

Igniting individual purpose in times of crisis

Creating strong links to an individual purpose benefits individuals and companies alike—and could be vital in managing the postpandemic uncertainties that lie ahead.

by Naina Dhingra, Jonathan Emmett, Andrew Samo, and Bill Schaninger

In these stressful, surreal times, it's understandable for CEOs to fixate on urgent corporate priorities at the expense of more intangible, personal considerations. How important is getting your people to think about their "purpose in life" right now when you're worried about their well-being—not to mention corporate survival?

It's more important than you think. During times of crisis, individual purpose can be a guidepost that helps people face up to uncertainties and navigate them better, and thus mitigate the damaging effects of long-term stress. People who have a strong sense of purpose tend to be more resilient and exhibit better recovery from negative events.¹ Indeed, our research conducted during the pandemic finds that when comparing people who say they are "living their purpose" at work with those who say they aren't, the former report levels of well-being that are five times higher than the latter. Moreover, those in the former group are four times more likely to report higher engagement levels.²

Purposeful people also live longer and healthier lives. One longitudinal study³ found that a single standard deviation increase in purpose decreased the risk of dying over the next decade by 15 percent—a finding that held regardless of the age at which people identified their purpose. Similarly, the Rush Memory and Aging project, which

¹ Stacey M. Schaefer et al., "Purpose in life predicts better emotional recovery from negative stimuli," *PLoS One*, Volume 8, Number 11, 2013, ncbi.nlm.gov.

² See Jonathan Emmett, Gunnar Schrah, Matt Schrimper, and Alexandra Wood, "COVID-19 and the employee experience: How leaders can seize the moment," June 2020, McKinsey.com.

³ See Patrick L. Hill and Nicholas A. Turiano, "Purpose in life as a predictor of mortality across adulthood," *Psychological Science*, Volume 25, Number 7, pp. 1482–6, May 8, 2014, journals.sagepub.com.

began in 1997, finds that when comparing patients who say they have a sense of purpose with those who say they don't, the former are:

- 2.5 times more likely to be free of dementia
- 22 percent less likely to exhibit risk factors for stroke
- 52 percent less likely to have experienced a stroke

And if this wasn't enough, individual purpose benefits organizations, too. Purpose can be an important contributor to employee experience, which in turn is linked to higher levels of employee engagement, stronger organizational commitment, and increased feelings of well-being. People who find their individual purpose congruent with their jobs tend to get more meaning from their roles, making them more productive and more likely to outperform their peers. Our own research finds a positive correlation between the purposefulness of employees and their company's EBITDA⁴ margin.

Against this backdrop, CEOs and other senior executives should pay more attention to individual purpose as companies return to operations and begin feeling their way into the subsequent phases of the “next normal.”

It's a sure bet your employees will be doing just that. People seek psychological fulfillment from work, and, as the crisis recedes and companies ramp up new ways of working, some people will experience friction, and even dissonance, around issues of purpose. Workplace interactions that felt meaningful and energizing face-to-face, for example, may feel much less so over a video call. Meanwhile, other employees will be looking to see if their companies' actions during the crisis matched their companies' high-minded words beforehand—and basing their career plans on the answer. And at companies where employees excelled during the crisis, business leaders will want to find ways to recapture, and sustain, the sense of organizational energy, urgency, and speed—without the accompanying fear and stress.

In this article, we explore the organization's role in individual purpose by highlighting results from an ongoing research project into the intersection of organizational purpose and individual purpose, and examine how the two interact and fuel each other through the medium of the employee experience. Along the way, we highlight ways that companies can help employees find or articulate their purpose, explore how it applies to their working life, and seek to make purpose a tangible part of people's jobs. Finally, we hope to provide an occasion for deeper introspection on the parts of CEOs and other leaders themselves. After all, if we don't reflect on life's direction and meaning when life as we know it feels so threatened, when will we?

Get personal

Individual purpose can be thought of as an overarching sense of what matters in our lives, and we experience purposefulness when we strive or work toward something

⁴ Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization.

personally meaningful or valued. Research shows that most people say they have a purpose when asked, although it's often difficult for them to identify or articulate.

