

WORKING WITH PURPOSE

DEFINING AND CLARIFYING YOUR PERSONAL PURPOSE

Thought Leadership



Personal purpose is what connects our most authentic, true inner selves to the impact we have on the world around us.

Purpose is not an enduring characteristic, but rather, the meaning we give to what we do—the principles and standards that guide how we live and the choices we make. Over time, this purpose can and most likely will change, as priorities evolve, you refine what matters to you most, and your resources—those toolkits and assets you use to pursue your purpose—shrink or expand.

The Korn Ferry Institute defines purpose as existing at the intersection of three components: personal values, mission, and resources. You are purposeful when the three elements are in sync, enabling you to act in ways that are intentional, thoughtful, and deliberate. And when these parts align, you create inner strength that gives rise to hope, resilience, and intrinsic motivation.

We wanted to move from all-encompassing yet elusive purpose statements to a concrete, research-based definition that helps you define, clarify, align, and above all, activate your purpose, moving from concepts and ideas to actual realizations. Based on this new definition and our research, the Korn Ferry Institute developed a new conceptual framework of purpose that delineates these core elements as Values, Missions, and Resources, as well as offers a robust typology of different purposes. We have discovered that existing within these components are different types of interrelated missions and values that impact engagement, both at work and in life. With this understanding, we designed the Korn Ferry Purpose Framework as a means for people to uncover their own mission and values,

and connect these elements to their capabilities. The framework is based on research of how people describe their personal missions and how they define important personal values.

By using the KF Purpose Framework, you can define, activate, and connect with your purpose so you can bring your best self to work, and thus, live a more fulfilling life.

After all, if you are clear on the purpose of your work, you are better positioned to navigate and achieve success in an uncertain world. You are better able to manage complexity, tolerate ambiguity, and given today's crises, cope with stress and rise above challenging times. Personal purpose provides an anchor in a fast-changing environment—a core principle to inform behavior and choices.

And, as research shows, when you can pursue your personal purpose, you are more engaged with and committed to your work. You can be deliberate over what you do and how you do it in a way that expresses your values. You can recognize your unique talents and use them for greater influence. And when employees live your purposes, the feeling of self-fulfillment endures.

Personal purpose is aspirational and inspirational. But in order to become more purpose-driven, we must first look within. This is where we find our “why,” “what,” and “how”—those gifts that impact the world.

Methodology

We conducted in-depth field research, with a sample of 1,212 persons, to understand what people really mean by purpose and to what extent their purpose is important and active in their lives. For this examination, we collected information on two of the core components of personal purpose: mission and values.

In our exploratory study (N=333), survey participants were asked to free-write their personal missions, identify up to five important values, and rate some survey items addressing their purposefulness. About two-thirds of the participants were women and the sample is fairly distributed across ages. About 74% of respondents have post-secondary degrees, 64.2% were employed either full-time, and 49.6% have leadership or management experience.

We then used qualitative analysis to group similar responses into sets of common themes. The exploratory study produced three outcomes:

- A purpose taxonomy that delineates eight categories of personal missions.
- Two factors of purposefulness at work: clarity and compatibility.
- 37 values people frequently considered important.

In our confirmatory study, participants were invited again to free-write their personal missions. They were requested to indicate which of the eight categories their personal missions fit with best, and to rate how important each of the 37 values were to them. They also rated items of purposefulness and responded to a standard engagement survey. Complete responses were collected from 879 participants. This time, gender was distributed fairly equally among men and women, and all participants described themselves as fully employed. None were under the age of 20 and only 0.9% were older than 70. About 85.9% had post-secondary education and 57.2% had leadership or management experience.

We grouped values into clusters, using factor analysis, and explored the relationships between purposefulness, work engagement, and types of personal mission and values. These empirical relationships are reflected in the Korn Ferry Purpose Framework, which we developed based on literature review, reflection, a collective sample of purpose statements, and common threads discovered while researching personal purpose.

