

Habits of Highly Effective Higher-Ed Professionals, Part 2: Finding Your Purpose

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Recently, I published the article "[Habits of Highly Effective Higher-Ed Professionals](#)," talking about how (and why) higher-ed professionals need to take Stephen R. Covey's advice about "sharpening the saw" to life. That article stressed the importance of professional development to our careers and our effectiveness. Now I want to take a step further and discuss another habit of highly effective higher-ed professionals: creating a purpose statement to provide your career and life with lasting fulfillment. It sounds simple, but often is anything but.

I'll talk about:

1. *Why you need to shift from pursuing happiness to pursuing purpose*
2. *What constitutes "purpose"*
3. *How to create a purpose statement that will guide your life and career*

1. Why You Need to Pursue Purpose, Not Happiness

Recently, I was having lunch with a friend and former colleague. We were reminiscing about the "good ol' days" when we worked together as consultants. It had been years since we had met for a meaningful conversation. I found that as I explained the journey that had taken me from full-time consultant/part-time professor to full-time professor/part-time consultant, I realized that I had never

been "myself" in front of him...until this moment. Whether in a team meeting or a golf outing with a client, I had always felt that I had to be someone who I really wasn't. I hadn't been happy with who I was.

I had spent the past 20+ years seeking the elusive state of "happiness." Like many of us, I created a list of goals and achieved them, only to sit down and promptly create another list of goals. Despite these "lofty" accomplishments, I still wasn't happy, only anxious about what I still *hadn't* achieved. I had this burning desire to achieve, but something profound was missing from my career and my life.

One of my earliest goals was not professional but personal. I wanted to lose fifty pounds - a nagging weight that had accumulated during college and then had continued post-graduation. When I achieved this goal, I was certainly healthier physically, but my happiness was short-lived. I wanted something else. Something more. I wanted to be promoted at my firm. Eventually, I was able to check that box as well. I still wasn't happier. Then I wanted to pursue a doctoral degree. (In fact, I was a bit obsessed by this. Not only did I set this as a goal, but I created a plan using Microsoft Project to achieve it.) We are taught that continuous education leads to growth and opportunity. This is true; however, it doesn't guarantee happiness.

Fast-forward several years to the day I defended my dissertation at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I recall leaving the academic hall to a level of humidity that early June afternoon that was unmatched. "I made it," I said to myself. This, I believed, was the ultimate achievement that was finally going to provide happiness. I remember calling my mother, who had been my "rock" during the difficult times in my life, including the loss of my father and my spouse. My mother was certainly happy for me, but at the end of the call she said something which was so painful to hear and yet also so accurate that it sticks with me to this day.

She said, "You are happy - for now."

Hanging up the phone, I was disheartened. Walking back to my hotel room with my dissertation notes in hand, I reflected on her words. During each of my recent visits to my childhood home, my mother had said to me, "When will you be content?" (This was usually after I came in through the back door and began a conversation on a recent project I had completed or a promotion.)

"I made it" - what did that even mean? *Why* had I worked toward a doctoral degree? Why was I so interested in being promoted? Why, really, had I lost those fifty pounds?

Afraid to Stop: The Unhealthy Pursuit of Happiness

After finishing my dissertation, I went through a marathon phase in my life. Did I do this for the exercise? I assure you I didn't. 5Ks, 10Ks, and even half-marathons fall under the "exercise" category; I ran marathons and I did it because something was missing in my life. I was running toward happiness - at least, so I thought.

Phil Knight, founder and chairman of Nike, stated in his recent memoir, *Shoe Dog*, that we run because we are afraid to stop. I see his point. I was afraid to stop pursuing things that provided a momentary sense of accomplishment. I figured one of these accomplishments would trigger some form of happiness...eventually. Right?

As I was preparing for another marathon in the spring of 2012, my training and short-lived marathon career came to an abrupt end. I was informed that my mother had suddenly passed away. I kept training, thinking this would provide some comfort, but the toll became too much. Physically, I was in the best shape of my life. Emotionally, probably the worst. I remember experiencing a sharp pain in my foot during my last long-distance run, and to this day, I truly believe that was my mother telling me that this pursuit, along with all the others, was not going to provide me with the happiness I had sought for so long.

