

Tools to help derive purpose for leaders

Offered by [Clive Wilson](#), author of “Designing the Purposeful Organization” and Designing the Purposeful World”, senior consultant with [Primeast Ltd](#)

Coaching for purpose

Introduction

This method uses the energy of consciousness to help a coachee to understand their personal purpose and the things they may wish to do to deliver it. It can also be adapted for group work with a leadership team.

It is based on the premise that purpose is what happens when any life form is placed in any context. The life-form will naturally respond in order to thrive in that context. Dr Bruce Lipton discovered this in his work with stem-cells. If he changed the solution in his petri dishes, the cells would become specific cells (such as heart or muscle) according to the new solution. Dr Bruce Lipton’s work is easily accessible in his published books and in numerous [YouTube videos](#).

With humans the same applies. However, because of our evolved consciousness, we have the ability to observe what we think of ourselves and of our world. This is critically important because it is the energetic reaction between who we think we are and how we perceive our world that gives rise to our purposes.

Note the plural use “purposes”. We live in numerous contexts and therefore have many purposes at many levels (for example in our lives, families, workplace, society – down to a particular meeting or one relationship). As coaches, we need to understand the context we are working with alongside our client.

In simple terms, our job is to follow the energy of our coachee and work with that to raise their awareness (to self, context and the reaction between the two) in the most helpful way. We can use the following framework as our internal guide. This may be done in a linear way but, as we become more confident with the method, we may navigate freely to achieve best results. It should not be regarded as a prescriptive method, rather it is a tool to be adapted by an experienced coach.

1. **Who are you?** We begin with this open question, phrased in the most useful and appropriate way for our coachee. In its raw form it assumes no context and can therefore lead in any direction according to the consciousness of the coachee. Where we wish to narrow the context, we can do so. For example, “Tell me about who you are at work?” As the coachee talks, we listen and watch for energy (such as eyes lighting up, emotion, sitting up and so on) and we let our intuition guide us to further questions such as “I noticed your eyes light up when you spoke about ... Tell me more.” When we feel the coachee has developed a strong sense of positive self-

awareness in the moment we are ready to move to stage 2. Note the emphasis on positive self-awareness. This exploration may well expose limiting beliefs which may be dealt with here or separately as appropriate. Note also that this work may progress over many sessions with the coachee exploring many aspects of themselves such as their beliefs, values, strengths and achievements. We can be guided by what the coachee wishes to explore, at what depth and by when.

2. **What's happening?** Again, this can be narrowed by adding "...at work" and so on. Once more we notice the coachee's energy (positive and negative) and follow our intuition to explore things that may be important. We do this until we feel we have explored the most important aspects for our coachee. Along the path, we may have chance to help our coachee reframe their context in a more helpful way, such as identifying hope where there is mainly despair etc. Note that a person can just as easily have limiting beliefs about their context as they do about themselves.
3. **How are you feeling?** There will naturally have been an energetic reaction in consciousness for the coachee and this is a "time-out" for them to notice their feelings which, once more, we can intuitively follow until the most important and helpful feelings are out. If we feel we are missing something, we can use good coaching questions such as "What's really important here that we haven't talked about?"
4. **What role and purpose is there for you in this?** Notice this is the first time we have specifically mentioned purpose. That is because, as stated in the introduction, purpose is the consequence of the energetic reaction between the sense of self (Step 1); the sense of context (Step 2); and the feelings that arise (Step 3). If it is helpful, we can encourage the coachee to connect to a specific purpose. We can also ask questions to deepen the sense of purpose by asking further "Why?" questions (see also my tool on connecting leaders to a bigger or deeper purpose). There is good chance that, as the coachee goes deeper into the purpose, we become inspired as their coach. If this is authentic, we may wish to share our feelings with the coachee. This is a controversial subject as some coaches may consider this to be leading the coachee. This is a good subject to explore with our coaching supervisor if we have one.
5. **What needs to happen next?** This is a chance for the coachee to take stock of any number of things that they need to attend to. There will be a "best way" for us to ask this question. For example, if many issues have been raised, we might acknowledge "Wow, we've covered a lot of ground. Out of all of this, what would you like to attend to now and in the coming days?" Of course, with deep emotional revelations, they may just wish to take things away to reflect. We can help our coachee to make the connection between things that need to happen, and any purpose(s) mentioned in the previous step.
6. **Is there anything you need to commit to?** We can help our coachee to translate things that need to happen into things they need to do. It may be appropriate to

help them formulate SMART objectives – or not – according to our coaching relationship.

