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Purpose as a Mechanism of Moral and Organizational Control

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Abstract

Organizational purpose is commonly presented as a source of meaning, strategic coherence, and stakeholder orientation, yet its normative force can also shape how organizational members interpret legitimate conduct and desirable identity. This Original Conceptual Theory Article develops a bounded theory of purpose-based control to explain when purpose may operate not only as inspiration but also as a mechanism of moral and organizational regulation. The article integrates scholarship on organizational purpose, identity work and identity regulation, work moralization, organizational identification, meaningful work, cultural control, resistance, and governance. It proposes that purpose becomes potentially controlling when value-laden aspirations are translated into moralized expectations, identity-regulatory demands, value-based pressure, and anticipatory self-monitoring. These mechanisms are treated as proposed relationships rather than a validated causal sequence. The theory further distinguishes purpose-based control from formal, economic, performance-management, and technological control, and it treats voice, alternative identities, institutional context, and stakeholder governance as conditions that can interrupt or redirect the proposed process. The central implication is that responsible purpose requires more than an appealing statement: it requires governance arrangements that preserve interpretive plurality, challenge rights, and separation between commitment to organizational purpose and willingness to absorb personal costs. The framework remains conceptually provisional. Its propositions require longitudinal, experimental, multilevel, and qualitative testing capable of separating purpose perception, moralization, identity regulation, self-monitoring, meaningful work, and rival forms of control.

Keywords: Organizational purpose beyond inspiration, Identity regulation, Moral compliance, Value-based pressure, Boundary conditions and resistance, Implications for responsible purpose

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Introduction

Organizational purpose has become an influential vocabulary for explaining why firms exist, what they value, and how they should relate to employees and stakeholders. Yet management research does not converge on a single construct. Purpose scholarship spans strategic direction, societal contribution, organizational identity, values, and meaning, creating a fragmented field in which similarly labeled claims may refer to different levels and mechanisms [1]. This conceptual variety matters because an aspirational purpose can be interpreted as strategy, identity, moral commitment, or employee meaning. A theory of control therefore cannot begin from the assumption that “purpose” has one stable psychological or organizational effect. It must first specify what form of purpose is being enacted, by whom, and with what evaluative consequences.

At the employee level, perceived organizational purpose is multidimensional and distinguishable from meaningful work, even though the two may overlap in practice [2]. At the organizational level, purpose can be understood as a value-based aspiration through which an organization makes sense of what it seeks to become and how it intends to act [3]. These perspectives locate



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purpose between organizational representation and employee interpretation. They also expose a neglected question: when does a value-laden aspiration remain an orienting invitation, and when might it become a standard against which employees are morally judged? This distinction cannot be resolved merely by observing whether workers report purpose or meaning, because perceived inspiration and normative regulation are analytically different phenomena.

Empirical evidence also cautions against assuming uniform effects. Employee perceptions of corporate purpose are heterogeneous, and associations with firm outcomes appear to depend on how purpose and clarity are distributed across organizational strata rather than on the mere existence of a purpose claim [4]. Purpose beliefs also vary across ownership forms and employee levels, indicating that organization-wide purpose cannot be inferred straightforwardly from aggregate labels or executive statements [5]. These findings do not establish control. Instead, they show why a theory of purpose-based control must preserve levels of analysis and allow employee position, ownership, governance, and local enactment to condition what purpose means in practice.

This article therefore proposes a conditional Theory of Purpose-Based Control. It asks how purpose may acquire regulatory force when organizational values become moralized, tied to legitimate organizational identity, translated into expectations of value-consistent sacrifice, and internalized through anticipatory self-monitoring. The contribution is non-empirical and deliberately bounded: purpose is not defined as coercive, internalization is not treated as proof of domination, and behavioral alignment is not assumed to reveal moral agreement. The theory instead specifies a set of proposed mechanisms, rival explanations, and resistance pathways that can be tested, refined, or rejected. Its objective is to extend purpose research beyond inspiration without converting a plausible dark-side process into an unsupported universal claim.

