

LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS COACHING

Accidentally on Purpose!

Discovering your Life's Purpose

**Philip Henderson
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A presentation to Ethos at Webster University Campus located in the Irvine Spectrum.

I did it on purpose! (Accidentally)

By Philip H. Henderson
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What does it mean when you say that you “*did it on purpose?*” What does it mean when you know that you have lived your life “*on purpose?*” Does purpose mean your job or your title, or how much you earn? When you believe that your purpose in life is to hold a certain position, or to earn a certain amount, or to live in a certain house, you have mistaken purpose for path. A path takes you to your purpose. A purpose is something that you do that affects the lives of others. The other people may be family, friends, coworkers, your local community, or the broad community of mankind. Purpose always has to do with how what you do affects the lives of those you live with every day.



My executive coaching clients want to live a “*purpose-full life,*” not a life by accident. Many people live by accident without knowing that this how they live. You can tell whether you live by accident or on purpose by sitting down and writing your life’s purpose. If you have not done so, you can “purposely” set aside time to write your life’s purpose. Your life’s purpose is not a generic answer. To say that you live to promote your family is not a purpose. To say that you live to honor God is not a purpose. Purpose is personal.

I met a man from a small nation in West Africa whose tribal practices cause every child to be named before he is born. A naming ceremony takes place about three months before the birth of the child. In the naming ceremony, the unborn child is asked why he is coming to the world. When the shaman “*hears*” the child’s answer, that answer becomes the name of the child. Every time that person hears his name, he is reminded of his life’s purpose.

We do not have such ceremonies in America. When a child is born, he is often given a name common in his family. He can become George Foreman, the 3rd, or Sarah, after her mother’s sister. What would your life had been if you had been given

a name that told everyone what you do for your life's purpose? More than merely your occupation, Miller means you owned a flourmill, Smith means you work with metal. What if your name told what you were to be remembered for on your passing?

You are not born with a set of assembly instructions. Often you are expected to follow the family business and that is all there is to it. If you are a woman, you are expected to marry and bear children. If you are a male, you are expected to work and provide financial support for your family. Nowhere is the idea of "purpose" on your mind. Instead of purpose, you think of roles. You can be a husband, wife, mother, father, son, daughter, leader, financial manager, sales director, or a marketing expert—however a role is not a purpose. A role is how you use your time; a purpose is the meaning of what you do.

You may have heard the story about the philosopher who, while out on a contemplative walk around the town noticed men carefully installing bricks in an open area. Curious to know what was happening, especially so because of the great care each man gave to placing each brick precisely in place. Even the mortar was installed with great care. The philosopher approached one of the workers and asked him what he was doing. The man hardly looked up in his reply, "Sir, I am a bricklayer. I am building a wall here. If you don't mind, I'll get on with my work." Dissatisfied with the response but still curious, the philosopher approached another worker with the same inquiry. The second man, stopped, wiped his brow, and then looking the philosopher straight in the eye said, "Sir, this is the location for our new cathedral. Me and me mates are privileged to build the exterior walls of this house of God. Thank you for asking about my work." Two men could be toiling with the same task, but one man is angry while his work mate is filled with bliss. One man has a job; the other man has a purpose. The work does not make the purpose; the man makes the purpose.

You can be a gardener, a lawyer, a chef, a parent, a CEO, an HR professional, or an accountant and each of these roles could have the same purpose in life. The way you make a living is a role, a path. Your purpose is what you choose to leave as a legacy. When you have ceased living, some people will remember you. Some will be who they are because of the influence you made on their lives. Some of us will be remembered by a few loving family and friends. Others of us will be remembered by thousands whose lives were affected by the good work we did in our life.

You can choose your Purpose

When you have chosen your purpose, you can write what it is in a few words. You can explain your purpose to a stranger or a friend. You can choose to work with others who share your purpose. You will be known for your purpose. Without having to explain your purpose, everyone who knows you well will understand your purpose even if he or she has never heard you voice your purpose—your life will be a reflection of that purpose.

