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Work as Refuge:

By Jonathon A. Flaum

How to Add Meaning to your Life at Work



About 500 years ago there was a young origami master named Daishinji who lived in a small fishing village in Japan.

Daishinji was beginning to become well known for what she could do with a single sheet of paper.

One day she decided to fold a sheet of paper into a fish. Daishinji was amazed by it; she thought it to be a masterpiece and so did others.

The fish was fully shaped. With its folds of fins and gills, it looked almost real.

One day, after listening for a long time, the paper fish finally spoke.

His first three words were: “I am lonely.”

Pleased by the fish’s ability to communicate, Daishinji said, “Then I’ll fold you a world in which to swim.”

And so an entire folded world was made from paper – an ocean, seaweed, swordfish, whales, sharks, lobsters, crabs, an octopus, and even birds above.

For a long time this was good, and the paper fish was happy.

But then one day the paper fish realized that as deep as he swam he would never get wet.

And this seemed odd to him, to be a fish, but not to feel the wetness of water.

The paper fish begged to go to the real ocean, which was deep, wet, and full of mysteries unknown to Daishinji.

The young master began to get frustrated. After all, she had spent months building a world for her paper fish. “Imaginary things must stay in imaginary places,” Daishinji shouted with an anger that the paper fish did not recognize.

The paper fish would not take “No” for an answer. His determination was like that of a samurai, and Daishinji finally relented.

Although she knew in her heart that paper was only paper, Daishinji agreed to take the paper fish out to the deep, black, real ocean.

So the next morning as the sun was rising, the young origami master placed the paper fish in a red wooden box and secured it to her father’s fishing boat.

“One day you may get caught in a net, now that you are real. My father may bring you back to market so you can be supper for the village!” Daishinji screamed anxiously.

The wide-eyed finned giant finally turned back and shouted, “But now I am free — as real as you are!”

And then the yellowtail splashed a spray of water to the sky, and swam down deeper than any fish had ever gone.

Daishinji finally released her anxiety and, began sobbing.

The ocean rocked her from below like her mother once had.

After what felt like a lifetime, silence returned.

A tender smile of renunciation appeared on Daishinji’s lips.

“I don’t even know your name...” she whispered to the emptiness.

Daishinji focused on vast sea and on the empty red box until the two became one to her.

When the time seemed right, she pulled up her anchor and turned her boat for home.

After many years of folding paper, Daishinji became known all over Japan as a great master.

She created worlds on paper that all became real in their own time.

One day, a young origami practitioner sought out Daishinji. She asked the old woman why she bothered to make things if she then just let them go, holding on to nothing to show for her labor.

Daishinji thought a while.

She looked around her shop until she found the old dusty box with just speckles of red paint remaining on it.

Daishinji asked the young apprentice if she had come by boat. The apprentice said she had, and Daishinji suggested that they take a ride together. She instructed the young woman to drop anchor when they got to the center of the ocean.

Daishinji then told the apprentice to go to the side of the boat with the worn wooden box and bid a fish to jump in so they could look at it.

The apprentice went to the side of the boat and did as Daishinji instructed her.

Nothing happened for a time.

Then, out of nowhere, the largest yellowtailed tuna the apprentice had ever seen jumped into the boat.

The force of it knocked Daishinji and the apprentice overboard.

Daishinji was laughing hard as her old friend, the one-time paper fish got hold of her and the apprentice and helped them back on to the boat.

The apprentice watched as the one-time paper fish told his creator, “There is no going back.”

“I know,” said Daishinji. And she pulled up the anchor and instructed the origami apprentice to steer back to shore.

The young woman and the old one were silent on the ride back.

When they reached shore, the apprentice implored Daishinji, “Master, will you please teach me what you know?”

“I just did,” said Daishinji. 🌸

The unspoken lesson that Daishinji teaches the apprentice is that work is a relational experience, not a transactional one. Daishinji relates to her creation honestly enough so that the paper fish speaks to her. She becomes invested in a relationship. She trusts the creative process itself. The apprentice can't understand this behavior at first. It makes no sense to a young upstart who wants to transact the results of what the world measures with a yardstick of the external. But Daishinji shows the apprentice transformation in the center of the sea. Daishinji demonstrates that the beauty of work is not in committing a transaction, but in recognizing that a relation already exists. A relation between creator and created, such that the created is free to transform into its own autonomous entity. It is also a relation between one person and another where a lesson is transmitted through touching real experience.

Time is time, an entity that once traded for can never be retrieved.