What Was Missing

Despite all my goals and accomplishments, I had never asked myself one fundamental question that we all need to ask ourselves: **What is my true purpose?** My life changed dramatically once I asked that question. That question unleashed a passion I had never experienced in my life before.

How do we create a state of peaceful happiness? By defining clearly the reason we were put on this earth. We need to ask this question first, *then* set and achieve goals. Purpose is a required prerequisite. To find lasting happiness, we must first spend significant time and energy discovering ourselves, our talents, and our passions.

Purpose --> Happiness

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, the late Stephen R. Covey defines Habit #2 as "Begin with the end in the mind." He challenges us to create our own mission statement, as if we were a large corporation. Today, my mission statement (or purpose statement, as I refer to it) has grounded me and allowed me to pursue my true calling *and* discover happiness along the way. My purpose statement has guided me to be a better husband and father while beginning the second half of my professional career as a college professor and coach, helping others in their own pursuit of meaning.

Often in higher education especially, we are moving so quickly and pursuing goals and achievements without first defining our individual, core purpose. We exhaust ourselves and do not find happiness. So let's talk about identifying and defining purpose.

2. What Constitutes "Purpose"

Last fall, I was fortunate enough to teach a seminar to incoming first-year students, entitled "Finding Meaning: An Introspective Examination of Life's Purpose and Beyond." Early in the semester, I invited students to create an initial purpose statement that they could then reflect on throughout the week by journaling. I adapted this exercise from Richard Leider, author of *Repacking Your Bags*. As you can imagine, drafting a purpose statement was no easy task for eighteen-year-olds, many of them only days removed from the comfort of their childhood homes.

Some gave the standard, if elusive "Be happy." Others listed a specific goal they wanted to accomplish as their purpose, not yet knowing the difference between the two. However, I remember one response that was unlike any other - from a student from Seoul, South Korea.

His purpose? "Eat breakfast every day."

Once he said this, I paused and didn't reply - creating an awkward moment for all of us in the class. Some students giggled, while others simply stared as I did, waiting for more. What had the student meant? Did he simply not like the activity? The course? The professor? Was he simply testing me to see how I would react early in the semester?

Later that day, the student came to see me during my office hours to explain the rationale behind his purpose statement. I could tell that he just needed to respond to the bewilderment I had displayed earlier in class that day. He told me, "If I eat breakfast every day, this will help me start my day right." After hearing this, I knew we still had some work to do, but I could tell he was onto something.

**Before reading this article any further, find an index card.
Write down what you believe your purpose to be. Right
now.**

Leider calls this activity "trying on a purpose."

Your purpose statement will change, but we need to start somewhere. Share this index card with someone close to you and refine it as needed. Don't take too much time; remember that this is just a starting point. Chances are, you will feel energized just by completing this process.

Next, place this index card somewhere you will see it in the morning and the evening:

- In the morning, ask yourself, "How am I going to live my purpose today?"
- In the evening, ask yourself, "How did I live my purpose today?"

For many, journaling can be helpful in answering these questions.

To Find Your Purpose, Ask 3 Questions

I am often asked, "How did you discover your purpose?" Before answering that "How" question, though, we must first focus our attention on three "What" questions, to understand *what* purpose is:

1. What are your talents?

Maybe your talent is public speaking. Maybe you have a knack for social media. Maybe you are a "numbers" person. If you find this question difficult to answer, ask it of those whom you trust to provide you with feedback. In fact, it's a good practice to develop an "inner circle" of trusted individuals who will give you direct, sincere feedback regularly on your talents, your overall strengths, and your limitations.

2. What is your passion?

Maybe you have already discovered your *talents*, but they don't align with your career goals. That's understandable - and quite common - but also challenging. What are you *passionate* about? If this question feels uncomfortable, walk over to your bookcase and peruse the titles there. Look for a theme. Or ask yourself: Where do you spend much of your time, beyond work and family?

