



Me First, or the Greater Good

Remember “Brand Me”? That meme from the 1990s glorified a focus on your personal talents as a means to clamber up the career ladder.

It was just a bit more than 20 years ago that the magazine *Fast Company* featured a cover story proclaiming, “We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.”

While we don’t hear much about Brand Me these days, that outlook hasn’t gone away. Consider the person who, when asked to write a personal mission statement, wrote: “Personal success is going to be my top priority in life, and I won’t let any obstacle stop me from getting there.”

Contrast that me-first response with a statement by a carpenter, who wrote: “My personal mission is to leave my mark with homes and buildings ... so that I can help improve my local area and bring joy to my neighbors.”

Both endorsed “career” as their main choice of

a life mission. But the carpenter was among those who saw their career as a vehicle for helping others. The one who saw the pursuit of success as all-important was typical of those whose sense of mission puts their career squarely in their self-interest. In short, one stance is to see a career as serving a higher purpose, the other is just as “me first.”

These statements were among hundreds that emerged when the Korn Ferry Institute began analyzing nearly 900 working men and women, who shared their reflections on the values that drive their sense of mission in life and career. The Institute seeks clarity amid the murky matter of values and purpose—factors increasingly prominent in business these days, especially when it comes to attracting and retaining talent.

But what personal values bring the most value to a business?

One surprise in the still-ongoing data analysis stood out in preliminary findings: those men and women who have a more altruistic and benevolent

sense of their career as a personal mission bring more commitment to the organizations they work for than do those whose main focus is Brand Me.

Benevolence, in this case, meant simply serving or helping others. Me-first careerists, on the other hand, embraced “driving personal success and accomplishment” as their main personal mission. The findings focused on the career-oriented people who most highly valued “getting ahead,” contrasting them with those who saw their career as a way to serve a greater good.

Both those moved by benevolence and those intent on career progress were equally engaged in their work. Engagement at work, perhaps not surprisingly, correlated with endorsing values like loyalty, hard work, and integrity.

The extreme careerists—who see getting ahead as paramount—put most importance on a fitting cluster of values: power, achievement, recognition, challenges, and, particularly strong, wealth. Those who belong in this group “are unusual because they endorse values that most people we studied do not see as socially desirable,”

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says Signe Spencer, who leads the research project at the Korn Ferry Institute. In contrast, she adds, “the social benevolence group of careerists has an overall stronger sense of purpose” in their work.

Of course, our values and mission may morph as life goes on. In this first pass of analysis by the Korn Ferry Institute, the people assessed skewed somewhat to early career, with most of those responding in their 30s and early 40s. Many were team leaders or managers—even some managers of managers—but very few were yet in the executive ranks of their organization.

The choice of benevolence versus career as a personal mission was not made lightly, coming only after each person had reflected on their values and purpose in life.

Of eight choices given for personal mission, the most frequent choice—by 27 percent—was “benevolence,” wanting to help others. And the me-first infatuation seems to be fading. Only about 6 percent of these working men and women chose the “careerist” option; and more than half of them saw their career as a way to work for a greater good—benevolence by another name. ▀

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