Making work meaningful: A leader's guide

People who find meaning in their work are happier, more productive, and more engaged. Four practical interventions can help make the search more likely to succeed.

by Dan Cable and Freek Vermeulen

By now, it is well understood that people who believe their job has meaning and a broader purpose are more likely to work harder, take on challenging or unpopular tasks, and collaborate effectively. Research repeatedly shows that people deliver their best effort and ideas when they feel they are part of something larger than the pursuit of a paycheck. (For more, see the companion article, "The link between meaning and organizational health," on McKinsey.com.)

Most business leaders know this. They take pains to broadcast the company's strategy to employees. They say they really want employees to know that the organization has a higher purpose. And yet many of these messages aren't getting through: in one survey of senior executives around the world, only 38 percent of leaders said that their staff had a clear understanding of the organization's purpose and commitment to its core values and beliefs.[1] US and global Gallup polls confirm this, finding that about 70 percent of employees are not "involved in, enthusiastic about, or committed to their work."[2] Another study showed that nearly nine out of ten American workers believe

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[1] *The business case for purpose*, a joint report from EY and Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2015, ey.com.

[2] Amy Adkins, "Majority of U.S. employees not engaged despite gains in 2014," Gallup, January 28, 2015, news.gallup.com.

they do not contribute to their full potential, because they don't feel excited about their work.[3]

At a time when many companies are engineering jarring transformational changes to become more agile, digitally enabled, and proactive competitors, it is more important than ever that employees find meaning in their work. Traditional rewards systems and career ladders are disappearing, so workers need new reasons to believe in their companies.

We have found four organizational-design interventions that can help (exhibit). They are simple, inexpensive, practical, and local and can help employees at any level of the organization. This kind of straightforward practice is often overlooked in ambitious corporate initiatives. But it is critical for any company hoping to create an environment where organizational change is personal and where innovation becomes a bottom-up process of purposeful actions initiated by employees themselves.

1. REDUCE ANONYMITY

Humans are collaborators. We have evolved that way, understanding that we can accomplish more by cooperating face-to-face with others. Modern organizations, with their siloed workplaces and increasingly digitized operations, can foster separation and anonymity. But perceptive leaders can find ways to establish deeper connections between any worker and his or her customers.

Consider a cafeteria experiment conducted by Ryan Buell, an associate professor at Harvard Business School, and his coauthors Tami Kim and Chia-Jung Tsay.[4] In many cafeterias, cooks and diners do not see each other, since waiters serve as the intermediary between the two. Buell changed that dynamic by setting up a video feed from the grill station to an iPad in the kitchen. There was no sound and no interaction, but the chefs could see who was ordering the food that they would prepare.

Immediately, the cooks started to work differently. For example, they began freshly preparing eggs for each customer, instead of grilling several eggs in advance and plating those when ordered. Simply seeing their customer

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[3] Susan Adams, "Unhappy employees outnumber happy ones by two to one worldwide," *Forbes*, October 10, 2013, forbes.com.

[4] Ryan W. Buell, Tami Kim, and Chia-Jung Tsay, "Creating reciprocal value through operational transparency," *Management Science*, June 2017, Volume 63, Number 6, pp. 1673–95.

Four straightforward practices can help to create an environment where organizational change is personal.
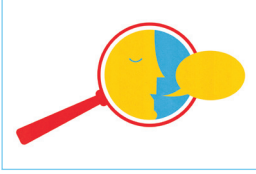
Reduce anonymity

Talk with employees about who their customers are, and encourage each employee to connect with one.

Build regular, face-to-face interactions with customers into existing processes, stimulating employees to learn who is most affected by their work.

Help people grasp the impact of their work

Invite customers who have had the best—and worst—experiences with your products to talk with employees in person so your team can see how their work affects customers.
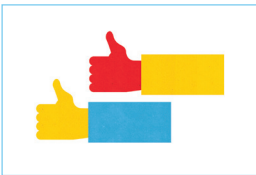
Recognize and reward good work

Periodically make a note of one good thing done by each team member, thank them for it, and describe why it made things better.

Create a "like" system on your company intranet or other network where colleagues or even customers can communicate satisfaction with a task or interaction (the "like" need only be visible to the recipient).

Connect work to a higher meaning

Push people to think about their work in a high-level way by asking employees a series of "why" questions for 3–5 of their most important job-related tasks.

changed everything. In short order (ahem), employee satisfaction soared. Better still, customer satisfaction went up 14.4 percent, according to Buell. Even though the chefs went unseen, the video feed had created a connection that added meaning to their work.

Alistair Spalding, artistic director and chief executive of Sadler's Wells Theatre, in London, understands the value of direct contact.[5] About ten years ago,

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[5] Freek Vermeulen, "Balance exploration with exploitation," in *Breaking Bad Habits: Defy Industry Norms and Reinvigorate Your Business*, Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, November 2017, pp. 179–208.

Spalding realized that he had to improve morale at the venerable dance venue—in particular, among its supporting staff of marketers, stagehands, and administrators, as well as others. The theater had endured a history of strikes, and the prep work for many shows lacked the precision and attention to detail that Spalding craved.