In the contemporary workplace, unlike medieval Japan and the Zen tradition the above tale alludes to, we are obsessed with transaction. We put in hours at work and we take home money, but this compensation is only the measurable, tangible by-product of work and far from its whole summation. If that was all work was, we may as well be monkeys trained by lab technicians to put balls in a basket in exchange for bananas. And for some of us, we have reduced work to such a transaction. This is painful because as human beings we inherently seek meaning and we get that meaning from the relationships we cultivate in the world.

And no, I do not believe it is sufficient for us to extract all meaning from those relationships we form outside of work. We work a scheduled 40–80 hours a week (many people work more) in the United States and if work is not helping us grow emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually then we are wasting a large portion of our lives. No transaction is worth that kind of waste—certainly not the transaction of time. Time is time, an entity that once traded for can never be retrieved.

It is pretty simple: continue to treat people as trained seals and they'll work for rewards alone; treat them as full human beings and they'll work for the work itself.

Let me offer a quick word to the skeptics, before I lose you. I understand your point of view because I consult with you every day. You are pragmatists: you pay people a lot of money so the mission of the company will move forward, the stock holders will be happy as well as your board and you want to extract the talent your people have so it can be put into service for the benefit of the aforementioned. You do not have time to run a support group, to make sure that people experience joy and fulfillment at work, or to help people externally experience who they internally perceive themselves to be. I understand your concerns, your pressures, and your biases. But let me tell you what I've learned from your corporate colleagues who also used to feel this way—you don't have the luxury to not pay attention to the quest for meaning of your employees.

The modern workplace as a transactional rather than a relational space is a short-term proposition. Emotional commitment garnered through fear rather than mutual care is a dying art. An employee-retention program based on material incentive alone is also the stuff of a former age. Should you choose to hold fast to this ethos of the past, my experience has been that you will continue to experience people as finite resources with limited abilities rather than infinite resources with endless possibilities. It is pretty simple: continue to treat people as trained seals and they'll work for rewards alone; treat them as full human beings and they'll work for the work itself.

Today's manager, if he/she truly wants to lead people to do great things, has to be interested in the people themselves and not just the tasks they want performed. A Daishinji manager does not say, "I'm doing this process so I can get this result." A Daishinji manager is not like a mathematician executing an equation. A Daishinji manager is rather an artist who says, "I am doing this because I am drawn to do this and I love this...and I trust that this process of attraction will lead me in the direction I need to go."

The answers lie inside the people you hired and if you don't believe that, you never should have hired them and you are wasting your money.

When people feel that they are not being manipulated into performing a certain way and that what the boss wants most is that they go at the process with integrity, openness, and genuine care for each other, the stage is set for transformation. Imagine what it would feel like to trust that if you set people on the journey, they will find the right path and deliver a result you never dreamed of—like taking paper and not just folding up the most beautiful fish you ever saw, but actually creating the conditions for the thing to become blood and flesh when it hits the water, to swim away into the ocean.

Notice I didn't say, "making the fish swim," but I said "creating the conditions." As a Daishinji manager, this is what you will do: create the conditions. I don't mean that you simply set up an environment, and then go back into your office and say, "Call me in a month." You will have to be available to consistently encourage, refine the questions, and re-articulate the mission and the questions that the world is organically presenting to the mission—but by all means, you are not there to give the answer. The answers lie inside the people you hired and if you don't believe that, you never should have hired them and you are wasting your money.

Management is ultimately about trust, trusting that your people can do something that you never could do on your own. And more than that, trusting that this is not just a question of scale or scope or of multiplying your own impact. Instead, it is about your people actualizing their own vision as a complement and improvement on your own.

When people have this opportunity, the work becomes much bigger than you and it also becomes much bigger than them. The work itself becomes a relational field on which to experience unexpected transformation. It becomes the process by which you get to know your capabilities, your interests, your desires, fears, and your loves. It becomes an extension of you and your people, and then, if you get good enough at letting go, the way Daishinji did, it can become even more than that. It can grow beyond its original creators to objectively serve the world and stand (or swim) on its own.

People need meaning and if they don't have it, the workplace devolves into a zone of petty competition, selfishness, and political play.

And you don't need a Tony Robbins seminar or the latest fad-like business consultant to create such conditions; you just need the work. You need the work to be meaningful, the goals to be clear, and the pathway for getting there to be undefined—you need to leave your people with something important to do. And not just the mundane things like executing your “to-do list,” but give them extraordinary things to do like find a path where all there is at present is uncharted territory. Allow the work to be a forum for self-actualization, and not for its own sake, though it's a by-product, but for the sake of fulfilling a genuine shared mission. And if you don't have a genuine mission, get one. People need meaning and if they don't have it, the workplace devolves into a zone of petty competition, selfishness, and political play. But human beings are better than that—they want a higher calling. And as a manager, you have the duty to give it to them.