Yet even when a person's purpose is clear, it can intersect with an organization's purpose in counterintuitive ways. Consider Alice, Maya, and Peter—fictitious composites drawn from our experience. All three work for a global healthcare organization with a strong, well-communicated purpose: to transform the lives of patients and their families by developing lifesaving therapies. This is music to Alice's ears—she sees her purpose as alleviating the suffering experienced by people living with chronic diseases; the company's purpose is a big part of why she joined. Maya appreciates the company's purpose, but it's much less inspiring for her than it is for Alice. Maya feels a deeper sense of meaning from taking care of her family and supporting it financially. Peter, meanwhile, clearly sees his purpose as caring for others and alleviating their suffering. Yet unlike Alice, who loves her job because of how well it aligns with her purpose, Peter is saving his paychecks and counting the months until he can quit and begin nursing school, where he expects to start truly living his purpose.

As these examples suggest, what people need from work and what drives them personally can be complicated. Sometimes an individual's purpose aligns perfectly with organizational purpose, as with Alice. But other times it's only a partial match, as with Maya and Peter. And for still other employees, it may be a poor match or none at all.⁵ As CEO, part of your job as organizational architect is to ensure that these two different forms of purpose—organizational and individual—are connected and mutually reinforcing, and are ultimately a consideration in everything from hiring, feedback and incentives, and learning to matching individuals to jobs they will find most fulfilling.

Before you can do any of that, however, you need to help your employees better understand their own purpose and how it operates, starting with the general types that help describe and characterize it. And don't forget: this applies to you, too. The more purposeful, open, and empathetic the leader, the more likely that he or she can instill the trust necessary to encourage people to leave their comfort zones and explore how their purpose might be better met at work.

What we measured

Human values are an important factor when defining individual purpose, as they help people determine what is personally important to pursue in life and work. Therefore, to better understand how people think about and experience purpose, we developed a survey to map the type and intensity of a range of universally held human values including tradition, security, power, and achievement, among others.⁶

Subsequent statistical analysis of the survey responses highlighted nine common ways that people orient themselves toward purpose (see sidebar “Nine types of purpose”). While an individual's purpose may hew quite closely to one of these nine types (Exhibit 1),

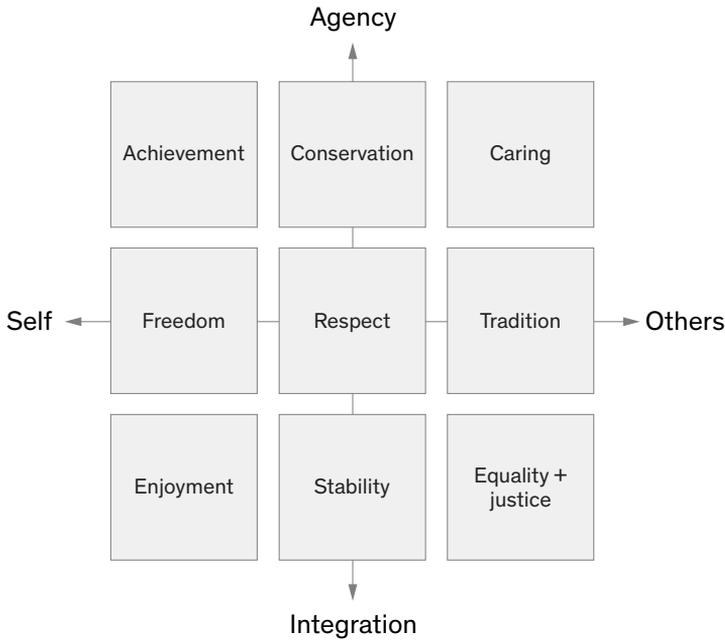
⁵To learn more about designing work to be more meaningful, see Dan Cable and Freek Vermeulen, “Making work meaningful: A leader's guide,” *McKinsey Quarterly*, October 2018, McKinsey.com.

⁶Our survey was adapted from the academic work of Shalom Schwartz, whose theory of basic human values identifies ten values that subsequent research has demonstrated are universally recognized across cultures. For more, see Shalom Schwartz, “An overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values,” *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, Volume 2, Number 1, scholarworks.gvsu.edu.

Exhibit 1

Your individual purpose (that is, where you find meaning) will likely map to some combination of the values below.

Nine types of individual purpose



The horizontal axis reflects the **target** of our work activities, whether directed toward ourselves or toward other people. We may find either or both orientations meaningful. The vertical axis reflects the underlying **motives** for our work activities, ranging from our drive to expand our sense of self to our drive to cooperate and unite with the world around us. Both dimensions may be experienced simultaneously and in combination.

it may instead arise from combinations of them, with the relative emphasis and priority of elements varying from person to person. Exhibits 2, 3, and 4 show three such patterns (or purpose archetypes) that arose from our research.