Theoretical foundations of identity regulation

Identity provides a necessary bridge between purpose as organizational aspiration and purpose as possible control. Identity work refers to the active processes through which individuals construct, maintain, revise, and repair understandings of who they are in relation to work and occupation [6]. This definition immediately limits any deterministic account. Employees are not passive recipients of organizational narratives; they interpret, negotiate, compartmentalize, or reject available identity materials. Accordingly, a purpose statement cannot be assumed to become an employee identity merely because leaders communicate it repeatedly or embed it in organizational language.

Identity regulation is more specific. It concerns organizational efforts to shape the discourses, categories, expectations, and evaluative standards through which members understand appropriate selves. Qualitative evidence shows that corporate discourses can privilege particular understandings of effective and ethical managerial identity while leaving room for actors to appropriate those injunctions in different ways [7]. Ethnographic evidence similarly demonstrates that identity regulation can be enacted through combinations of organizational discourse and human-resource practices and can be embedded in wider national and institutional contexts [8]. These studies establish that organizational attempts to regulate identity are possible; they do not establish that purpose narratives automatically generate such regulation.

Organizational identification is also distinct from identity regulation. Strong identification may foster attachment and alignment, but review evidence documents potential dark-side consequences when identification becomes excessive, rigid, or entangled with problematic organizational demands [9]. Identification therefore cannot be treated as an uncomplicated indicator of successful purpose. Nor can it be used as a proxy for moral consent. Employees may strongly identify with an organization while disagreeing with particular practices, or they may comply behaviorally for reasons unrelated to identification.

The proposed extension is that purpose may become identity-regulatory when value-laden organizational aspirations imply what a worthy, authentic, or legitimate member should be. This relationship is not directly established by the cited studies. It is a theoretical connection between purpose as value-based aspiration and identity regulation as organizational shaping of self-understanding. The key boundary is agency: identity regulation is an organizational attempt, whereas identity work concerns how actors respond. Purpose-based control would therefore require evidence not merely that purpose is visible, but that it is translated into identity-coded expectations and that those expectations affect subsequent judgment or conduct.

Moral compliance

The next proposed mechanism is moral compliance. In this article, moral compliance does not mean simple obedience to law, policy, or managerial instruction. It refers to a proposed form of alignment in which an organizational expectation acquires force because it is interpreted as morally right, virtuous, loyal, or identity-consistent. Recent research shows that work itself can become moralized, with both burdens and benefits. Moralization can generate moral rumination while also interacting with cognitive flexibility, indicating that moral meaning may organize attention and judgment without producing a uniformly negative outcome [10]. This mixed pattern is important because it prevents moralization from being equated with coercion. Moralization can also attach to motives. Experimental and field evidence indicates that intrinsic motivation may itself become a basis of moral evaluation, shaping judgments about who deserves support and encouraging selective prosociality toward

those perceived as intrinsically motivated [11]. The implication for purpose theory is not that purpose necessarily moralizes motivation. Rather, value-rich organizational environments may create conditions in which employees infer that some motives signal virtue while others signal insufficient commitment. Such evaluative distinctions could matter even when formal performance standards remain unchanged.

Research on unethical pro-organizational behavior shows why identification and local norms must be treated carefully. Egoistic norms can shape the perceived ethicality of conduct intended to benefit the organization, and organizational identification can strengthen that pathway [12]. Related evidence shows that identification with an organization or supervisor may support unethical pro-supervisor behavior, while stronger moral identity constrains that relationship [13]. These studies concern specific forms of misconduct, not purpose. Their relevance lies in demonstrating that “for the organization” motives and identification do not guarantee ethical conduct and can interact with moral boundaries in complex ways.

The proposed construct of moral compliance therefore describes a narrower process: purpose-linked expectations become behaviorally consequential because nonalignment risks being interpreted as moral deficiency rather than mere disagreement. This requires more than shared values. It requires moral evaluation, social or identity costs, and a link between those costs and subsequent conduct. Alternative explanations include ethical climate, authority, fear, reciprocity, and identification independent of purpose. The proposed purpose-to-moral-compliance relationship remains untested and should be evaluated against these simpler explanations rather than assumed from evidence that moralization or identification can affect workplace judgment.

