

MILTON DE SOUSA

The Meaningful Leader

The power of meaning
to serve and transform



EDIÇÕES SÍLABO

«A meaningful leader cares for people and the planet. Leading by an inspirational narrative while enabling employees to augment their impact and leveraging company strengths is a sustainable approach to attracting and retaining motivated talent. In his provocative book, Milton challenges conventional leaders via inspiring examples of meaningful leaders worldwide.»

João Gunther do Amaral

Chief Development Officer, SONAE

«Milton shows us that to lead in today's world full of uncertainty and ambiguity, one must find and give meaning in/at work. That is a clear duty for leaders facing future challenges.»

Ricardo Pires

Chief Executive Officer, Grupo SEMAPA

«Milton's book and reflections couldn't be more timely! People are increasingly looking for companies that guarantee them meaningful work. They are looking for contexts in which they can relate and leave a mark. And this must be guaranteed by leaders. Leaders are the ones who create the contexts that are favourable to positive experiences. I'm sure Milton's message inspires all who want to be better leaders.»

Isabel Viegas

Chief HR Officer, Grupo SEMAPA

«The extensive and careful reflection on leadership Milton de Sousa wrote made me reflect on the leadership of myself and those that served to me as an example. In that process, aspects like humility, being non-judgmental, collaboration, trust and modelling got a new and inspiring meaning».

Caroline van den Berg

HR Director, SPIE Nederland

«As cracks and challenges become visible in the volatile worldscape of today, meaningful work is core to our individual and organisational existence. We want to make a difference, and Milton has gifted us with how leaders can do just that, inspiring others through storytelling, mentoring, and enabling and empowering the workforce. The Meaningful Leader is a must-read for leaders at every level of the organisation.»

Dr. Alex Bennet

Director, Mountain Quest Institute, USA; Professor, Institute of Knowledge and Innovation Southeast Asia, Bangkok University, Thailand

«Purposeful leadership is the key to connecting the many generations now collaborating in our work context. With his deep insights into organisations, ability to reflect out of true curiosity and to ask the right questions, Milton touches upon the essence of how to lead and engage talents for the long term: finding our purpose in what we do.»

Renske Paans-Over
Chief HR Officer, Robeco

«We have come through a time of profound change over the last three years, which have completely impacted and transformed the way we work, people's expectations on how they expect to work, and consequently the way people need to be managed and how we need to lead. For these reasons, I find Milton's work on Meaningful Leadership very timely and incredibly insightful as my firm, and I consider how we will operate in the future and the leadership and guidance we will need to provide going forward».

Colm Gorman
EMA Head of People, KPMG

«This book offers valuable insights into creating a meaningful and purpose-driven organisation. It emphasises the responsibility of leaders to lead with care and transform their organisations. It also highlights the importance of curiosity, courage and empathy in making a lasting impact and legacy for future generations. If you aspire to be such a leader, this is a must-read book for you!»

Rianne Jans
Chief Financial Officer, Deloitte Nederland

For Fleur.



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**The power of meaning
to serve and transform**

Milton de Sousa

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Foreword

A note on avoiding meaningless meaning

It is a pleasure to write these opening lines to the book of my good colleague and friend Milton de Sousa. We have taught courses and done research together. So, mine is not a neutral view of the author but one founded on a common trajectory with a number of mutual interests. In this foreword, I share my view of meaning at work and leadership, explaining why I think this is a core topic for contemporary management.

Milton treats meaning at work from the perspective of servant leadership. He is one of the most qualified voices in the treatment of the theme. I see servant leadership as important and as a paradoxical process: managers need to serve while keeping their authority. As the book attests, this is an exercise in balance. Balance, though, is a difficult process. An excess of «leadership» is as problematic as an excess of «service». Therefore, the words of this book will constitute a challenge for practitioners. But the advice is important: helping people find meaning at work is not forcing them to accept meaning as a top-down form of engagement. Let me play the role of the cynic in these opening lines, a role necessary to avoid the corruption of meaning.