Introducing the Korn Ferry Purpose Framework

Healthier. Happier. Wiser. More engaged. Research suggests that, when you have strong values, a strong mission, and a strong sense of purpose, not only are you healthier and happier, but you can make wiser decisions about your work.

Think of purpose as an active expression of the deepest dimension within yourself. When you uncover and live that purpose, you walk the pathway to exceptional performance and greater well-being. This is because purpose deepens your impact while, at the same time, accelerating your personal growth.

Having a clear view of your purpose can help you make better choices and apply your talents more effectively. With a purpose at work, you can demonstrate the agility and proactivity you need to manage ambiguity without becoming opportunistic and reactionary.

But when asking people about your purpose, the answers can be overwhelming; there are as many different types of purposes as there are people. A close examination of over 300 personal mission

Purpose in action: Miracle on the Hudson

In January 2009, Captain Chesley B. “Sully” Sullenberger III, a pilot with US Airways, safely landed his plane on New York City’s Hudson River after a collision with a flock of geese led to engine failure. His calm leadership and decades of flying experience allowed him to make quick decisions that helped lead to a complete evacuation of US Airways Flight 1549, with no fatalities.

In a 2018 op-ed published in the *Washington Post*, Sullenberger discussed how his life mission changed after that fateful flight, writing, “After Flight 1549, I realized that because of the sudden worldwide fame, I had been given a greater voice. I knew I could not walk away but had an obligation to use this bully pulpit for good and as an advocate for the safety of the traveling public. I feel that I now have yet another mission, as a defender of our democracy.”

statements surfaced common themes, and from this review, the KFI found that personal purpose sits at the crossroads of the three core elements:

Values. Values are principles and rules that help you weigh your options and make decisions. A value is something that you believe to be important and do not want to compromise, and explains why you care about certain things. Life consists of choices—many choices. When people don't know what's important to them or what they care about, they falter over important life decisions, which can relate to low accomplishment and poor well-being. Being purposeful means you are deliberate about how to live your life or carry out work in a way that expresses your values.

Mission. Mission is the impact you want to have on the world as a result of living your purpose. It's the aim around which you structure your life and invest your energies—in other words, the legacy you want to leave behind. Mission identifies where you want to be active; it's the intention behind actions. Mission fuels energy and passion: people derive a sense of meaningfulness when they live your lives in line with a mission. Life can go in many directions—your mission informs which direction.

Resources. Resources are the tools you have that contribute to your mission. Resources include the skills, characteristics, capabilities, tools, and assets you bring to what you do well—or can learn to do well. Everyone possesses talent, either natural or developed through experience, but there are some things that each person does particularly

well. Being purposeful means recognizing your unique talents and skills, and using them for greater impact.

Values, Mission, and Resources are the components that shape the Korn Ferry Purpose Framework. Leveraging research findings on personal mission and values, the KFI developed the framework to help you understand, convey, and compare different purposes. Our research suggests that people define their values and missions along two basic dimensions embedded in the KF Purpose Framework: what is the reason for their existence and who primarily benefits from their purpose.

- **The reason of their existence:** Consciously or unconsciously, you seek to answer two existential questions when you articulate or activate your values and mission: “who am I?” and “what do I do”. Thus, personal purpose is a proxy for the meaning of life and what kind of person you want to be. It also captures the type of endeavor, role and impact you value and want to have. In this dimension, some personal purposes primarily focus on defining someone's identity. Others put the emphasis on actions and outcomes.
- **Who benefits from the purpose:** You can also define your purpose along a “self-focused” versus an “others-focused” orientation. Self-focused purposes reflect the desire to advance and strengthen the self or personal interests. This contrasts with others-focused purposes, which transcend self-interest and reflect broader, prosocial motives.

Figure 1

The three components of the Korn Ferry Purpose Framework.



