





### Work as a Calling:

Bliss, Burdens, and a Stroll through the Zoo

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#### The quest for meaning...

"I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not big enough for people."

— Nora Watson, quoted in Working

- What is a calling, and how do people find it?
- What is it like to manage people with a calling? (a "Millennial" challenge)

#### Reasons Why We Work

Job orientation (economic motives)

"[People] will work hard for money; they will work harder for other [people]. But [people] will work hardest of all when they

are dedicated to a cause."

- Harry Emerson

Career orientation (esteem, recognition, status motives)

Calling orientation (ideological, cause-related motives)

(1878-1969, theologian)

#### Work as a Calling: Classical Views

- Ancient Greeks: work inhibits the sublime pursuits
- Hebrews: work is a curse for original sin
- Early Christians: work is a route to goodness (wealth lets you help others)
- Protestant Reformation: work is noble
  - *All* work is a calling (cobbler & minister both serve God, others)
  - Finding and embracing your calling is a sacred obligation!
- Classical definition: A calling is work you are destined to do because of God-given gifts and talents, and the opportunities afforded by your station in life.

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#### Work as a Calling: Contemporary View

Modern workplace: Calling has virtually no religious connection

The idea of a calling "prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs." (Max Weber, 1930)

- What does a calling mean today?
  - "Find your bliss"
  - "Dream job"
  - ""

    "My work feels like play"

#### An Example: Zookeepers

- Zookeeping lacks strong economic incentives:
  - Average income is under \$25,000 per year
  - About 63% rely on another source of income (e.g., second job, family)

**Source**: Bunderson & Thompson (2009)

#### An Example: Zookeepers

- Zookeeping lacks strong economic incentives
- It also lacks strong status incentives:
  - "[A] nun came by with a school group and the nun said, 'See the kind of job that you get when you don't finish your education!' This was within ear shot ..."

Note: About 73% of zookeepers have a bachelor's degree or higher!

**Source**: Bunderson & Thompson (2009)

## And Yet, Zookeepers Are <u>Highly</u> Committed

- Nearly half of 1330 keepers surveyed volunteered for at least a year before getting hired.
- Only 6.5% were seriously thinking of leaving the profession.
- Sample quotes from interviews with 24 keepers:
- "There's not much that they could do to get me to quit."
- "I can't think what would cause me to leave."
- "I don't think there's anything they could do to me that would make me leave ..."

### Why? Calling and Cause



"I have a meaningful job that makes a difference"

11.7% 87.9%

"Working with animals feels like my calling in life"

25.4% 72.0%

"I'm willing to sacrifice non-work time for animal care & conservation"

Disagree/Strongly Disagree
Neutral
Agree/Strongly Agree

**Source**: Bunderson & Thompson (2009)

# How Do Zookeepers View Calling? "Hardwiring"

"It's a calling for me just because my whole life I've just been interested in animals. So looking back I should have known at some time I would be working with animals ..."

"It's a property of the suits them for a career working with animals."

Whatever my genetic makeup is I'm geared towards animals."

"I was always interested in animals ever since I was a kid. I drove my mom nuts catching bugs, and worms, and frogs, and salamanders, bringing home anything I could find ... butterflies, stuff like that."

#### How Do Zookeepers View Calling? "Destiny"

"I was here two days and I knew this is what I was meant to do. There's people that have volunteered here for years and they don't get a job and I worked here a month and a half. So it's kind of like my calling I think."

"I've always read a lot about [animals] and it kind of led me here. It

Theme 2: Zookeepers perceive that the hand of fate has brought them inevitably to their work.

"So things kind or worked out the way they should ... I kind of fell into this. Things just worked out real well."

"I just fell into the right places. And I'll admit being where I am right now is 50% pushing me to go in a certain direction and 50% luck. I mean that part time job I got when I first came here, I had nothing to do with it."

#### What does calling mean today?

- *Classical definition:* A calling is work you are destined to do because of God-given gifts and talents, and the opportunities afforded by your station in life.
- Contemporary definition: A calling is work you feel destined to do because of innate talents, passions, and life opportunities.
  - You don't necessarily "choose" it
  - It isn't always fun

## The Burdens of Calling "Moral Duty"

"[I]f I don't stay then who's going to be here to make sure that the animals are taken care of the way I want them to be taken care of? I'm here for that."

"The animals never chose to be here and it's our responsibility to come in and give them the care that they need and make sure that they're healthy and happy."

"[T]here's a quote that I read somewhere that says that we become responsible for that we have obtained. That's kind of how I look at it. We obtained these animals... I mean, they have no other choice... They're stuck here. So I have to do what's best for them."

## The Burdens of Calling "Sacrifice"

#### Pay

"I'm making \$9 an hour and every day I drive past Subway and on their little leader board out front: 'Hiring starting at \$9 an hour.' I make as much as someone at McDonald's does. I'm certainly not doing it for the money."

"We had at least one person on food stamps. We have a lot of people working two jobs. I know of one keeper here working three jobs to make ends meet."

#### Balance

"When the nightwatch calls me up and says we've got a problem in your building, I'm out of bed and I'm in here."

"Working here at the zoo has cost me a marriage."

# What's the Upside of Managing People with a Calling?

Keepers with a stronger sense of "calling":

- Were less likely to think about quitting
- Are willing to sacrifice for their work
- Were more satisfied with their work
- Were slightly more likely to be seen as "star" performers by zoo management

# And the Downside (or the Complicating Factors)?

Keepers with a stronger sense of "calling":

- Hold their zoo to a higher moral standard
- Are less flexible about changing their job assignment
- Are more critical of fellow keepers who don't measure up to their standard

"Some people are here just because it's a job. I don't have patience for that. People should be here because they care."

**Note**: These are correlations only. Causality is not yet known.

### The Puzzles

Does passion pay?



NO!

### Puzzle 1: Paying the Passionate

The higher the sense of "calling," the lower the salary (independent of job level)

- Ø Does management take advantage of passion?
- ø Or do keepers use passion to *compensate* for low pay? (cognitive dissonance theory)

"I love the zoo. I would not tell [management] that because they can get a strong hold on you that way. If management knows you love your job, they'll try to do things to undercut your pay."

#### Puzzle 2: Placating the Passionate

Must management say one thing & do another?



- Some evidence that keepers identified most strongly with their zoo when --
  - They *believed* that the zoo ranked conservation over entertainment
  - Their zoo director *actually* ranked entertainment over conservation

#### Some Take Aways

- Having a "calling" fosters loyalty and sacrifice; it can compensate for lack of other incentives
- It also "raises the moral bar" and may make employees less flexible
- Managers must be cautious of unintentionally penalizing callings
- Keeping passionate employees satisfied may require managing mixed messages
- Passionate people especially need direct interaction with beneficiaries