Managers Managing Themselves Through Purpose, Focus, and Resilience

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Abstract

Managers will enhance job performance and satisfaction by truly understanding the purpose that motivates and drives them to “be their best” at their job. Managers skilled at applying focus in the work environment are experts at effectively applying attention to cause a laser-like focus that zooms them into the concentration needed to effectively perform work tasks. They also know how to avoid distractions that impede focus. Resilience—the skill to overcome adversity and failure—provides managers with techniques to help them get through difficult situations, bounce back, and be optimistic about the future. Collectively these three concepts—purpose, focus, and resilience—provide managers with skill sets to maximize job productivity and satisfaction.

Keywords: purpose, focus, resilience, managers, job productivity, and satisfaction

Managers have an obligation—they owe it to themselves—to allocate sufficient time and effort to maximize effectiveness and personal satisfaction related to current position responsibilities, the specific work environment, and career development. To do so, managers need to systematically address: (1) the purpose that drives and rewards them at work, (2) the laser-like attention to performing work responsibilities through focus, and (3) the development and application of skills to overcome adversity—even unfairness—at work through resilience and to proceed with optimism. Because self-awareness fosters self-management, managers must consistently study and reflect upon their thoughts and actions regarding purpose, focus, and resilience (Goleman, 2013).

Purpose

“It turns out that, no matter what the events or circumstances, people [managers] who have discovered and lead from their purpose experience a significant increase in their level of clarity of focus and confidence to act” (Craig, 2018, p. 87). All managers have an underlying purpose that motivates and energizes them to want to do their job and do it well. Purpose is the intrinsic reason managers want to do their job effectively and from which they reap great satisfaction. While all managers are likely driven by money to some degree (external motivation), it is the intrinsic motivation stemming from purpose that stimulates them to do their work effectively and strive to be their best. Purpose represents what a manager “stands for” and
likely is not willing to compromise in the long run on the job. If a manager’s purpose does not match well with the job, the manager is likely to view work as boring and not providing meaningful challenges (Craig, 2018).

Pink (2009) notes that, “The secret to high performance isn’t our biological drive or our reward-and-punishment drive, but our third drive—our deep-seated desire to direct our own lives, to extend and expand our abilities, and to live a life of purpose” (p. 145). Under the heading *purpose motive*, Pink (2009) continues by opining that “the most deeply motivated people—not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves” (p. 133). For managers, this “cause” is the purpose that drives them to want to work and receive satisfaction from this work when it is done well. Allen (2008) observes that, in its deepest sense, purpose represents the essence of what is important and is the *reason for being*. Purpose serving as a “reason for being” often is indicative of managers applying purpose in the context of their jobs.

While purpose is extremely important to managers regarding being rewarded from work, it is sometimes difficult for them to specifically identify. Purpose is the personally meaningful reason that managers enthusiastically look forward to work each day and from which a true sense of accomplishment is derived. For example, a manager’s purpose associated with job and career might be developing growth in each staff member’s performance, thereby also causing the work unit to be more productive. Another example of purpose is a manager who is driven by challenges from work that are at the threshold of impossibility, but that can be achieved through hard work and excellent planning. Managers who truly view themselves as servant leaders are driven by a purpose of contributing to the *greater good* of the work unit, organization, and those with whom they interact (Miller, 2018). In this same vein, Duckworth (2016) views purpose as, at least in part, “the intentional contribution to the well-being of others” (p. 143).

Purpose provides managers with a context for what rewards them at work and provides a perspective from which to anchor all the many reasons why they perform their jobs. Feeling an *authentic* purpose starts with managers knowing what they truly care about and why they should, and do, care about it (Haden, 2018, p. 198). Managers, who have a good match of their purpose with a work environment that furnishes opportunities to realize the purpose, have a significant positive impact on their work’s quality and those with whom they are associated. Fulfilling purpose *connects* managers’ internal feelings with those with whom they collaboratively interact by helping them experience their purpose (Weiss, 2018). It should be noted that a manager may have more than one purpose, but too many (e.g., five to ten) are likely to be unrealistic and thus unfulfilling.

Matching a growth mindset—as opposed to a fixed mindset—with purpose is an excellent approach for managers to be motivated and expand knowledge and career skills. The growth mindset is based on a belief that staff members’ talents and capabilities can continually be enhanced by managers. This also holds true for the manager. The fixed mindset; however, exemplifies managers who believe that development of new knowledge and skills is unlikely and have a fatalistic attitude regarding a positive change and growth in oneself and others (Dweck, 2016).

