



By: William Treseder

This post is a short excerpt from his new book [*RESET: Building Purpose in the Age of Digital Distraction*](#)

Hungry For Purpose

The Ancient Greeks used the word *telos*. The best translation is “end-purpose” or “end-goal”. I really love this concept. The *telos* of a thing. What is its purpose? Why does it exist? This is a key element that entrepreneurs coax out of themselves, even if they need a little help sometimes.

The *telos* unlocks their enthusiasm and drive by providing a true north. The *telos* becomes

their mission. Their purpose. Their reason for taking every breath.

Most people do not think about the world like this. We get dragged away from the most important considerations by a constant barrage of pointless junk. The natural friction of life—bills, traffic, paperwork—forces us to spend our precious time worrying about the details.

We stare down at our feet—or our phone—as we shuffle through life.

We often forget why we are doing something in the first place. Whatever our original objective, we let the smaller intermediate tasks get in the way. Missing the forest for the trees, as the saying goes. We rob ourselves of the ability to see how the dots connect. This is such widespread behavior that it even has an official clinical name: goal displacement.

Our tendency to get distracted with details is precisely why we need missions! A mission lifts up your gaze, forcing you to look up so you can stare confidently at the horizon. The mission reminds us why we do what we do. This is a rare trait in a world where everyone seems perfectly content to plod along mindlessly.

A mission motivates us to the point where we will let nothing stand in the way of making it a reality. Doubts are unavoidable, but they can be overcome when we can see the clear connection between our current actions and our ultimate goal. Every obstacle will be overcome.

A mission reorganizes the way you think. A compelling mission reframes the resources around you. Everything becomes a tool to help you build your dream. Everything, even money, is evaluated based on how it can move you closer to the *telos*.

A mission also inspires the people around you. There is a glorious power and freedom to the

feeling that we are doing what we are meant to do. And that is exactly what happens to a team when it collectively adopts a mission. People are freed to do their best work in service of a compelling cause.

Marc Benioff, the billionaire founder of Salesforce, learned this the hard way. He struggled for years as an early executive at Oracle. The company wasn't able to plan effectively because the business environment changed so quickly. Without a plan, communication broke down.

Marc's response was developing the now-famous V2MOM tool. It starts by clarifying the vision of the company. Everything else hinges on that vision. That goal. That mission.

Paradox Of Choice

Unfortunately, compelling missions seem to be few and far between. If you're like me, you've been interested in lots of different ideas, people, jobs, companies, and places. There are so many options out there! How can anyone ever truly know what they want out of life? It's so hard to choose.

I could never just pick one and stick with it for the rest of my life. That's completely unrealistic.

Don't fall into this trap. No one has complete confidence in a choice when making it. We can't set such a high bar before making a choice. None of us have unshakeable confidence in our personal and professional goals.

That's true even for the folks who tell you that they always knew they wanted to be a doctor, engineer, a social worker, or whatever. They don't always feel that way, but the *telos* is stronger than their inevitable doubts.

Clearly knowing our mission means that we have memorized the story we tell ourselves every day about why we get out of bed every morning. No matter how we feel, we still get up.

Focus, Focus, Focus

Focusing on a mission is a skill. A lucky few are born with enough of this mission mindset that it naturally modifies their behavior. They are totally obsessed with a particular opportunity and will take incredible risks to take one good shot at it!

Elon Musk is the extreme example of how a mission mentality can affect our behavior. The billionaire entrepreneur built Zip2 and Paypal, netting himself almost \$200 million by 2002. And did he put that money in the bank? No, he promptly plowed it into his next three companies: SpaceX, Tesla, and SolarCity. And I mean, *allof* it. In 2008 he was completely out of cash and both companies almost went bankrupt. That's how much some entrepreneurs believe in their missions.

The rest of us aren't like that, of course. And I'm not sure we should aspire to be. The point is that we can achieve many of the benefits of this kind of mindset.

We can train ourselves to identify and pursue compelling missions.

Finding a mission is easier said than done, though. Many people and organizations failed to build and maintain a mission mentality. Often the *telos* fails to catch hold or quickly dies out. It's hard to define and then pursue a mission.

One of my professors at Stanford, Rob Reich, understands how difficult it is to choose in a world full of options. On the last day of his classes, he offers the students a simple but provocative challenge: learn to close doors. Don't become obsessed with keeping your options open.

After years of watching students struggle, Professor Reich now thinks the single important lesson he can impart is that everyone needs to learn to commit. Avoiding choices is itself a choice. Seek out discomfort. Make the hard choices that will ultimately reward you.

Dollar Signs

Cultivating a mission mentality will require that you reframe the major activities in your life. You must be able to see—and eventually feel—the benefits of focusing on purpose and impact. This will happen primarily in one powerful way: money loses its place as the most important thing in your life.

This is a key piece of the entrepreneur's toolkit. Hopefully we can exploit it for our own benefit, too.

An entrepreneur learns quickly that they can't be obsessed with money, especially when he or she is starting out. It's incredibly hard to sell stuff to people when you are a no-name company that has only existed for a month or two. You are an obviously risky choice. Why would someone pick you over something they've used for years?

Because your solution is exactly what they need. Successful entrepreneurs quickly learn to become experts in their customers' problems. Then they work tirelessly to solve them. Sometimes for free.

Entrepreneurs become obsessed with providing value to people, not with making money.

You and I don't naturally think like that. We like to picture the money, not the people who will pay us. This constantly frustrates me when I'm talking to the Stanford entrepreneurs that I teach.

In one mindset—let's make money!—they have a hard time coming up with ideas, but in the

other mindset—let’s help people!—they are full of them. One is wasteland, and the other is a blooming garden.

We were so obviously built to focus on others. Money corrupts our mindset and our actions.

We’ve all said something like “I want to be a millionaire!” Statements like this are strange blend of sad and funny. What people mean when they say stuff like that is “I want to spend a million dollars.” And spending money is the opposite of how you become rich!

The mission mentality takes us in a radically different direction than obsessing over money. We need to stop thinking about becoming rich and instead ask questions that require the courage of an idealist:

“What kind of an impact do I want to have on the world?”

“What is a problem to which I can devote my life?”

Those kinds of deep questions feed your soul. They also help you probe deeply, which begins the slow process of excavating your true self. Asking these hard questions is the first step to finding something exciting. Something that is worthy to be called your next mission. Your next *telos*.

What to remember about “Mission Mentality”

- Focus on the question *Why?* to dig into your motivation for acting
- Focus on the question *Who?* to explore the human impact of your actions
- A compelling mission will naturally help you avoid getting distracted
- A compelling mission draws in a team of willing supporters

Take four minutes to consider these questions

- Do I have a good answer to *Why?* and *Who?* for my daily activities?
- What causes and organizations do I volunteer with or donate to?
- How does these causes and organizations draw me in?
- How would I feel if I could double or triple the impact I have in these fields?

If you want to spend ten minutes learning more about how we can create opportunities, watch Kare Anderson's TED talk "[Be an opportunity maker](#)".

If you want to spend fourteen minutes learning more about creating emotional connections to work, watch Leonard Ha's TEDx talk "[Who's on your poster?](#)".

If you want to spend nineteen minutes learning more about how people are attracted to missions, watch Daniel Pink's TED talk "[The puzzle of motivation](#)".

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