



Is a New Purpose Field Afoot?

An Overview of Purpose360



Our country's attention toward creating purposeful lives and work appears to be growing at an unprecedented rate. Various sectors are adapting to capture and encourage the benefits of purpose—from changing corporate recruitment strategies to revamping systems and launching new programs that support students. And with good reason! Research shows that a sense of purpose is correlated with achievement, creativity, and resilience, and even improves psychological and physical health.

But can these efforts coalesce into a field that improves not only individual lives, but society as a whole? Echoing Green hosted the world's first interdisciplinary 360° review of purpose in the United States to find out. »



Four Central Take Aways »



Something big is happening

For what may be the first time in history, we are convinced that something like a larger purpose field is afoot. Purpose has a rich history, but this is a whole new chapter in the purpose conversation.

[But is “field” really the right word?](#)

Purpose360 participants both championed and challenged our use of the word “field.” Some pointed out that fields are often rooted in academia, suggesting that we may be seeing something more like a purpose movement, era, or even a dynamic. Others reminded us that fields have fences, and are designed to keep people out. Overall, participants urged us not to label what was happening too quickly. Rather than build “the field,” they suggested, we might instead hold space for it.

It is drawing an uncommonly diverse group of individuals and institutions

Despite working in different areas—from ministry to employee engagement—Purpose360 participants repeatedly reported feeling as though they were part of the same agenda and identified common threads that connected their work with purpose.

[And it could become even more diverse.](#)

Purpose360 participants debunked the myth that purpose is only for the elite, but recognized that this perception is strong and must be addressed. We explored how we might expand the purpose conversation to include a still broader range of individuals by using alternative language, operating in different spaces, continuing to emphasize that purpose does not only manifest in one’s paid work, etc. They also noted the importance of non-traditional leaders—looking not only at the “Mother Therasas” of the world, but also the “Mother Joneses” down the block doing everything she can for her kids and her community day after day, for instance.

There is a common definition of purpose

Purpose researchers and practitioners in attendance resonated with Echoing Green’s definition of purpose: A boldly acted-upon life aim that is both right for you and good for the world. There was also consensus on smaller points. For instance, that purpose is increasingly being extricated from career, and that it isn’t enough to simply think about one’s purpose; it must be acted upon.

[Yet important nuances also exist.](#)

Most notably, we saw an overarching trend away from capital “P” Purpose, the concept that an individual has one singular purpose that they must find, and toward lower case “p” purpose, the idea that a sense of purpose can be incorporated into one’s life more organically. The former is epitomized by the phrase: “What is my purpose?” whereas the latter is epitomized by the phrase: “How can I live more purposefully?” However, we also saw healthy debate on this point.

More investment is required for social impact

There was a shared conviction that purpose has the potential to transform individual lives and, when those individuals are impact-driven, transform society as a whole. The highly researched benefits of purpose on physical and mental health and productivity are well known, but its more recently researched role in driving impact—though much less talked about—is equally important.

[Guiding the purpose field could have large benefits.](#)

Organizations and companies that claim to be purpose-driven but don’t back up their promises with policies, programs, and other actions can threaten the power of organizing around purpose to impel social impact. What’s more, purpose—a neutral tool that takes on the values of the person wielding it—can also be used to create destruction. For this reason, it is very important that we specifically and intentionally organize around a pro-social sense of purpose, helping to guide the purpose field/movement/era/dynamic in a positive direction.

What do you hope to see happen next?

After the event, we surveyed participants who responded with their hopes for next steps. »



61% wanted to see the group reconvened for additional field-building work



41% supported launching a purpose media campaign around purpose



47% wanted to see the production of new academic research on purpose



Why Field Building?

Changing the way in which Americans think and act is no small task, and we recognize that we cannot achieve the change we hope to see alone. Echoing Green must be one among many interconnected institutions and organizations cultivating a sense of purpose among their constituents. The following affinity groups formed to explore the way in which institutions and organizations in various sectors are, and could be, engaging with purpose in order to drive social impact. »

Business & Society



At Purpose360, individuals such as Eileen Fisher (Eileen Fisher, Inc.), Doug Rauch (Conscious Capitalism), and Ron Cordes (Cordes Foundation) discussed the role of purpose at the intersection of Business and Society

What Purpose Could Do »

Purpose-led companies comprised of purpose-led employees outcompete laggards due to positive consumer response and high employee engagement, productivity and achievement.

