

Are You Deciding On Purpose (extended interview)

Counselor and author Richard Leider explains his laws for finding purpose in your work and life.

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From his home in Scandia, Minnesota, 40 miles from Minneapolis, author, speaker, and counselor Richard Leider overlooks the St. Croix River and acres of woods-the kind of natural environment that he says contributes to better decisions about work and life. A founding partner of The Inventure Group, a Minneapolis-based training firm whose mission is to help individuals, leaders, and teams discover the power of purpose, Leider counts among his clients such high-powered companies as AT&T, Caterpillar Inc., General Motors, Motorola, and 3M-organizations where he both coaches executives and teaches in executive programs. His books include *Repacking Your Bags* (Berrett-Koehler, 1995, with David A. Shapiro) and *The Power of Purpose* (Berrett-Koehler, 1997). He also publishes *On Purpose*, "a journal about taking charge of your work/life."

What has distinguished Leider throughout his three decades as a career coach and counselor is the philosophy he brings to difficult decisions about work and life. Leider's activities as a long-time board member of Outward Bound and his annual backpacking safaris to Tanzania, East Africa testify to his conviction that interaction with nature is an important part of reflection and self-knowledge. At the heart of his approach to counseling is a belief that each individual is born with a reason for being and that life is a quest to discover that purpose.

Fast Company spoke with Richard Leider about his "laws" for making decisions on purpose.

1. Life is a spiral.

People today are intimidated by how much choice they have. There are almost too many career choices, too many life choices. People are overwhelmed at times by the decisions they get to make-and have to make-about their jobs, their families, their businesses, their futures. There are so many variables today: Where will you work? Where will you live? What do you want for yourself? What do you want for your family? If you don't have a way to sort it all out, you can become paralyzed.

I have a visual exercise that helps you understand the choices you have to make at different points in your life. Draw a little spiral, something like a

tornado going upwards. That spiral represents the different phases you encounter in your life. There are times in life when you're on a plateau, where things are well balanced. Then along comes a triggering event that knocks you into limbo. When that trigger occurs, you have to put all your energy into handling the situation, whether it's an emergency at work, the death of a close friend, or your own health crisis.

That puts you into the third part of the spiral: a period of uncertainty. Something is ending, something else is about to begin-but you're between the ending and the beginning. To get out of limbo, you have to look at everything you've been carrying with you. You have to unpack your bag and then repack it, so you can go on to the next phase of your life.

Today more and more people are being struck by more and more triggers. One out of two marriages ends in divorce. Every eight seconds, one of the country's 76 million Baby Boomers turns 50. In the workplace, companies have downsized and reengineered, and people have become free agents. As a consequence, more people are asking themselves where they're going, what they're going to do with the rest of their lives, and what really matters to them. These aren't decisions you can just think your way through. They involve emotions more than ideas-how we feel about ourselves, more than how we think about ourselves.

2. Answer these two questions.

Ask yourself these questions and answer them honestly: What do you want? And how will you know when you get it?

People really do have their own solutions. The problem is, either they don't know how to discover them, or they avoid discovering them. But if you want to come up with good decisions for your work and your life, simply ask those two questions-because it all comes down to very simple things.

3. Feed these three hungers.

There are three hungers that people are trying to feed throughout their lives. The first is to connect deeply with the creative spirit of life. Sooner or later, most people come to recognize that there is some sort of creative energy that infuses all of life. They feel a hunger to touch that energy and to be touched by it. That doesn't mean that you have to be a creative person in a classic sense-to make your living as a painter, a dancer, a writer, or an actor. It could mean an experience as universal as bringing a child into the world, or helping to nurture and shape a life. It could mean finding ways to infuse the workplace with more creativity and more playfulness.

The second hunger is to know and express your gifts and talents. The people I have met in my 30 years as a career counselor are always absolutely sure that they have some unique talent. They may not know what it is yet. They

may not know how to express it. It may have nothing to do with how they earn a living or what they do at work. But they know that they have something within them that they have to contribute. And this feeling lasts throughout your lifetime: The healthiest seniors I've met continue to explore their gifts and abilities, long after they've left the workplace.

The third hunger is to know that our lives matter. Everyone wants to leave behind some kind of legacy, some kind of personal mark. It doesn't have to be great or magnificent. But human beings know that at one level, we each have a own unique thumbprint, and we all want to leave that print behind for others to see that we've been here. We can be successful, make a lot of money, reach a certain status, but it will be success without fulfillment. Fulfillment comes from feeding these three hungers.