The KF Purpose Framework is a guide that enables you to reflect on these dimensions, and thus, uncover, clarify, and better understand your personal purpose, both in life and in work. The model helps you define, activate, and connect with your purpose, and achieve the impact you want to have on yourself, others, and the world. As a result, you will be empowered to create alignment within yourself and find alignment with the values and purpose of your organization.

Values

Values can refer to end states of existence—that is, goals that you would like to achieve or the means to reaching your goals. Values serve as guiding principles that help you make decisions and determine the importance among alternative choices. The Korn Ferry Institute identified a set of 37 personal values based on literature reviews and original data; through factor analysis, we placed these values into five empirical clusters: Greater Good (e.g. community, environment, altruism), Personal Well-being (e.g. happiness, love, well-being), Getting Ahead (e.g. power, wealth, achievement), Belonging (e.g. family, tradition, hard work), and Self-Transformation (e.g., independence, authenticity, growth). As we worked with these values, we discovered these clusters could be understood as reflecting a more active (doing) approach or a more reflective (being) approach. What's more, they could be understood as either being more focused on the self or more focused on others; however, the Self-Transformation cluster was placed at the center because it includes aspects of both sides of these dimensions. Analysis of the correlations between clusters suggest that this arrangement is robust.

Our research found that the personal missions you pursue tend to align with what you value: if you value Greater Good, for example, you are more likely to select Advocating and Benevolence as your mission focus. You are concerned about the community, environment, and world, therefore you dedicate yourself to the well-being or success of others.

This contrasts with those who prioritize values around Personal Well-being. In this case, your mission focus is more likely to center on promoting quality of life, primarily your own. Sensibly, if your mission focus is on Career, you are likely to value Getting Ahead more than other people do, whereas if your mission is Personal Growth, you are likely to rate the Self-Transformation values more highly.

Figure 2

The five values clusters as placed on the KF Purpose Framework.



Values shape your choice of Mission as values provide guidelines for what is important. In turn, the practice and successful pursuit of a mission also informs and influences what you value.

Mission

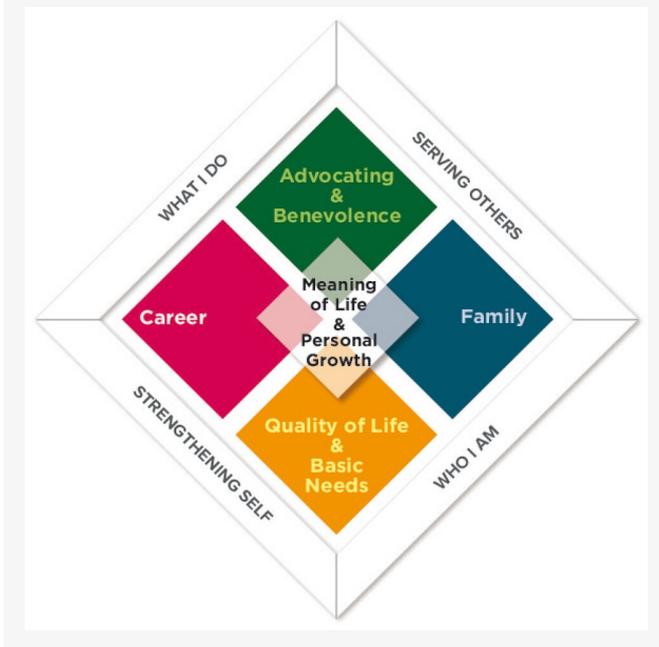
Mission is the legacy you want to leave as a result of living your purpose. We structure our lives around, and invest our energies into, our purpose, using it to help identify and guide the arenas where we want to be active.

As part of our research, we asked participants to define “what you want to focus on, what you want to accomplish, what kind of impact you want to generate, or who you want to become in a particular area of your life.” From the answers, we identified eight mission focuses:

- Advocating
- Benevolence
- Career
- Meaning of Life
- Personal Growth
- Family
- Quality of Life
- Basic Needs

Figure 3

The eight mission focuses as placed on the KF Purpose Framework.



