
the g-spot

What's the point of that?

Corporate purpose.
Admirable ambition
or expensive ego?

By Gillian James

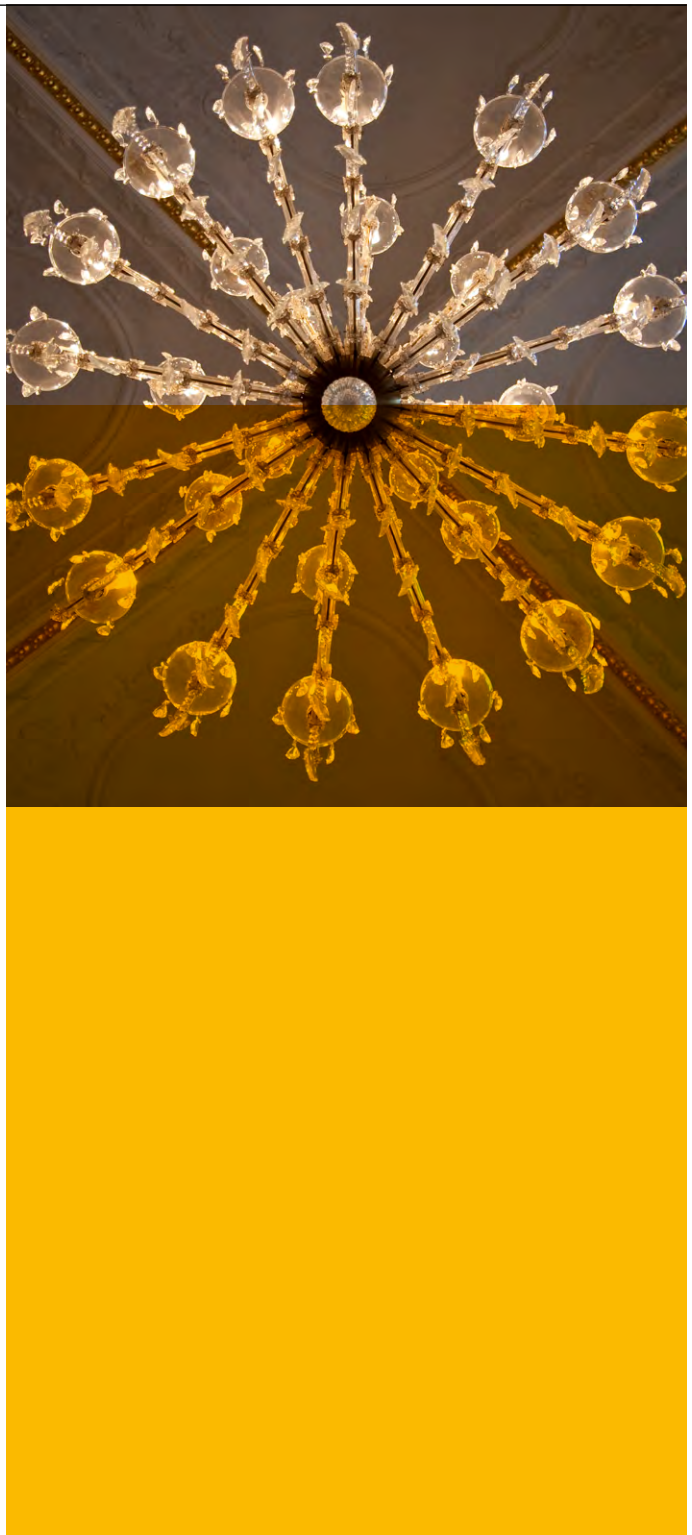
Many years ago, when I was a young and tiresomely enthusiastic advertising executive, I found myself fishing in a remote part of Northern Australia. My guide, a man of few words and clearly fewer illusions, asked what I did for a living.

When I told him, he looked at me with genuine curiosity and said, "And what's the point of that?"

He probably thought he was making small talk. In reality, he had just lobbed an existential grenade into the boat. Within a year, (and no shade to those still in it) I had left that industry. The question, however, stayed with me.

*What is the point of what we do?**

In many ways, corporate purpose is our collective attempt to answer that fisherman. And over the decades, the answer has become steadily more ambitious. But I would suggest the more difficult question is: *at what point does corporate ambition become corporate ego? And what does it cost us when it does?*



The evolution of purpose is worth tracing, because the shift is more revealing than it first appears.

The 1943 Credo of Johnson & Johnson reads less like a manifesto and more like a list of responsibilities: fair prices, decent wages, obligations to patients. Serious, moral, but grounded in behaviour and pointed outward. By the 1980s and 1990s ambition had grown wings, with Microsoft and Nike making bolder claims, but both still tethered to something tangible. In the early 2000s, we worked with Virgin Atlantic, whose manifesto at the time was simply this: to grow a profitable airline that people love to fly and where people love to work. Aspirational, practical, and legible to everyone from the boardroom to the boarding gate.

