

Employer branding lessons from Jonathan Livingston Seagull

 By [Celeste Sirin](#)

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This summer holiday, whilst my 85-year-old father was clearing out his bookshelf, he gently placed a timeless novel in my hand which my late mum lived by. As an employer branding enthusiast, and in light of the various workplace trends of 'quiet quitting' and 'the great resignation', I could not help but draw an analogy of lessons learned of what should remain top of mind for companies when looking at their 'people brand'. I have pleasure in sharing some of these profound messages and lessons from Jonathan Livingston Seagull, written by Richard Bach. The author captures a story of a gull who was not afraid to follow his purpose of living his unique self.



Image source: Engin Akyurt from [Pexels](#)

What is my purpose?

The word 'purpose' gets commonly used in many company value propositions, but we often find ourselves reflecting introspectively questioning whether we are truly following our own purpose and one-life ambition? Am I doing enough? Can I do more? Did I accomplish enough in 2022? What more can I do this year to stretch myself? Further, does our purpose run so strongly through our being, notwithstanding what others think, as we passionately continue to pursue our purpose that we hold so strongly close to our hearts?

As we face 2023, let's reflect on what Jonathan, the bold and free-spirited gull can teach us, covering all aspects of the values of learning, diversity and inclusion, leadership, purpose, mediocrity, resilience, and more.

- Jonathan is a gull that always remains curious, continuously aspiring to learn more. His desire and purpose were to perfect the joy of flying and feeding differently from the rest.

Message: Recognise those employees with enquiring minds, curious to learn with attitudinal differences which cannot be taught – the inherent drive to grow and learn more.

- Notwithstanding Jonathan's set-backs and self-doubt at times, he kept on challenging himself to think and do differently with the desire to forge ahead. He felt there was more to living the mundane, ordinary life of scavenging gulls, just settling for feeding and breeding. Lying awake at night, he wondered whether he could fly higher, fly further and if he was truly performing at his peak potential.

Message: Nowadays, uncontrollable outside uncertainties and headwinds are the accepted norm. To find talent who enjoy taking personal accountability to adapt and demonstrate resilience to soar above life's challenges for themselves is incredibly beneficial and should be harnessed.



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- Jonathan was unlike the rest of the flock, who wouldn't dare question the normal accepted self-imposed mediocracy passed down through generations. When Jonathan announced his ambitious intention of flying higher, he was cast out of the flock, being labelled a dreamer. He boldly pursued his goal on his own, not being affected by others on what he was capable of achieving and demonstrating to himself.

Message: Diversity and inclusion remains a hot topic on many CHRO's 2023 agendas. Recruiting, engaging and promoting multicultural and multigenerational talent pools can possibly break down any imposed barriers of mediocracy. Companies cannot overlook the emerging generations who seek a strong sense of purpose, impact, relevance and belonging – they want to be heard otherwise they might leave to go it alone.

- Jonathan relished his self-accomplishments, rejoicing in his achievements, yet unaffected by the accolades placed on him by his fellow admiring gulls. He received great pleasure from doing something well, even if it was to prove to himself that he could be a master of flying.

Message: Appreciation and recognition cannot be underestimated. For companies, an employee-centric approach is that of listening, understanding and tailoring one's approach to an individual's need.

- Breaking barriers and the boundaries of longstanding Gull Council Laws and even flying in the dark, as hard as he tried, Jonathan could not obediently abide to blending in with the rest. His aim was to reach his full potential – "being the gull sees farthest who flies highest".

Message: A company's competitive edge will always be its people – helping them reach their full potential can be mutually beneficial for the employee and the organisation.



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- Jonathan is not embittered to the flock for the skill he gained but enjoyed it for himself. In heaven, he meets elder Chiang who recommends that, as a born instructor, Jonathan perfects his lessons of kindness and teach gulls the vision to see truth in themselves as he did. Jonathan shares his life-time purpose and ambition by teaching a small group of like-minded aspiring students to put their limits aside, hungry and excited to learn and grow from every lesson.

Message: Smart companies continue to recruit the older generations and retirees back into their organisations. As mentors for the young, they impart their long-lasting, solid qualities of love, kindness, sharing, empathy and growth.

- As hard as Jonathan tries, his flock continues to view him as the devil. Student Fletcher questions why Jonathan remains loving a mob of birds that see him as evil. He responds through choosing to see the real good in every gull, and helping them to see it in themselves.

Message: Leaders have an influential role to play in helping employees recognise and nurture the qualities that reside within.

Leaders and employees alike, we all have unlimited ideas of freedom to fly high. Putting aside our thoughts of limitations is what will get us there. Likewise, through companies being laser-focused on finding the Jonathan Livingstone Seagull within each employee, they will grow to become a bold, adventurous and resilient flock of purposeful high-flyers!

ABOUT CELESTE SIRIN

Celeste Sirin is an employer branding specialist, speaker, facilitator and founder of Employer Branding Africa which aims to develop employer branding best practice in South Africa by educating South African leaders. She is a leading authority in positioning and elevating employer brands for companies, offering extensive insight into local, African and international employer branding trends.

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