Identifying the activities from the following probe is a good way for managers to find their purpose if they perceive it is not readily apparent: “Each of us has a set of activities that bring a deep sense of joy and satisfaction and reconnect us to a part of ourselves that is as essential as breathing” (Craig, 2018, p. 81). Duckworth (2016) advocates that a manager’s acute interests coupled with identifying those things associated with “what we do that matters—to
ourselves and other people—serves in finding one’s purpose” (pp. 143-145). Another approach to identifying purpose is for a manager to seek input from significant others in his/her life through querying them on what they think drives the manager and is her/his passion (Weiss, 2018). Lastly, purpose is often found by managers in identifying their most important values in life (e.g., about five to seven), reflecting on the importance of each, and using the collection of these reflections to identify purpose.

From a career perspective, a manager matching purpose so that it meshes with the “big picture” challenges of a position in an organization is optimal for job satisfaction, productivity, and career advancement. A recent study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) advocates that, “the future belongs to challenge-driven leaders” (Walker, 2018, p. B4). It is crucial for managers to seek positions and organizations that are a good fit between their purpose and the challenges that need to be fulfilled.

Focus

The effective application of attention is the lynchpin for managers effectively using focus. Goleman (2013) notes that “attention works much like a muscle—use it poorly and it can wither; work it well and it grows” (p. 4). Goleman advocates that the research on the science of attention “tells us these skills [e.g., attention] determine how well we perform any tasks. If they are stunted, we do poorly; if muscular, we can excel” (p. 2). Continuing, Goleman observes the positive link between attention and excellence, indicating that it “ripples through almost anything we seek to accomplish” (p. 3). Sustained attention is particularly important for managers in the context of focus because it represents the dedication of uninterrupted time to sufficiently understand what is being studied. Selective attention means that managers can “hone in” specifically on what needs to be the focus of their attention to gain essential information, effectively interact with others, and perform the task at hand.

Voluntary attention is what managers use when they consciously focus on something such as the verbal and nonverbal meaning communicated by a staff member in a meeting. Managers control voluntary attention, whereas they do not control involuntary attention such as reacting to a loud, unexpected noise (fire siren) while in a meeting. Bailey (2018) observes that, “When it comes to focusing at work, there is no shortage of scapegoats to blame for our mind wandering” (p. 105R). The good news is that, while the skill of channeling involuntary attention has waned in the high-tech world of gadgets (e.g., smartphones), managers can improve involuntary attention by consciously striving to do so. The point is that through conscious effort, managers “can overcome distractions and develop the ability to concentrate on demand” if they are willing to put forth the effort (Zahariades, 2017, p. 14).

Managers have no direct control over involuntary attention because the body’s “safeguard system” puts out an alert based on humans’ genetic make-up (Zahariades, 2017). Managers can have some control over involuntary attention, though, by seeking work environments that preclude these types of interruptions if doing so does not pose a danger. Disconnecting the emergency warning light in a conference room is not an action a manager should take. However, locating a meeting in a room that has no “street noise” (e.g., sirens), posting a “please do not disturb” sign, and requesting participants to preferably turn off, or at least silence, non-essential electronic devices are logical ways for a manager to address involuntary attention.

Proactive managers focus their efforts “on things they can do something about, and their
energy is positive” (Covey, 1989, p. 83). This compares to reactive managers who often focus attention on circumstances over which they have no control. This sometimes leads to a feeling of “victimization,” prompting the manager to wallow in self-pity—which is unproductive. Duhigg (2016) points out the need for managers “knowing where to focus and what to ignore” (p. 102).

After weighing the pros and cons of a situation and concluding they are about equal, it is most advantageous for managers to focus on the potential benefits (pros) and identify the needed actions to realize these benefits (Cuddy, 2015). This compares to managers in the same situations focusing on the negatives (cons) and not pursuing actions needed to “make it work.” Before proceeding with implementing the actions, however, cost and available resources must be considered.

Mindfulness is the skill set of managers being fully present, aware of where they are and what they are saying, and doing through a heightened state of involvement and wakefulness (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000; Boyce, 2018). Mindfulness also includes managers being acutely understanding of the perspectives of others as to the intent of communications—verbal and nonverbal—to clearly understand their context (Bartz, 2018). Managers practicing mindfulness “are likely to choose to be positive and will experience both the advantages of positivity, and the advantages of perceived control or well-being” (Langer, 2009, p. 279).