Academic research and our own experience tell us that an individual's sense of purpose isn't fixed or static—it can be clarified, strengthened, and, for some, may serve as a lifelong aspiration, or North Star. And, while what people find meaningful tends to evolve over long timeframes, it can shift relatively quickly, particularly in response to the kinds of life-changing events that many people are experiencing now as a result of the pandemic, or the more recent racial-justice protests. A leader previously fueled by personal achievement, for example, might emerge from the trauma of these times more motivated by issues of equality or by contributing to community. Or a leader formerly motivated by freedom and independence might find the tug of stability meaningful.

What to do about it

The pandemic has been a cruel reminder for companies everywhere of how important it is to never take healthy or motivated employees for granted. Since individual purpose directly affects both health and motivation, forward-looking companies will be focusing on purpose as part of a broader effort to ensure that talent is given the primacy it deserves.

Nine types of purpose

We surveyed 509 people representing a range of personal demographics (gender, age, ethnicity, and education) and occupational characteristics (industry, sector, and role). We asked them about the type and intensity of their life values by having them rate the importance of a series of statements, each related to a value that academic research has found to be universal. Statistical analysis of the results showed that respondents' life values clustered in one of nine categories. Taken together, our results suggest that an individual's purpose maps to one of the nine—or is formed by combinations of them.

The nine types of purpose, and examples of their characteristics, are as follows:

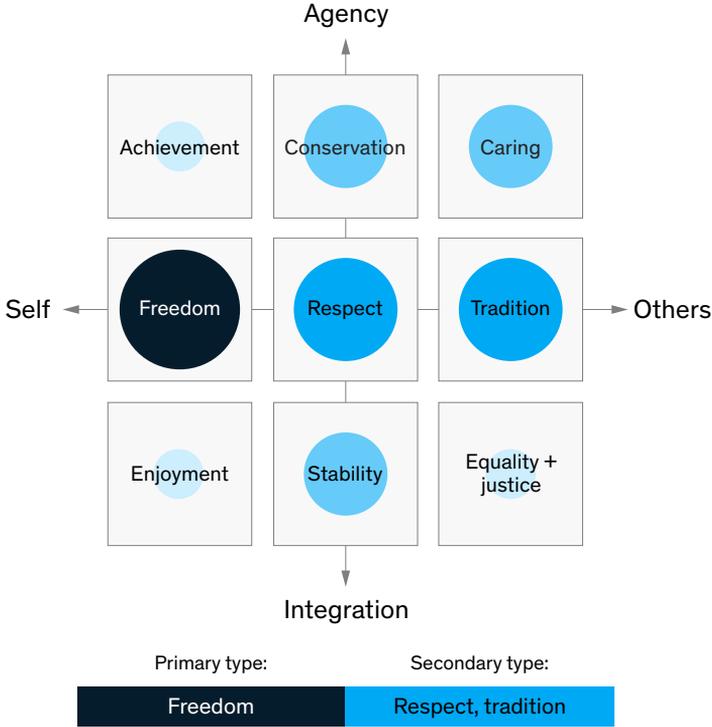
<p>Achievement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Having a sense of authorityBeing the most influential person in any groupHaving high status and powerHaving a high income	<p>Conservation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Working against threats to the environmentRaising awareness of the importance of preserving the environmentCaring for the environment	<p>Caring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Helping the people close to meSacrificing for my loved onesBeing responsive to the needs of my family and friends
<p>Freedom</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Learning things for myselfForming my own opinionsChoosing my own goals	<p>Respect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Not being shamed in front of othersAvoiding humiliation	<p>Tradition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Respecting my culture's historyPracticing the rituals of my culture or religionPreserving the established values of my culture or religion
<p>Enjoyment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Having new and different experiencesGoing on adventuresHaving excitement in life	<p>Stability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Respecting authority figuresHaving order and stability in societyAdhering to standard rules	<p>Equality and justice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Listening to people who are different than ITrying to understand people, even when I disagree with themEnsuring everyone is treated fairly

While it may be early days in understanding precisely how an individual's purpose connects to what he or she wants and needs from work—or how these tie to an organization's purpose—now is the time to start figuring it out. Start by simply discussing these matters with your team openly, honestly, and thoughtfully. By treating this as the beginning of an ongoing conversation about purpose, meaning, and what your employees want from work, you can help people better identify and articulate their purpose, and even start finding ways to help them live it more fully at work—an outcome that will benefit everyone.