3. What societal need is not being met?

After you discover your talents and your passion, find out how they can contribute to the greater good. One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to be consumed trying to find meaning while failing to look beyond ourselves. When we move from a *selfish* place to a *selfless* place, amazing things begin to occur. When you contribute to a broader need within your local or global community, you are making meaning in your life. This is a "game changer" for most people.

When you know these three things - your talents, your passion, and the societal need to which you can contribute - you can begin defining your purpose.

3. How to Create a Purpose Statement

So how do you create a purpose statement?

I wanted a purpose statement that would ground me and provide direction for all the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead. Without one, I would stay in "goal-seeking" mode, always adding projects and objectives. Having a purpose statement would help me focus my priorities, permitting me to say "yes" to projects that would provide meaning and "no" to projects that didn't.

Creating a purpose statement sounds straightforward, but it isn't. This is a statement that will serve as your internal compass, directing you toward a life of meaning. Something so powerful requires both time and space.

Forty Miles to Purpose

If you commit both time and space to finding your purpose, I promise you will remember the physical location where you make your discovery. I committed to hiking around a beautiful lake near my home every day until I "found" a purpose statement that would guide my life. Besides the beauty of the terrain, I knew I would be free there from the distractions that often prevent us from making meaningful discoveries. Over the course of that time, I used my smartphone *only* to record notes that came to mind as I hiked. No email, no Internet, no text messaging.

My discovery didn't happen on Day 1, Day 2, or even Day 7.

It happened on Day 10.

I was approximately forty miles into my search, and there it was. So clear. So real. I grabbed hold of it like a prized possession and I haven't let it go since. Here it is:

"Serving God by serving others to reach their full potential."

At first glance, that statement looks very simple. Your reaction might be: "It took you forty miles to come up with that?" And I would agree with you. It *is* simple, yet powerful - for me. Your purpose statement shouldn't be complex. We find reasons to make too many things in life overly cumbersome. This unneeded complexity creates stress and a lack of follow-through.

Find a purpose that speaks to you and make it your own. Place it somewhere where you will see it multiple times each day. Memorize it, share it with others, and let them know how it has transformed your life. Then watch how others react to that story.

I'm not saying that you need to find a lake and begin hiking in order to find your purpose. However, you do need to commit blocks of time to truly immerse yourself in the experience. This could be an hour in the morning before the kids get up, or any time during the day at a location that is distraction-free. Perhaps you need to leave your smartphone behind, if it will be a distraction. You might be thinking that you don't have time or space, but consider: we find plenty of time to attend meetings every day that add little or no value to our lives. We take up time checking our email dozens of times each day. If it matters to you, you can find the time and the space.

This process may also stir up fears and self-doubts. We might say to ourselves, "Now is not the right time" or "I'm not sure how to move forward." This is called resistance and it can completely control our lives to a point of constant stagnation. To learn more about resistance and methods for overcoming its power, I would encourage you to read Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art*, as well as *Resisting Happiness* by Matthew Kelly.

Back to Breakfast

Back to the student who proposed "Eat breakfast every day" as his purpose statement. At the end of fall semester, each student in that class submitted final papers reflecting on the term and sharing the final version of their purpose statement. His statement lifted off his paper as I read it:

"Contribute to make the world a better place through creativity and imagination."

How did he make this journey? First, by identifying his talents, passion, and a societal need to fulfill. He spoke of his experience volunteering in Seoul when he was younger at a center that offers rehabilitation services for children diagnosed with cerebral palsy. He said that through this exercise of discovering his purpose, he had decided to major in Computer Science, which would position him to provide exceptional services to children who experience similar physical challenges.

How did he discover his purpose? By dedicating both time and space until the discovery was made. He told me he had found a quiet place on campus away from all distractions, and had visited each day throughout the semester.

Conclusion

Stop and reflect for a moment.

Imagine a world in which everyone answered the "three what's," discovering their talents, their passion, and a societal need that was not being met. Imagine that everyone provided themselves with the time and space (that's the "how") to discover their purpose statement. It's our obligation to ourselves and one another to make this journey.

Your purpose awaits you.