Novel distinctions in the context of mindfulness means that managers consciously have open minds, do not categorize information based on past experiences, and understand the subtleties of the information being communicated in order to identify creative or “novel distinctions” of the present information to solve problems (Langer, 2014). Bartz (2018) notes that mindfulness also means managers truly comprehending their purposes while performing tasks and tracking where they place their attention. Managers practicing mindfulness have an acute sense of presence, meaning that they are attuned to a situation and are comfortable, confident, and passionately enthusiastic “in-the-moment” regarding what is taking place and how they should behave and react (Cuddy, 2015).

Flow

Think of a moment in your life when you were so involved in what you were doing that the rest of the world seemed to have disappeared. Your mind wasn’t wandering; you were totally focused and concentrated on that activity. Time disappeared too. (Boniwell, 2012, p. 29)

The preceding quote is indicative of what managers experience when they cause flow to happen. For managers, flow is the epitome of focus at its best. Flow is “the experience of complete absorption in the present moment” (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2009, p. 195). The ideal conditions for managers to prompt the engagement in flow are:

(a) perceived challenges, or opportunities for action that stretch but do not overmatch
(b) existing skills; (b) clear proximal goals and immediate feedback about the progress being made; (c) intense and focused concentration on the present moment; (d) the merging of action and awareness; (e) loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor); (f) a sense that one can control one’s actions; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next; (g) distortion of temporal experience (typically, a
sense that time has passed faster than normal); and (h) experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process. (Lopez & Snyder, 2009, pp. 195-196)

When in flow, managers operate at full capacity because of a *dynamic equilibrium* between the challenge (task) at hand and the maximizing of their skill set. The task is extremely challenging, but in reach through managers stretching their skill set to the limit. Flow represents a manager’s total absorption of attention, causing a laser-like focus on the challenge (task) that represents an extremely enjoyable, satisfying, and productive experience (Lopez, Pedrotti, & Snyder, 2015). As Duckworth (2016) observes, “The flow status is intrinsically pleasurable. When you’re in flow, everything feels effortless” (p. 132).

**Resilience**

“Resilience is something you realize you have after the fact. A manager’s level of resilience is an excellent determinant of who succeeds and who fails” (Coutu, 2017, pp. 6 & 8). Resilience is the ability of a manager to recover from adversity and setbacks, adapt to change in a positive context, persist in the face of adversity, and manage ongoing hectic and stressful work environments (Ovan, 2015; Achor & Gielan, 2016). The aforementioned is referred to as *positive adaptation* (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). Effectively managing ongoing hectic and stressful work situations requires managers to plan “recovery periods” in which they draw back, reflect, relax, and then return to solve previously encountered problems. This contrasts with the “toughing it out” approach that can result in managers becoming stressed out and inefficient in addressing adverse situations (Achor & Gielan, 2016).

“The most resilient individuals and teams aren’t the ones that don’t fail, but rather the ones that fail, learn and thrive because of it. Being challenged—sometimes severely—is part of what activates resilience as a skill set” (Fernandez, 2016, p. 2). Factors leading to managers being resilient are: (a) an ability to stay balanced and deal effectively with difficult emotions; (b) a sense of feeling “safe,” even when under duress; and (c) a strong social support system. Managers also need to control their work environment in order to reduce the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed and stressed—two factors that can greatly reduce resilience (Fernandez, 2016). Aspects of managers remaining resilient over time are: (a) practice mindfulness, (b) compartmentalize cognitive load, (c) take detachment breaks, (d) develop mental agility, and (e) cultivate compassion (Fernandez, 2016). Optimism is essential for managers to effectively “move on” in a productive manner after overcoming adversity through resilience.

Practicing optimism is especially important to managers when experiencing the emotional impact an adverse situation can have on their feelings, motivation, and self-worth. In such a situation, the optimistic manager quickly takes the perspective that the adverse happening was not likely caused by him/her. And even if it was so, it is “history” that cannot be changed. The most beneficial course of action is not to dwell on the adverse situation, but move forward wiser and motivated “to be a better person.” The optimistic manager also learns from adversity—including failure. Seligman (2015) believes managers can *learn to be optimistic*. Bononno (2004) advocates that resilient managers *restore their equilibrium* following an adverse event and learn to grow from the experience.
Concluding Thoughts

Managers that are skilled at utilizing purpose, focus, and resilience will enhance their job productivity and satisfaction. While purpose is sometimes initially difficult to identify, managers matching their purpose with the mission and vision of an organization will reap great rewards. Acute application of attention causes managers to have the focus needed to “hone in” and engross themselves in the tasks needed to produce the work for which they are responsible. Resilience gives managers the “staying power” to keep going when encountering adversity (or even failure), learn from the adverse experience, and emerge optimistic and ready to assume new challenges.

References


Footnote