Most of us have been led to believe that the purpose companies are in business is to make a profit. But, as Collins and Porres pointed out in *Built to Last*, businesses need profit like humans need air. The mission of most successful organizations talk about the quality of their products or services, their value to the customer, and their employee-friendly workplace. Profit is what they need to function in an economic system, but it’s not a goal of a business enterprise.

And if you ask people why they work, they will tell you it’s for the money. But money is to individuals what profit is to business, they need it to function in the economic system. But it is not what motivates us to work. In survey after survey, and in research study after research study, when the questions push beneath the surface, people list money behind values such as satisfaction, close work relationships, autonomy, work/life balance, and learning. This is the simple answer to the conundrum about why we often see money listed as number one when respondents are asked why they work.

Recently, with the need for knowledge workers increasing amidst the continued volatility of the economy and the projected shortage in the labor pool in the next ten years, the demand for employee loyalty and commitment have come back into vogue. Work/life policies and programs are the current organizational response to the need to attract and retain the best and brightest workers. One study reported that balancing work and personal life is the number one priority for 78% of workers. 70% of males in the same study said they were willing to give up pay, power, and prestige for more time with
their families. And college students’ top consideration for selecting their first employer is the ability to achieve work/life balance. But work/life balance is not just about on-site day-care centers, flexible work hours, and tuition assistance.

Herzberg’s famous motivation/hygiene theory is still relevant today. The truly great places to work, like Fortune Magazine’s 100 Best Places to Work For, are not great because of their perks and benefits, but because of their organizational culture and policies that promote meaningful work and a nurturing, supportive workplace,

**Meaningful Work**

For quite some time now, the baby-boomers have been questioning meaning and purpose in their work as they have aged into their mid-life and early retirement years. One recent study of executives who lost their jobs but were financially comfortable found they still valued meaningful work over independence. Another study that has been examining job satisfaction for more than 30 years found that, “in the past, job satisfaction increased as people moved from their twenties into their thirties. In 1973, for instance, nearly half the workers between the ages of 30 and 40 claimed to be very satisfied with their job(s) . . . Job satisfaction among 30 to 49 year olds today is no higher than among the 18-29 group. And these same surveys have traditionally found the lowest levels of job satisfaction among the youngest segment of the population. Ironically, the young adults of this generation are not reacting to the same problems that have plagued past young workers (inexperience, lack of credentials, and unhappiness with entry-level positions). Like their parents, generation x and y’ers are also questioning the meaning and purpose of work. But their questions concern whether they even want to start down the career path their parents took and their decisions are resulting in making different
choices about the role of work in their lives. What we keep hearing over and over is that workers want more control over their work, want more work/life balance, and want more personal growth and meaning in their work.

Yet, even though we now work in a knowledge economy, we still manage with a manufacturing, assembly-line mentality. We are trying to motivate knowledge workers with an industrial era mindset. The worldview and value system that lie at the basis of the industrial era mindset were formulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The metaphor was the world as a machine, which was brought about by the revolutionary changes in physics and astronomy. This mechanistic science was based on a new method of inquiry, which involved the mathematical description of nature and the analytic method of reasoning.

The physical and social sciences of the 20th century evolved under this paradigm. This paradigm has dominated work, education, and every other aspect of our society for the past three hundred years. In this mechanical era we believed we knew (or could determine) the outcome for every course of action (the cause-effect principle). Yet, in the past several years, there has been an increasing recognition for the need of a new paradigm for organizations that meets the turbulent demands of the 21st century. Peter Vaill, the noted management academic, consultant and philosopher, has talked about the metaphor of continuous white water. Our machine paradigm is based on the notion that change is abnormal; most of the time things should be calm and steady. But as a person in one of Vaill’s management workshops put it, “. . . you never get out of the rapids! No sooner do you begin to digest one change than another one comes along to keep things unstuck . . . The feeling is one of continuous upset and chaos”. The implications are that
in complex systems, such as organizations, possibilities can be known but precise outcomes cannot be predicted. This means that there are not only multiple ways of knowing; of viewing reality, but we will never know all there is to know. As Billy Joel put it in his song, *Shades of Gray*, “Shades of gray wherever I go, the more I find out, the less that I know.” We need to accept divergence, multiple perspectives, and incomplete truths, and stop looking for the “right answer”.

Caught in a Dilemma

There is a lot of turmoil, confusion, and pain in the business world today. Managers and human resource people attend workshop after workshop (and calling in consultant after consultant), embracing each new tool as a way to create the new workplace, only to see their hopes dashed. They say, ‘if only we could find the right technique. Surely there must be a way of making best management practices stick.’ Yet, after a short application, it’s back to business as usual (John Nirenberg, 1995, essay, “Why aren’t we Doing Better”)

Nirenberg analyzed more than 6,000 articles and books on management tools and techniques to determine the basic principles that seemed to lead to successful applications.