‘Free spirits’ tend to find meaning in situations where they control what they do and when they do it.

Archetype 1: The free spirit

Higher importance  Lower importance



 <p>Purpose activators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working independently while having opportunities to stress test ideas with others Choosing how I accomplish my goals while still observing the traditions of my family and culture 	 <p>Purpose blockers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being micromanaged or stuck with inflexible processes Being censured in public Being pressured to take a direction that goes against established practices
---	--

And as you get started, remember that your actions and your capacity to lead with compassion play an outsize role now. You will have access to only what your people give you access to. Treat these conversations and resulting insights as the gifts that they are, and you'll increase the odds of seeing more of both.

Start the conversation—yesterday

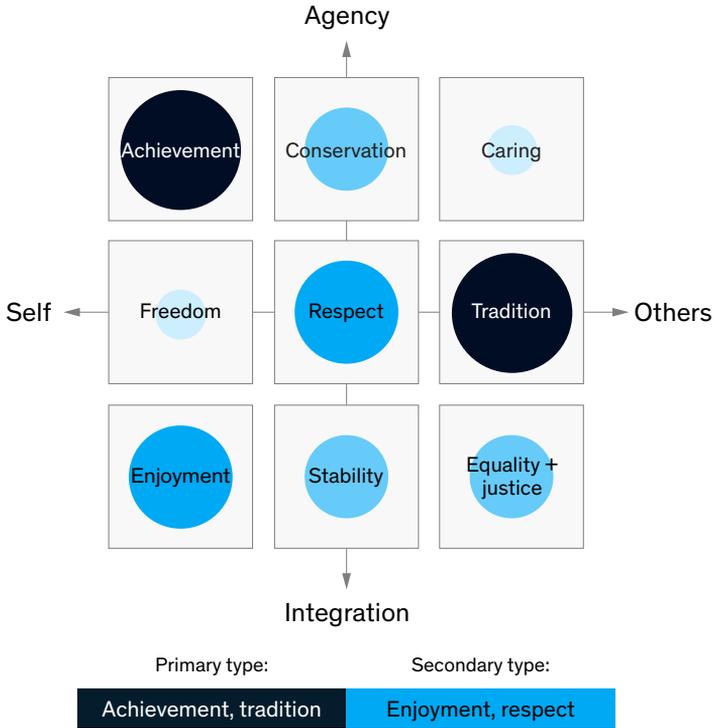
During times of crisis, effective leaders are important sources of trust, stability, meaning, and resilience. They also play a vital “sensemaking” role for those around them. For many people in your organization, the urgency of this time is to blend exhilaration with extraordinary stress. Those who compartmentalize the pressure and

Exhibit 3

‘Achievers’ find purpose in accumulating social or material resources; they often find meaning in self-improvement.

Archetype 2: The achiever

Higher importance  Lower importance



 <p>Purpose activators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities to increase earnings and gain stature in the eyes of others Being the authority on a subject and impressing others Opportunities for fun and excitement 	 <p>Purpose blockers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling invisible or lacking influence in a group Fear that failure will lead to humiliation Having to act out of sync with one's culture/religion
---	--

trauma may face stress, anxiety, and burnout later—and purpose will be a catalyst in these dynamics.

