# Maverick* Research: Do Not Pursue a Sense of Purpose for Your Team

Published 17 August 2022 - ID G00767046 - 12 min read

By Analyst(s): Daniel Sanchez Reina, Jennifer Carter

Initiatives: CIO Leadership of Technology Talent, Culture and DEI

> There is a kind of obsession with instilling a sense of purpose in employees to increase engagement and motivation. That's a waste of time. In this research, CIOs will learn what they should dedicate their time to instead.

## Overview

### Specific Maverick Caution

This Maverick research breaks new ground by challenging the assumption that CIOs should pursue a sense of purpose in their team members. Since this research challenges some deeply held views, its findings and advice should be treated with caution and contextualized for specific environments.

### Maverick Findings

- *Why we work* determines *how well we work*. That is, the meaningfulness that employees attribute to their work determines their performance. Such meaningfulness has traditionally been equated with having a *sense of purpose* toward work.

- The *enterprise sense of purpose* that many leaders articulate does not necessarily elicit an *individual sense of purpose*. It is like a lottery in that enterprise sense of purpose may be motivating for a few, but may not be motivating for many others. Even worse, many employees consider it a cynical ploy to have them working at their maximum productivity levels.

- However, a *sense of purpose* is just one way of eliciting meaningfulness. There exist other ways that haven't yet been exploited enough.

## Maverick Recommendations

- Don't waste your time trying to instill a sense of purpose in your team (whether at the individual level or collective level), since this is a useless effort for a vast majority of employees.

- Boost performance, engagement and intent to stay by building a *sense of play* in each of your team members.

## Maverick Research

Gartner Maverick* research delivers breakthrough, disruptive and sometimes contradictory ideas that challenge conventional thinking. Formed in our research incubator, it is designed to explore alternative opportunities and risks that could influence your strategy.

## Analysis

We all would like to have team members who wake up and think to themselves, "It's 6 a.m., but I don't mind. I want to go to my workplace, because my job, my company and my colleagues at work fulfill me." That would be, in a nutshell, the archetype of an engaged employee.
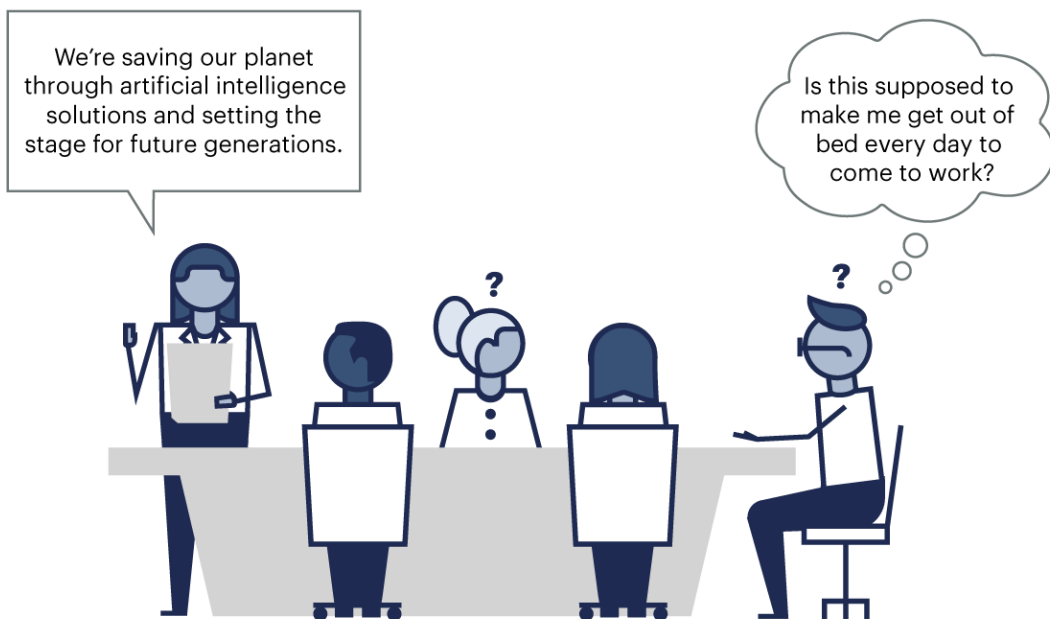
Sadly, a scarce 21% of employees feel engaged at work, worldwide. [1] Although this percentage used to be even lower before the pandemic — and the pandemic has stagnated it again — it is a very low number: Only 21% are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace. The rest of employees (the majority of employees around the world) struggle to have an overall positive perception about their workplace, often doing the bare minimum to get through the day, and struggle to develop emotional attachment.

