The Story Of Candice And Her Quest For Purpose At Work

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The day after delivering a keynote presentation, I received an email from Candice who kindly agreed to share her story. She wrote:

> *Dear Dan,*
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> *I was at the conference you spoke at yesterday; I have to say it inspired me. I wanted to take a moment to say, "Thank You!" I am data analyst within a federal organization and have recently accepted a one-year developmental opportunity within our IT department.*
>
> *Let me give you some background. I am your stereotypical HR employee. I smile, I laugh, I bring in baked goods, I overuse words like awesome and fantastic and I definitely use way too many emoticons when sending out e-mails. :) I love providing feedback and telling people what a great job they are doing.*
>
> *In October I started working in IT and found it the exact opposite of HR (no big surprise). If I didn't get up and walk around to say, "Hi," I could go days without seeing my colleagues. We communicate strictly over e-mail (for "racking purposes"). It is stifling and it does not encourage collaboration or innovation. Which is (what I originally thought) IT was all about.*
>
> *YES, bring down the walls and have us all work together. Let's talk, brainstorm and bring all of our ideas to the table. Let's stop being disengaged and become engaged in the work and each other.*
>
> *Even as a "worker-bee" in our organization I know I can influence change.*

Candice wasn't necessarily asking for help, but I felt compelled to respond and to offer what I could. Part of my response to Candice was as follows:

> *Hey Candice,*
>
> *Thank you so much for reaching out. What an honor for you to feel so trusting as to share such an intimate and heartfelt story. I applaud you. Many don't have the courage to send that first email.*
>
> *I suppose I'm glad my talk struck a nerve. Hopefully one of two things happens for you next:*
>
> *1. You can affect change within your department so your fellow colleagues are more like humans and more collaborative*
>
> *2. You self-analyze that (perhaps) they can't be changed, and you set a course for a new place to call your work home*
>
> *That said, I think IT needs more people like you to help shift the heads down, let's-not-talk-about-it culture. :-) Yes, an emoticon. Hang in there.*

With gratitude and more emoticons, Candice responded by thanking me for taking the time to provide a few workplace options for her to consider. Perhaps my decision to engage in unsolicited career advice with Candice was due in part to Alfred Adler .

In the late 1800s, as a psychiatrist in Vienna, he was the first researcher of a more connected and humanistic philosophy of living. Among other characteristics and theories regarding optimal human development, Adler believed each individual was born creative, determined and unique. He also believed people were oozing with social tendencies possessing the capacity to live in harmony and with a penchant for community.

Adler suggested humans would not only push for their own self-development, they would contribute to the well-being and purpose of others. When I discovered his writings and research several moons ago, his way of thinking (and his way of being) struck a nerve. Adler's theories and thinking — and his views on psychology — may explain why he left Sigmund Freud's inner Vienna circle back in the early 1900s.

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Freudism and Adlerism are rather different psychologies. For me, Adler's work has a profound impact on the way in which I choose to engage with others and the way I choose to live my life. It's helped me understand why some leaders are better at developing others as well.

In Candice's situation, there were three rhetorical questions to ask:

- Where was her leader in a time of need?

- What was the culture like on her team, or the organization?

- Why wasn't the leader developing a culture that permitted Candice to demonstrate purpose in her role at work?

Paul J. Zak, a neuroeconomist at Claremont Graduate University and author of *The Moral Molecule* developed a theory known as Ofactor. It's a theory of organizational design that suggests an employee's level of joy has a causal and direct relationship to both trust and purpose.

In simpler terms, "Trust multiplied by Purpose = Joy." Interestingly, the "O" of Ofactor pays homage to oxytocin, what Zak believes (and proves through his research) is the chemical foundation for trusting others.

With respect to leaders, he writes:

> *Trust can be raised by implementing policies explicitly designed to empower and engage employees. When managers implement policies that raise trust, colleagues at work have the incentives and resources to perform better, boosting organizational performance.*

It seemed to me that Candice's lack of joy led to disenchantment. Consequently, she became disengaged and her levels of trust waned if not disappeared. Zak's research suggests an environment without trust (and arguably workplace purpose) will cause a lack of joy. For Candice, a workplace without joy was akin to a bee hive without the honey.

In another study, authors Emily Lawson and Colin Price argued in *McKinsey Quarterly* that leaders ought to possess an apt level of understanding with both behavioral psychology and neuroscience in order to manage organizational

change successfully. Any triumph an organization wants to achieve with respect to change stems from leaders successfully persuading employees to get on board with the change itself and to think differently about their jobs and roles.

Let's flip Lawson and Price's theory around for a moment. How might leaders think differently with respect to employee career development, so that workplace situations — such as what Candice was experiencing — simply disappear? The authors state:

> *Since the collective culture of an organization, strictly speaking, is an aggregate of what is common to all of its group and individual mind-sets, such a transformation entails changing the minds of hundreds or thousands of people.*

Indeed, this is what we require in leadership today.

If we want employees, like Candice, to find purpose in their place of work and to be both thriving and innovative, one of the mindset changes that is required of leaders is to recognize the importance of trust, joy and proper career development … in order to aid an employee's level of workplace engagement.

Candice was arguably on the wrong side of hope. Things were going backwards. One might even suggest she was in a state of cognitive dissonance. She was trying to will her way to some form of career enlightenment without the support of her direct manager and the organization itself.

