



7 "PRIMITIVE" QUALITIES FOR FINDING MEANING IN YOUR WORK

Marco Greenberg

For many people, one of the consequences of COVID-19 may be a permanent blurring of the boundaries between work and personal life.

This radical work-life imbalance makes it more urgent than ever that our work truly give us meaning. It should focus the mind on a critical question: is our work fulfilling?

The available data is not promising. In a 2018 poll of about thirty thousand American workers, one of the most comprehensive such studies every undertaken, Gallup found that most respondents were still not emotionally connected to their work and classified themselves as “not engaged.” They generally showed up and did the minimum required, but they’d leave the job for an even slightly better option. Of those, 13 percent described themselves as “actively disengaged” with “miserable work experiences.” Meanwhile, 67 percent said they were sometimes, very often, or always burned out at work. The irony is that large numbers of people nonetheless said they were “satisfied”—suggesting an epidemic of low expectations.



What gives? Whether virtually tethered to our devices or at our desks or both at the same time, the average person will spend 90,000 hours at work over a lifetime—more time than we will spend with our families or pursuing recreational interests and hobbies.

I don't know about you, but “actively disengaged” and “miserable” are not how I'd like to spend those 90,000 hours.

I've seen both sides of this equation. I've held jobs in which I was stuck in a cubicle and felt caged like a bird with its wings clipped. The feeling of being underappreciated, unrecognized and uninspired is something I've experienced personally and have seen countless others experience as well, simply going through the motions and seeing working as an unwelcome chore. That literally made me depressed. But I have also discovered that it doesn't have to be this way. There is an antidote.

One alternative path can be putting out your own shingle and setting course as an entrepreneur. I've done that too, coming to realize that this path brings excitement and passion, but also a roller coast of ups and downs, along with loneliness that may not be for everyone. Many of us don't have the financial resources, the appetite for risk or the willingness to make that level of a sacrifice. The answers are not obvious. You must look inside yourself.

What makes the difference between those who find the right path for them and those who don't? It can seem like such a fine line, but the consequences in their lives are so strikingly profound. How do some people enter the workplace every day like they're walking the plank—while others practically skip on their way to the meeting or computer or job site?

Working with hundreds of businesses and advising CEOs and other top leaders, I’ve seen many who share a passion, excitement and love of work that is far from the burnout and misery that plague so many American workers. The traits they share need not be limited to the top levels of the hierarchy: they are found in people of all types, from mid-level management to employees just out of college, from blue collar to white collar, in old line businesses as well as the tech-driven new economy.

I’ve noticed that those who love their jobs most, and hence are great at what they do and achieve the most professionally, often share an important set of traits: They reject the conventional way of doing things, aren’t checking the employee handbook before they act, are not unnecessarily bound by process and often throw the “civilized” rule book out the door.

They don’t see their work as their “job” or even their occupation—they see it much more as their overriding calling, mission, and even obsession. These are characters that follow a more “primal” path and often clash with their more conventional colleagues.

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Don't get me wrong: We need a variety of personality types at work to truly make things gel and scale. But we need to look deeper than the standard designations of left brain vs. right brain, introvert vs. extrovert, and corporate vs. entrepreneur types.

The balance can be difficult to strike. It is reasonable to ask yourself: How do I emulate the positive traits of change agents, disruptors, mavericks, and rebels while also not getting fired or losing that client? It starts with knowing yourself and having the awareness and emotional intelligence to know where you fall on the spectrum. To use the scale that I came up with, start with asking yourself how “civilized” you are.

I break down the civilized qualities into HOMING, which stands for Hierarchical, Occupational, Measured, Insulated, Nonconfrontational, and Grounded.

These can be useful qualities, and in the right degree they are essential to keeping an organization humming. But when these qualities become dominant, they often stand in the way of much-needed change and growth for both the individual and the larger organization. They stifle creativity, curtail risk-taking and foster a CYA culture. Rather than members of the workforce being able to tap into their innate and instinctive interests, they are trained to comply, conform and fall in line. Compare the best and most innovative work environments—from Patagonia to Edward Jones, and you'll see people who work as a team but are allowed to cultivate a sense of independence and responsibility. When workplace cultures treat workers as if they're on a factory assembly line, even if they're in service industries, their work becomes formulaic, predictable, and boring. Is it any wonder that they burn out, uninspired by work that is drudgery? And, of course, that harms the bottom line: workers who aren't inspired don't feel ownership and so are not motivated to work harder or smarter for the company.

Most of us have been trained to act civilized and have done little to cultivate what I call our “primitive” side. I realize that term can be loaded, and I mean it in a way that conveys what is original and natural, what is pure and positive. And we all have a primitive side: It’s the drive that leads us to obsess over our mission. It’s the thrust that propels us to fight until we win. It allows us to ignore convention and conjure up new solutions to old problems. It’s the urge to jaywalk instead of waiting for the light. It’s listening to our intuition, and being in touch with our bodies, to know when it’s dangerous. It’s taking a social or financial risk when convention says not to but you know better. It’s the courage to march to your own drum.

Primitives reject the HOMING behaviors and instead go ROAMING.

Each letter describes a different trait that each of these personalities embodies. Those traits inevitably overlap, so that people may have several of them and find themselves within a range.

R stands for Relentless, which doesn’t just mean trying hard or never giving up or having grit or any of that stuff you’ll find on inspirational blogs. Relentless primitives have a radical way of charging forward with their careers, and it colors everything from how they approach rewards to how they bounce back from failure. It’s the instinct that guided my client Austin McChord from his father’s basement, where he was building his first prototype out of Legos, to founding a billion-dollar company. Much as relentless primitives know how to barrel full-steam ahead, they know when to pump the brakes and abruptly change direction.

