

★ Finding and living a calling at work

Being in a place where a calling can't be enacted is like a high priced car that just sits in someone's garage. Ryan Duffy demonstrates that in order for a person to reap the benefit of a felt calling, they need to be actively living out that calling in a work role.



It might be surprising to hear that when surveying large samples of working adults, approximately half feel their work is a calling (Duffy et al., 2015). In these surveys people were allowed to define "calling" in the way they see fit, but most scholars agree that a calling represents a career which serves as a primary source of life meaning and is used to help others in some fashion (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Over 100 studies have demonstrated the feeling a calling is related to viewing one's work and life as more meaningful and satisfying (Duffy, Dik, & Douglass, 2016). However, there is an important caveat to these findings. Namely, in order for a person to reap the benefit of a felt calling, they need to be actively living out that calling in a work role. Indeed, research has demonstrated that if one has a calling but is not living it the positive effect of a calling on key outcomes is essentially zero (Duffy, Allan, et al., 2013).

Accordingly, as the study of calling advances, what has become most important is understanding the processes in place that help an individual live out their calling. In their recently developed theory on work as a calling, Duffy, Dik, and Douglass pooled over ten years of research findings together to lay out a model of how calling is enacted. The two strongest predictors of living a calling are (of course) having a calling but also having access to opportunity to pursue that calling. Duffy et al. (2016) note that this latter variable is often undervalued and that most people around the globe face very limited access to vocational opportunity, making it difficult for many to pursue a calling even if they have one.

But for those who do have the resources necessary to pursue their calling, Duffy et al. (2016) note that the process of turning a felt calling into a lived one occurs through experiences in the workplace. Specifically, when individuals find a work environment that fits with their calling this will over time increase feelings of meaning and commitment to that specific career which in turn will allow people to feel they are living out their calling. Because of this, from an intervention perspective, what is most important is helping individuals boost the sense of fit between their calling and work environment.

Duffy et al. (2016) discuss two practitioner strategies and one organisational strategy to increase this sense of fit. Practitioners should work with clients to a) increase their motivation to pursue their calling, as being motivated has been found to increase the likelihood that the eventual goal (living a calling) will be attained and b) teach them job crafting techniques which often involve small changes to how one works or how one interacts with people at work, essentially techniques that increase the degree to which one's work helps others. Research has shown that these small changes to one's work environment can have a large impact on how well an individual feels their work is a good fit (Vogt et al., 2016). Organisations should work with employees to be open to learning about – and most importantly supporting – each employee's unique calling. Being in a supportive environment is believed to be a critical factor that increases a sense of fit between one's calling and job.

When this process unfolds in a healthy fashion, individuals who eventually are able to live out their calling are believed to be some of the happiest and most productive employees (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Conversely, being in a place where a calling can't be enacted may lead to adverse work experiences and decreased well-being – akin to a high priced car that just sits in someone's garage (Duffy et al., 2016). As such, it is essential that practitioners and organisations alike work to maximise the fit between a person's calling and their experiences at work. Doing so will reap benefits for all involved.



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Editor's note: On May 24 2017 Dr Ryan Duffy was a guest of CDANZ in Auckland where he presented a workshop entitled "Finding and Living a Calling at Work: Exploring Individual and Practitioner Strategies." Slides from his presentation are available at <http://www.cdanz.org.nz/professional-learning/presentations/>

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