Value-based pressure

Value-based pressure is proposed as a distinct mechanism through which purpose may become controlling without relying on explicit command. The construct refers to pressure to demonstrate commitment by accepting conduct or costs symbolically associated with valued organizational ideals. Experimental evidence on passion attribution shows that observers may regard poor treatment as more acceptable when workers are seen as passionate, partly because passion implies that workers would volunteer or derive intrinsic reward from the work [14]. This does not show that purpose-driven organizations exploit employees. It does show that positive value attributions can alter judgments about what burdens appear legitimate.

Research on deeply meaningful work provides a related but importantly different pattern. Among international aid workers, deep meaningfulness could coexist with devotion, boundary inhibition, overwork, and relationship turmoil, while occupational value homophily shaped how those tensions were experienced [15]. The relevance to purpose-based control is analogical: when commitment to valued work becomes a marker of identity, accepting costs can be interpreted as evidence of authenticity. Yet occupational self-selection, mission-driven work, and relationship context offer substantial alternative explanations, so meaningfulness cannot be reduced to pressure.

A balanced theory must also retain the positive evidence. Meta-analytic findings associate meaningful work with generally favorable proximal and distal outcomes [16]. Multilevel review evidence further shows that meaningful work depends on personal, job, organizational, relational, and societal conditions rather than on a single organizational message [17]. These findings challenge any account in which purpose, meaning, devotion, and exploitation are treated as interchangeable. Purpose may contribute to meaningfulness without creating control; meaningful work may coexist with autonomy; and high commitment may be freely chosen rather than normatively compelled.

The proposed concept of value-based pressure applies only when willingness to absorb cost becomes an implicit test of commitment. Value-rich work can coexist with favorable employee experiences while also generating conditions under which passion or deep devotion is associated with the legitimization of burdens or boundary costs [14-16]. The mechanism is therefore conditional, not intrinsic to purpose. Evidence of long hours, sacrifice, or enthusiasm alone is insufficient; analysis must examine whether employees can refuse burdens without being morally downgraded, identity-threatened, or treated as less committed.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for purpose as a mechanism of moral and organizational control.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Purpose as a Mechanism of Moral and Organizational Control.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Organizational purpose	Value-laden collective aspiration	Construct ambiguity	Not meaningful work or identification	Upstream input	Enactment varies	Purpose is not inherently controlling
Perceived organizational purpose	Employee perception of purpose	Level confusion	Not formal purpose	Interpretation channel	Selection may matter	Individual perception cannot prove organizational effect

Identity work	Active self-meaning construction	Employee agency	Not managerial regulation	Response process	Multiple identities coexist	Not proof of control
Identity regulation	Attempts to shape legitimate selves	Organizational influence	Not successful internalization	Candidate pathway	Context-sensitive	Attempts may be rejected
Organizational identification	Felt organizational oneness	Attachment versus ethics	Not moral agreement	Possible amplifier	Effects vary	Identification is not inherently harmful
Work moralization	Treating work as morally significant	Moral evaluation	Not ordinary preference	Candidate process	Effects may diverge	Moralization is not coercion
Moral compliance — proposed	Alignment through moralized obligation	Normative versus formal compliance	Not rule obedience	Proposed mechanism	Purpose link untested	Requires consequential moral evaluation
Value-based pressure — proposed	Pressure for value-coded sacrifice	Burden without command	Not workload pressure	Proposed mechanism	Selection may matter	Sacrifice alone proves nothing
Meaningful work	Work experienced as significant	Positive rival account	Not organizational purpose	Rival/complementary pathway	Direction varies	Meaningfulness is not control
Self-surveillance — proposed	Anticipatory self-monitoring against purpose-coded standards	Internal regulation	Not electronic surveillance	Proposed downstream process	Direct evidence pending	Must be separately measured
Purpose-based control — proposed	Purpose used as a moral standard for membership and conduct	Integrative explanation	Not formal or technological control	Principal proposed theory	Incremental validity unknown	Not a validated causal model