One day, all companies will measure social value alongside economic value, fundamentally changing investment.

How We Get There »

Companies need to develop a set of strong social values and actively work to solve social problems, and encourage employees to do the same.

Where We Are Now »

Business leaders are beginning to respond to increased societal expectation that they add value to the larger culture .

Business leaders are increasingly embracing employees' individual purpose exploration partly in response to the demands of the Millennial generation.

Talent Engagement & Organizational Culture



Individuals such as Jane Bowman (Ben & Jerry's), Katie Hunt-Morr (Etsy), Chris Marcell Murchison (HopeLab) and Jenn Lim (Delivering Happiness) discussed the role purpose in Talent Engagement & Organizational Culture

What Purpose Could Do »

Nonprofit organizations/governmental agencies/companies/other work places become more sustainable, innovative operations driven by energized individuals who see their work place as contributing to their overall wellness.

How We Get There »

Internal purpose practices throughout employees' engagement

with a company (i.e. on/off boarding, performance assessments) need to become mainstream.

Where We Are Now »

Human resources departments are recognizing the limits of extrinsic rewards and are considering alternative forms of value, including purpose.

Companies are beginning to encourage employees to bring their whole selves to work, responding from a cultural shift from work/life balance to work/life integration.

Individualized opportunities for employees' purpose to manifest across their work and their lives are being introduced as newer work modalities are normalized (i.e. sharing economy; contingent work).

Coaching & Career Development



Individuals such as Allison Jones (Idealist.org), Trish Tchume (Young Nonprofit Professionals Network), and Pulin Sanghvi (Princeton University Career Services) discussed the role of purpose in coaching and career development

What Purpose Could Do »

The establishment of a sustainable purpose-based economy.

How We Get There »

Work and life-pathing tools and systems needs to be revised, from reworking resumes to tell the story of learning and engagement to establishing more clear pathways to purposeful work.

Where We Are Now »

Explosion of life- and executive- coaches in response to individual interest in purpose coupled with lack of understanding on how to find one's purpose.

Trend is turning from what you do defining who you are to who you are defining what you do. Individuals leading with their personal brands versus a school or company brand and taking an entrepreneurial approach to their career in which even a full-time employer is seen as just one client/one piece of their larger purpose.

Communications, the Media & the Arts



Individuals such as Emily Esfahani Smith (*The Atlantic*, *New York Times*, etc), Rha Goddess (*Move the Crowd*) and Jared Levy (*Guru Communications*) discussed the role of purpose in communications, the media, and the arts.

What Purpose Could Do »

Normalize the production of art that matters, shifting culture and consciousness among individuals and institutions in mass.

How We Get There »

Build arts-based coalitions and movements for collective sway. For instance, continue to push brands to become more purpose driven. This has risks (i.e. purpose-washing, purpose-lite), but can also create authentic shifts within institutions.

Support purpose-oriented startups in journalism.

Where We Are Now »

Purpose is trendy/trending.

Purposeful art tends to preach to, and be consumed by, the “choir.”

Emerging broadcast channels are used to promote individuals’ purpose (i.e. crowd-sourcing, “do-gooder selfies” like the ice bucket challenge).

Rise of the “purpose hero” (i.e. social entrepreneurs) and of the “purpose superstar” (i.e. Oprah).

Retirement



Individuals such as Ann McDougall (*Encore.org*), Emilio Pardo (*AARP*), Paul Irving (*Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging*) and Bill Damon (*Stanford University*) discussed the role of purpose and the stage of life traditionally called “retirement” (otherwise known as the “encore” stage of life)

What Purpose Could Do »

More intergenerational mixing in higher education, faith communities, work places, etc as the pursuit of purpose improves health

and wellness of aging individuals and equalizes opportunities across the age spectrum.

More purpose-driven individuals at the encore stage of life using their time to contribute to a better world.