4. Discover the four factors of every decision.

No matter what decision you're facing, the same four elements apply. First, discover how to live from the inside out. You absolutely have to start with yourself, not with the external demands of the situation. Second, discover your gifts. What is it that makes you unique? What song do you want to sing? Third, discover what moves you. Where do you find joy? A decision that connects with your own emotions is much more likely to succeed. And fourth, discover solitude. Go to a special place where you can find quiet. If it's the mountains, take the time to get there. If you can't go there, create a space in which you can find a similar peace of mind. In solitude, you're much more likely to deal with the first three elements of this process.

5. Answer the ultimate question.

The ultimate question is, What is your vision of the good life? In this culture, there's a tendency to talk about the good life in consumerist terms. It's all external. We measure the good life by the car we drive, the Scotch we drink, the designer brand we wear, the community we live in. In doing research for my books I ask people for their definition of the good life. Remarkably, I hear the same answer: The good life means living in the place where you belong, being with the people you love, doing the right work-on purpose.

You can boil it down to those four elements. You live in a place where you feel you belong. You're with people you love, and your relationships are working-including your relationship with yourself. You've got the right work: You're using your talents on something you believe in, in an environment that fits who you are. And you're doing it all on purpose: It fits your overall philosophy.

With all of those elements, you look at your life and work from the inside out. They're all about you as an individual, about creating meaning for yourself, rather than having the outside world create it for you.

6. Make every job search an in-venture and an adventure.

Looking for a job is so much a part of everyone's experience, and is so important to each of us, that not only is it worth talking about on its own terms, but it also relates to the much larger issue of personal direction. Start with a fairly simple fact: If you don't know what you're looking for, almost any job will look great. And if you don't know where you're going, a lot of paths will take you there. But if you do care where you work and where you're going, how do you assess what's right for you?

We all need good information to make good decisions. There are two parts to good information gathering. The first is internal-I call it "in-venturing." It means taking a long look inside yourself. For some people-particularly tough-minded, old-school businesspeople-that can be very difficult. This personal reflection stuff is not their cup of tea. They're not interested in it, and they're not comfortable with it. For others, it's not only part of who they are-they've built time for it into their life. By participating in programs such as Outward Bound, they try to live a more conscious, reflective life.

Whether you're comfortable with it or not, to make a good life decision, you have to answer some hard questions about who you are and what you want. I believe we all have answers to those questions-we all have mental maps that express our innermost sense of ourselves. In-venturing gives us the quiet and the time to discover those maps.

Then, after you know more about your map, you're ready for the second part of good information gathering: adventuring. Adventuring takes you out into the world, prepares you to find the people and environments that fit your needs, suit your talents, and match your map. Of course, in reality, you don't first do in-venturing and then do adventuring; they happen simultaneously.

But frequently, in-venturing doesn't happen at all-people simply avoid it. An event will trigger a change, but instead of taking time for reflection, they go back out into the world. And what they find is the same kind of job, the same kind of situation that didn't work for them before.

You see the same pattern in both work and marriage: You leave a job that makes you unhappy-and then find the same kind of job. You get divorced-and then marry the same kind of person. And typically, you blame the world for these bad experiences, rather than doing self-reflection or finding some coaching to break the pattern.

7. Use this formula for a good career decision.

Over the years, I've devised a very simple formula that lays out the critical factors to consider when you're making a career choice: T + P + E x V.

T stands for talent, and it's where you should begin when you're considering a career choice or a career change. Very simply, the questions are, What are your strengths and weaknesses? How can you focus on your strengths and manage your weaknesses?

Most people aren't using their talents. They didn't choose their career; their career chose them. They got into a line of work because they had to get a job, or somebody told them they'd be good at a job. They were young, they started down a certain path, and they never stopped to ask what their calling might be—not just their job, but their real calling. Then before they know it, they hit midlife, and they're asking themselves, "Why am I doing this? Why did I start down this path instead of following my real talents?"

P stands for passion, or for purpose. Talents develop best in the context of interest. Aristotle said it a long time ago: "Where the needs of the world and your talents cross, there lies your vocation." Ask yourself, "What needs doing in your organization? What needs doing in the world?" Then put your talents to work on some area of need that you believe in. Choosing your work is your chance to do something more meaningful than getting up in the morning, putting in your time, doing what it takes to pay the bills.

The E stands for environment: What work environment best suits your style, your temperament, your values? I often meet people who have identified their talents and their passion, but who are working in an environment that doesn't permit them to express themselves. When they move to a new environment, one that uses their talents and honors their values, they suddenly find an alignment that works. They discover new energy and new purpose in their work.

V stands for vision—how you see the rest of your life. Talent, purpose, and environment are all about work style and work choice. Vision describes how work fits into the rest of your life. Where do you want to live? How much money is enough? How important are your relationships? What are you doing to stay healthy?

