

PURPOSE AS STRATEGY:

Building Cultures that Attract and Sustain Talent

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Attracting and retaining talented people has become one of the most pressing challenges facing organizations today, especially in the nonprofit and social impact sectors. In an article published by the **Rochester Business Journal** on January 16, 2026, Marc Misiurewicz, Founder and CEO of Empreinte Consulting, explores why purpose has emerged as a powerful strategic tool for building strong, sustainable workplace cultures.

In *Purpose as Strategy: Building Cultures That Attract and Sustain Talent*, Marc examines how organizations that clearly define and live their purpose are better positioned to engage staff, reduce burnout, and navigate change. Drawing on insights from Pam Ayers, Empreinte’s Executive Vice President of Strategic Initiatives, the article highlights how purpose-driven cultures support psychological safety, strengthen leadership at every level, and ultimately improve outcomes for both employees and the communities they serve.

Across industries, leaders are facing a familiar and growing challenge: attracting and retaining talented people in an increasingly competitive and value-driven labor market. Compensation matters. Benefits matter. Flexibility matters. Yet increasingly, organizations are discovering that these alone are not enough. People want to know why their work matters and whether the culture they are joining aligns with who they are. This is even more prevalent in the nonprofit and social impact sectors, where the work is demanding, resources are often constrained, and staff are asked to carry both operational responsibility and the complexity of human dynamics.

Purpose has become a strategic differentiator, not a soft ideal. Organizations with clear, lived purpose are better positioned to attract talent, sustain engagement,

and weather periods of uncertainty. Those without it often struggle with turnover, burnout, and misalignment, even when other incentives are strong. In nonprofits, this misalignment can have ripple effects, impacting not only staff wellbeing, but program quality, funding stability, and community trust.

My colleague, Pam Ayers, Executive Vice President of Strategic Initiatives at Empreinte Consulting, has spent her career helping organizations translate mission into daily practice. With roots in direct service and decades of experience supporting human services and community-based organizations, Pam has seen firsthand how culture shapes outcomes. As she puts it, “A purpose-driven culture grows when people understand why the organization exists and feel connected to that meaning in their daily work. Purpose becomes the

anchor, the lens for decisions, behaviors, priorities, and strategy.”

Too often, purpose is treated as a statement on a website or a slide in a strategic plan. When that happens, staff quickly recognize the disconnect. Pam has seen firsthand how damaging that gap can be, particularly in nonprofits where employees are deeply values driven. She recalls working with an organization that unveiled a beautifully written purpose statement that bore little resemblance to how people experienced the workplace day to day. The result was not inspiration, but erosion of trust. If lived culture and stated purpose do not match, people disengage—and in mission-based organizations, that disengagement is felt quickly and deeply.

Organizations that get this right approach purpose as a discipline, not

a slogan. That starts with translating purpose into observable behaviors. What does purpose look like in meetings, in decision-making, in how people are treated when things are difficult? Leaders play a central role here. Culture is shaped less by what leaders say and more by what they model consistently. Transparency, accountability, and humility create environments where people feel safe to contribute and innovate. Fear and silence do the opposite.

Psychological safety is another foundational element. People cannot truly adopt or advance an organization's purpose if they do not feel safe being themselves at work. This is especially important in nonprofit settings, where staff are often navigating secondary trauma, high caseloads, or community-level challenges. Cultures that acknowledge people as whole humans, not just roles or outputs, foster deeper commitment and stronger performance. This is not about lowering standards; it is about creating conditions where people can meet them.

Purpose also sharpens decision-making. Pam describes working with organizations that apply a simple mission-alignment filter early when evaluating opportunities, particularly funding or partnership prospects. If an initiative does not fit the organization's purpose, it is set aside before time and energy are wasted. That clarity allows teams to focus, improve outcomes, and avoid mission drift—a common risk in nonprofit environments shaped by shifting funding priorities.

Importantly, purpose-driven cultures do not depend solely on the C-suite. Leadership must be developed at every level. In healthy organizations, managers, supervisors, and frontline staff are empowered to lead from where they sit. This distributed leadership model helps organizations become more adaptive and resilient, especially during periods of change. Teams learn how to manage complexity, communicate effectively, and support one another, even under pressure.

We are also seeing a broader shift in workforce expectations. Younger generations expect values and behavior to align. Equity, transparency, and wellbeing are no longer viewed as optional perks; they are baseline expectations. People are paying close attention to how leaders show up, how decisions are made, and whether organizations live up to what they claim to stand for. In the nonprofit sector, where values are central to the work itself, these expectations are particularly pronounced.

The impact of purpose-driven culture extends beyond employees. Clients, customers, and communities feel it as well. Organizations grounded in purpose tend to act with greater consistency, dignity, and care. In social impact work, the way an organization treats its staff often mirrors how services are delivered—a concept familiar in social work as a “parallel process”. When internal culture aligns with external mission, trust deepens and impact strengthens.

Purpose, however, is not static. It must be revisited and reaffirmed as

conditions change. The core should remain steady, but strategies and approaches must evolve. Organizations that hold purpose too rigidly risk losing relevance. Those that pair a clear anchor with a willingness to adapt remain resilient.

At its best, purpose shapes how organizations treat people internally and how they show up externally. As Pam describes it through a social work lens, the way you treat your team reflects the care and dignity you hope to extend to those you serve. When that alignment exists, cultures become places where people want to stay, grow, and contribute.

In a time when talent is mobile and expectations are high; purpose is no longer a nice-to-have. It is a strategic necessity. Organizations, particularly nonprofits—that invest in clarity, consistency, and humanity will be better positioned to attract exceptional people and sustain meaningful impact. The work is not always easy, but the alternative is far more costly.

Now is the time to treat purpose not as language on a wall, but as a daily practice that shapes decisions, relationships, and results.

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