Self-surveillance under purpose narratives

Self-surveillance is proposed here as anticipatory self-monitoring against purpose-coded standards of legitimate commitment. It differs from electronic surveillance, direct supervision, or formal performance measurement because the immediate evaluator is partly the employee's own interpretation of what a worthy organizational member should choose. Ethnographic research in a high-commitment activist organization shows that a culture of self-sacrifice can become identity-regulatory, while bodily breakdowns can separate commitment to a cause from commitment to organizational culture and precipitate resistance or exit [18]. The evidence does not establish purpose-induced self-surveillance, but it demonstrates how morally valued commitment and organizational identity may become difficult to disentangle.

Moral praise likewise need not produce internalization. Research on nonphysician health-care workers suddenly celebrated as “heroes” during the pandemic found that externally bestowed positive identities could be received ambivalently rather than simply incorporated into workers' self-understandings [19]. This matters because a theory of purpose-based control must allow employees to question seemingly affirming identities. A narrative that portrays workers as courageous, caring, entrepreneurial, or mission-driven may supply identity material without determining how that material is interpreted. Resistance can begin at the level of meaning before it becomes visible as refusal, voice, or exit.

A culture of overwork provides a further analogue. Research on parental leave in South Korea shows how employees may engage in compensatory work devotion, working harder and questioning their own entitlement within a culture that privileges visible commitment [20]. For purpose-based control, the proposed extension is that value-based pressure may become self-surveillance when employees pre-emptively ask whether setting a boundary, rejecting extra work, or invoking an entitlement signals insufficient dedication to organizational purpose. Such self-monitoring remains conceptually distinct from workload, insecurity, or managerial monitoring and therefore requires separate measurement.

The proposed mechanism is consequently conditional. Purpose-based self-surveillance would be evidenced not by sacrifice alone but by a recurrent process in which employees anticipate moral or identity evaluation, monitor their own choices against purpose-coded expectations, and alter conduct because deviation threatens valued membership. Selection into mission-oriented work, professional norms, economic dependence, and ordinary performance pressure are credible rivals. Direct evidence would require temporal designs capable of showing that purpose enactment precedes moralized self-evaluation rather than merely accompanying already committed employees.

A stringent test should also distinguish anticipated evaluation from retrospective rationalization. Employees may describe sacrifices in purpose language after acting for practical reasons, creating an appearance of self-surveillance where none preceded behavior. Experience-sampling designs that measure anticipated moral judgment before boundary decisions, followed by subsequent conduct, would help distinguish the proposed mechanism from post hoc meaning-making and stable dispositional commitment.

Proposed theory of purpose-based control

Organizational control is heterogeneous: it includes formal, cultural, incentive-based, and other configurations that differ in mechanisms and consequences [21]. Control also cannot be presumed to undermine trust, because control–trust relationships vary with their form and organizational context [22]. Technological and algorithmic systems provide another distinct control channel by restricting, recommending, recording, rating, replacing, or rewarding worker activity while also provoking worker contestation [23]. These literatures establish that behavioral coordination may arise from multiple sources. A theory of purpose-based control must therefore demonstrate a mechanism beyond ordinary authority, incentives, surveillance, or technology.

