

The Three Keys to Meaningful Work

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Is Three the Magic Number?

The conventions of work that arose during the industrial age are coming to an end. 21st century work cannot be built upon foundations of rewards and punishments. The information age worker cannot follow the rules of the conveyor belt. The new generation of workers desire a deeper meaning in work.

In the recent decades meaningful work has been studied in many ways. Surprisingly many influential positions on the significance and meaning in work revolve around a very similar tripartite distinction; a distinction that has deeper roots in the very basics of positive psychology.

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Three Types of Work

Robert Bellah (Bellah et al. 1996) introduced the following famous division of the three kinds of work:

- job
- career; and
- calling.

A job's function is to provide means to satisfy basic needs. A career's function is self-expression and mastery. A calling puts one's talents in the service of something greater. Bellah's work has been later empirically verified by e.g. Wrzesniewski et al. (1997).

Three Kinds of Happiness

In his seminal *Authentic Happiness* (Seligman 2003), Martin Seligman delineated three happy lives:

- the pleasant life
- the good life; and
- the meaningful life.

The first draws from sensual experience and hedonism; the second from competence and flow experiences; and the last, from being able to contribute to a greater whole.

The Three Factors of Good Work

The *Good Work* principles delineated by Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon (Gardner et al. 2001) are:

- engagement
- excellence; and
- ethics.

Engagement means that the worker can feel a sense of connectedness and presence with her work. Excellence means that she can produce high quality results competently. Ethics means that she will also carry the responsibility of the short and long term effects of her work to others.

The Three Psychological Needs

Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (Deci & Ryan 2000) argue that at the roots of human motivation are the three parameters:

- autonomy
- competence; and
- relatedness.

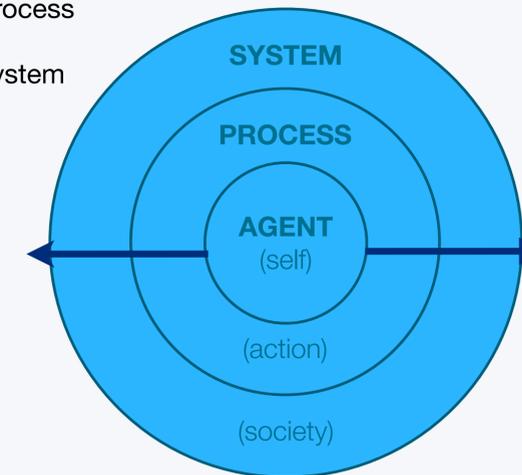
Every human being seeks to be a sovereign individual. Every human being seeks to achieve new things. And every human being seeks to feel connected to others. This division has also been recently successfully popularized by Daniel Pink (2010) and Roman Krznaric (2012).

The Three Keys to Meaningful Work

In all of the positions described above, a similar hierarchical dynamic can be detected. Meaningful work arises from being able to function as an autonomous individual, from being able to competently produce results and from being able to contribute to a common cause.

This division can be reflected functionally as follows:

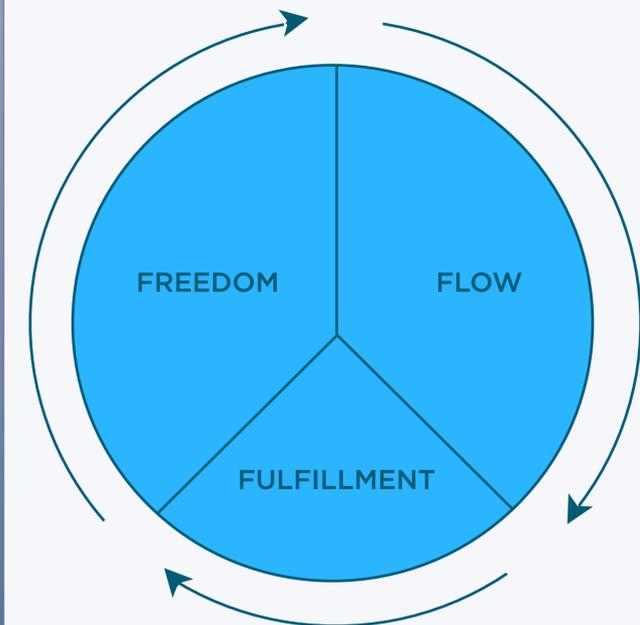
- agent
- process
- system



The division can be reflected ontologically as follows:

- self
- action
- society

The three keys to meaningful work form a concentric system, where an agent acts effectively to produce valuable results for the entire system of actors. At the center of meaningful work are *the capacity to function without constraint* (“freedom”), *the capacity to act effectively* (“flow”) and *the capacity to participate in something greater than oneself* (“fulfillment”) as an individual.



These three keys, **freedom**, **flow** and **fulfillment**, form a positive circle, where increased freedom offers better chances of discovering flow. Finding one's own flow factors in turn offers greater capacity to contribute. By contributing to a society, the society is usually inclined to compensate for the contribution, where added resources enable greater freedom and so on.