

When vocation meets profession*

By Lenette Schuijt

“We like to think that we have chosen our work, but it could be more accurate to say that our work has found us.”

Thomas Moore

Introduction

Organisations tend to measure quality of work against clear criteria or standards. These criteria are well suited to apply to products that must comply with standards of technical perfection. But for service being delivered between human beings, these criteria are not satisfactory. Customers experience of quality has to do with the individuality of an employee who likes his or her work and is willing to do what the particular situation requires, even if this means doing something extra. For instance, a waitress who is genuinely interested in how we liked our food, a teacher who tutors a student to ensure he or she can take an exam despite an illness, or a physician who takes the time to explain the implications of a treatment. In such moments professional competence and a unique talent converge. Competence, willpower and a self-chosen profession go hand in hand with someone's calling, by which I mean a talent we were given, a movement from within us that determines our paths of life.

Speaking of having a vocation is often uncomfortable, we much rather talk about our profession. We prefer to choose our own direction in life. Therefore, it takes courage to use the word vocation within the framework of our daily work. Language and traditional symbols may stand in our way, for example if we associate vocation with religious life ('having a vocation to be a nun'). In this view, vocation is something external that someone else determines for us. This means that we are compelled to become something we are not (yet) and that we have been chosen for a certain task.

I see vocation differently. To me, working from a vocation means doing a job that suits your character, personality and unique qualities. We deliver quality in work if our unique individuality is on par with our competences and ambitions. Is this possible within an organisation? What does this require from an executive? This essay provides guidelines for finding a balance between vocation, that which wants to unfold in people, and profession, the

competence to act adequately in professional situations. If we can find this balance, quality is an obvious and natural result.

Profession, vocation and quality

Once we interrelate vocation and profession with the quality of our work, we establish that profession is usually a well-defined set of activities which require competences that can be met by various people. We usually choose a profession based on external factors such as preliminary training, expectations of others or career prospects. In Western European culture, freedom of choice is highly valued. We design our own lives, choose our own relationships and select a profession from the viewpoint that we can be anything we want to be. We see ourselves and our life as makable, so we choose a profession that fits the image we have of ourselves, just like we buy a car that suits us. I refer to this as the *horizontal* dimension. We direct our lives by setting objectives and working towards these objectives with alertness and conscious actions. What we achieve in life is our personal merit.

A vocation is closely connected with our personality and thus not as clear-cut. We do not choose our vocation, rather, it chooses us. It is a movement from inside, compelled from within, a direction we naturally feel inclined to or to which we are irresistibly drawn. This is what I refer to as the *vertical* dimension. It involves tuning oneself to that which is already there to discover, something that takes place and crosses our path.

As a result of our strong focus on personal choices, we lose sight of all the things we don't choose: our individual character, personality, sex, our parental environment, our weak spots. The individual character of an individual does not consist of competences and qualities only, but of limitations and restrictions also. They are the reverse side of our talents. In addition to following our hearts, complying with our vocation also entails embracing that with which we are not satisfied and acknowledging and accepting that there are things of which we are incapable. Wanting to become someone from willpower may yield status and admiration, but it can also damage one's soul.

If we pursue an ideal image of ourself, without understanding what we can and cannot do, the structure of our professionalism has a weak foundation. With respect to this, Dutch philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven says: 'Professionalism can develop from within as a consequence of the devotion to a task chosen by virtue of one's profession. If the opposite occurs – and this is known to be the case in certain situations – and the professional exterior is

developed and ‘applied’ to an arbitrary profession to be chosen later, it is as if the core of the matter is implanted rather indifferently afterwards and it remains to be seen whether or not it becomes a small thing that can be exchanged rather easily. It is alienating having to experience this and seeing people act professionally without the important word ‘vocation’ coming to mind even hesitatingly.’¹

Profession without vocation is like an empty case. Technically, the service may be good, but no real quality develops in the contact with a telephone operator who behaves ‘customer-friendly’. A professional exterior, doing your best, pretending; all of this results in mediocrity. Customers do not fail to notice when we provide them with something that comes from the heart. It’s not quite the same when our ego is looking to be professional or when our authentic self *cannot* be anything but professional. If our ego shines through, we may make promises we cannot fulfil, we use mediocre instruments and listen to customers with one ear only. By doing this we harm the client and ourselves.

We meet true quality is generated when professionalism is developed from inside. This starts with the realisation of a personal and unique vocation. According to Aristotle, all human beings (and living beings) have a natural orientation. They pursue the realisation of their specific shape, character, and nature. This orientation does not stem from a consciously chosen target, but it is inherent in the nature of human beings. Like an oak grows from an acorn and not from a chestnut, human beings have a unique individuality that strives to develop. Everyone is born with a number of singular talents and characteristics. We are not a ‘*tabula rasa*’; *a blank page*. Every baby is born a specific person with clear preferences and dislikes, with an individual character and singularities. When we grow up, we learn to be guided by expectations of others and the demands our environment sets. We tend to forget our natural inclinations. Following our vocation or purpose means accepting the combination of personality and unique talents that determine us, along with the limitations involved.²

The vocation of our co-workers

In order to gain an insight into the unique path of peoples’ lives managers are to open their minds to people and learn more about employees. Executives have to start observing what they actually see and experience from their employees. They need to get an eye to what is – potentially – there. This means having an open attitude to their co-workers and to their unique combination of personality, characteristics, style and competences. In addition, it requires an

openness from the executive. He or she must dare to be surprised and touched. ('Oh, this is possible also! I'd do it differently, but this is successful too' or 'the way she handles this is very informative.')