His findings centered on the following points:

• Each tool and technique was *originally a custom-made solution for a specific organizational or individual problem* (that often was later packaged and sold as the “answer”).
- The individuals and teams involved had the courage to explore new ways of doing things.
- The developers of these new tools & techniques had the commitment and patience to do what was necessary to make it work.
- There was nothing inherent in the tool or technique that guaranteed success or failure. It was having the appropriate tool for the given problem or circumstance, and involving the appropriate people with the appropriate skills.

He also found that, paradoxically, if the conditions were appropriate and the people open for the application of a given tool, the tool itself was not often needed. Conversely, many organizations block the introduction of new ideas so that no tool or technique is going to work, then use the tool or technique as the scapegoat. And in the end it is the people who suggested the tool or technique in the first place who are blamed for it not being the panacea. As one consultant sized up the dilemma, “Organizations don’t change. People change. And then people change organizations.” Organizations can and should provide the culture for meaningful work to flourish. But first individuals (including managers) need to realize the value of meaningful work. Which means they need to change their mindsets before they can expect the organization to change.

Roots of Individual Change

How do we help people change in order to reach the goal of meaningful work? By sticking to the roots of individual change. There were two aspects of organizational behavior that the three legendary content motivation theorists, Maslow, Hersberg, and Aldefer, advocated that are even more critical today than when they were first proposed, intrinsic motivation and growth (learning). But, somehow, in our desire to assist our
organizations to be more productive, we have forgotten our roots. There are two reasons why this is important:

- Somehow, in our rush to get to performance (the end goal), we keep neglecting the importance of the means to the end
- Just as the traditional paradigms around such issues as organizational structure, management style, and employee benefits are no longer valid, neither are the traditional paradigms around motivation and learning.

But we still apply them in a very mechanistic manner. We haven’t changed our approaches to these two elements even though the work we do and the environment in which we do the work has changed dramatically.

A New Motivation Paradigm

Since the mid-1970’s, new theories have emerged that focus on intrinsic motivational processes and on self-systems that determine an individual’s behavior. Intrinsic motivation is an internal emotional preference for a task that gives us satisfaction and meaning. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, author of Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, conducted research about intrinsically motivated behavior by studying people’s actual work behavior. He included people in a wide range of occupations and activities and discovered a particular kind of experience where people’s performance seemed effortless. They described the feeling of being able to continue forever in their task and wanting to learn additional skills to master more demanding challenges. The fun, sense of mastery, and the potential for growth of self was what he labeled flow. One of the research subjects reported in his studies was a welder named Joe. Joe had a forth-grade education, worked in a dark and dank environment, and lived
in a shoddy, run-down neighborhood. Yet he taught himself how to fix the plant’s machinery ranging from huge mechanical cranes to tiny electric motors. The researchers were baffled as to how Joe learned to fix such complex equipment without formal education. Joe described how he started to fix kitchen appliances when he was a child by placing himself in the appliance’s predicament. He thoroughly enjoyed learning to fix machinery by this empathic problem-solving approach. His interest in creating a meaningful workspace extended to his home-life. His house, in the middle of a street that was deteriorating, was surrounded by a carefully sculptured and manicured yard.

Albert Bandura’s studies on self-systems add support to Csikszentmihalyi’s findings. His social cognitive theory describes how our self, our way of being, motivates us towards certain goals and behaviors, based on our view of our level of competence and our need to bolster our self-esteem. His concept of self-efficacy is based on the idea that when people set goals at the top level of their perceived capability, they are more likely to perform at that level. When people perceive themselves as having limited abilities, they will pursue performance-oriented goals to receive favorable feedback on their competence. A performance goal orientation stems from an extrinsic motivational interest. On the other hand, people who see themselves as having greater abilities will pursue learning goals that reflect their need for self-enhancement. This intrinsic interest in one’s work is based on a preference for challenging work, a view of oneself as being curious, and a search for opportunities that permit independent attempts to master material. This creates an orientation that can lead to higher levels of motivation and meaningful work.
In one study, 190 sales people from eight firms were given a questionnaire to determine if they engaged in one of two orientations; working smart (learning orientation) and working hard (performance orientation). The results demonstrated that those that had a learning orientation worked both smart and hard, whereas those that had a performance orientation just worked hard.

Most sales motivation programs focus on setting sales targets and offering salespeople incentives for achieving or surpassing these targets. Yet this seemingly positive environment is actually a very coercive approach. The negative implication of not reaching the target was stronger than the incentives. In fact, it was found that those salespeople with low self-efficacy and a performance orientation were actually demotivated and felt like “losers”. The truly positive environment of the learning orientation increased salespeople’s interest in learning and improving their ability. They enjoyed their work, welcomed challenges, considered mistakes part of the learning process, and were more effective (than those salespeople with a performance orientation.).