How We Get There »

Pursuit of purpose for the greater good at the encore stage of life needs to become a cultural norm, changing systems in the process (i.e. establishing 401P accounts).

Where We Are Now »

Growing knowledge about research that purpose improves health, prosperity, longevity and subsequent development of new centers, projects and events dedicated to exploring the power of purpose at this stage of life.

Early adoption of positive terminology about aging such as “encore”.

Faith & Spirituality



Individuals such as Rob Wilson-Black (*Sojourners*), Sheila Katz (*Hillel International*), and Stephen Lewis (*Forum for Theological Exploration*) discussed the role of purpose in faith and spirituality.

What Purpose Could Do »

Exploration of individual purpose leads to a culture of justice and service across spiritual communities.

How We Get There »

Needs to be a shift in focus from dogma/institutional point of view to an individuals’ lived experiences and exploration of how we can connect our souls to our societal roles.

Where We Are Now »

Individuals engage in healthy identity formation within a spiritual community, offering a communal sense of belonging, and connection to a historical narrative. Yet this sense of purpose is not always rooted in justice and service.

The rise of purpose within secular spaces sometimes creates tension in nomenclature and all that it implies between faith-based and secular practitioners (i.e. purpose vs. calling (which implies a call-er) vs. vocation vs. values).

Behavioral & Organizational Sciences



In this group, individuals such as Amy Wrzesniewski (Yale University), Chris White (University of Michigan), and Tony Burrow (Cornell University) discussed the study of purpose & work through the Behavioral and Organizational Sciences

[What Purpose Could Do »](#)

Shift individuals' orientation toward work, normalizing the pursuit of meaning and social impact alongside that of profit, shifting society over time.

[How We Get There »](#)

Responsible companies led by inspiring leaders who are moving the purpose needle need to be championed.

[Where We Are Now »](#)

A community of individuals and institutions interested in purpose and work is emerging, complete with publications, events, and its own set of internal debates emerging across sectors and disciplines.

Philanthropy



Individuals such as Barnaby Marsh (Templeton Foundation), Jon Gruber (Einhorn Family Charitable Trust), and Sara Arlotti (Hummingbird Foundation) discussed the place for purpose in philanthropy.

[What Purpose Could Do »](#)

Forward several philanthropic missions by integrating the health/wellness/relational power of purpose into existing efforts in education, health care, the media, etc.

[How We Get There »](#)

Short-term, purpose needs to be established as a funding priority; long-term, purpose needs to be established as a funding category.

[Where We Are Now »](#)

Although recent research is increasing conversation about the power of purpose within philanthropic organizations, the vast majority of funding for purpose still comes from a small handful of funders.

Higher Education



Individuals such as Howard Gardner (Harvard University), Marta Urquilla (Georgetown University), and Marina Kim (AshokaU) discussed the role of purpose-based innovations in higher education.

[What Purpose Could Do »](#)

During a time in which the return on investment for a college degree is in question, the role of college to instill a sense of purpose, or an internal compass, in students is a unique value add that lends the college experience viability.

[How We Get There »](#)

Redesign higher education around the pursuit of purpose. Embed individual purpose development into every point of contact a student has with the institution (admissions, sports, potentially emphasizing a mission over a major, etc).

[Where We Are Now »](#)

Higher education is experiencing a great deal of disruptions, uncertainty and fear as the return on investment of a college degree is called into question.

New models of learning are appearing and older models are reappearing (i.e. virtual learning, applied/action-research).

Debates on whether higher education should be more, or less, focused on purpose development are rampant (i.e. credentialing vs. deep learning, transaction versus transformation, etc).

Leadership Development



Individuals such as Akaya Windwood (Rockwood Leadership Institute) Terry Chadsey (Center for Courage & Renewal), Scott Sherman (Transformative Action Institute), and Ben Duda (Americorps Alums) discussed the role of purpose in leadership development.

[What Purpose Could Do »](#)

Move us away from the current cultural overreliance on the “heroic leader” and toward a recognition that all individuals can create change, and the power of these individuals working together.

