

MEANING:

A KEY DRIVER OF
IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

*James Bowen and Brian MacNeice
Co-Founders and Managing Directors*

OVERVIEW

WHEN PRESSURE TO PERFORM IS STRONGER THAN PERCEIVED MEANING IN AN ORGANISATION, PEOPLE REACT NEGATIVELY WHEN PRESSED TO IMPROVE THEIR PERFORMANCE. WE EXPLORE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEANING AND PRESSURE, AND WHAT YOU CAN DO TO LEVERAGE IT TO YOUR ORGANISATION'S ADVANTAGE.

A client posed an interesting problem to us recently:

“I have a team that is underperforming. But every time i try and push them to perform better it has the opposite effect. Their performance gets worse! What am i doing wrong?”

The answer lies in our understanding of what drives performance in groups of people, and the dynamics of meaning versus performance pressure.

OUR RESEARCH: THE POWER OF MEANING

Our research into high performance institutions has taught us the power of meaning as a key driver of performance. In organisations like the elite armed forces (the US Navy Seals, British SAS and Royal Marines, for example), the firefighters of New York, or humanitarian aid agencies like Médecins Sans Frontières, the concept of meaning is very powerful. Here, people do what they do not for financial reward but for something much deeper than that. In each case the pay is not that good yet the risks are massive, indeed potentially fatal if things go wrong. People who work in these environments are motivated by a strong connection to what they value. When these circumstances prevail – that is to say the strength of meaning far outweighs any perceived pressure to perform – individuals are motivated to perform well beyond the reasonable boundaries of what might be expected.

MEANING VERSUS PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

The opposite occurs if that equation is reversed. When the pressure to perform is stronger than perceived meaning in an organisation, people react negatively when pressed to perform better. Why? Because it doesn't matter enough to them. Why should I go the extra mile or make that additional effort if I don't care as much?

This takes us back to our frustrated client. Our instinct told us that the reason his efforts were failing was because the performance pressure he was applying was much stronger than his team's perception of meaning in their role.

We were able to verify this by measuring both dynamics through our High Performance Diagnostic Tool, a technique we use with clients to gauge the relative strength and weaknesses of various components within their performance environment. The results backed up our gut call: the performance pressure metric was much higher than the meaning metric for the team. Until this was addressed the problem would remain.

FOSTERING A SENSE OF MEANING: AN EXAMPLE FROM THE PHARMACEUTICAL SECTOR

In this case, the team was working in a pharmaceutical plant in a relatively mundane operational role. As part of the solution we developed a direct link between the work they did and the patient outcomes it led to down the line. We captured patient stories in striking visuals and prominently displayed them on the operations floor. We even invited some patients to the plant to tell staff first-hand of the dramatic impact the product being manufactured on site had on the quality of their lives. We created a genuine connection between the team's role and the impact this had on people they had never met. This drove a much deeper sense of purpose in their day-to-day role.

Six months later we measured the meaning and pressure metrics again: this time, meaning was stronger than the perceived pressure to perform. Then, and only then, was our client in a position to raise the pressure to perform with his team and get a positive response. Productivity improved dramatically. Ironically, he did nothing different to what he had tried previously. The difference was that his team now had a much deeper sense of the broader significance of their work that led to a more positive response to his promptings.

If you are striving for better performance in your people, don't ignore the importance of meaning because it really matters!



CONTACT

Unit A1, East Point Business Park, Fairview Dublin 3, Ireland
T. +353 (1) 240 0294 E. info@kotospartners.com
www.kotospartners.com