

Working With Meaning

July 2004 Presentation by David Peck

I have a question for you: are people who work in jobs they find energizing and even stimulating the “lucky ones,” or do they have a different set of standards than people who don’t like their jobs?

My friend Sarah is the leader of a large and well-regarded marketing organization in a successful Fortune 500 firm. She’s built strong loyalty among her staff. She is a hard worker, putting in long days and bringing work home with her most weeks.

She says, “The people at the very top see our excellent results, but my budgets are among the first to be put on the chopping block when the firm needs to tighten its belt.” She has led her organization through several rounds of layoffs over the last three years. Some of her critical functions are being done by one, or less than one, person, even those that really need two or more people. Her technology budget has also been cut repeatedly. “It’s not as if I have the budget to automate things that people used to do to make up for the staff I lost.” Getting approval to hire someone, even if she could do it, seems to her irresponsible for the organization and for the prospective employee, given the tough economic climate.

At the same time, she is more accountable than ever for consistently high performance. She is doing her best, even with less and less resources. She, and many others are holding on to where they are professionally, and definitely not thinking about their next professional step.

Sarah is miserable, but continues to do her job. “If I won the lottery tomorrow, I would be out of here,” Sarah told me.

What would she do if she thought she had the freedom to do whatever she wanted to do?

She hasn’t given that much thought. But she’s always had a dream that she could be a travel writer. She loves to write, and to travel, so it seems a natural fit.

How many people would leave their jobs tomorrow if they could? Many if not most people, according to Robin Ryan: “30 million people go to work every day to jobs they hate.” Many of us are taught to feel lucky we have a job at all. Some are taught that “only the lucky ones get jobs they truly enjoy.” According to a 2004 survey by Ethan Winning, Salary (or total compensation) remains the number one determinant of job satisfaction, followed closely by the relationship with the direct supervisor.

Since we tend to incorporate what we are taught, most people don’t try to seek work that is meaningful and satisfying.

Here’s the news: people who are doing work they find meaningful and satisfying are not the lucky ones. They are simply people who set different standards for the work they are willing to do, and stick to them. You can do that too.

Experience tells us that people who do work they find meaningful for themselves, their families and/or society, are happier and more productive. They tend to be more creative, engaged, energized, focused, and work in more effective ways.

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I make no judgments about what one person chooses to find meaningful versus another. It's in the eye of the beholder. And part of the courage required to follow it is letting go of how others perceive it. In a sense, it is a hero's journey to align your head and your heart.

The difference between those that hold themselves to these standards of satisfying and meaningful work and those "working to live" is a simple thing that can be hard to do. But it's highly worth while. Why should we expect to be happy in our work? If you would rather work with or for someone who is happy in their professional life, rather than someone who is not, then you have the answer.

By changing what you believe (which you can do at the speed of thought), and adding courage, you can realize that you deserve to be in a professional situation that you find meaningful and rewarding. You can pursue that, and you will get it, provided you are patient and can work through the setbacks that will come along.

What are appropriate standards? Here are the three that I used when I made my transition several years ago, and which I apply to my work to this day:

1. I can't believe I get paid to do this
2. My work is energizing
3. If I won the lottery tomorrow, I would continue doing what I'm doing

Most of us know instinctively that we "should" be able to have work that meets these standards, but I believe most people comply with what they were taught (that is, "I'm lucky to have a job.")

If 9/11 and the burst of the dot com bubble taught us anything about work life in the U.S. in the post-2000 era, it is that life is less certain than we thought. Carpe diem! We have the power to hold ourselves to a new standard for what we choose to do for work.

What can get us motivated to set new standards for our work? For some, it is that the pain of what they are doing needs to get bad enough for a change to happen (I call that the "I've had its!") For some it is to realize that better options exist, and that they start with higher standards.

In my leadership coaching practice, I have worked with people who have reached each of these transition points. The common ingredient for success in both situations is the courage to set new standards and stick with them through thick and thin. Secondly, the support of family, friends and colleagues is very important. We want to see the people we care about be happy. The cliché is "Dare to dream." But the pragmatic reality is that by setting new standards and getting help to stick to them, the odds for a meaningful, happy and energized professional life are exponentially higher than if we stick to the belief that we are lucky to just have a job.