My client's most difficult challenge is to discover their purpose in life. I give them an exercise to prepare a mission and legacy statement. The mission and legacy statement is a statement of purpose. The statement serves as a guide for my clients to make daily choices that will advance their mission and their legacy. Mission is the path they are following, legacy is the meaning of that path. For example, a client could choose to become a sales director (path) whose legacy is one of service, integrity, passion, honesty, and square dealing (purpose). Those who choose to purchase from him will describe him as a paragon of a man. They will say about him that he would forgo a sale unless it was in the best interests of his customer. He would refer his customers to other suppliers if the competition's products were superior to his.

When my clients gain a clear understanding of their purpose, making decisions is easy. They can steer to "True North principles" because they understand the path they are following serves their purpose. I give my clients a series of exercises leading up to an exercise that I call, **The Five Envelope Exercise**. I use this exercise to help my client write his first draft of a mission and legacy statement. I encourage my clients to visit the FranklinCovey website to get started on the statement. You might find this useful, visit <http://www.franklincovey.com/msb/> to get your first draft on paper. A Mission and Legacy Statement is in two parts; your mission and your legacy. Together, these elements define your life's purpose. Your purpose can be complementary to mine or at odds with mine. Your purpose may have nothing to do with my purpose. My purpose could be to enhance your success at your purpose. Your purpose could be to inspire others to great achievements or to sacrifice your success to promote the success of someone else.

Ask me what my purpose is. If you were to awaken me from a deep sleep, I would give the same answer. If I were in the midst of a difficult assignment buried deep in the concerns of others, I would give the same answer. If I knew that I would die in 30 days, 30 hours or 30 minutes I would give the same answer. Purpose, once you have discovered it, does not vary. Goals vary. Paths vary, however, purpose is constant.

Try to shake me away from my purpose. Can you offer me a higher purpose? Some might suggest that loving God is a higher purpose. I say to them that loving God is a necessity in life; just as breathing is a necessity—but breathing is not a purpose. Loving God may help point you to your purpose but it is no more a purpose than is breathing. For example, you can love God in a monastery and pray all day long—that can be good for some people; or you can love God and become a physician—but who would say that the purpose of a physician is to love God. Loving God is not a purpose it is a necessity. Even if you are an atheist, you must breathe. Every time you take a breath, you love God. The moment you cease to breathe, then you can stop loving God, but not a moment before. Breathing itself is an act of love for God.

If you cannot write your purpose in a few words, then you may not know your purpose in life. Knowing your purpose at the very least allows you to explain your purpose to others. If you cannot express your purpose to others, then it is time to establish a purpose. I devised an exercise you can do today that will answer two questions. Do you know your life's purpose? If the answer is yes, then let us hear it. If the answer is no, then listen to the questions below, your answers may lead you to discover your purpose. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the Caterpillar tells Alice, "*If you don't know where you are going, then any road will get you there.*"¹ Once you have clarity about your life's purpose, choosing the path that will take you there is infinitely easier. Every choice can be measured against your purpose. Your purpose is a guidepost that clearly marks the way for you.

¹ From Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*,

"Cheshire Puss, she began, rather timidly, as she did not know at all whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. Come, it's pleased so far, thought Alice, and she went on. Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?"

That depends a good deal on where you want to get to, said the cat.

I don't much care where, said Alice.

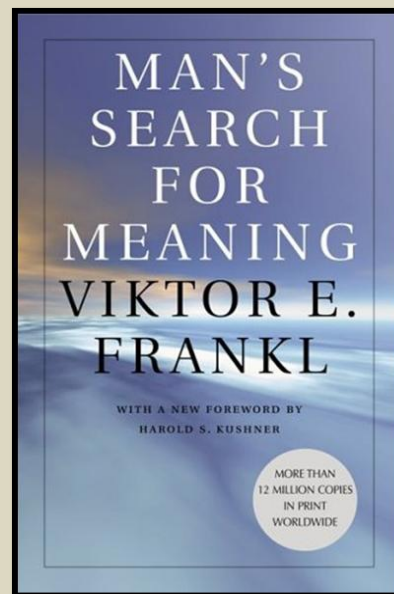
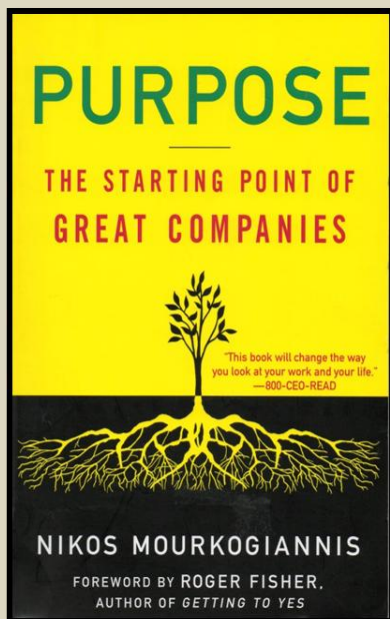
Then it doesn't matter which way you go, said the cat.

