



# Why we work

What happens when you  
connect people and purpose



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For more information regarding the methods for this Truist Purple Paper, "Why we work", please reach out to Senior Researcher, Sarah Coley, at [Sarah.Coley@truist.com](mailto:Sarah.Coley@truist.com).

# Why purpose matters

Pursuing purpose is the right thing for leaders to do, and it's something that employees notice. More and more companies are doing it. Pursuing purpose can have a deeply positive impact to drive value for shareholders and stakeholders.

We believe a sustained culture of purpose starts with an organization's largest resource: its people. Our exclusive research shows that employees who understand their purpose—and actively pursue it in their roles—stand out. They work more collaboratively, have greater insight into their job functions, and attach more meaning to the work they do. Profit follows.

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We believe a sustained culture of purpose starts with an organization's largest resource: its people.

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"When people acknowledge a higher purpose in their work, we've found it to have positive downstream outcomes," says Truist Leadership Institute Senior Researcher Sarah Coley. "Engagement and retention are higher, and we also find employees better understand their role within the company."

## **Our guide to activating purpose through people**

Here, we present an evidence-based guide for leaders at all levels to activate their company's purpose through its employees. By understanding their individual skills, values, and needs, leaders can create meaningful shared purpose that fosters collaboration and trust.

Ahead, you'll find tools to use after choosing and developing a company purpose.



# Start with clarity.

Trust what you know about your organization, but be receptive to feedback.

1

2

3



## Sarah Coley

Senior Researcher  
Truist Leadership Institute

### Can you share your purpose statement and how it helps you?

My purpose statement is, “Be something positive for other people.” I sometimes get caught up in doing things perfectly, so I hesitate and second-guess myself. My leadership purpose reminds me that there’s no “right way” to help others. If I start with good intentions, and intend to be diligent—which I trust myself to do—I can have faith that I’ll have a positive impact on other people’s lives.

### Why is activating purpose through people so important?

Purpose invigorates employees. Carrying out organizational purpose isn’t just about the goal; it’s about your people feeling affirmed so they can show up as their best selves and support the organization’s purpose in meaningful ways.

### What do you think would be a good first step?

Clarity. Leaders should think about what purpose looks like for their organization. What are their needs, and what do they want to accomplish? Trust your understanding of your organization, but also be receptive to feedback along the way. Purpose can evolve, especially in how it’s executed.

### What’s the most important aspect of the journey?

Keeping employees in perspective. Give them the resources they need to pursue their purpose and actively communicate to them how the company is living out its organizational purpose each day. This helps them understand the overlap between their purpose and that of the organization.

# Join purpose with operations.

Embed it into how you go to market, manage people, and engage communities.



## Erica Shalhoup Paterno

Director of Purpose  
Alignment & Activation  
Truist

### Can you share your purpose statement and some thoughts about it?

My purpose statement is, “To make a positive impact by giving back at every opportunity and instilling that belief in future generations.” When I’m living on purpose, I’m more intentional about how I engage in a situation, with a focus on doing everything I can to make a meaningful contribution—at work with my colleagues, at home with my family, and in my community—and being grateful about having the opportunity to do just that.

### Why is activating purpose through people so important?

People are an organization’s best catalyst for change. When you engage the hearts and minds of your teammates to truly live your purpose, person by person, interaction by interaction, you unleash the collective power that comes from striving for something greater than yourself. When individual teammates connect their personal purpose to their work, they can be inspired to help organizations live out purpose in new and impactful ways every day.

### What is crucial to its success?

Authenticity. To ensure purpose is authentically felt by everyone in the organization, it should be embedded into everything you do—the way you think about your products and services, the way you lead, how you make your decisions, the way you serve clients and engage communities. It can’t be separate from your daily operations; it’s a part of the fabric of who you are.

### What if people are averse to purpose?

You have to create a safe space, and time for personal reflection and introspection. Leaders should lead by example. Don’t start by asking your teammates to define their purpose right off the bat or make it a requirement. Build relationships of trust first. You can do this by sharing your purpose first in organic ways. Meet your people where they are and help them see the intrinsic benefit.

# Lead by example.

Strengthen your company's purpose initiative by strengthening yourself.



## Jenni Marsh

Director of Consulting  
Truist Leadership Institute

### Can you share your purpose statement and how you activate it?

My purpose statement is, "To mindfully and continuously become my best self and offer empowerment to others toward theirs." My natural tendency is to push my helpfulness on others who may not want or need that. When I am living on purpose, I am more likely to be mindful of myself and what empowerment looks like and feels like moment by moment.

### Why is activating purpose through people so important?

People bring purpose to life. When they can show up to work authentically, they bring a passion and energy that's necessary to drive results. They determine how an organization strives toward its goal—each in their own unique way.