Give them a meaningful mission that is about more than transaction. Give them something that is hard, that is full of obstacles, and is incredibly worthwhile. And then tell them they must do it, that you yourself do not know how. Give them support, care, a relationship with you—a real one. Be human with your people and model a relational way of working. Model what it means to not know all the answers, to see work not as a simple transaction to complete, but as a relationship to discover. A relationship with the self, the people you work with, the discoveries themselves, and with the client or customer.

We have to trust that our ideas on paper have a power of their own, a power beyond our ego and personal strategy, a power that the world itself imbues, a power that only an interaction with the world can set free.

Working this way is transformational, not transactional. This is the way of work we must cultivate if we are to make work a refuge for our humanity to be explored. And for my purely pragmatic readers, if the previous sentence stills feels too amorphous to you at this point, why don't you read this one: This is the way we must work, if we are interested in making a workplace that produces never-before-seen innovation that will drive a company toward greatness.

A transformation is not a transaction. It is not a matter of the vending machine experience of, "I put in this, I get out that." A transformation is always a surprise. I know a drum maker who has been making drums in his shop for the last 16 years. He works with saws, a lathe, chisels, files, sandpapers, oil, and with goat skins and rope. He has made thousands of drums in his lifetime, every one of them with his own hands, which are calloused and worn. But each time he hears one of his drums played by a new player it is different to him. It feels as if he never made it at all. The player remakes the drum in her own image. The drum is transformed from raw material to instrument in a way where the whole is not only bigger than the sum of its parts, but is wholly different.

Consider a loaf of bread. The dough rises first and then the heat transforms it completely—miraculous, but not supernatural. Transformation is natural; it happens everyday—we just have lower expectations of it happening at work. We have come to believe that because we do business, we are making transactions and not building relationships or making art. But that perception is our choice. The former breeds selfishness, nihilism, and greed where the measure of success is always external. But the latter relational business practice that is currently gaining steam in the U.S. business, post-Enron community breeds altruism, meaning, and integrity. To get to the latter, the first step is trust. We have to trust that our ideas on paper have a power of their own, a power beyond our ego and personal strategy, a power that the world itself imbues, a power that only an interaction with the world can set free. A power that is as natural and available as rain showering a dry field.

It is high time for the business workplace to realize that manipulation is powerless next to trust.

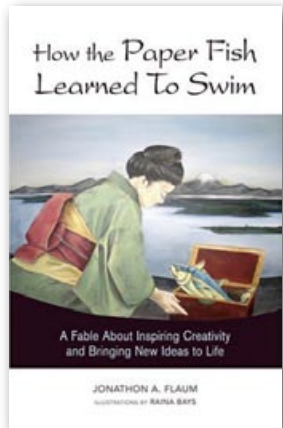
But it is scary to let down the shields that we use to cover over our humanity. It is scary to try to do this thing called transformation authentically. Sometimes the bread will not bake properly and we cannot eat it. Sometimes, for the untrusting and inexperienced drum maker, no sound will be present and sometimes the project your group commits to will fail and sink in the water when released...but oh, how they will learn! How you and they will grow. Failure is not the enemy of transformational success; overly strategic manipulative plans are. Authentic failure is life's great teacher.

Transformational success is the same way. Such a thing is not a strategic transaction that can be forecasted on a spread sheet—it is a natural, though miracle-like, dough turning to bread, wood and skin turning into drums, sperm and egg turning into a child that will one day be as capable of independent sovereign life as you are. It is the process you must trust. It is the life pulsing inside you and it is the work that beckons. The kind of work you won't remember as a transaction of money, but rather as a process of becoming yourself—and allowing your people the room to become themselves.

Control is not the ultimate elixir; and in making the mistake in business of drinking from its cup alone we have poisoned the most hopeful and alive part of ourselves.

It is high time for the business workplace to realize that manipulation is powerless next to trust. Control is not the ultimate elixir; and in making the mistake in business of drinking from its cup alone we have poisoned the most hopeful and alive part of ourselves. The antidote is to remain open to becoming continually and unexpectedly transformed by our relationships, our creative ideas, and our life—a life that has been crying out from the beginning to find a place for its authentic expression and revelation at work.

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