Some personal missions are self-focused. They include Basic Needs, Quality of Life, Personal Growth, and Career. Others, such as Advocating and Benevolence, are clearly self-transcendent; it appears you are more likely to have self-transcendent than self-focused purposes.

In the KF Purpose Framework, Mission sits at the center of your personal purpose. It influences, and is influenced by, your Values. Mission also enables

you to select among your existing and potential personal resources that enable you to implement your mission.

Resources

Two women want to help new, at-risk mothers. One has a nursing degree and experience as a counselor; the other is a public speaker with an extensive civic and political network.

These two women have similar Missions and similar Values, but they have unique Resources—that is, their varied talents, experiences, tools, skills, traits, and drivers. Because of their individualized toolkits, these two women will execute their similar missions and values in different ways. The first professional may use her skills and degree to serve as a visiting nurse to new mothers, providing guidance and support. The second may use her experience and network to increase public awareness about health disparities and help raise funds to benefit new mothers.

In essence, your Resources make a difference in how you pursue your purpose. Resources include the vital elements, cognitive capabilities, networks, credentials, and qualifications that help determine where and how you activate your purpose. In the KF Purpose Framework, your Mission directs and chooses among your Resources, which in turn enable your Mission, and indirectly influence your Values.

Table 1

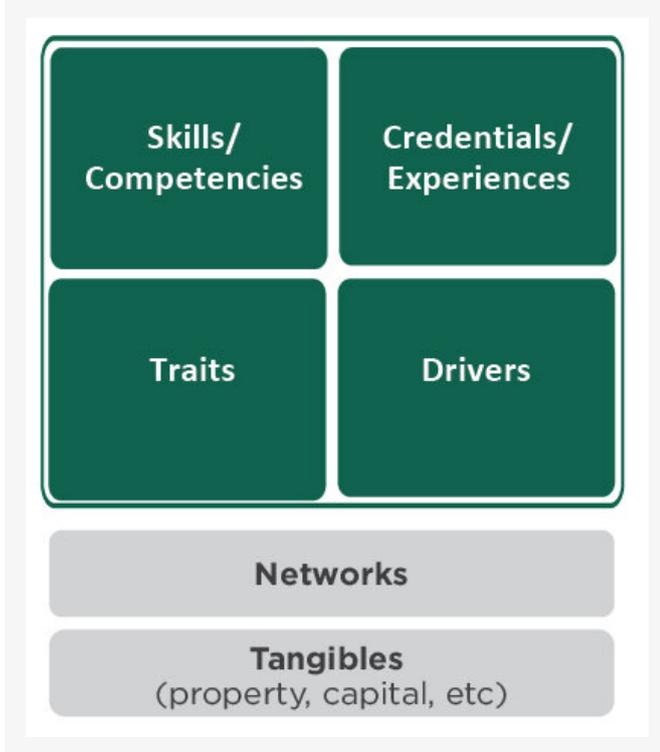
Description and distribution of eight mission focuses in the study.

Theme	Description	Example	Distribution
Advocating	Supporting or sponsoring a cause or issues	Raising awareness of domestic violence	11%
Benevolence	Serving or helping others	Providing shelter to displaced employees	27%
Career	Personal success and accomplishment	Being able to achieve what I set out to	6%
Meaning of Life	Living a life that expresses certain values or beliefs	Treat people as I would want to be treated	17%
Personal Growth	Growing and developing myself	Overcoming my fears; mastering skills	8%
Family	Being there for my family	Being there with my family	17%
Quality of Life	Desired experience such as well-being and lifestyle	Travel the world	10%
Basic Needs	The need for health, housing, money, etc.	Staying healthy while aging	2%

Note. 2% answered "something else."