Established by Leon Festinger in 1957, cognitive dissonance refers to a human being's quest to achieve internal balance, harmony and consistency. Each of these traits is what each of us should be striving for in a world replete with mobile device addiction, attention deficit disorder and countless – sometimes mindless – management requests. This was precisely what Candice was trying to sort out for herself. Candice was striving for purpose in her role at work.

Festinger argues there are three basic assumptions to cognitive dissonance:

- People are sensitive to inconsistencies in their life as it relates to their actions and beliefs
- When inconsistency occurs, people take action to try and resolve such dissonance or inconsistency
- People will attempt to resolve any inconsistencies by changing their beliefs, actions or the actual perceptions with any new action

Without purpose, trust or joy in an employee's place of work—without leaders being capable of changing their own mindset to adapt to the career needs of those who work for them, and with the potential for cognitive dissonance—it's no wonder levels of employee engagement and career fulfillment remain pathetically low.

There are stories like Candice littered throughout the world.

In fact, Kalixa Pro, a U.K.-based firm, found in 2014 that 49% of workers were so unhappy with their place of work that they believed their career choice was a mistake. An additional 24% were so disillusioned that they admitted to describing themselves as poor employees.

Candice deserved a follow-up. I wanted to see if things were progressing. I was interested to see if her career situation had improved such that the dream of workplace joy was somewhere on the horizon. I contacted her again to see if her environment was getting better. Her response was as follows:

> *Hi Dan,*

> *I took your advice to heart. I have been working hard at creating a more collaborative work environment within my IT team. It has been challenging, but when I catch a colleague smiling, laughing or (gasp) taking me up on my offer of going for coffee, it brings me joy! There is still a long way to go, but every journey starts with small steps. :)*
>
> *That being said, I have been actively looking for a way to get back into the HR world. As much as I enjoy learning about systems and using an analytical approach to solving client issues, I feel that my heart belongs to HR.*
>
> *Last week I was presented with an opportunity to go back to HR in the capacity of an Electronic Performance Support (EPS) designer. It will bring together my two passions, HR and IT systems, as I will be creating EPS solutions for our IT systems and its users! :)*
>
> *Thanks again for your advice and being a sounding board. I am glad I took a chance in reaching out to you. You have made a difference!*

Everyone deserves a workplace that makes us feel fulfilled, useful and full of purpose. Everyone deserves joy. Candice even remarked, "It brings me joy." The key to this story with Candice is it's a two-way street of responsibility, between the leader (who can help shape both the culture and purpose mindset of the team or organization) and the team member, who must take ownership with personal and professional changes required to achieve such a scenario. This is the magic dust intersection of what I refer to as the *"sweet spot".*

I may have provided a slight nudge to Candice, but it was nothing more. The good news is that the impetus was already within Candice to make the change, both emotionally and physically. She deserves the kudos. She may not have found herself in such a scenario, however, if the guidance, support and action had been applied earlier by her direct leader. If her organization was one demonstrating the tenets of a more purpose-driven one, perhaps this scenario becomes moot and never happens.

I responded with one final email:

> *Dear Candice,*
>
> *Congratulations! This warmed my heart like an out-of-the-oven apple pie does to my tastebuds in the fall. What a fabulous story.*
>
> *I played a very small part, my dear. You had the courage baked within you from the get-go. Once you used some of those courage reserves, well, look out HR.*
>
> *All the best.*
>
> *Cheers*
>
> *DP*

Leaders might view the story of Candice and use it as an opportunity to self-reflect.

Think, for a moment, about those employees who are currently on your team and how you might improve the identification of traits similar to Candice.

1. What might you do differently in the future to support their development toward a more fruitful and thriving role?

2. How might you play a part in an employee's path toward a role that is full of purpose, one that permits the employee to flourish?

3. How might you shift the culture and operating practices of your organization such that employees are emotionally attached — oozing joy and trust — to the overarching mission of the organization itself?

4. How might you change the purpose of the organization from one focused solely on maximizing shareholder value and profits, to one that balances both purpose and profit while delighting the customer and other stakeholders?

The purpose of the organization is to delight customers through engaged and empowered employees, acting ethically within society to deliver just profitability that benefits all stakeholders including the community, workers and owners.

We might argue this is what Candice was seeking as well.

In Donald Polkinghorne's book, *Practice and the Human Sciences: The Case for a Judgment-Based Practice of Care* he states:

> *The accumulation of experiences over time creates a fund to guide future actions. Involved in self-organizations, people are continuously engaged in interaction with their environments – their cultures, physical objects, other persons, and themselves. They are not simply passive recipients of environmental stimuli (or information). Rather, they attend to and affect the world, which in turn affects and evokes changes in them. Apropos of this, two adages express the same truth metaphorically: The burnt child fears the fire and once burned, twice shy. Thus, having learned from experience, a person responds to identical or similar situations differently at different times in his or her life.*

Leaders ought to respond differently in a position of authority.

Be both a coach and a strategic visionary of workplace purpose. Assist your team members as they perform in their roles. This can only help to unleash the raw power of purpose.

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Dan Pontefract's next book, *THE PURPOSE EFFECT: Building Meaning in Yourself, Your Role and Your Organization*, will publish May 10, 2016. He is Chief Envisioner of TELUS Transformation Office.