### What's an important thing leaders should know?

Do your work first. Who do you want to be as a leader? How do you want to be remembered? The way you show up for your teams—as opposed to what you tell them—is a strong way to inspire change.

### How can leaders approach purpose amidst employee stress or burnout?

High-pressure situations can cause people to narrow their focus. They may need different things from leaders during these times. A leader's ability to stay anchored in their own purpose allows them to feel steadier in times of chaos, be mindful of their teams, and adapt to meet their teams' needs.

# What you'll learn in this Purple Paper



What our exclusive, national research study shows about company purpose and its positive people impacts



Why leaders at all levels are instrumental in implementing purpose



How purpose correlates to better alignment for employees with their jobs, teammates, and the company



What top leaders can do to establish greater trust throughout the organization



Why authenticity is key for communicating company culture

# Should companies value purpose as much as profit?

A majority of the approximately 1,300 U.S. employees we surveyed in our national research study lean that way.



**59% say purpose should be at least as important as profit.**

Thirty-one percent also expressed that companies should improve society in ways beyond providing or creating jobs (TLI Research).



# Who benefits from a culture of purpose?

## **Business owners**

Retain an engaged workforce

## **Customers**

See their values reflected in businesses

## **Communities**

Receive support from purpose-driven companies

## **Vendors**

Interact more meaningfully with organizations

## **Employees**

Feel personally valued and respected



Part 1

# Why focus on people above all else?



# When employees activate purpose

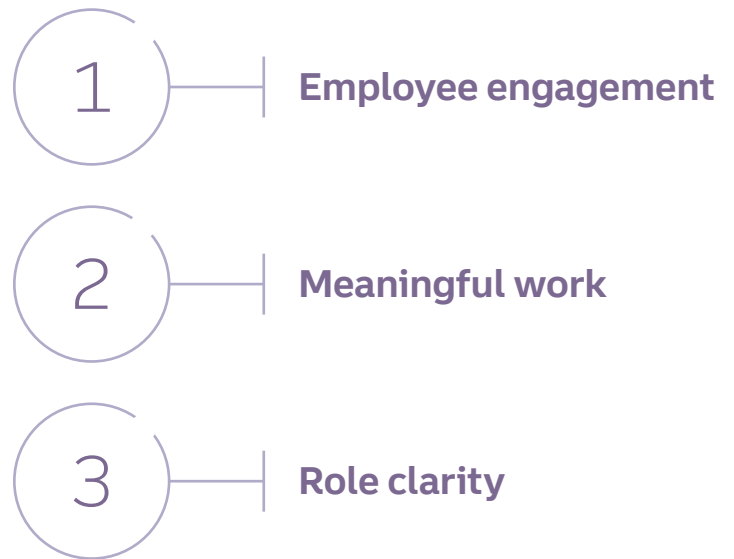
For employees to fully embrace organizational purpose, it may be helpful if they're already considering their own personal purpose. Our evidence says that up to 78% of employees agree or strongly agree that they often think about their personal purpose in life (TLI Research).

Leaders sometimes overlook the important role that employees can play in activating company purpose. The truth is that employees are the key to greater activation of genuine purpose throughout every level of an organization.

To better understand what happens when employees get involved with purpose, Truist Leadership Institute conducted a national study of approximately 1,300 employees. We showed them statements relating to corporate purpose, their personal purpose, and more, and asked them how much they agreed or disagreed with those statements.

Listening to and understanding this sample's attitudes about personal and corporate purpose may help leaders align their individual goals with the company's, manifesting greater engagement and increased productivity.

From the national study, we saw that having a higher purpose can benefit employees—and leaders play a vital role. We've measured three key benefits:

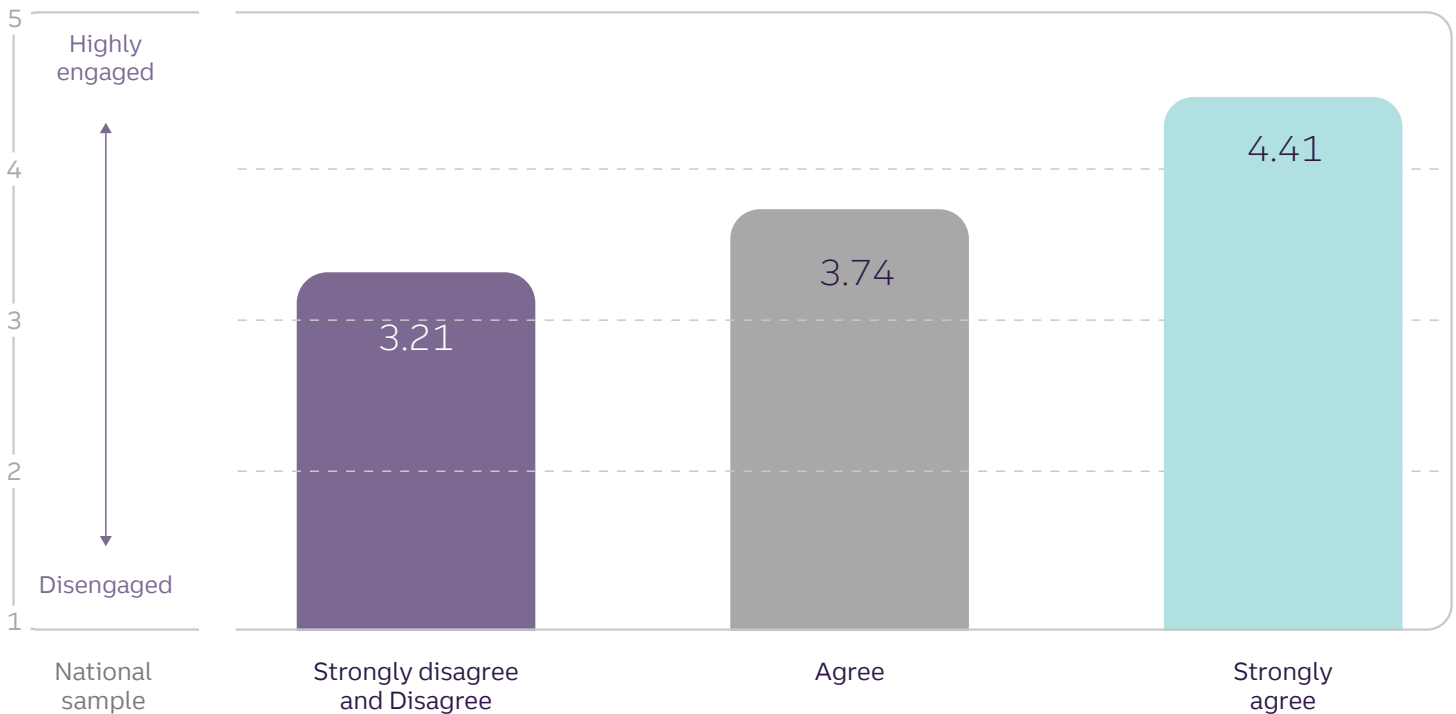


# When employees activate purpose

Employees who say they can pursue their organization's purpose in their day-to-day job:

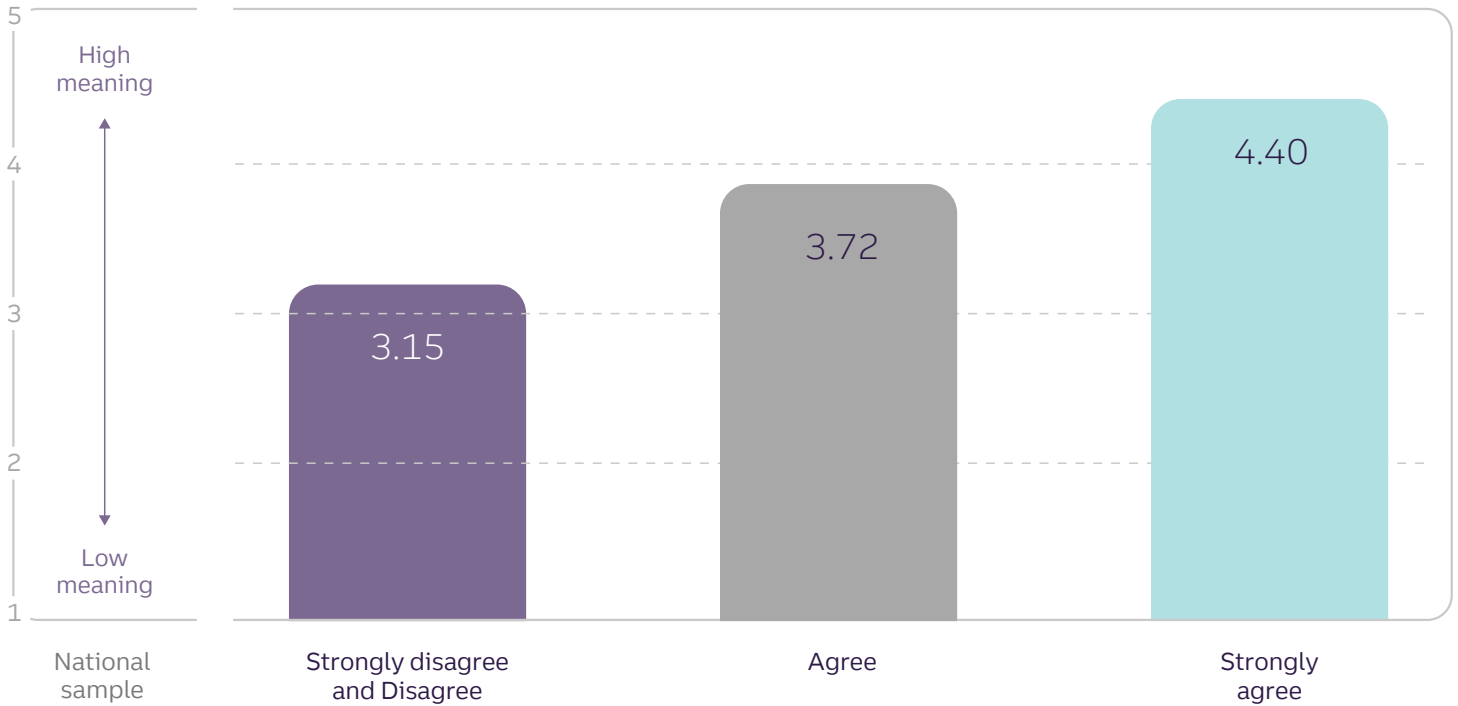


## 1. Are more highly engaged

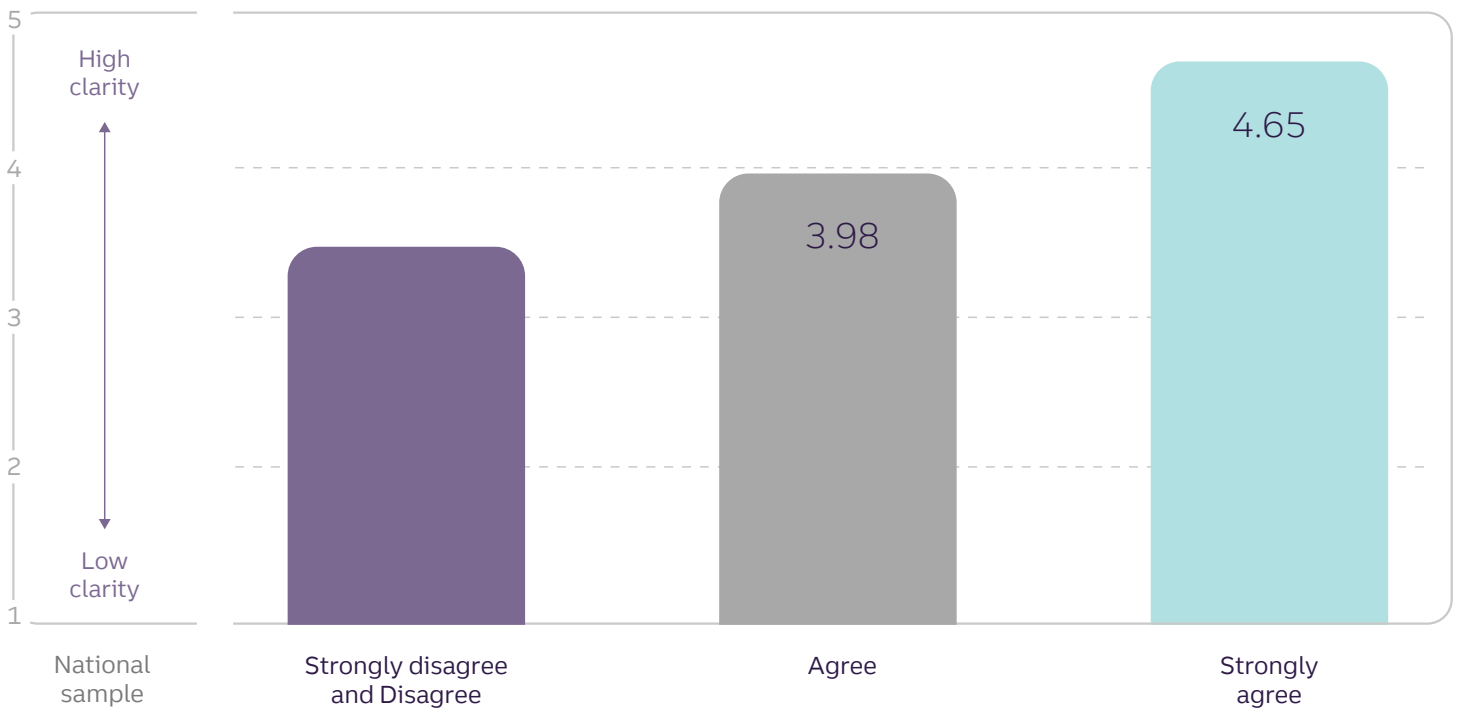


# When employees activate purpose

## 2. Are more likely to perceive meaning in their work



## 3. Are more likely to have clarity about their role





## 4 types of organizational purpose to consider

### Is your purpose customer- or employee-oriented?

Purpose tied directly to the work a company does—like making delicious gluten-free snacks, developing young leaders, or empowering employees to make an impact—may be the easiest to communicate internally and externally.