But then, purpose ascended to the stratosphere. Unilever declared its ambition to make sustainable living commonplace. Patagonia announced it was in business to save our home planet, and in their case the conviction appears genuine. But for many organisations that followed, something quietly changed. The language stopped describing what the organisation does and started describing how it wants to be perceived. That is a different thing entirely. *Purpose stopped describing the work and started serving the ego.*

When the gap between declaration and reality becomes wide enough, purpose stops being a compass and starts being a costume. And employees, who are considerably smarter than most purpose frameworks assume, can tell the difference.

Gallup's 2025 State of the Global Workplace report found that global employee engagement fell to 21% in 2024, the lowest since the pandemic, representing an estimated \$438 billion in lost productivity. Given's Purpose Gap Report found that over half of employees believe there is a meaningful disconnect between what their organisation says about its purpose and what it actually does. And while 79% of leaders say purpose matters, only 34% embed it into how their teams actually work.

But behind these numbers is something the research rarely says plainly: a significant proportion of the workforce right now is simply not in a position to care about saving the planet. That is not cynicism. It is Maslow, pure and simple.

When people are worried about their energy bills, their rent, their job security, or simply making sense of a world that feels increasingly unstable, they are operating in a very different psychological register to the one most purpose statements assume. Asking someone to feel inspired by a corporate mission to transform society, while they are quietly carrying the weight of all of that, is not just ineffective. It is a little tone deaf.

This is not an argument against purpose. It is an argument for being honest about where to start.

Sometimes lessons are best learned from outliers and Ryanair is most certainly a purpose outlier. Michael O'Leary clearly has no interest in saving the planet. Ryanair's purpose, to the extent it has one, is to get you there cheaply. Check TripAdvisor and you will find 33,000 "terrible" reviews sitting alongside a market capitalisation of \$33 billion and over 200 million passengers a year. Love it or loathe it, there is no gap between promise and reality, because the promise was never dressed up as anything more than it is. The contract is honest, and 200 million people a year find that sufficient. It is, in its own utilitarian way, the Johnson & Johnson Credo updated for the low-cost era.

The more uncomfortable question is not whether you admire Ryanair. It is whether your organisation has managed the worst of both worlds: the ego of a grand purpose statement and the delivery of a budget airline.

We have all had the experience of standing on a cold platform staring at a cancellation board, or navigating a broken service that clearly hasn't worked for years, and then watching the organisation responsible launch a rebrand. The gulf between those two things is not just frustrating. It is corrosive. It tells customers they are not really the point. And it tells frontline workers something even harder: that the story the organisation tells about itself matters more than the reality they are living every day.

So, can we please hear a loud cheer from the back for simply getting the basics right. These are not, and should not, be boring. The basics are not the unglamorous precondition to the interesting work.

Right now, in this economic and social climate, consistently delivering the ordinary is extraordinary.

The problem is that corporate ego has no language for it. You cannot put "got it right, every time" on a values poster. You cannot build a rebrand around "simple to use." And yet those are precisely the things that rebuild trust, re-engage staff and give frontline workers something real to be proud of. Anyone else old enough to remember "We try harder" from Avis which helped to transform that company's fortunes? I am.. just.

The person who got every service out on time today, who answered every call, who made sure the basics worked without drama or fanfare, is the one actually delivering whatever the purpose statement promises. They don't get the keynote or the LinkedIn post. They get the quiet satisfaction of having done it well. **That is not a consolation prize. That is the whole point.** In our experience, the organisations that understand this make a deliberate choice to hero the ordinary. They celebrate consistency. They make getting the basics right a source of genuine, visible pride rather than a minimum standard that nobody mentions. The frontline worker who can point to a day where everything ran as it should has something real to stand on.

So, back to that fisherman.

The higher purpose climbs, the more carefully it must be grounded. And perhaps the most provocative question a leadership team can ask

right now is not “what is our purpose?” but “who, honestly, are we asking to believe it, and what are we offering them in return?”

Because for the customer on the receiving end of a broken service, and the employee on the frontline of delivering it, your rebrand is not a North Star. It is a chandelier. Shiny, expensive, and completely out of reach.

Take action by

- Asking honestly whether your purpose statement reflects genuine ambition or a desire to be admired. Then look at whether your day-to-day operations can actually prove it.
- Heroing the ordinary. Celebrate the teams who quietly get the basics right, make it visible, and mean it.
- Listening to what your frontline people are actually dealing with right now. The conversation you need to have is probably more practical than philosophical.

That'll be all!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gillian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

* With apologies to Simon Sinek, who has built an admirable career helping organisations find their Why. Though one occasionally wonders whether the volume of the conversation about purpose is itself part of the problem.