... So long as I get somewhere, Alice added as an explanation.

Oh, you are sure to do that, said the cat, if you only walk long enough"

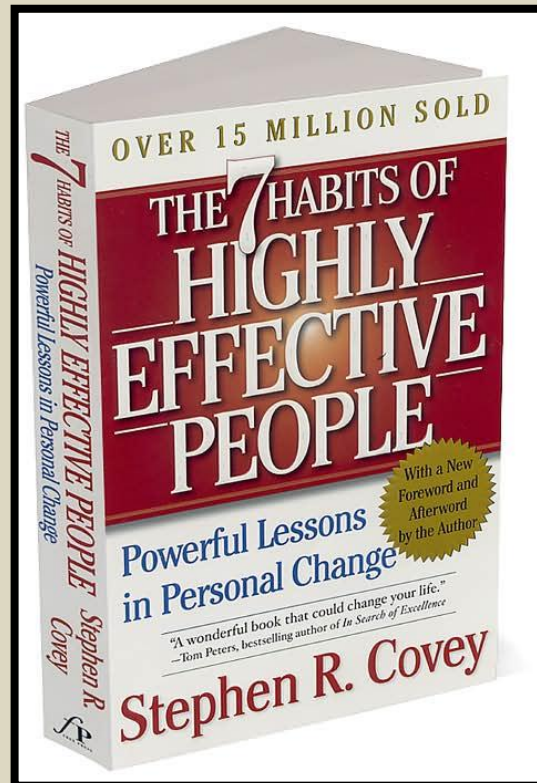
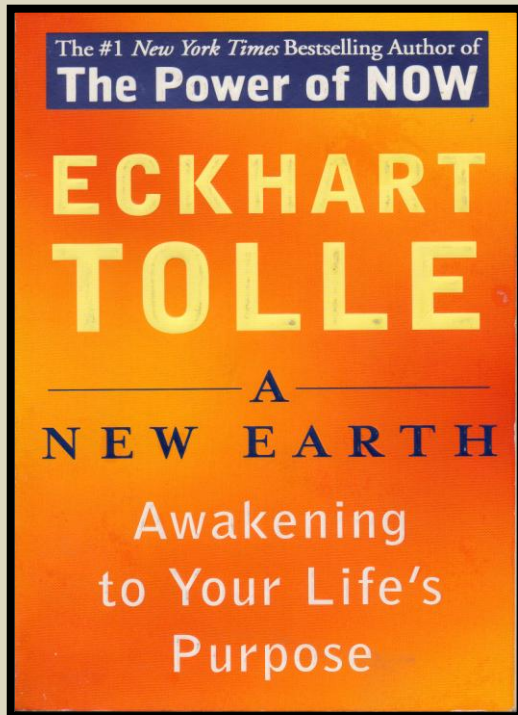
You can visit the FranklinCovey website to get started on writing your purpose statement. A brief visit to <http://www.franklincovey.com/msb/> will get your first draft on paper.

I recommend these two books for a general discussion of the importance of purpose and meaning.



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These two remarkable books may help you discover your life's purpose. I imagine that most of you have The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic somewhere in your personal library. If you have this book heed to habit number 2.

A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose, by Eckhart Tolle is a relatively new voice in this discovery process. He speaks poetically and clearly about being a person who lives with purpose.