By Invitation

The search for meaning amid tasks galore and race to be first

For most, life is a busy pursuit. But it is good every now and then to take the time to reflect on why you do what you do.

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For The Straits Times

In a merit-based and achievement-oriented society like Singapore, to succeed in school or at work often means standing out in a crowd and ranking ahead of other competitors. The most common performance indicators of success are tangible ones, defined by societal and group norms. So, for students and their parents, academic scientists and professors, and people in various occupations and organisations, concrete outcomes like academic grades, journal publications and awards, income and wealth, or promotion and power have become the widely accepted ladder of success that drives what they do, and how they do it.

But the pursuit of success is maladaptive when the competitive comparisons with others and the craving for salience dominate how we think and feel, and what we do. It will constantly produce stress and strain at the various stages and moments of our lives. It is easy to end up forgetting why we engaged in an endeavour, joined a community or a cause, or even chose an occupation or organisation in the first place.

SCIENCE AND MEANING

Take, for example, the role of academic scientists and their reason for doing science. In a science feature interview published two weeks ago in The Straits Times, I said: “Why are we doing science? It has to be because we want to solve human problems and enhance human well-being. It cannot be to publish in top journals and win awards. That should be the consequence of good science, not the reason for doing it.” Not surprisingly, I received many responses from academics and users of science including policymakers and leaders of public-sector agencies. These individuals reacted strongly because they believe in intramural research and evidence-based practice – the need to apply research to address practical issues. They know that good science solves real problems. But somewhat unexpectedly was the response received from those who are not academics, scientists or direct users of scientific findings. They shared with me the things they put effort in and spend their time on, and how they are motivated by the personal meaning they find in doing what they believe in, and care about. Most involve contributing to society and making a positive difference to the lives of others.

A common theme in the comments of many of these Singaporeans from all walks of life was that their personal sense of meaning and well-being came about after they realised how overly consumed they had been in pursuing a singular dimension of success. These dimensions broadly divide with academic grades in school, a promotion or political power at work, or more wealth and fame – relative to what others had.

MATTERS OF THE MOMENT

Zero-sum competition and comparison with others can lead to adverse consequences, for self and others. Here are some examples of egocentric thoughts lacking in empathy; negative emotions such as anxiety and anger; social disorders that breed division, envy, contempt and conflict; and selfish acts that advance oneself at the expense of others.

These consequences make it difficult to build interpersonal trust, which are among the strongest predictors of individual well-being, group morale and group cohesion.

But beyond these more obvious consequences, there are silent effects that creep into our daily routines and influence how we think, feel and behave. They proceed quickly, moment by moment, resulting in a negative spiral but become harder to stop over time.

Here are some danger signs that we may have ‘normalised’ in our daily lives:

• Undiscerning. Concerned with competition from others, an individual takes on every task assigned or available. He works tirelessly to complete them, often providing more details than necessary and without regard to the distribution of work among co-workers.

• Need for control. Situated on proving one’s superiority, an individual sets out to win a debate or argument at all cost – never mind the feelings of others and the adverse effect of his responses on them.

• Risk aversion. Worried about looking bad relative to others, an individual avoids having to do something now that might lead to him failing or appearing incompetent. This ends up in missed opportunities, errors of omission, and good advice rendered ineffective due to delayed adoption.

The individual caught in a negative spiral of maladaptive performance goals could be anyone of us. At stake is our physical, mental and social health.

Maladaptive performance episodes, which are momentary threats to our well-being, are mutually self-enhancing, and thus make up a negative spiral. But we are unaware of the danger because each threat appears as a small and necessary daily burden that we take for granted. We are too busy to live. In some cases, the victim of an abusive or exploitative close relationship. If we are unable or unwilling to identify the danger signs, take action early and react adaptively, it becomes more difficult to get out of the spiral. We could end up like the metaphor of a fish that was slowly boiled alive.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

The dangers of maladaptive performance goals can be countered with mastery and learning goals. The latter shift one’s focus to mastering deep skills in a task domain, instead of trying to outdo everyone in every task. They also encourage learning within situations that seek to understand issues, contexts and people.

Research has also identified the job characteristics that help make work meaningful. For example, it is easier to perform tasks that are complex enough to be challenging but achievable, based on one’s competencies. We also want some autonomy over how to carry out and accomplish the task activities, and we want helpful feedback on how we are performing.

Work is also more meaningful when there is a good fit between the person’s profile of abilities and needs and what the work demands and offers.

Learning and mastery goals, job characteristics and person-work fit are all important for meaningful work. In fact, they are the ‘process meaning’ because they are all about how we do the work. But there is also an equally important aspect of what makes work meaningful, which I call “outcome meaning.” This is about why we do what we do, and the impact of what we do.

One outcome is more powerful when it is other-centric, as opposed to one centred on oneself. Research has shown, across many demographics, people find their lives more meaningful – and they experience good well-being – when they know that they have made a positive difference to other people’s lives.

Paradoxically, we achieve personal fulfillment not by putting others down, but uplifting them. Not by comparing ourselves with others, but contrasting how others are better off than before because of what we did. Put in another way, the egocentric pursuit of personal meaning is an approach that characterises most people, with and without a education. In a merit-based and achievement-oriented society like Singapore, it is unlikely to see the two coexist. But the outcome of the accomplishment may have little to do with what truly matters to us when we find meaning in doing work – and that really matters.

It is important to remember and reflect, especially when we can choose what to devote our time and life to. Back to the reason for doing what we do, think about your academic colleagues and PhD students this question: “When you do, do you want to have beside you a heap of publications read by a select group of academics, or the peace of mind knowing that your work made a difference to the lives of students and patients. The basic issue in this question is relevant to not just academics. We can replace the heap of publications with stalks of cockrall or collections of symbols of wealth, power and fame. Or anything we accumulated from years of stressful work. We would still be left behind by a fixation on popular success, prestige and possession, instead of focusing on personal meaning, purpose and passion.

Life is a busy pursuit, most, and a stressful one for many. But the outcome of the accomplishment may have little to do with what truly matters to us when we find meaning in doing work – and that really matters. To pause, reflect and reorient, and work to retrack and redirect. Compromise and comparison are not inherently unhealthy, but it is easy to slip into a negative spiral when we ignore the danger signs. It is human to want to achieve and accomplish something significant. How then do we have a sustained and sustainable sense of personal fulfillment?

Research evidence and anecdotal experiences have provided the answer: when the significance is less about salience in comparison with others but meaningful in itself. It is the collateral, and more about the positive difference one makes to other people and the larger community and society. Here is a simple self-test. Are we now than before because of what we did.

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