### Is your purpose altruistic?

This type of purpose is typically broad and can manifest in many ways. For example, a purpose that includes, “to have a positive impact on the community” could lead to the company hosting volunteer opportunities or donating goods and services. An altruistic purpose can be the most inspiring type of purpose because it is aspirational and eclectic.

### How does Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) fit in?

CSR can positively impact a company’s stakeholders and become a tangible expression of a company’s purpose within the communities it serves and with clients and team members. CSR goals may include commitments to social causes and well-being, care for the natural environment, employee satisfaction and growth, and organizational culture. These goals can both be a part of and serve to create a broader organizational purpose.

### How do you encourage employees to engage with their personal purpose?

Some companies encourage their employees to identify and pursue their own purpose at work while aligning it with the organization’s goals. For example, if someone’s personal purpose is to help others, they may be fulfilled as a corporate trainer at a company that uplifts underserved communities. And it’s not just about a job fit—an employee can always find new ways to enact their purpose in their current role, and a conversation with their manager can yield even more ideas and possibilities.

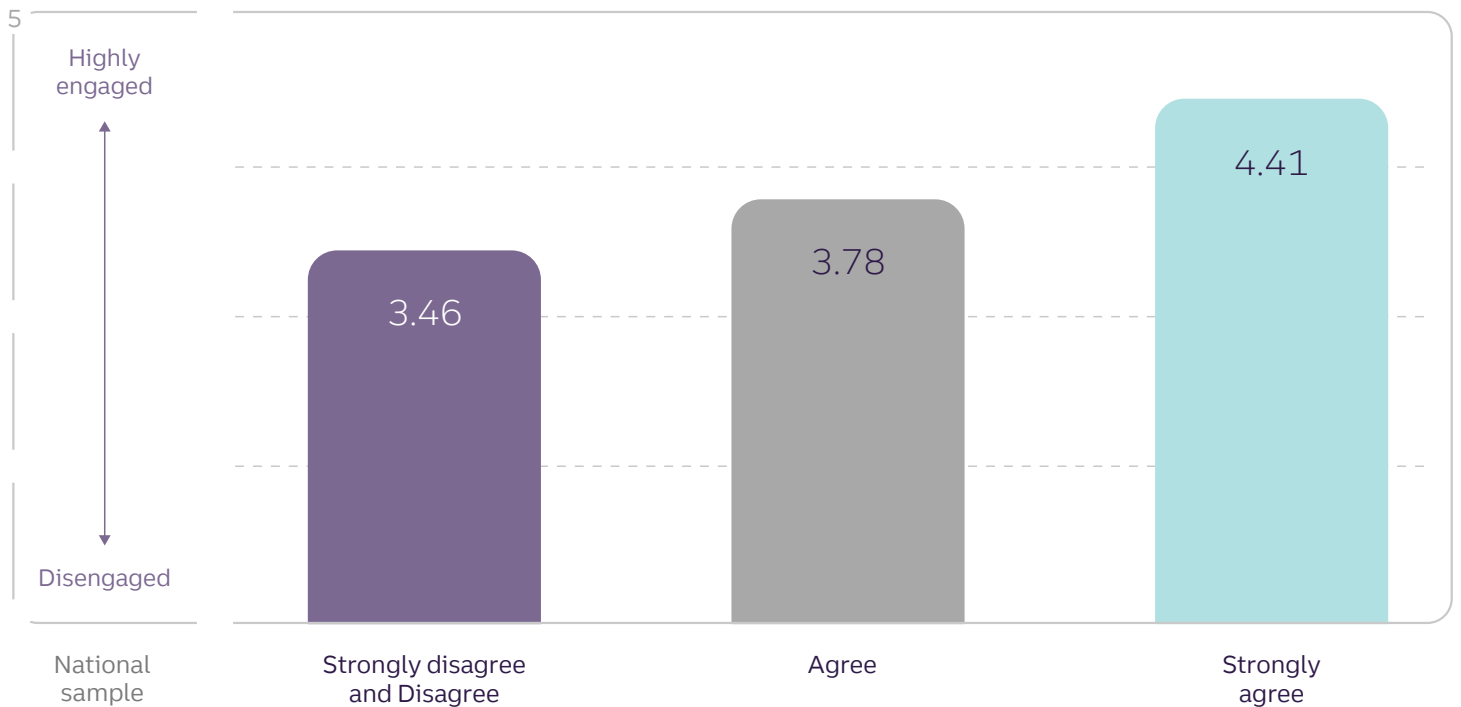
For more research on the several different types of purpose, see [Edmans](#), [Gulati](#), and [Korn Ferry](#).