Purpose itself can be theorized in normatively neutral terms rather than defined as intrinsically prosocial or coercive [24]. Building on that boundary, this article proposes purpose-based control as a form of normative organizational control in which a value-laden purpose becomes a standard for morally evaluating membership, commitment, and conduct. The proposed sequence is purpose articulation, moralization, identity binding, value-based pressure, and self-surveillance, followed by contingent alignment, sacrifice, silence, resistance, or exit. Each transition is a proposition requiring empirical testing, not a validated serial mediation pathway.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for theory of purpose-based control, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

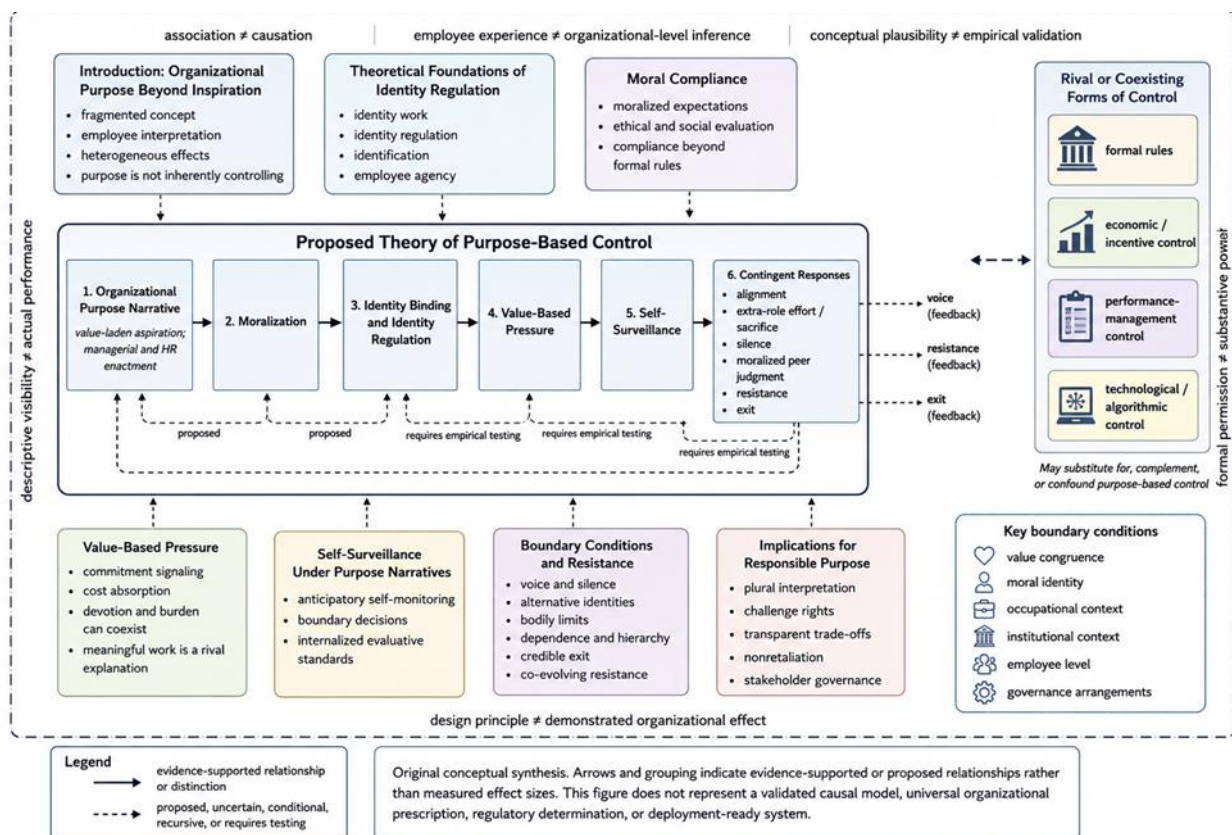


Figure 1. Theory of Purpose-Based Control

The theory advances seven bounded propositions. First, purpose is proposed to become more controlling when values are enacted as moral standards rather than strategic aspirations. Second, moralized purpose is proposed to gain force when legitimate membership is tied to identity-coded expectations. Third, such identity binding may generate value-based pressure when accepting personal costs signals authenticity. Fourth, value-based pressure may encourage anticipatory self-surveillance. Fifth, formal, economic, performance, and technological controls may substitute for or confound the apparent process. Sixth, voice, plural identities, bodily limits, and credible exit can interrupt it. Seventh, governance arrangements that distribute interpretive authority may constrain unilateral moralization. These propositions specify testable contingencies rather than predicted effect sizes.