Spalding saw that the artists who performed at Sadler's Wells were essentially anonymous to the staff. The employees did their work during the day, the artists showed up at night to perform, and the groups never connected. Unsurprisingly, the employees demonstrated relatively little interest in the theater's overarching intent to become the center of innovation in dance. Indeed, the staff tended to have a somewhat negative attitude toward the artists.

Spalding decided to combat this by launching an "associate artists" program. Artists who performed at the theater regularly would get free office space at the theater and access to its rehearsal studios and cafeteria. Spalding went so far as to position Sadler's Wells as a center of innovation, where artists could meet, practice, dream big, or just hang out.

This was a great boon to the artists. But the employees benefited as well. As the theater became more of a home to a community of artists, the artists became much less anonymous to the employees. Gradually, Spalding began noticing proactive changes and improvements in the performance of the employees. For example, lighting staffers became more involved in the selection of lamps for performances, bringing a level of technical expertise that had been lacking before. Similarly, the cafeteria staff became more engaged as they saw how their work contributed to a dynamic atmosphere that, in turn, encouraged artists to spend time at the theater. The marketing and sales side benefited as well, and over the next four years, attendance at Sadler's Wells grew 25 percent, to 470,000 visitors a year.

Spalding believes that none of this would have occurred without the associate-artist program. "I thought that it was important that it wasn't just administrators around," he said. "That there are actual living artists in the building reminds everyone of what we're doing. The whole organization is involved in the work of artists." By replacing anonymity with familiarity, Spalding had altered attitudes and behavior, laying the groundwork for success.

2. HELP PEOPLE GRASP THE IMPACT OF THEIR WORK ON THE CUSTOMER

Many companies give workers data about their customers. But giving employees a clear sense of how their work directly affects specific customers is more profound.

Wharton School professor Adam Grant conducted a series of experiments with university fund-raisers.[6] Fund-raising is a tough job; many people do not appreciate unsolicited calls, and yet the typical fund-raiser must make numerous calls before receiving a pledge. Most employers pay for performance: a fund-raiser's remuneration depends almost completely on the donations secured. But the job is so monotonous and taxing that productivity and morale are generally quite low.

Grant conducted two experiments. In one, he arranged for fund-raisers to hear a senior executive and a board member of a university speak about the significance of education in society and the importance of the fund-raisers' work to scholarship recipients. Nothing came of these supposedly motivational speeches. Productivity didn't improve at all.

In the other experiment, Grant arranged for fund-raisers to meet a student who had received a scholarship. The student explained that the scholarship had changed his life, allowing him to attend university and study abroad. By conversing with the student, the fund-raisers saw the impact of their work firsthand.

After meeting the student, fund-raisers placed many more calls than before and secured larger donations per call. Research shows that the person on the other end of the line can sense the caller's enthusiasm.[7] The fund-raisers' new attitude made their phone conversations more engaging, convincing, and successful. In the two months after meeting the student, fund-raisers raised 295 percent more than they had in the two months before—an average of $9,704.58 versus $2,459.44.

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[6] Adam M. Grant, "Does intrinsic motivation fuel the prosocial fire? Motivational synergy in predicting persistence, performance, and productivity," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, January 2008, Volume 93, Number 1, pp. 48–58; Adam M. Grant, "The significance of task significance: Job performance effects, relational mechanisms, and boundary conditions," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, January 2008, Volume 93, Number 1, pp. 108–24; Adam M. Grant et al., "Impact and the art of motivation maintenance: The effects of contact with beneficiaries on persistence behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, May 2007, Volume 103, Number 1, pp. 53–67; Adam M. Grant and David A. Hofmann, "Outsourcing inspiration: The performance effects of ideological messages from leaders and beneficiaries," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, November 2011, Volume 116, Number 2, pp. 173–87.

[7] Amy Drahota and Scott Simon, "Hearing a smile in tone of voice," NPR, January 19, 2008, npr.org.

Helping people understand the impact of their work does not have to be complicated or expensive. It should be personal, however. These kinds of first-hand interactions should be built into an organization systematically. One useful practice is to insist that all employees—whether they are customer facing or not—make regular on-site visits to the end users of the company's products.

That is what Dorothee Ritz, Microsoft's general manager for Austria, did with her Vienna-based employees.[8] Ritz insisted that everyone see for themselves how people were implementing the company's products and services. One manager spent several days out on the street with police officers to learn how they use remote data. Another manager spent two days in a hospital to see the impact of going paperless. Soon, Ritz noticed, employees were suggesting more pointed solutions for customers based on their on-site visits. According to Ritz, this simple practice gives employees a better sense of the real value of their work.

3. NOTICE, RECOGNIZE, AND REWARD GOOD WORK

Employees want to know that their work is noticed and valued. Smart companies find meaningful ways to do this without doling out raises and bonuses.