# When employees activate purpose

Employees who can pursue their personal purpose in their day-to-day job:

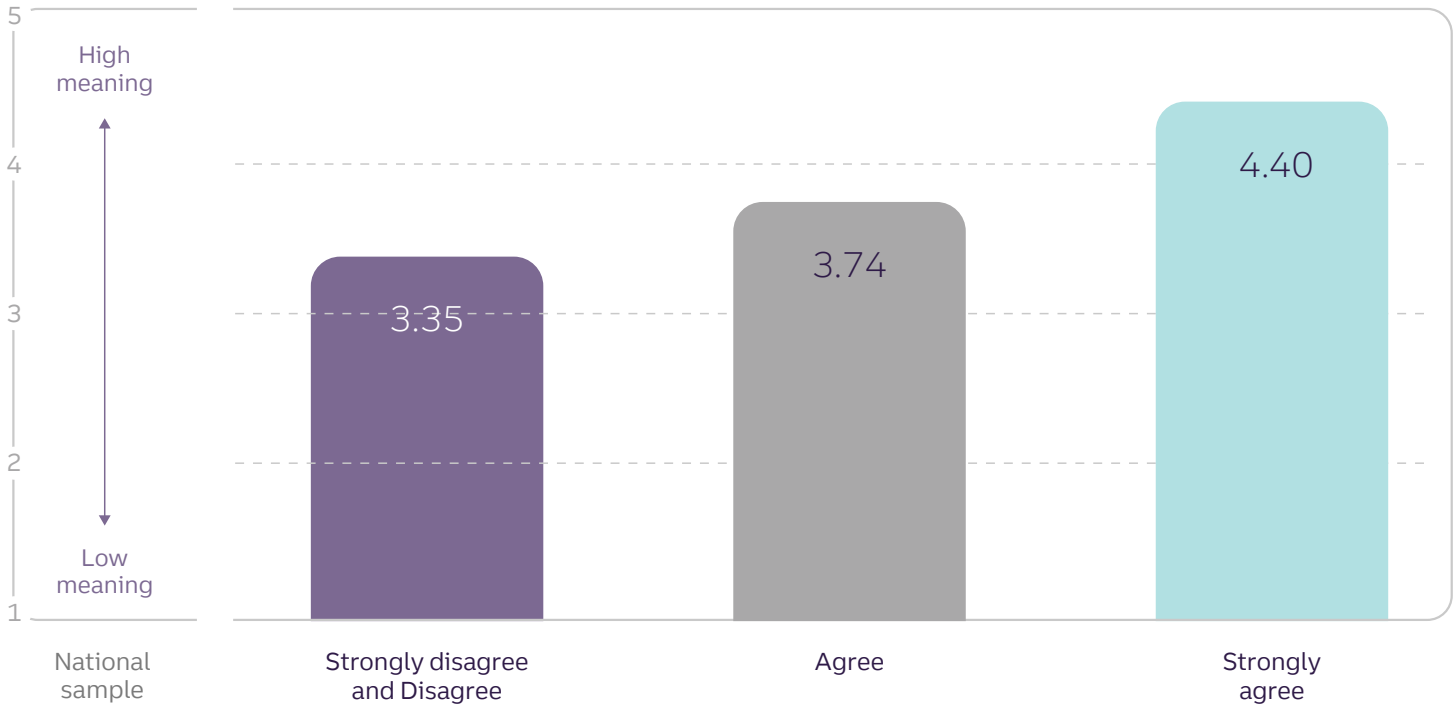


## 1. Are more highly engaged

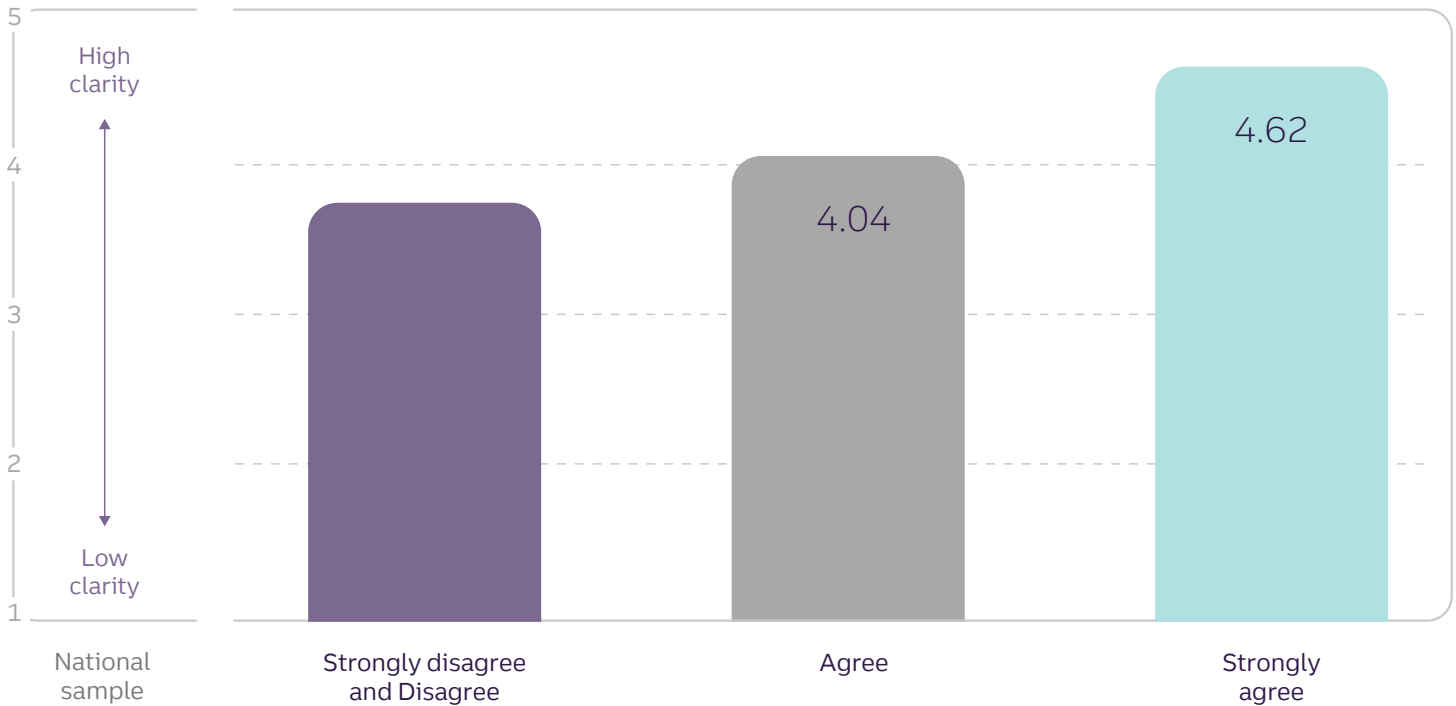


# When employees activate purpose

## 2. Are more likely to perceive meaning in their work



## 3. Are more likely to have clarity about their role



## Two bonus benefits: Executive connectedness and more cohesive teams

Our research uncovered a previously unexplored benefit of purpose: enhanced executive connectedness. Executive connectedness is a concept developed and researched at Truist Leadership Institute ([TLI Research](#)).

“The way organizations talk about purpose can affect the way employees perceive their executives,” says Coley, “and whether or not they have faith in top leaders to make employee-focused decisions.”

Executive connectedness indicates satisfactory communication with—and trust of—top leadership. We found that the more employees can pursue the organization’s purpose, the more they’ll feel a connection to senior leadership.

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The impacts of purpose go beyond individual employees. They create more cohesive teams. Does purpose rally teams around a common goal? Our survey results suggest it does.

More than two-thirds of our respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their organization’s purpose helped build camaraderie among its employees.

“Collectively tackling an organization’s purpose supports employees; it gives them the means to pursue a common goal. It can result in higher camaraderie, even among co-workers who are in separate workstreams,” says Coley.





Part 2

# Implementation guide



## Implementation guide

# Implementing purpose through people

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Leaders can activate organizational purpose through their people in any company, in any industry. We've compiled a helpful guide with tips for clearly defining organizational purpose, sharing the message with various teams, and modeling important behaviors.