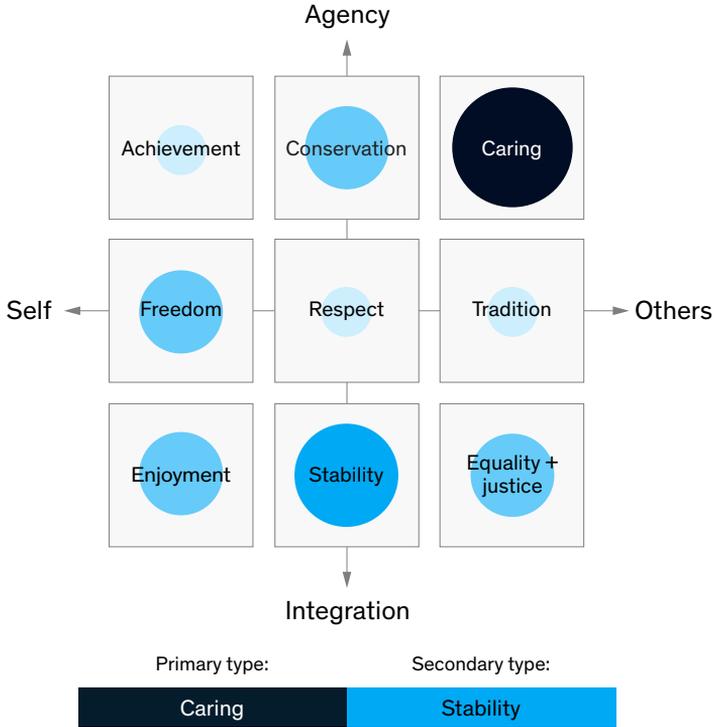
Consider, for example, the teammate who feels tension between the imperative to meet foundational needs by earning a paycheck, and the frustration (which may be unconscious) of not having the time, opportunity, or license to focus on their purpose. Or the colleague who thrives on face-to-face interactions with customers and coworkers but finds days filled with video interactions draining and deadening. People need empathetic and caring leadership to help be aware of, understand, and grapple with such tensions as they develop.

Exhibit 4

‘Caregivers’ find meaning in choosing how and when they care for others; they care less about material gain or what others think of them.

Archetype 3: The caregiver

Higher importance  Lower importance



 <p>Purpose activators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being able to help others or mentor colleagues A work–life balance that provides opportunities to respond to the needs of family and friends A sense of security and order 	 <p>Purpose blockers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being pulled away from family and friends or isolated from colleagues Uncertainty, or lack of an orderly path
--	--

Simply talking about the pressures can help heighten your colleagues’ sense of purpose at work, as will encouraging your team to step back from the immediacy of the crisis to focus on the bigger picture and what matters to them.

One effective way to do this is through periodic, guided conversations with your direct reports. Don’t think of these as project check-ins, or even as purpose check-ins, but rather as *empathetic check-ins*—a chance to understand how employees are doing and learn how you can support what they need. Have your company’s managers make these meetings a recurring part of how they lead as well.

Make personal reflection a business priority

By creating a space for honest discussions about purpose—including your own—your team will hopefully be more willing to explore the topic for themselves. A “purpose audit” can help. Create the time that people need to consider how their work is fitting into the bigger picture, using the nine types of purpose as a starting point to explore what elements resonate and why. When people can articulate a purpose, do they feel they are living it? What barriers prevent them from living it more fully? How—if at all—have recent events changed the way they think about purpose? One deceptively simple ice-breaking question that we’ve seen elicit rich conversations is: “When do you feel most alive?”

Sharing purpose with others can build accountability and act as an accelerator that helps people consider where and how to bring more of their purpose to work. With your help, the crisis may provide new opportunities for employees to take action in line with their purpose. It may even motivate you to further explore your own sense of purpose and see how you could benefit as well (see sidebar “One CEO’s story”).

Help people take action

There are many things leaders can do to help ignite purpose for their colleagues. For example, one large retailer dedicates time for a regular “purpose pause,” where teammates are encouraged to celebrate their involvement in local community projects and to identify new ones to support. The company uses an app to spur connectivity and increase the odds that good ideas are applauded and shared.

For its part, Zappos created a customer-service line to answer questions and help find solutions for people dealing with the pandemic. The kicker? Callers need not be Zappos customers, and the topics can be anything—from food delivery and finding essential supplies to literally anything on a caller’s mind. To be sure, with business slower and call volumes down, the hotline gives the company’s customer-service reps something to do between their regular calls. Yet it also offers reps the chance to help others and connect with them, which is one way that people can help satisfy the psychological need for belonging. And research around job design suggests that even simple tasks are perceived as more meaningful when our psychological needs are satisfied.

As these examples suggest, purpose and meaning can be valuable considerations in adjusting day-to-day routines or even in designing roles. But even if you’re not ready to go as far as Zappos, there are other ways to give people license to be purposeful now. When possible, create opportunities, such as the following, for people to live their purpose during this time by tailoring projects, support, communication, and coaching to suit different needs, values, and situations:

- For the up-and-coming leader who views her purpose as freedom to learn, grow, and experiment, empower her to try new things in service of customers and stakeholders, keeping projects within guardrails but without multiple layers of oversight. Be sure to frame any negative outcomes as learning, not failure.
- For a team member who values preserving and upholding tradition, invite him to help plan important organizational or community rituals (like team events or company days). Such events create connection and can be critical to build and maintain culture.