Figure 4

The elements of resources as placed on the KF Purpose Framework



Taking the journey through the KF Purpose Framework

When engaging with the framework, you can explore your personal purpose using the following five steps:

Step 1: Reflect on Values

- Think about your values and what is most important to you. Generally, place those values on the framework's compass of Values and evaluate which areas tend to be valued most. Reflect on what events, people, and groups have led you to prioritize these values. If needed, reorder these values in the process. Although values and purpose may evolve over time, they should also have some connection to your lived experiences.

Step 2: Reflect on Mission

- Think about the impact you want to have on the world around you—the legacy you might leave. This impact does not have to be vast or ostentatious; it can be based in how you go about your everyday life. Use the framework's typology of Missions to consider what kind of mission you have, and whether your values and

your mission line up in a way that makes sense. They may or may not be in the same quadrants in the framework, but it is important that your mission and values have a connection that is consistent.

Step 3: Reflect on Resources

- Think about what you have as your resources and how they can help make your mission real. Consider your credentials, personality, experiences, skills, competencies, and how you like to work. Then, determine which of these can be used to advance your mission and how you will leverage some of your resources for your purpose.

Step 4: Write your full purpose statement

- Think about what you would include in your full purpose statement. Ask yourself whether you can make a full statement that includes the impact you want to have, the values or reason this impact is important, and some indication of how you will go about living that purpose.

Step 5: Action planning

- Think about the actions you can take to discover and activate your purpose. Plan for immediate steps and long-term acts that move you in that direction. What can you do today or tomorrow? What about next week, next month, or next year? Even small changes can add to your sense of meaning and purpose.

Purpose in your pocket

How you find meaning in work is fundamental to how you approach, enact, and experience your work and workplace. Purpose, after all, is one of the critical personal factors that contributes to that sense of meaning and meaningfulness.

Still, even if everyone is on a lifelong journey to find **their** purpose, only a few of us can clearly articulate what that purpose is. Many of us either don't have a conscious purpose, or have one that is too vague to be useful. In fact, our research found that people who make vague statements like "help people and the world" or "be a good person" tend to score lower on engagement and have less clarity on values. Therefore, in practice, purpose is not activated and realized.

Or some of us may say we are purposeful because we have established our career goals, earning a certain amount of money by a certain time. But goals are not purposes; goals are specific,



concrete, and time-constrained. They don't provide lasting meaning, nor do they explain what is unique about each of us.

Purposes, instead, are those high-level aspirations that represent ultimate ambitions and grand missions. They give meaning to those short-term, specific goals. Sometimes, you may do things for a purpose you may not even realize yet.

This is because your purpose is there for you to discover and activate. And at its core, the Korn Ferry Purpose Framework is a journey of discovery.

The Korn Ferry Purpose Framework gives you a tool to uncover and define a clearer, more consistent, and actionable purpose, one that provides you with a better sense of direction, steers your decisions, and makes life more fulfilling and rewarding. Using the model as a guide, you can better integrate the emotional and intellectual facets of your purpose and explicitly ground it into your deeper identity and values.

Think of the KF Purpose Framework as a pocket guide to purpose. It is a simple, deep, and structured handbook to self-wisdom, a live compass to distinguish personal signals from irrelevant noises, and an easy-to-understand yet effective catalyst to reveal and galvanize action through meaning.

But taking this journey will not only enable you to refine and clarify your purpose. It can also help you understand how that purpose fits with your organization's mission.

In the past, companies would often look for talent who shared the same values as the organization, and whose performance aligned with its business objectives. But in this highly disruptive economy, harmony and consistency have become less important. Instead, when diverse values and

purposes are allowed to coexist in an organization, new perspectives and ideas emerge like spring water that constantly flows, fueling strategic explorations.

The KF Purpose Framework can act as a guide to identifying those overlapping points between personal purpose and company mission, and provide the tools to create stronger alignment. After all, employees who can relate to an organization's values, even when the main objectives may diverge, become more energized in their work. And when employees are energized, thus bringing their best selves to work, they can optimize their contributions to the company.

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About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.