O is for Oppositional. Often wild and pugnacious, oppositional primitives know that a healthy dose of discord is sometimes the best source of energy. They despise group-think and are never afraid to say, “You’re wrong and here’s why.” My close friend Danny Lewin, who tragically lost his life during 9/11 trying to thwart the hijackers aboard American Airlines Flight 11, was the consummate oppositional primitive. I watched Danny, once a teenager sweeping the floors of a Jerusalem gym, argue and trash-talk until he became an internet 1.0 billionaire at age twenty-nine. Like other oppositional primitives, Danny sought out impossible challenges and found innovative ways to solve them.

A stands for Agnostic—the ability to jump from one field to the next without getting too attached to any one industry, method, or goal. A former coworker of mine, Love Whelchel III, has been a roadie for hip-hop group N.W.A., an IT recruiter, a chief talent officer, the CEO of his own company, and the right-hand man for rapper and entrepreneur Sean Combs among his many zigs and zags. Agnostic is how my friend Tanya Valle gave up her lucrative job at an entertainment PR firm to become a zookeeper.

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M is for Messianic, or having a zealous attachment to a mission that is not necessarily grounded in solid projections and reliable facts. It’s the capacity to see oneself as destined for a unique mission that drove the neuroscientist Ali Rezaei to devote himself to finding a cure for Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, addiction, and other diseases through cutting-edge technology. Messianic primitives like Ali are guided by a singular calling to achieve a seemingly unreachable goal, fix a daunting problem and change the world.

I stands for Insecure, which you sometime have to be to push yourself hard enough to get the best results. Insecure primitives are near and dear to my heart—because I am one. As an agency guy serving an array of clients, I’ve been let go, I’ve had my professional life upended time and again, and I’ve lived to tell my tale. Insecure primitives are survivors who never rest on their laurels; they scratch and claw their way to success by embracing their shortcomings and turning them into powerful advantages. Take it from Riki Drori, a marketing executive at YouTube, who has become one of the highest rated managers at the company by being honest and open with her team about her weaknesses and insecurities.

N is for Nuts, or being just plain crazy, sometimes taking chances no cautious person would advise. Being nuts is what led a successful physician named Dorian Paskowitz to abandon his lucrative practice, load his young family into a rickety camper and spend the rest of his life surfing. These are rare souls who follow their dreams, no matter how insane or dangerous they might seem. Nuts primitives may allow civilization to rein in their worst impulses, but they are also risk-takers, eccentrics, and misfits.

And, finally, the **G** is for Gallant, a trait that combines both courage and nobility, and one that compels primitives to protect those to whom they're loyal and who are loyal to them. It's what drove India Howell, a successful American businesswoman, to give up her privileged life, move to Tanzania, and adopt dozens of homeless children from the streets. Gallant primitives measure their impact by how much good they do for others. It may sound surprising, but being gallant may be the most primal instinct of all.

Maybe you've been at the same job for years and it's time to shake things up. Maybe you're just starting out, and you sense that the civilized rules that got your parents lifetime employment with the same company no longer apply. Maybe you'd like to do things differently at work but keep hearing from colleagues that "it's always been this way"—or that "this can't possibly be done." Maybe you're finally launching the business you've always dreamed of starting. Or maybe you're a primitive manager who'd like to light a fire under your civilized employees.

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Finally, perhaps you're one of the tens of millions who are suddenly unemployed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is no easy solution, and feeling fearful is natural, but I would argue that actually in times like these there's an advantage in being more primal. That means being proactive and putting the hunt back in job hunt. Adopting the kind of spirit which puts the emphasis on being nimble, flexible and adaptable. It's the mindset that allows us to emerge from our caves and venture out of our comfort zone, uncover a new opportunity in an in demand field or hustle and cobble together assorted side gigs.

Whatever is the case, doing an inventory of how often you adopt the Civilized HOMING versus Primitive ROAMING behaviors is a good starting place to evaluate how to unleash your more creative, passionate, productive, and ambitious spirit.

Now is the time to do it. The melding of home and work has been building up for years—as evidenced in the subtitle of the book [*Time Bind*](#) from almost 20 years ago: “When Home Becomes Work and Work Becomes Home.” COVID-19 has made it an indisputable reality, meaning that if we don't get work right it will affect the home.

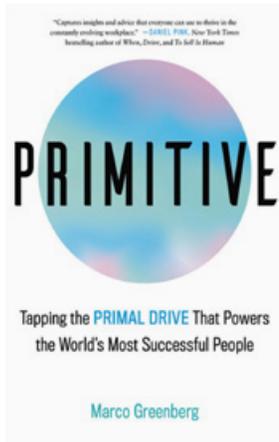
So as you do that inventory, consider personal behaviors as well. Are you listening to your own voice and your loved ones rather than succumbing to constant outside chatter? Do you set boundaries with others? Are you giving yourself permission to waste some time? These things, too, can be primitive.

I'm a bit of a mutt myself, but lean toward the more primitive side. Finding that diversity of thought, characteristics and experiences can be the most complimentary and liberating step toward better knowing yourself and getting what you want from your career. It can also help you better leverage the talents of your colleagues.

So the next time you're inclined to write someone off as "not the right cultural fit" or "not a team player" or "too defiant," catch yourself. Consider whether they might just be more primitive and see if you might work together to unleash that energy in a constructive way. Conversely, if you identify more as a civilized type, can you make a few "primitive moves" to shake things up and help you leapfrog ahead. **Whatever your disposition, tapping into those primal instincts can take us all to new heights.** 🦒



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