This lack of engagement is something that executives perceive consciously or unconsciously, based on facts or intuition. That's why executives, in general, and CIOs, in particular, are often trying to instill a sense of purpose in their team members, which is — sorry to say — a waste of time and energy. A sense of purpose is something that can't be prescribed from outside of oneself.

Think of yourself: Will you develop a sense of purpose just because your boss or the top management has articulated the corporate sense of purpose and communicated it to you? At a high probability, no. Purpose comes from within. To increase engagement (and hence performance), executives and CIOs try to imbue a sense of purpose — or its derivatives in the form of an inspirational speech or a well-written motivational sentence. But this will have, at best, a very limited impact on the majority of people, much less a long-lasting impact (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Enterprise Purpose Statements Don't Create Employee Engagement



**Enterprise Purpose Statements Don't Create Employee Engagement**

We're saving our planet through artificial intelligence solutions and setting the stage for future generations.

Is this supposed to make me get out of bed every day to come to work?

Source: Gartner
767046_C

Gartner

Let's get back to the basics: Why do enterprises aim to elicit a sense of purpose in employees? Because they want their enterprises to operate with the maximum excellence in performance and in well-being for employees. And many leaders take the easy path of issuing a one-size-fits-all statement and hope that everyone adheres to it. But the reality is that this approach doesn't work for the majority of people — so let's explore one that will.

In this research, we discuss what CIOs need to pursue instead of a sense of purpose.

## Know the Negative Side of the Sense of Purpose

I bet you or your enterprise has tried to formulate purposes like the ones below, to make employees get out of bed every morning to come to work with infinite energy and a permanent smile from ear to ear:

- "We are contributing to making our enterprise become a reference in our sector through developing an excellent digital customer experience (CX)."

- If you are in the healthcare business: "We contribute to our enterprise's mission of enhancing people's skin health through our technologically innovative solutions."

- If you are in the food wholesale industry: "We facilitate a digitally smart supply chain to ensure that each grocer receives a continuous supply of products to support their local communities."

Or more idealistic purposes, like:

- "Through our digital solutions, we make our customers happy, making them feel good using our products and getting more out of life."

- "We're saving our planet through our AI solutions and setting the stage for future generations."

Or maybe purposes with an economic flavor, like:

- "We want to generate continuous process optimization through technology, to accumulate enough cost savings to power new ventures that will diversify our product and service portfolio."

- "We want to increase our revenue through offering our customers the digital solutions that nobody in the sector has offered them so far."

What if I told you that your efforts probably have been in vain — that is, that you probably won't achieve the motivation, productivity and retention rate that you are striving for? Following are the main reasons why these efforts may be in vain (and most of the times you are not conscious of it):

- The message is a bit inauthentic or a bit fluffy, creating disbelief or, worse, cynicism. People smell inauthenticity from far off. Let me ask you something: Are you one of those leaders whose pursuit of a sense of purpose for your employees is a cynical ploy to have them working at their maximum productivity levels and having them worship their work? If so, be careful, as most employees want their work to be a facet of their lives, not their whole lives.

- The message inspires indifference or apathy, especially if it was too economically based, creating professional zombies (that is, people who work mechanically, not willing to do a great job or to make a discretionary effort to work exceptionally when necessary).

- The message is kind of one-size-fits-all, which turns out to be ineffective. Why? It's simple. Purpose is a very profound and personal feeling, so the probability is very low of generating the effect that you expected in a sufficiently large number of people.

- Similar messages have been given in the past, with little translation into day-to-day practices. That is, there is a credibility issue.

## Know the Forgotten Motives at the Workplace

Why we work determines how well we work. [2] In other words, the meaningfulness that we attribute to our work determines our performance.

Purpose is not the only motive why we humans work. There is another motive that is equally important and that creates meaningfulness (and no, it is not about money, as money comes from necessity or from satisfying desires, not from meaning). It is *play* — that is, "I work at my company because I enjoy it." [3]

Let's look at a couple of examples.

*Example 1:*

*Lisa is an engineer. She is energized and motivated to go to work, because she has fun improving existing products or inventing new ones. That is, she enjoys doing it, and she has a good time dedicating her time to doing it. It feels similar to when she would play with building blocks as a child.*

*Example 2:*

*Tom is an application developer. He is energized and motivated to go to work, because he loves to code and design applications.*

*Example 3:*

*María is an application developer, too. She is energized and motivated to go to work, because she loves the considerable amount of new things that she and her colleagues are asked to do. She enjoys both the newness and the team spirit to make it happen.*

*Example 4:*

*Rafael is a database expert. He loves to compete against other colleagues (inside and outside his enterprise) to find new ways of accessing data faster. Competing is also a motivator for playing for many people.*

---

As you can see in these examples, *play* can involve any of the characteristics of the homo ludens. That is, human beings, by nature, need and yearn to play, during all their lives, and in different life stages, and it manifests in different ways. It can be having fun. It can be the desire of competing against others. It can be enjoying what we do. *Play* (at work or at home) connects us with the child in us and with probably the best moments in our lives.