8. Live in the real world.

In an ideal world, you would do what you love, and you would get paid handsomely for it. But in the real world, you're often pulled in two or more different directions. It's become popular to say, "Just follow your bliss and the money will come." I don't believe that at all. These decisions take hard work. You can't simplify life into that kind of wishful thinking.

But what does work is something called natural productivity. It happens when the elements of that formula -T + P + E x V- are in alignment: You do your best when you're using your talents on something you believe in, and when your environment supports your effort. The number-one factor that holds people back is their environment. People have real talents that they're

prepared to apply to something they believe in, but their environment is toxic. They take their talents and sense of purpose to a job across the street-and they shine.

Most people who feel a tension between what they say they want to do and what they find themselves doing simply haven't done their homework. They're waiting for someone else to make the choice for them-or for the world to present them with a corner office, a lot of money, and a life of travel.

9. Don't sell yourself short.

Work can and should give you a sense of joy. You spend 60% of your life doing work or getting ready for it. So to dismiss your work by saying, "I'm just doing this to pay the bills" seems like an enormous trade-off. Are you really willing to trade off 60% of your time just to have money to spend in the time that's left? That's not a good investment. And if money is what motivates you, ask yourself this: What if you could invest in yourself? Would you invest more if you knew you were working on something that used your talents and tapped your passion? If you could invest in yourself, why not invest in your time?

10. Find motivation from without-and from within.

I'm not naive about motivation. External rewards like money play an important role in motivating people. But so does getting recognition for mastery. I know a lot of people who have made a lot of money, and what they want now is the recognition that comes from being at the top of their profession. Another motivator is a chance to work with a team that you value in a place where you feel valued. You love going to work because of the people you're working with. Together you have a chance to create something that really matters. On an internal level, recognizing your talents can be a great motivator: What you want more than anything else is the opportunity to express yourself. For purposes of self-motivation, nothing is more powerful than the desire to demonstrate your talents.

11. Get advice from within-and from without.

I start with one simple truth: All change is internal change. Ultimately, every decision comes from within you-and you can't separate yourself into a work "you" and a life "you." Every decision touches all of you.

That said, it's just as critical to have other people you can turn to for advice and perspective-a personal board of directors. You need a variety of people, each with a different outlook. As you go down the boardroom table, you see your family; you see someone who's been a mentor to you.

I recommend at least one or two people who are "go-to" people-regular sounding boards. You need at least one person you see all the time, someone

who's a great listener and who allows you to make your decision. You're not asking that person to make the decision. You're asking them to listen and to help you with your decision process.

You may even have someone on your board who's no longer alive-but whose opinion you value and with whom you can have a virtual conversation about the decision you're facing.

12. Make your decisions the way senior citizens wish they had.

For nearly 25 years, I've been doing interviews with senior citizens, asking them to look back over their lives and talk about what they've learned. I've conducted more than 1,000 interviews with people who were successful in their jobs, who retired from leading companies after distinguished careers. Almost without exception, when these older people look back, they say the same things-things that are instructive and useful for the rest of us as we make decisions going forward in our lives.

First, they say that if they could live their lives over again, they would be more reflective. They got so caught up in the doing, they say, that they often lost sight of the meaning. Usually it took a crisis for them to look at their lives in perspective and try to reestablish the context. Looking back, they wish they had stopped at regular intervals to look at the big picture.

They also sounded a warning: Life picks up speed. The first half of your life is about getting prepared and getting established. Then time shifts gears. You hit the second half of your life, and everything moves faster. Days turn into weeks, weeks into months, and all of a sudden, you're 65 years old. Looking back, they say, you realize that time is the most precious currency in life. And as they got older, having time for reflection became even more important.

Second, if they could live their lives over again, they would take more risks. In relationships, they would have been more courageous. And in expressing their creative side, they would have taken more chances. I think it was Oliver Wendell Holmes who said, "Most of us go to our graves with our music still inside us." Many of these people felt that, despite of their successes, their music was still inside them. Almost all of them said that they felt most alive when they took risks. Just being busy from business made them numb. Aliveness came with learning, growing, stretching, exploring.

Third, if they could live their lives over again, they would understand what really gave them fulfillment. I call that the power of purpose: doing something that contributes to life, adding value to life beyond yourself. Purpose is always outside yourself, beyond your ego or your financial self-interest.

We all want both success and fulfillment. Success is often measured in external ways, but there's an internal measure of success, and it's called

fulfillment. Fulfillment comes from realizing your talents-adding value and living by your values. Fulfillment comes from integrity, from being who you are and expressing who you are as fully as possible. It doesn't have to do with your job description or the specifics of your work. It has to do with how you bring your self to your work, regardless of what that work is.

Richard Leider is available on the Internet at www.inventuregroup.com.