The theory also rejects a simple inference from observable alignment to internal control. Employees may work long hours because of incentives, labor-market dependence, professional commitment, workload, or algorithmic evaluation rather than purpose. Organizational control can operate through multiple formal, relational, and technologically mediated configurations rather than through a single normative mechanism [21-23]. Incremental validity is therefore central: purpose-based control should explain variance in moralized self-regulation after plausible rival controls are measured. Conversely, failure to

distinguish PBC from identification, meaningful work, leadership, or performance pressure would count against the theory rather than merely represent incomplete support.

A useful decision rule follows from this distinction. Evidence for PBC should require more than a statistically or qualitatively observable association between purpose and effort. Researchers should demonstrate that purpose content is translated into morally evaluative expectations, that employees perceive those expectations as relevant to membership or commitment, and that this evaluation explains subsequent self-regulation beyond competing controls. Absent those elements, the safer interpretation is purpose-related meaning, identification, ordinary culture, or another control mechanism rather than purpose-based control.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in purpose as a mechanism of moral and organizational control.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Purpose as a Mechanism of Moral and Organizational Control.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Purpose narrative → moralization — proposed	Value-laden purpose	Moral evaluation	Value congruence	Purpose becomes a moral standard	Pre-existing values	Manipulate moralized versus nonmoralized purpose
Purpose → identity-regulatory demand — proposed	Enacted purpose	Identity binding	Institutional context	Membership becomes identity-coded	Generic culture or leadership	Longitudinal purpose-enactment study
Moralization → moral compliance — proposed	Moralized expectations	Ethical/social evaluation	Moral identity	Alignment with morally coded expectations	Ethical climate or authority	Separate moral from formal compliance
Identity binding → value-based pressure — proposed	Identity-coded purpose	Commitment signaling	Occupational context	Cost absorption signals authenticity	Passion or identification alone	Compare independent mechanisms
Value-based pressure → self-surveillance — proposed	Cost-coded commitment	Anticipatory self-monitoring	Dependence and alternatives	Boundary choices become self-policed	Workload or insecurity	Experience-sampling temporal test
Self-surveillance → alignment or silence — proposed	Internalized evaluative standard	Self-correction	Voice efficacy	Conditional alignment or silence	Fear or incentives	Control rival pressures prospectively
Formal/algorithmic controls ↔ apparent PBC	External control systems	Rules, ratings, rewards	Task and technology	Similar observable alignment	Direct external control	Estimate competing controls jointly
Governance and resistance → attenuation — proposed	Voice and plural authority	Contestation	Institutional context	Reinterpretation, resistance, or exit	General governance quality	Multilevel comparative process tests

Boundary conditions and resistance

Purpose-based control cannot be theorized adequately if resistance appears only as failed compliance. Employee voice and silence are distinct, contingent behaviors shaped by individual and contextual antecedents, so the existence of a formal voice channel cannot establish either willingness to speak or consequential influence [25]. For PBC, this distinction means that invitations to “challenge purpose” matter only if disagreement can alter interpretation or implementation without imposing disproportionate moral, career, or identity costs. Apparent consensus may otherwise coexist with private disagreement, strategic silence, or compliance undertaken for reasons unrelated to moral internalization.

Identity also supplies resources for resistance. Ethnographic evidence shows that employees can mobilize alternative identities and othering practices to contest managerial identity demands across organizational levels [26]. This suggests that purpose-based identity regulation may weaken when employees possess credible professional, occupational, national, community, or other identities from which organizational claims can be judged. Such plural identities should not be assumed automatically to generate resistance; they may also reinforce organizational purpose. Their theoretical significance is that organizational identity need not monopolize the standards by which employees evaluate themselves.

Control and resistance can also co-evolve. Process research in platform work shows that worker resistance changes as control arrangements and worker latitude change across stages of the labor process [27]. The setting differs substantially from purpose-oriented organizations, but the temporal insight is transferable as a proposition: resistance may cause purpose enactment to be revised, intensified, localized, or made more ambiguous. Employee responses to control include voice,

silence, identity-based contestation, and evolving resistance practices whose form depends on organizational and temporal context [25-27]. PBC therefore includes feedback rather than assuming one-directional internalization.