One CEO's story

One CEO found that articulating his sense of purpose was the first step to becoming a more observant, empathetic leader. Here's his take.

"I want the relations I form to be true, to have relevance, depth, meaning. This is a big part of how I see my purpose. I'm willing to make myself vulnerable and open to connect with people in a truthful and meaningful way.

"[Since articulating my purpose,] I believe I'm more honest with myself and faster to recognize if I might be doing something that's motivated by my own vanity, fear, or pleasure. I know I'm more open to feedback and criticism. I spend less time talking about weekend or vacation plans and more time exploring what motivates, frustrates, or scares people—the things that really matter. I make faster connections with people now—in part, I think—because of this.

"With my team, I do my best to check in emotionally during meetings, and not be afraid to share my own weaknesses and doubts. If I don't know the answer, I'll say so, and I find all of this strengthens my impact and credibility as a CEO. The idea of being vulnerable in front of a group of people is no longer something to be ashamed of, but rather a strength. I'm a better listener now.

"Whenever I feel disconnected from my purpose, I get flustered, lose sleep, and generally feel stressed out. This is a biological signal for me to stop, get back to what matters, and search for whatever it is that feels *untrue* so I can make it truthful."

- For colleagues whose purpose is aligned with equality and opportunity for others, consider connecting them to the forefront of company initiatives and projects where your organization is helping the communities in which you operate.

Keep in mind that some people view their purpose as caring and providing for those closest to them—and practically everyone else in your organization will be feeling anxiety around these issues right now. Be sure to tailor your communication to address their needs, too, so that this time takes less of a toll on their personal purpose.

Reimagine a purpose-led future

As much as the pandemic is testing your leadership right now, the real test with purpose starts as the immediate crisis fades and the hard work of reimagining and reforming your business for a postpandemic world begins. Embedding and activating individual purpose more thoroughly in the various elements of the employee experience will take hard work and commitment. While it's too soon to say what best practice will look like, it's safe to say that the more you can connect purpose to the following areas, the more likely the benefits will build upon one another:

- **Recruiting.** Explicitly connect the purpose of the organization to the personal contributions an individual in the role could bring to the company. By backing it up with real, purpose-rich stories from hiring managers who have seen this in action, you will increase the odds of attracting people whose purpose fits well with the organization and the work, and help them be productive sooner.

- **Onboarding.** Make purpose part of the first conversation with both the manager and the team to build a shared vocabulary. Start people off right by helping them reflect on how the work and the organization connect with their own purpose. In fact, applied research finds that encouraging new employees to focus on expressing personal values at work allowed them to significantly outperform peers, be more satisfied at work, and increased retention by more than 30 percent.⁷
- **Feedback and performance management.** The value of strengths-based feedback is well known; purpose is a natural extension that can help connect an individual's broader self to their work. Activating purpose during feedback sessions may even help buffer people against the uncomfortable aspects of receiving negative feedback. Try starting a performance conversation with a reflection on purpose and how the work the individual has been doing—as well as their performance—illuminates their purpose and values.

Other employee journeys present moments for purpose as well. Ask yourself at each point: How could we make purpose part of this conversation or interaction? What unexpected benefits might result? How might the accumulation of these small moments build a purpose movement in my team and organization?

These are challenging times, and people who are able to draw energy and direction from a sense of individual purpose will weather them with more resilience, and will recover better afterward. Companies that embed and activate individual purpose in the employee experience can benefit as well, including through improved performance. And, of course, purposeful work and a purposeful life are enduring benefits in and of themselves—ones that everyone should have the opportunity to seek. Q

Naina Dhingra is a partner in McKinsey's New York office, **Jonathan Emmett** is an associate partner in the New Jersey office, **Andrew Samo** is consultant in the Montreal office, and **Bill Schaninger** is a senior partner in the Philadelphia office.

The authors wish to thank Svetlana Andrianova, Cristina Escallón, Helen Hu, David Mendelsohn, and Amy Vickers for their contributions to this article.

Copyright © 2020 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved.

⁷ Daniel M. Cable, Francesca Gino, and Bradley R. Staats, "Breaking them in or eliciting their best? Reframing socialization around newcomers' authentic self-expression," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Volume 58, Number 1, pp. 1–36, February 8, 2013, journals.sagepub.com.