The book defends the importance of meaning at work as a source of motivation. It is easy to agree. Yet, leaders may learn to accept that meaning comes from different places, and the meaning of meaning for me may be different from the meaning of meaning for you. Officially imposed meaning is meaningless. The book, in my view, should be read with this in mind. There is nothing as meaningless as pretending that one is energized by slogans repeated by leaders who read about purpose. Talking about purpose does not create purpose. Being an example, as the book explains, does.

The book offers a number of ideas to turn meaning into a practice. Thinking about management as a service, making it happen and telling sto-

ries about how it happens are all powerful mechanisms to create meaningful work. The book itself is an example, telling stories of the process. The stories will introduce you to cases of famous and less famous characters and organizations. Some of these people transformed their organizations and the world for the better. Their examples may look easier on paper, but we should not ignore that transformation demands determination – as the title says. These now inspiring cases did not start as success stories. They are all examples of people inspired to serve and determined to change. In the end, work is still work. Even meaningful work is effortful, challenging, and often difficult. Yet, if it does not contain an element of meaning, it is just a way of exchanging precious time for a salary. While we need the salary, time is the most precious resource. Hence the challenge: let us turn work into something meaningful so it deserves the time it takes. To find out how, turn the page, please.

Miguel Pina e Cunha

Fundação Amélia de Mello Chair Professor, Nova SBE

Acknowledgements

This book has taken far longer to write than I expected initially. Given the complexity and vastness of the theme, I often got carried away and excited to explore new paths and fields of study, which forced me to revisit the flow of the text far too often. I learned immensely, but in hindsight, I could have been more pragmatic and saved my wife and children some of the sacrifices they made for me to finish this piece. Because of that, but not only, my first word of gratitude goes to my wife. Fleur is my shelter and an example of persistence, wisdom, and compassion. This book is for her. I am forever grateful for her love and what she provides to me and our three loving and most remarkable children, Hugo (the sage), Boris (the scientist), and Wolf (the brave). I am blessed to have an enlarged family spread between Portugal and the Netherlands filled with love and kindness. My loving parents, Maria and Jorge, who gave everything for me, and my parents-in-law, Marcia and Richard, who embraced me as their son, moulded my idea of a loving, meaningful, and happy family. Something I try (and often fail) every day to achieve. I take much inspiration from them.

We are largely a product of the people we encounter and welcome into our lives. Alex Bennet, David Bennet, Dirk van Dierendonck, and Miguel Pina e Cunha are my intellectual muses. They have changed my understanding of the world and given me tools to think more deeply. I can never reach their intellectual greatness, but I hope to at least honour somehow their learnings and trust in me.

Writing these words made me recall those friends from my late adolescence and young adulthood, mainly in my hometown of Porto. They represent a side of me that is undoubtedly childish but filled with dreams and ambition. A part of me that I need to surface more often. I have failed to reconnect with them regularly, but I hold them close to my heart. Pedro Moura, Virgilio, Sérgio Almeida, Vitor Lourenço, David, António Mota and Bert Smeets.

Then there is this small group of friends. A handful of people that, in different ways, supported and inspired me in the last 20 years. Albino Correia (also my uncle), Sham Moodliar, Angel Oquendo, Ricardo Baptista Leite, Miguel Pinto Luz, Cláudia Filipa Ferreira, Pedro Ferreira, and Albert Goldsteen. All are unique but equally capable of determination and generosity. I am forever grateful for their affection and friendship, which they may not realize but helped me immensely in this endeavour through their example. Finally, I thank Alex Bennet and Margarida Correia for their revisions and Manuel Robalo from *Sílabo* for supporting me in my first book and, hopefully, a few more to come.