## Lay a foundation for purpose.

Executive leaders should first be clear on organizational purpose and how it fits into their existing mission, vision, or other central statement of objectives. Is purpose replacing any previous statements? Avoid employee confusion by removing outdated references from the workplace. If purpose is being added to existing statements, empower people leaders to explain what it means to employees—and how it should be connected to other guiding principles.



## Identify those to involve.

Depending on the size of your organization, you may need to involve several people to effectively communicate purpose throughout the enterprise. Larger organizations can tap mid-level people leaders. Empower them to become ambassadors who champion the company's purpose and work it into language, meetings, and culture.

## Think about your own purpose.

To fully activate purpose, everyone in your organization should have the opportunity to define their own "why," or personal purpose—starting with you. What is it you hope to accomplish as a leader?

Create the safe space for everyone to take this purpose journey personally. Be open to genuinely sharing your beliefs, because it will send a clear signal to employees that they're free to explore and share their own purpose.

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# Implementation guide

## Act with integrity.

Discuss with others—including your direct reports—how purpose factors into your daily work, behavior, and decisions. They may be looking to you for guidance on how to put purpose into practice.

To complement what you should do, there are also things you shouldn't do. If you're not confident you will be able to avoid these pitfalls, you may have other concerns you need to address before implementing purpose, or at least address alongside your initiative.