The principal boundary conditions are proposed to include value congruence, moral identity, hierarchy, employment dependence, occupational norms, institutional context, credible exit, voice efficacy, and alternative identities. Purpose-based control should be weaker where employees can reject burdens without moral downgrading and where purpose interpretation is genuinely contestable. It may be stronger where evaluative authority is concentrated and dissent is costly, but this remains an empirical proposition. No single behavioral response can diagnose the mechanism: silence may reflect fear, alignment may reflect meaning, and exit may reflect labor-market opportunity rather than resistance to purpose.

Implications for responsible purpose

Responsible purpose should therefore be understood as a governance problem as well as a communication problem. Comparative analysis of corporate purpose emphasizes that governance and institutional arrangements shape how purpose is understood and enacted across contexts [28]. This counsels against a universal design template. The same aspirational language may operate differently where employee representation, labor protections, stakeholder participation, managerial discretion, or ownership structures differ. Responsible purpose consequently requires attention to who has authority to interpret purpose, whose interests become morally privileged, and what mechanisms exist for contesting organizational claims.

Purpose also creates risks when symbolic commitment becomes disconnected from enacted practice. Critical purpose scholarship emphasizes the possibility of decoupling and the difficulty of managing stakeholder trade-offs and value distribution [29]. For the proposed theory, inconsistency can matter in two directions. It may weaken moral authority when employees perceive hypocrisy, or it may intensify control if workers are expected to embody values more rigorously than organizational decisions do. Neither response is inevitable. The implication is that responsible purpose should be assessed through enacted allocation of costs, benefits, and decision rights rather than through rhetorical intensity alone.

Stakeholder governance theory further directs attention to vulnerabilities and the allocation of authority around collective-action and contracting problems [30]. Applied cautiously, this perspective supports four proposed principles: plural participation in interpreting purpose; consequential rights to challenge purpose-linked demands; transparent disclosure of material trade-offs; and protection against treating unwillingness to sacrifice as evidence of moral deficiency. These are design principles for investigation, not validated interventions. They should be adapted to institutional and occupational context and compared with alternative governance mechanisms rather than presented as universal remedies.

Responsible purpose therefore does not require removing moral aspiration from organizational life. It requires maintaining a boundary between aspiration and compelled virtue. Organizations may legitimately articulate values and invite commitment, while employees retain the capacity to disagree about means, costs, and trade-offs. Empirical research should examine whether challenge rights, plural governance, and explicit protection of boundaries actually reduce value-based pressure without eroding meaning or coordination. Until such evidence exists, the responsible-purpose implications remain normative propositions whose value lies in making authority, contestability, and employee vulnerability visible.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a Theory of Purpose-Based Control to explain a possibility that inspirational accounts of organizational purpose can overlook: value-laden purpose may acquire regulatory force when it becomes a moral standard for legitimate membership and conduct. The proposed theory links moralization, identity regulation, value-based pressure, and self-surveillance while preserving meaningful work, voluntary identification, formal control, economic dependence, and technological control as distinct or rival explanations.

The contribution is deliberately conditional. Purpose is not intrinsically coercive; strong identification does not prove domination; sacrifice does not prove pressure; and behavioral alignment does not establish internalized moral compliance. Employees can reinterpret organizational narratives, draw on alternative identities, speak, remain strategically silent, resist, or exit. Institutional and governance conditions also shape whether purpose is contestable or monopolized.

The theory therefore provides a research architecture rather than an implementation formula. Its propositions require direct measurement, temporal separation of mechanisms, multilevel analysis, and comparison with simpler explanations. The central normative implication is similarly bounded: responsible purpose depends not only on what organizations claim to stand for, but also on whether members can question how those claims are interpreted and enacted without having disagreement recoded as deficient character or commitment.

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