and recommit when challenges arise down the road. When your team's **WHY** is strong, it can deal with any **WHAT** and **HOW**.

In end, many factors may influence the immediate enthusiasm or capacity of your team and you're wise to manage them well, but the underlying foundation for exceptional performance and enduring commitment is always Purpose. Together, these strategies will help you advance a compelling **WHY** that puts the **WHAT** and **HOW** in perspective, encourages your people to give their best, and equips your team to thrive.



Dr. Andrew Johnston builds better leaders and teams in corporate, church, military, and non-profit contexts as a consultant, coach, and speaker. He works around the world and around the corner, with some of the biggest brands on the planet and individual leaders just like you. Check out Dr. J's services or connect with him personally at DrAndrewJohnston.com. Dr. J will be leading the workshop: *Five Foundations for Thriving* at this year's Outcomes Conference.