## Avoid indifference.

Employees may lose trust in leaders from the executive level down if they don't sense true caring and prioritizing of purpose.

## Beware of inaction.

The amount of publicity your organizational purpose receives should match your organization's ability and effort to enact it ([Ellen et al., 2006](#); [Viererbl & Koch, 2022](#)). To put it more simply: Do the work, don't just talk about it.

## Reject insincerity.

Informal, authentic communication about purpose may be more impactful than polished marketing messages ([Forehand & Grier, 2003](#)).

## Close knowledge gaps.

People leaders should have access to resources and guidance that help them effectively communicate purpose.

## Stay the course.

Purpose is a lasting commitment. It's distinct from mission and vision ([HBR](#)), or goals. Goals are likely to change quarter to quarter or year to year. Purpose will not change frequently.



## Personal purpose

Your unique and authentic statement of your intention in the world. It's about how you want to show up for yourself and the people in your life.

## Organizational purpose

The reason a company exists.

Purpose is fully activated when you can connect personal purpose, organizational purpose, and the work that you do.

Part 3

# Communication guide



# Inspiring and engaging employees

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## Activate leaders at all levels.

Mid-level managers can be effective champions of purpose that can help with implementation at various levels of the organization. Help them understand their personal purpose, empower them to answer employee questions about the company's mission, and keep them updated as information evolves. Ask them to listen to employee sentiment and share it with senior managers.

## Encourage personal and corporate purpose alignment.

Listen and engage to be sure employees understand the corporate purpose—why the company chose it, what it means for operations, and how it touches every employee. Invite employees to think about similarities between corporate purpose and their personal purpose. How do they complement each other?

## Match employee experience with purpose.

Does your corporate purpose guide internal policy decisions? You can show you value employees as key stakeholders here. Help employees understand how corporate purpose shapes their experiences. Make an action plan to change any employee policies, expectations, working conditions, or other factors that do not match corporate purpose.

## Pathways for communicating purpose

Creating a holistic stakeholder communications plan

### Internal

1:1 conversations  
Town halls and meetings  
Employee intranet  
Email communications  
Job descriptions

### External

Social media  
Company website  
Community events  
Job listings  
Recruiting events

# Communication guide

## Things to avoid

### Intrusion

Having employees explore personal purpose may feel like an invasion of privacy or an unwanted exercise for people who don't value it.

### Bossiness

Endorsing corporate purpose aggressively may seem like a way of coaxing more work out of employees.

### Demands

Making purpose a chore may increase an employee's burden, which could increase the risk of burnout or overwork.



## On purpose: A note on intentionality

We often think of purpose as the intersection of an individual's values, passion, and talent. But purpose can also reflect the way we show up and conduct ourselves in the workplace.

Truist Leadership Institute focuses on purpose as a pathway for leaders to understand how choosing—even in the smallest ways—to approach work deliberately can inspire teammates to complete organizational tasks that drive results.

"We define leadership as the art and science of creating an environment that inspires employees to implement strategies consistent with an organization's beliefs and values," says Jenni Marsh, director of consulting, Truist Leadership Institute. "How we live our purpose is the art. And tapping into that purpose in a way that produces results is the science."

"People are an organization's best catalyst for change."

**Erica Shalhoup Paterno**

Director of Purpose  
Alignment & Activation, Truist

Part 4

# Key takeaways



# Key takeaways

The authentic pursuit of purpose in the workplace can positively impact profits, and it can drive high performance for your business. We want to conclude clearly: **The best way to unleash purpose is through your people.**

It's up to leaders to ensure they understand the company's broader mission—and how their personal purpose aligns with it. By crafting a sincere approach and a clear plan, and by engaging team members, you can create more cohesive, engaged teams and a culture of purposeful work. The potential societal and community impacts follow. **Everyone wins.**



## What leaders need to know



Employees who felt they pursued their—and their company's—purpose in their daily tasks expressed increased work engagement, derived more meaning from their jobs, had a better understanding of their roles, and felt greater camaraderie among co-workers.



Trust of—and connection to—top leadership increased for employees who were able to pursue organizational purpose in their roles.



People leaders can be effective ambassadors of purpose that help consistently establish a culture of purpose throughout various levels of the organization.



Model purpose by understanding your own “why” and communicating your beliefs genuinely with your teams and direct reports.





The Truist Leadership Institute campus in Greensboro, North Carolina, is featured in many images in this Purple Paper<sup>sm</sup>. We invite you to come see us.

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) | Visit our [website](#) | Call us at 336.665.3300

During the past 65 years, Truist Leadership Institute and its predecessor firm, Farr Associates, have developed and refined approaches to business leadership through collaborative work with clients throughout the United States. Truist Leadership Institute provides organizations with a leadership development partner who helps create dynamic and effective leaders, increase employee retention, and improve the bottom line.