[How We Get There »](#)

Resist the transactional, quantifiable and measureable nature of leadership development as it exists today, and replace it with relational whole ways of being by introducing individualized notions like purpose.

[Where We Are Now »](#)

Instead of asking “can I make money”, leaders are starting to ask “can I make meaning?”

Overall, we are over-investing in supply (individuals seeking a sense of purpose), and underinvesting in demand (changing the systems/contexts and their receptivity to purpose-led individuals).

Strong purpose measurement tools (i.e. scales, mobile tech) that demonstrate the impact of purpose and of various purpose interventions need to be developed.

[Where We Are Now »](#)

Exploring the research-based similarities and differences between meaning/purpose and hedonic happiness.

Developing more purpose interventions.

Growing domestic knowledge of international purpose perspectives, research and interventions.

Psychology & Education



Individuals such as Jenni Menon Mariano (University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee), Kendall Cotton Bronk (Claremont Graduate University), and Mary Gentile (Giving Voice to Values at Babson College) discussed purpose development through the lens of psychology and education.

[What Purpose Could Do »](#)

Humanize schools, workplaces, and other communal spaces by increasing well-being and driving pro-social behavior among individuals.

[How We Get There »](#)

Research on purpose needs to be translated into evidence-based, culturally appropriate interventions that go beyond reflection (i.e. aspirational activities and hypotheticals).

Purpose researchers, educators and other practitioners need to be strategically connected.

What's Next?



Purpose360 participants also identified and engaged in a series of conversations that they believed still needed to happen. These conversations were spurred by the following questions:

How do we effectively connect the various parts of the purpose movement?

Who will fund the development of this field? What role can philanthropy play in bringing together this fragmented field?

What assumptions are we making about this field? Who owns it? Who determines it?

What are the most promising/effective models in cultivating purpose?

How do we democratize purpose?

How do we deal with the shadow side of purpose (i.e. fundamentalism)?

Is saying that purpose needs to be “good for the world” too ambitious/elitist?

What is the relationship between happiness and purpose?

How do we build intergenerational support to confront agism? (Leveling opportunity playing field through purpose)

How can we translate research on purpose into actionable tools for educators and practitioners?

How do we bridge the conversations on purpose that are happening separately among employees and employers?

How do we equip companies and organizations to become better at learning and development?

How do we design effective purpose institutions?

How can we measure company and school success?

Do those of us building this field have a unifying theme or goal?

What are the issues around partnering with organizations/institutions of faith?

How do we define multiple pathways for students to seek/design purpose?

How can a focus on purpose bring higher education back to transformational education?

Why Echoing Green Cares About Purpose »

Echoing Green’s mission is to unleash next generation talent to solve the world’s biggest problems. Echoing Green was one of the first organizations to invest in early-stage social entrepreneurs through our Fellowship program almost 30 years ago, and has since supported nearly 700 organizations led by the most extraordinary purpose-driven leaders of our time. Today, Echoing Green Fellows include the founders of Teach For America, City Year, One Acre Fund, The Global Fund for Children and SKS Microfinance. *One of the crucial ingredients we look for in a future social entrepreneur is a strong sense of personal purpose.*

In 2011, Echoing Green became one of the first organizations to name and invest in the development of an emerging purpose field when we launched our signature Work on Purpose program with the vision to make purposeful decision-making a cultural norm. We do not aim to create a world of social entrepreneurs, but rather

a world of diverse individuals driven by the same sense of purpose that drives the world’s most successful social entrepreneurs whose efforts will help solve more of the world’s biggest problems.

The program has trained over 750 faculty and staff representing nearly 200 colleges, universities, nonprofits, and corporations on our signature purpose curriculum.

Today these individuals are using the curriculum to inspire and equip tens of thousands of emerging professionals to realize their unique way to make a social impact.

For more information on Echoing Green’s perspective on the purpose field, including our core recommendations for its development, please visit our white paper on the burgeoning purpose field.

We would like to thank our 2015 attendees for playing a crucial role in the burgeoning field to which we devote our time, resources, and intentions.

We are also grateful for our 2015 Supporters: The Cordes Foundation, Fitzii, HopeLab, Hearts on Fire, Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund, and Luck Companies.

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