7. **What support do you need and who from?** Keeping this question open will help the coachee to think about and name people who can support them. This may include colleagues, friends, family and their coach.
8. **How would you summarise what we've done today?** A lot of ground has been covered so asking for a summary will help us gauge what has truly happened for our coachee and to help them fill in any memory gaps.
9. **How do you feel?** Hopefully the coachee will feel energised and it is good for them to say so as it will help them to be resourceful on the road ahead.

Connecting leaders to a bigger or deeper purpose

Introduction

This tool is offered in two parts but there is a cross-over in the rationale. So, parts of one can be used in the other at the discretion of the coach or facilitator. I only frame them as 1-1 and group because that is the way I tend to use them most often.

The tool is based on a simple premise that leaders (in my experience), even at the highest level, often “sell their purpose short”, meaning “playing themselves small”.

I describe some case studies in my books, “[Designing the Purposeful Organization](#)” and “[Designing the Purposeful World](#)”, like the African Revenue Authority that described its purpose as “collecting taxes to the highest standards”. This was in one of the world’s poorest countries and could be translated as “taking money from our neighbours”. But a series of “why” questions translated this into “funding the development of a great nation”. Then there was an organisation that “wrote software for medical scanners”. Their unstated purpose was more about writing the software than the lives they saved as a consequence. The examples are endless.

Simon Sinek describes the need to focus on our deep “why” in his YouTube video on “[The Golden Circle](#)”. This is actually a really good warm-up for leaders before having a conversation on purpose.

1-1 Conversations on Purpose – asking why

For me, these usually happen in the coaching arena and often during a conversation about a Barrett values assessment. It may be a leader who has received feedback that others would like to see them be more future-focused, visionary, strategic, global-thinking and so on.

Such data will prompt me to ask them WHY their organisation does what it does. The answers often relate to the “what” rather than the “why”. For example, an IT leader may say that they install fabulous systems because it will solve a problem for their customers. Another “why” may elicit that this will make the customer’s work more efficient. But we still haven’t touched the inspiration. It may take a couple more “whys” to reach the conclusion that the IT leader improves efficiency for their customers so they are more able to serve humanity by focusing on their purpose (whatever that may be). It may be a hospital that is saving people’s lives or an energy company that is keeping the wheels of industry turning.

This exercise may seem simple, but it actually takes courage to be persistent with a senior leader in a manner that really challenges their assumptions. However, the value of reaching this inspiring purpose is immense. With this realisation, as coaches, we can encourage the leader to build this purpose into conversation as often as possible – with employees, peers, customers and suppliers. People are inspired by being of service to humanity, directly or indirectly.

Group conversations on Purpose

This second part to this tool builds on the first, taking it into a group setting. Most often, in my experience, this will be a leadership team but there is special value in working with a group of mixed stakeholders so the purpose can be seen through many lenses. If it is a leadership team, think about asking some members to really focus on other perspectives (e.g. staff, customers, suppliers etc).

The method is essentially a use of “thinking rounds”, a tool well known by many facilitators.

Depending on group size and space layout, arrange a circle of chairs. Have an initial conversation with the group about the power of asking “a deep why” to establish their collective purpose. Maybe show the Sinek “Golden Circle” video as a warm-up.

In the first round ask people in turn to say why their organisation exists. Ask those not speaking to listen deeply and note things that are said which they find to be inspirational. In the second round, ask people to say (again in turn) what they had heard that was most inspirational. In my experience, a strong sense of purpose(s) will arise.

Note the plural of purposes here. It is not unusual for one primary purpose to be named. However, other purposes are really worth capturing and noting which stakeholder groups they serve. For example, purposes such as providing meaningful work and careers for staff or delivering shareholder returns so that pension funds can provide a livelihood for retired people are valuable purposes, even though they may not be the primary purpose.

It is a good idea to capture this information in an inspiring manner, perhaps in the form of a stakeholder charter.

These tools also work very well in a virtual context!