Much has been written in recent years about leadership in general and the need for HR pros to become leaders, not just employees. These writers miss two significant nuances: the need to give people meaning in their work and the power of story as a tool for encouraging meaning.

Futurist Rolf Jensen, Director of the Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, writes that “Storytellers will be the most valued workers in the twenty-first century. All professionals—including advertisers, teachers, entrepreneurs, politicians, athletes, and religious leaders—will be valued for their ability to create stories that will captivate their audiences.” To his list, I would add HR professionals.

Jensen claims that in the years ahead we will move into what he calls the Dream Society: “In today’s Information Society, we prize those who can skillfully manipulate data, in tomorrow’s Dream Society—focused on dreams, adventure, spirituality, and feelings—we will most generously reward those who can tell stories. The highest-paid person in the first half of the next century will be the ‘storyteller.’ In the future, the notion that work should be no more than a means of obtaining something else will disappear. People will, of course, be paid for working, but money will not be the main reason for working. People will require meaning in their work.”

Current surveys of Generation Xers place meaning high on the list of what they look for in a job. Aging baby-boomers—having passed through their materialistic stage—will also demand meaning in their work, not just management.

Organizations will have to develop a collective meaning to survive. As Jensen writes, “Today’s business firm is rational, efficient, and devoted to making profits, because it developed out of the Industrial Age and the Information Age. But this type of company will either adapt or disappear in the future. A Dream Society requires values—ethical, social, or religious. A company obsessed with efficiency and working only for profit will be regarded as untrustworthy...in the Dream Society, companies will be more balanced. They will seek to earn a profit, but they will also want to achieve certain human values, i.e., kindness to animals, fairness to all, or happiness for workers and their communities.”

As HR pros, you will be increasingly called upon to help give meaning to employees. Of course, before you can help others find meaning in their work, you have to find it in your own.

Can all honest, legal work have meaning, dignity and value? Yes, I believe it can. If you doubt me, read Victor Frankle’s classic work, Man’s Search for Meaning, about finding meaning in his work as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. There may be more difficult environments, but I can’t imagine where or when.

Even if your current job doesn’t fit your long-term passion, find meaning in the support the work provides as you plan for more passionate future work. Find meaning in doing what you do with excellence and integrity. As Mother Teresa notes, “We do not do great things. We do small things with great love.” Ultimately, if you can’t find meaning in your work—leave. The dilemma is this: the future of HR will require such a level of commitment that you will not be able to sustain your work with anything less than all-out dedication.

One way to give meaning to your work and to the work of those you lead is through storytelling. As we move into Jensen’s Dream Society, it’s no accident that we elected an actor as president of this country and a playwright—Vaclav Havel—as president of the Czech Republic.

How powerful are stories? “Everybody is a story,” writes Dr. Naomi Remen in her book Kitchen Table Wisdom, Stories That Heal. “When I was a child, people sat around kitchen tables and told their stories. We don’t do that so much anymore. Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way wisdom gets passed along. The stuff that helps us to live a life worth remembering. Despite the awesome powers of technology many of us still do not live very well. We may need to listen to one another’s stories again.”

Loneliness is the hidden wound of our time, the price many have paid for embracing such frontier values as independence, self-reliance, and competence. In the future, HR pros will be increasingly called upon to remember we are all connected and can become a community, to help organizations move toward goals with humor and meaning, with purpose and quality companionship. A good story provides a compass for a group’s mission.

As leaders, how do we discover and develop our own stories to inspire others? Look at your wounds. There is power in the wounded leader. As Nietzsche wrote, “life breaks all of us eventually, but
...before you can help others find meaning in their work, you have to find it in your own.

Out of her wounds, Danticat weaves her life and culture into a powerful force to move us to understanding and action.

Maya Lin, the architect who at twenty beat out hundreds of more established architects to win the contest to design the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, recounted how wounded she felt when people attacked and misunderstood her design. Yet she found that out of that wound came the inspiration to design more and even greater work.

Tell stories. Use them in your work. Search for the stories of others in songs, novels, poems and dance. Practice them first if you must—in front of your kids, a Toastmasters’ group or your book club—but weave them into the memos and reports you write, the meetings and trainings you lead.

When you do, you will have taken an awesome step into the future of HR—toward leadership through the power of storytelling.

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