Chapter 1

Why we need meaningful leaders

With so many books on leadership published every year, you might rightly wonder, as I did too, why another one? Yet, despite the numerous views and models from insightful scholars, thinkers, and executives, there seems to be something missing in providing a comprehensive, scientifically informed overview of the intersection between meaning, work, and leadership, especially for a larger audience. For example, some authors refer to purposeful leadership without adequately positioning it within the larger framework of meaning. Purpose is only one part of the story, albeit admittedly an important one. This lack of understanding of what meaning entails needs to be addressed. At the same time, fundamental socio-demographic shifts in the meaning of work, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and technological disruption, with profound implications for organizations and leaders, remain largely unanswered. These social changes are accompanied by growing concerns about climate change and sustainability, giving way to new views about the purpose of the organization, as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals.¹ All the while, populist leadership is on the rise (in governments and organizations), which is both a consequence and a cause of negative forms of meaning in society that needs to be countered. Within this context, organizations still fail to provide the conditions for people to create meaning in their work. From a more academic perspective, new developments in models like servant or transformational leadership seem insufficient to capture the complexities of what we just described.

In my effort to aggregate various lines of thinking from management science, psychology, and (some) philosophy, my proposition with this book is admittedly ambitious – and therefore risky – and surely incomplete. Regardless, I hope it does provide a comprehensive overview of this new idea of meaningful leadership that can be practically relevant for leaders and intellectually interesting for scholars. Let us start!

The war for talent is a war for meaning

I have always been intrigued by the life stories of many Uber drivers. They represent fundamental shifts in how people look at work and how technological disruption is opening many new and unforeseen career opportunities. My top stories include a former SWAT leader from the police force in Rio de Janeiro who used to fight gangs in the *favelas*, a Russian-Portuguese goalkeeper of the Portuguese national ice hockey team (yes, *ice* hockey in Portugal!), and a successful IT consultant, Marco, that at the age of 50 decided to quit his job to drive people around and give piano lessons. This last one intrigued me. During my ride, I asked Marco why he decided to change his life so abruptly. He told me about his permanent worries with customers and a pivotal moment during his vacations when he spent an entire hour on the phone with a client while his kids were playing in front of him on the beach. That was when he decided to change. I asked him how he felt compared to his days as an IT consultant. And his words couldn't be more convincing. «My life has become so much better. I have less money, but I have fewer worries, and I live a life of tranquillity. I enjoy driving and meeting people, and my job is done when the journey is finished. I can sleep at night without worrying about the next day».

I thought for a while that this sounded a bit like escaping life. Did Marco not miss something more meaningful? But he continued, «What I like the most, though, is that I can now spend a lot more time playing and giving piano lessons (his passion since he was a young kid). I teach kids aged 6 or 7 to retirees. My oldest student is 65». He told me about this one student, a woman that was retired. She had lost her daughter and decided to take piano lessons to focus and reorient her life. I could sense his pride for her. She could play well, but the most important was how the piano lessons allowed her to rebuild her strength and the focus to continue her life despite the excruciatingly painful loss. She often told him, «Marco, you saved my life,» to which he uttered, «No, I did not. You saved yourself through your

dedication and strength». I realized that Marco lived not only a life of joy but also one of meaning. He seemed to have a happy, relevant, and purposeful life. After all, in his mind, *he was saving lives as a piano teacher*.

Marco's story, like many others, encapsulates much of that I see happening in the new reality of work: people having the courage to make conscious (and unusual) career choices, the possibilities that technology provides to craft work and create more autonomy personally, and finally the centrality of happiness and meaning in the way we look at work. This last aspect is especially true among younger generations. For example, not too long ago, I supervised a master's project with five brilliant management and economics students for a large and prestigious strategy consulting firm. The company was so happy with them that it offered them positions in different offices. All of them refused. Why? Because, as they said, they wanted to have a real impact and find a better balance between work and other interests. This would probably be unthinkable ten or 15 years ago, but today even the most famous consulting firms face unusual turnover rates.

My observations are not about consulting or any other sector but across all industries. In the last three years, the number one concern encountered among the hundreds of executives I worked with was this: how to attract and retain talent that seems to expect something so different from what we were historically used to?