It is impossible for an executive to know the vocation of every single co-worker, but he or she can have an open mind to it, be prepared to notice signals and enquire about it. The executive may try to find coherence in someone's qualities, a *leitmotiv* in their life. He or she can create opportunities that call forth specific qualities in an employee. When I coach people, I often work with their life stories in order to trace their vocation. To discover a vocation you need to let go of a clear-cut image of talent. Having an eye for talent involves much more than discovering the future *high potentials* based on their current job profiles. Vocation or talent is not limited to a few chosen ones in whom the organisation has to invest. Everyone has talent, from the Managing Director to the housekeeper. Discovering unique talents starts with seeing what each human being has to offer, with their individual character, their peculiarities and their limitations.

A pitfall for managers is wanting to deploy all talents right away. However, it is wiser to listen to what inspires employees and create the kind of functions in which employees can find their full potential. Executives need to ask employees what motivates them and what they want to develop. They must be alert to what lives under the surface: what is potentially there and is looking to be manifested. Their interest should not be limited to the (current) function or competences of employees, but to what inspires their employees and what inner drives move them.

It is the task of the organisation to bring people's talents to prosperity. An executive cannot teach people, but he or she can open up the essence of someone's qualities and give it some space to develop. Rather than targeting their weak competences, they can reinforce and exploit stronger ones. In order for people to express their vocation at work, a manager must have an eye for talent, as well as the skill to develop this talent. Coaching people in a way that brings out what is inside of them is a specific skill. Organisations can facilitate this process.

Quality

Quality is often defined in terms of professional ability, competences and skills, all of which can be deployed and effectuated. But especially in the service industry, we meet true quality only when professional ability and a personal touch, a certain individuality are combined.

Employees in an organisation can deliver quality if they have the opportunity to deploy their unique and specific traits. This makes it possible for employees to be satisfied that organisational objectives are met and at the same time be genuinely proud and fulfilled in their job.

Quality is not something managers should want to control; instead, they need to create the conditions for quality to show up. High-quality work is not only the result of what someone does, but particularly of what one can be. It is therefore important not to obstruct operations with quality criteria and ISO standards. People must have the room to do what is required in a certain situation. They should be able to decide what quality is in a certain situation.

Especially in unexpected situations, it is important for an employee to be able to react from within instead of having to fall back on criteria which are often inadequate. They need to be able to find a balance between what a situation requires and what is adequate and professional.

Giving people the space to work from their vocation does not mean that they work without engagement. Inner inspiration needs to bear fruit in terms of professional results.

Organisational objectives must be translated into clear targets and required competences, performance indicators must be stated and performances measured on a regular basis.

Yet, the main contribution of executives is not in measuring and monitoring these targets, but instead in encouraging the kind of professionalism from within that leads to high-quality work. When meeting an employee, executives need to discuss primarily the reality behind the figures. How is the employee doing? What is the reason that performance is lagging behind? What keeps the employee from fully deploying his or her talents? What does the employee need to further professionalize?

Conclusion

Finding out what your vocation might be is a great adventure which will continue as long as we live. Every day we can be amazed about the 'tissue' that invisibly connects seemingly coincidental events in our lives. Giving form to your vocation, translating your human individuality into professional activity, is an entirely different challenge. It requires us to stand on the crossroads of which we feel inside and what our work requires from us.

We are invited to express our individuality in situations where professional criteria count. We need to rely on a diffuse sense of direction without abandoning our alertness. Finding our own

unique way requires time, yet we need to take steps and make choices. Talents must mature while we do what has to be done now.

Enabling people in the organisation to connect their vocation with their profession puts organisations on edge. Inner vocation is intangible and immeasurable and thus difficult to manage. People who know their own path can make things difficult for an organisation because they don't allow themselves to be pigeon-holed. If we take talents and vocation seriously however, we trigger unexpected talents that would go unnoticed and pine away otherwise. Developing individual vocations results in vitality and innovative power. Clients, purchasers, colleagues, suppliers and managers are surprised by professionalism with a human face. It is an undisputable fact that authentic people who genuinely enjoy their work deliver the best quality.

* This article is an abbreviated version of the essay that was published in Henk Jan Hoefman and Lenette Schuijt (red.) *Het Menselijk Gezicht van Werk*, Asoka, 2004.

1. Cornelis Verhoeven "Dierbare Woorden" Damon, 2002

2. Also see L. Schuijt "Met ziel en zakelijkheid. Paradoxen in leiderschap" Scriptum, 2001