A sense of purpose is difficult to deliberately influence from the outside, because it is extremely personal and intrinsic. On top of that, in many cases, employees would find it really difficult to even answer the question, "What is my purpose?" Even if your enterprise or department has articulated a sense of purpose, the individual sense of purpose does not necessarily match with it. Hence, ignore **purpose** and focus on **play**, which is a much more manageable element from the outside. All of us know what delights us, what we enjoy doing or what we enjoy doing in a very specific way. And, best of all, it can be verbalized.

## Pursue a Sense of Play at Work

You may be wondering, "How on Earth can I develop a *sense of play* in each of my team members?" Do not despair. There are ways to do it.

First, there are some important caveats that you should keep in mind:

- Different roles typically determine different senses of play.

- There cannot be a one-size-fits-all message to generate a sense of play. The duty of leaders and direct managers is to identify it and foster it in each individual.

- Achieving a 100% sense of play in every single thing that each person does is unrealistic. The objective is to reach a positive net balance of a sense of play.

- Commercial companies need to make a profit, and public companies need to pursue their mission. Those are the ultimate reasons for their existence. The sense of play is a means to an end, not the end state.

## Recommendations

**1. Have a conversation with each of your direct reports, and ask them what makes, or would make, work a playful experience for them.** Give examples. Don't set false expectations, though: If what your employee asks for is impossible to achieve within your company, speak out about that reality. Let them know what is and isn't out of bounds.

Be mindful that this may not work in national cultures where putting personal aspects out in the open is an uncomfortable experience. In these cases, dedicate time to discover it on your own: What would make a playful experience for each of your direct reports?

Also, the meaning of the word "play" can be different for different national cultures. Some may even feel it is not applicable to the workplace. For those struggling with this conversation, you can replace "play" with "enjoyment," "delight" or "passion."

**2. As a complement to the previous point, ask each of your team members: "On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 is 'I very much hate it,' and 10 is 'I very much love it'), which things at work would make you score below 5?" It can be things that they are doing currently or not. Do the survey anonymously if you see fit.**

Dodging the "play killers" is another way to increase the sense of play. Again, be careful not to set false expectations about things that are not fully in your hands or that you are not willing to do.

**3. Create a group or community of people interested in a given professional topic (AI, RPA, data analytics, etc.), whereby the experts organize a monthly session to further explore the topic and its application. This group or community can be open to anybody in the enterprise.**

Experts are the ones who will experience the sense of play here, if sharing their mastery is a playful action for them.

4. Offer employees an 80/20 work model, in which they dedicate four days per week to their role, and one day to learning and developing their professional passion (or personal passion, as long as the enterprise can benefit from it).

Be wary: If the employee gets the sense of play only when applying this 80/20 work model, invest time exploring the reasons why the rest of the time this person does not enjoy the work, and act accordingly.

5. Open up the possibility for employees' family and friends to have quarterly conversations with you about what makes the employees happy, what connects with the child in them and how this could be achieved at work.

Needless to say, this has to be agreed on and authorized by the employee.

6. Provide employees with a project-based incentive in which, for each milestone or major outcome that they achieve, a portion of the project budget goes toward a local cause of their choice. They will experience the delight of contributing to society, provided they enjoy helping others.

7. Offer a "career sabbatical," in which employees can take one month per year to work in a different business unit or company, doing something they enjoy very much. If they opt to do it outside the company, make sure that there is a noncompete agreement in place.

8. Develop a reciprocal networking program in which employees mentor colleagues across the company on a routine basis (for example, biweekly). The mentors get to share knowledge on a subject that they are an expert in and passionate about. However, each connection requires a role reversal: The mentor becomes the mentee and learns about a new subject from the partner in return. This will work for employees who enjoy teaching and sharing their expertise with others.

If, after trying hard to elicit a *sense of play* in a person (that is, after having done all the right things you could do), you find it did not work, determine if there is a hidden motivational lever you are not aware of. If there is not, you might have to think beyond the scope of their current role: You could suggest that the employee pursue a completely different role within your organization or perhaps in another business unit. It may help them reflect on what makes them really enthusiastic at work.

Having these high-stakes conversations on a quarterly or biannual basis will be key to showing that you care about them, while making them accountable for realizing their own well-being.

May the forces of play be with you!

## Evidence

[1] State of the Global Workplace: 2022 Report, Gallup.

[2] D. Chandler, A. Kapelner, Breaking Monotony With Meaning: Motivation in Crowdsourcing Markets,

Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 2013.

[3] E. Deci, R. Ryan, Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior, Plenum Press, 1985.