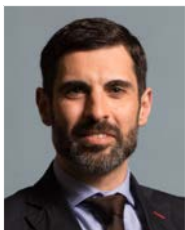
What is it then that people want from work? Leo Rosten, humourist and screenwriter, once wrote that «The purpose of life is not to be happy at all. It is to be useful, to be honourable. It is to be compassionate. It is to matter, to have it make some difference that you lived».² (Some people attribute this quote improperly to the transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson). In striking contrast, the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca referred to true happiness as the ability «to enjoy the present, without anxious dependence upon the future» (p. 3).³ This view is not to be confused with hedonism, the theory that pleasure is the sole purpose of life. As a stoic philosopher, Seneca defended happiness as a life of virtue, as we are «not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears but to rest satisfied with what we have, which is sufficient, for he that is so wants nothing».

This quote captures quite closely what the latest research on meaning and happiness tells us about their differences. Roy Baumeister, a social psychologist currently at the University of Queensland, and one of the most well-known scholars in the field, conducted a study with several colleagues involving 397 adults to explore the difference between having a happy life and a meaningful life.⁴ The findings are insightful and, in many ways, con-

cordant with the reflections from Leo Rosten and Lucius Seneca. As Roy Baumeister and colleagues put it, meaningfulness is a «cognitive and an emotional assessment of whether one's life has purpose and value» (p. 506). In contrast, happiness is more about «subjective well-being, which is to say, an experiential state that contains a globally positive affective tone» (p. 505). Meaning involves connecting past, present, and future. Happiness is more focused on the here and now. While meaningful work may not lead to happiness, it does not exclude it. I see that people, just like Marco and the example of my students above, increasingly want work that provides a healthy balance between happiness and meaning.

On this last point, in a study of 2021 by Lifeway Research, 57% of Americans said that they wonder at least monthly about how to find more meaning and purpose in life, with 21% thinking about it even daily.⁵ If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated an ongoing trend to find a more balanced equilibrium between work and private life.⁶ The «Great Resignation» of 2021, a term coined by Anthony Klotz from Mays Business School at Texas A&M University, during which in the USA alone 47 million people quit their jobs,⁷ was already slowly taking place and is also the result of what some call the «Great Reflection». More recently we seem to observe the «Great Regret», in which many people, especially among the younger generations, want to return to their jobs.⁸ All these trends represent, in my view, different expressions of our permanent search for meaning. For example, in a 2021 study by Gartner⁹ with 3,500 employees worldwide, 65% reported that the COVID-19 pandemic made them rethink the role of work in their lives, with 56% of those saying they wanted to contribute more to society because of the crisis. In other words, worldwide, people are reconsidering their priorities, emphasizing meaning and purpose over more materialistic and mundane concerns while also looking for day-to-day happiness and a sense of security.

This centrality of purpose has increased dramatically ever since the famous 2018 letter by Larry Fink from Black Rock,¹⁰ claiming that their purpose was ultimately to contribute to society. Aaron Hurst even published a rather famous book on the purpose economy.¹¹ Indeed, purpose has become very fashionable in universities and corporate life. Piggybacking on this trend, many writers came up with their formulations, including the famous «why» of Simon Sinek¹² and even the rediscovery of old notions like Japan's *Ikigai*.¹³



Milton de Sousa is an Associate Professor at the Nova School for Business and Economics (Nova SBE), part of Nova University in Lisbon. After working for many years as an engineer, manager, and business owner, he pursued a PhD, leading to a second career as a scholar. Milton's purpose is to contribute to more meaningful work and human-centric organiza-

tions. He has spent the last 15 years teaching, running numerous leadership development programs, and conducting research, especially on servant leadership and motivation. This book combines Milton's practical and academic experience to help leaders become more meaningful.

Meaning is a fundamental human need. Yet, most organizations fail to provide the conditions for people to experience meaningful work. For example, while meaning is a primary contributor to engagement, it is estimated that around 60% of people are disengaged at work. The economic and social costs of this problem are immense. What is surprising is that management science knows how leaders can promote meaningful work, but that knowledge does not reach practice sufficiently. This book aims to help cover that gap.

Based on an extensive review of the latest research on leadership and human motivation and insights from practice, management science, psychology, and philosophy, this book offers a model to enable leaders to foster meaning in organizations, including practical tools and guidelines for becoming a meaningful leader every day.

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