

The Anatomy of Rebuilding & Recovery

A CEO LOUNGE INITIATIVE

Project 0x2A¹

Finding purpose in work and life



Maneesh Sharma
Country Head, GitHub

In conversation with



Bhaskar Pramanik
Former Chairman, Microsoft India; and
a Mentor, Advisor & Board Member

Associate
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Maybe you need to sell your Ferrari to find your Ikigai. Maybe you have to be a NASA scientist to take that one journey to a remote village for your revelation. Or maybe not. Do phrases like value systems, moral compass and finding one's purpose in life have social currency beyond their textbook definitions? Maneesh Sharma plays devil's advocate to industry veteran Bhaskar Pramanik.

Words by **Divya Sista**

"The Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything is 42"

- Douglas Adams
The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Around 14 billion years ago was perhaps when life's genesis block was created. Then came the big bang (or any other theory of the birthing of the universe you choose to believe in), our planet, us, the stories we tell ourselves, the inventions and discoveries and all that we have done, do and would do. As humans, we

instinctively created knowledge about everything around us, explored and tried to comprehend the world around us. We created societies and social networks, pursued tangible and intangible possessions, engaged in construction and destruction. Everyone raced or slowed down to find their own speed, direction and goal — something our collective consciousness terms as 'purpose'.

THE PASSION VS PURPOSE CONUNDRUM

"Everything sounds rosy and nice with philosophy," Maneesh Sharma, Country Head, GitHub quips. "However, there are so many people out there who haven't figured out their calling, or purpose in life. Should we put a deliberate effort to find purpose?" he questions.

Finding a sense of purpose is a very personal journey, like a prayer. It might range from just getting to a mundane job every day, to championing the underprivileged in Africa.

Bhaskar Pramanik, ex-Chairman, Microsoft India bowls us over with his reply. "I don't think I had a purpose in life when I started. I had ambition. Purpose to me is when I look at my achieved ambition and ask myself, why am I engaging in this? What does this ambition mean? Ambition, passion and aspiration are all fine. They are all something that will play the role of a sparkplug in your life's journey of purpose. Ambitions also keep changing from time to time as we grow with

each experience, meet new people, get influenced by ideas and peers, which should happen too. But only when you question ambition and aspirations will you find purpose. Asking yourself the why, what, how of it will give you the answer to the question of purpose."

SIX ROWS OF SEVEN WAYS TO FIND PURPOSE

Like wisdom, having a sense of purpose has long been associated with age. The older we get, the wiser we become in conquering the perils and uncovering pleasures of the material world. We may find the purpose of our life through religion and philosophy, work and worship, or hedonistic and philanthropic ways.

"The world is changing dramatically. The concepts that we once thought were etched in stone are being questioned. Today's generation is up to speed in everything they do — they are clear about what they need and want, they know their personal purpose and are even aligning it with their



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What is your why?





“Today’s generation is up to speed in everything they do. They are clear about what they need and want, they know their personal purpose and are even aligning it with their organisation and brand association. Is there a sense of urgency to find purpose and a threat of succumbing to pressure?”

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organisation and brand association. Is there a sense of urgency to find purpose, and a threat of succumbing to pressure?” ponders Sharma.

Pramanik does not entirely disagree. “Yes, everyone is running. But it is not a race, but a marathon. Aspirations and ambitions become purpose. The way you go about reaching purpose is centred on a value system you imbibe as you grow up. Over a period of time, you embrace a set of values that shape your view of the world. You want those values to be complimented when you work for a company. No one wants to work for a company which looks at stakeholder value, profit at the cost of the planet or exploiting human resources,” he explains.

The value of purpose extends beyond individual slaking to benefit organisations in reaching their pursuits — from higher levels of employee engagement to working towards a shared idea, or even greater productivity.

“Microsoft is a great example of this. When Satya Nadella took over,

he sold every employee the idea of putting a PC (personal computer) on a desk to using Microsoft’s product to empower individuals. Employees played up, leadership and strategies were redefined. In today’s business space, most CEOs have to take a stance on ESG (environmental, social and governance aspects), so much so, that even investors are looking to invest in companies with a sound ESG plan,” Pramanik explains.

THE PRETTY NEAT IDEA OF PURPOSE

At this point in the conversation, one thing is established — finding purpose is not easy. Despite humanity’s overweening complacency in its intelligence, we look for inspiration to seek purpose — sometimes in other people, sometimes in nature. At times, a shared vision, too, helps to bring out purpose.

“But is there a formula to build a shared vision that can unveil purpose? How should youngsters think about purpose?” Sharma wonders.

With lines of work and life blurring, the question of if they should be distinct arises. Work should be an enjoyable activity and even possibly a means to the end of purpose.

"There are two areas of focus for any organisation or person looking at realising purpose through work," Pramanik answers.

"Collaborative management, where a group has the same set of values, build similar behaviours, have the same purpose and as an organic collective, they instinctively do things to achieve that purpose. The second area of focus is the strategic execution of that shared vision, where everyone consciously works towards it. A good company balances the two," he elucidates. Employees have been increasingly seeking fulfilment through work.

"There is no such thing as work-life balance. When both blend, there will be no difference between work and life, and you'd enjoy life as you should. But isn't it difficult to manage expectations that you set for the self, family and the organisation?" Sharma quizzes.

"Gratification for the self is instantaneous. But when you do something for another being or anything idealistic it lasts longer. This is also the primary reason we build relationships. Remember that a great leader who inspires is not always the one with a high IQ (intelligence quotient) but one with a balanced IQ and EQ (emotional quotient), because a major characteristic that defines a leader is empathy," Pramanik explains.

THE THREE CUBES PUZZLE² AND THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Given the state of constant flux we are in, and with everything happening in the world at an incomprehensible speed, the idea of purpose has become transient. Is the current generation, already overwhelmed with speed and distractions, ready to take on the highs and lows of this quest?

"Change can happen anytime, anywhere. What has also changed is the attitude and people's perceptions. The baby boomers, who are still around, are people born right after India's

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independence, have been through long periods trying to find stability and make their mark. Then there are the millennials, and now there is the GenZ. GenZ is the right kind of person for this time and world. They are open to change and dialogue, they are willing to embrace diversity and are happy to discuss taboos. In a country like India, which makes up for the largest young population of the world, this new generation will spearhead the growth story of the country in the right way,” asserts Pramanik.

The pandemic coincides with a bevy of existential threats across the globe — a first we have experienced since the World Wars. It has changed the way we interact with others, rekindled relationships and rebuilt support systems and faith. This is, without a doubt, the life-shaping event for everyone, a crisis that has taught us lessons and shown us strengths that we did not know we possessed. But, how exactly should one respond or

react to a crisis?

“During times of crisis, your sense of purpose and values come to the fore. They are your anchors in a storm and help you make the right decisions. In a crisis, it is not about yourself, but about your stakeholders. You (the leader) have to leverage culture as the head of an organisation. Collaborative engagement happens instinctively and manifests itself as a culture during a crisis. It comes out as the true mettle of the organisation. We shouldn’t worry about things we cannot control, and leave them to the forces above us, but worry about things we can control,” propounds Pramanik.

That said, the finding of purpose is a journey one has to embark upon like Adams’ *Hitchhiker*. Sometimes it may come to you serendipitously, at others, you may have to venture far in its quest like the infinite improbability drive, or cruising through an interstellar black hole!

¹ Hexadecimal notation for 42. In Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy*, 42 is the answer to Life, The Universe And Everything.

² <https://news.mit.edu/2019/answer-life-universe-and-everything-sum-three-cubes-mathematics-0910>

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