

ON  
PURPOSE



Daniel Goleman

# What's Your Purpose?

**A**fter Apple cofounder Steve Jobs discovered he had the liver cancer that was to cause his death, he gave a heartfelt talk to Stanford University students: “Don’t let the voice of others’ opinions drown out your inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become.”

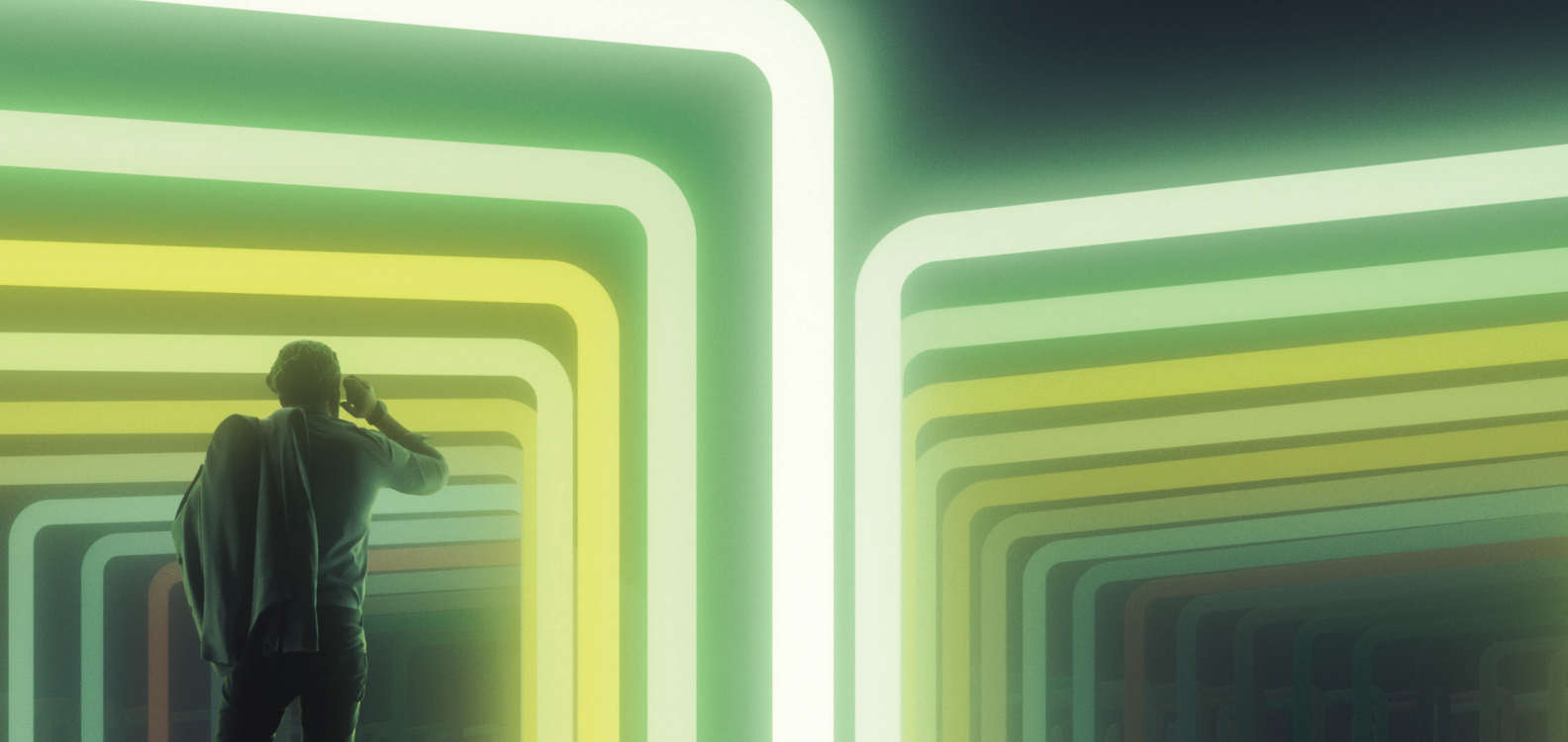
That sage advice gets support from neuroscience. The wiring of our brain, it turns out, can make it hard to articulate that “inner voice,” the internal compass that points us to our sense of meaning and purpose in life. It can point us in the right direction, but doesn’t give us the words to name where we are heading.

The brain stores our life wisdom—the sum total of every experience we’ve ever had—in circuitry deep in its lower reaches. These deep-down

circuits connect to a mid-brain structure, the insula, that monitors feelings throughout the body. But they have zero connection to the part of our brain that thinks in words, the topmost layers. These are the circuits, as Jobs put it, that “already know what you truly want to become.”

These bottom-up circuits respond faster in brain time than do the reasoning circuits in the neocortex. When it comes to thinking fast and slow, our intuitions come more quickly than our rationality.

While this intuitive circuitry can’t talk directly to the verbal cortex, it has strong connectivity to the gastrointestinal tract. Take, for instance, that all-important question: Is what I am about to do in keeping with my sense of values and purpose? Because of the brain’s wiring, we don’t get that answer in words. We get it in a felt sense, a “gut feeling.”



The famed neuroscientist Antonio Damasio calls the sensations in our body that tell us if a decision feels right or wrong “somatic markers.” These internal signals guide us in everything from who to marry to how we put our sense of purpose into words. But the feelings come first, the words after. This isn’t a dismissal of the rational pros and cons of decision-making; rather, felt sense gives us data, too.

The better we are at reading our gut feelings, the better we can draw on our life experience in making a decision. That’s one reason self-awareness has been the keystone ability in emotional intelligence.

A while back, Korn Ferry conducted a revealing study of 3,781 senior leaders and their direct reports, asking the anonymous direct reports to describe the climates the leaders created. The best ones were created by “visionary” leaders, the one who could articulate an inspiring mission, one they wholeheartedly believe in. This

gave conviction to their words, so they could naturally express that mission from the heart to the heart—that is, in a bull’s-eye way that hit home with their audience. And once these leaders got their direct reports aligned toward the same

goal, they could give in-the-moment performance feedback in an authoritative tone on whether that person was helping get there.

But to send such a message to those you lead, you must of

course first lead yourself—by matching your gut sense of what matters to your role. Before taking a Korn Ferry program that focused on this, for example, one pharmaceutical company executive had been thinking about quitting. But during the training, he articulated what matters to him the most—as he put it, “directly impacting the lives and health of clients.” In the end, he stayed with the firm but took a role working more directly with clients. In a very real sense, he’d found his purpose. ■

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**Goleman** is author of the international best-seller *Emotional Intelligence*. See [keystepmedia.com](http://keystepmedia.com) for his new series of primers, “Building Blocks of Emotional Intelligence.”