**Meaningful Work**

There is now a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of intrinsic motivation that has emerged. There has been a renewed interest in Maslow’s theories based on Csikszentmihalyi’s and other’s research and writings. There have been numerous studies conducted recently around the topic of meaningful work. Based on a review of these theories and studies, I developed a construct (a preliminary theory) that reflects “work as the expression of our inner being” (Mathew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work*, 1994). The construct consists of:
The *sense of self*

- Bringing one’s whole self (mind, body, emotion, spirit) to the work (and the workplace)
- Recognizing and developing one’s potential (learning)
- Knowing one’s purpose in life, and how work fits into that purpose
- Having a positive belief system about achieving one’s purpose

The *work itself*

- Mastering one’s performance
- Seeking challenge, creativity, learning, and continuous growth
- Pursuing the opportunity to carry out one’s purpose through the work
- Having autonomy, empowerment and a sense of control over one’s environment

The *sense of balance*

- The balance of work self and personal self
- The balance of work with family & other relationships
- The balance of spiritual self and work self
- The balance of giving to oneself and giving to others

No single factor in each of these three themes can stand-alone or is more important than the others. Meaningful work requires the interplay of all of these elements. Yet we can examine each of these themes separately while acknowledging their interdependence.

What is of real significance is that these themes and factors in the aggregate represent a deeper level of motivation than the traditional intrinsic values of a sense of accomplishment, pride, satisfaction of finishing a task, and praise from a supervisor.

*Sense of Self*  People need to bring their whole selves (mind, body, emotion, and
spirit) to their work. The sense of the whole self is critical to finding meaning in work. People often fail to bring their whole selves to work out of fear of rejection, prejudice or misunderstanding. Dick Richards, in his book, *Artful Work: Awakening Joy, Meaning, and Commitment in the Workplace*, said that “We work hard to create physical safety in our workplaces. Can’t we also create mental, emotional, and spiritual safety—safety for the whole person?” One of the significant findings of a recent study on spirituality and work was the number of respondents that felt they could not bring their whole selves to their present workplaces. Before one can bring their whole self to work, one has to first be aware of one’s own values, beliefs, and purpose in life. The sense of self also includes constantly striving to reach one’s potential and believing in one’s ability to reach that potential. And to realize the criticality of continual lifelong learning. The sense of self also includes having significant control over one’s personal and work “space”. Joe the welder created space at work by mastering skills that were considered valuable. That gave him the ability to have a measure of control over his work environment. This carried over to his personal space; his home. He didn’t let the condition of his neighborhood pull him down; he created his own personal space to give him meaning.

*The Work Itself.* “Real joy comes not from ease or riches or from the praise of men, but from doing something worthwhile”. Wilfred Grenfell’s statement personifies the essence of what really motivates people, the work itself. In the not-so-distant past, managers made decisions about the structure and process of work activities, in the name of efficiency. Jobs were broken down into tasks, which involved certain competencies, and specific and measurable objectives. People were hired to perform very tightly defined jobs. But work has now changed dramatically. Organizations have realized they
need to rely more and more on workers to make decisions about how the work should get accomplished. Knowledge workers are hired to bring their skills and abilities to bear on multiple projects. This requires more worker autonomy, flexibility, empowerment, continuous learning, risk-taking, and creativity. Joe the welder loves to “tinker”, and the organization values his ability to fix machines. So Joe is doing what he is good at and what he finds worthwhile. His tinkering allows him to learn, to take risks, to do other tasks besides his welding, and to improve his proficiency.

**Sense of Balance** To paraphrase a Zen Buddhist saying, work and pleasure should be so aligned that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. The sense of balance at its ideal is that life is so integrated that it doesn’t matter whether what one is doing so long as it’s meaningful. But given that most of us do not live in an ideal world, a sense of balance concerns the choices we make between the time spend at paid work, unpaid work (work at home, with family, as a volunteer), and at pleasurable pursuits. No one area of our lives should be so dominant that we cease to value the other areas. All work and no play are stressful, overwhelming, and usually results in our health, family, and social lives suffering – even when the work is meaningful. All play and no work quickly becomes boring and meaningless.

We also need to balance the nourishing of our different selves (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual) because, in the less than ideal world we do not have the luxury of meeting all of our needs through one major activity. So we need to take the time to learn, to keep fit, to reflect, to meditate or pray, and to give to & be with others. Again, because we usually worry most about doing our paid work, we don’t take the time to care
for ourselves. And when we do not take care of ourselves, we cannot be there for others. So we end up running on the proverbial treadmill until we finally realize we are not meeting our own or anyone else’s needs. The statistics we read in the media on work-related stress, people being overweight and less than physically fit, depression, divorce, and even workplace violence speak for themselves. Joe loves his paid work, but he also loves to “work” on his house and yard.

Meaningful work is not just about the meaning of the paid work we perform; it is about the way we live our lives. It is the alignment of purpose, values, and the relationships and activities that we pursue in life.