Wikipedia relies heavily on unpaid editors who volunteer to create and correct its pages. Retaining these editors is key to the success of the company. To further this effort, the company gave UCLA Anderson assistant professor Jana Gallus permission to randomly select a number of people from a group of 4,000 eligible editors to receive an award (the remainder served as the study's control group).[9]

The Wikipedia award had two components: an electronic image posted on the editor's personal page and recognition on an official Wikipedia page. Since editors use pseudonyms, the award conferred no direct personal gains in a traditional sense. Nevertheless, this symbolic award spurred productivity (up by 13 percent over 11 months) and retention (up 20 percent). Many of the award-winning editors started taking on more ambitious tasks, such as writing articles from scratch, while others tackled critical behind-the-scenes coordination and maintenance. The editors also became more engaged in helping others: reward recipients were twice as likely as other editors to answer requests for help from community members.

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[8] Daniel M. Cable, "Crafting narratives about purpose," in *Alive at Work: The Neuroscience of Helping Your People Love What They Do*, Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, March 2018.

[9] Jana Gallus, "Fostering public good contributions with symbolic awards: A large-scale natural field experiment at Wikipedia," *Management Science*, December 2017, Volume 63, Number 12, pp. 3999–4015.

"Thank you very much," one editor posted on the award's public discussion page. "I have spent much time with Wikipedia. The recognition . . . makes me very happy." Another wrote, "I feel very honored to receive this award. It makes me realize that contributions, even if they may be small, are recognized here."

Put simply, work becomes more meaningful when people know that their actions are noticed and appreciated. The recognition doesn't necessarily need to be public, as Bryan Stroube from the London Business School and Robert Vesco from Bloomberg discovered when they studied the comments posted on the website Hacker News.

The site is part of Y Combinator, which provides seed money to start-ups in exchange for an equity stake. The company built Hacker News for entrepreneurs to post ideas for start-ups and get reactions from a relevant community. All users, for example, can "like" a particular comment when they value it. At one point in its history, Hacker News made the number of likes that someone had accumulated visible to the community, but at another time, it showed the number only to the individual commenter. By comparing the public and private periods, Stroube and Vesco showed that publicizing the numbers of likes did not increase useful comments across the system. The number alone gave commenters a sense that their feedback was being noticed and appreciated.

Many companies can create an internal network where employees can "like" the work of colleagues. But the personal touch is important as well. Good leaders make constructive praise a regular part of their management routine.

4. CONNECT DAILY WORK TO A GRANDER GOAL

Our first three suggestions offer simple ways to help employees feel that their work is valuable. Our fourth suggestion offers a concrete way to help employees understand how their daily responsibilities tie in to a higher meaning, to a purpose larger than themselves.

Almost every company says they would like to do this, but few succeed. Business leaders regularly communicate their company's higher purpose in a vision or mission statement and try to reinforce it at conferences and workshops.

While these efforts are well intended, few have a positive or lasting impact. Sometimes, the problem is the vision itself. Gerard Langeler, a cofounder

of Mentor Graphics, said that his own company fell into such a "vision trap" when it defined its vision as "changing the way the world designs," an expression of purpose that was too grand and too detached from daily tasks.[10] Sometimes, the problem is the way that the vision is communicated. Remember the fund-raiser experiment? When leaders try to impose a vision, employees tend not to take the message to heart. Employees need to make the connection from their work to the company vision themselves.

To help leaders stimulate this bottom-up process, we recommend a simple intervention technique based on the work of Antonio Freitas and his colleagues from the State University of New York and New York University.[11] The exercise pushes people to think about their work in an increasingly high-level way and can be exercised one-on-one, during team meetings, or in internal workshops.

Here is how it works. Imagine a manager at XYZ Technology who regularly fills out performance-evaluation forms. The exercise begins by asking the manager, "Why are you completing these forms?" Perhaps she would answer, "In order to give my team members feedback about their performance and to help them improve." A second question builds on her answer: "Why do you want to help them improve?" She might say, "so that my team can develop better enterprise software." A third repetition of the question builds on the second answer: "Why do you want to build better enterprise software?" She might answer, "to improve the efficiency of our customers." A fourth and final question gets to the essence of her work: "And why do you want customers to be more efficient?" The response might be, "so they are free to be their most creative and productive selves." That is a grand goal—indeed, the kind of thing a company might say in its mission statement. As each of her answers builds on her previous ones, the manager comes to align her task with the organization's loftiest goals.

Wharton School's Andrew Carton examined how a similar exercise worked at NASA during the 1960s, when the agency was tasked with putting an astronaut on the moon. In four steps, employees discovered a meaningful connection between their work and NASA's ultimate aspirations. These steps linked their daily tasks ("I am building electrical circuits") to NASA's

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[10] Gerard H. Langeler, "The vision trap," *Harvard Business Review*, March–April 1992, Volume 70, Number 2, pp. 46–55, hbr.org.

[11] Antonio L. Freitas et al., "Seeing oneself in one's choices: Construal level and self-pertinence of electoral and consumer decisions," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, July 2008, Volume 44, Number 4, pp. 1174–9, sciencedirect.com.

objective ("I am putting a man on the moon") and even to a greater purpose ("I am advancing science"). According to Carton, the personal connection to a meaningful common goal boosted employees' "coordination and collective enthusiasm." As one former NASA employee recalled, "We didn't want to go home at night. We just wanted to keep going, and we couldn't wait to get up and get back to work in the morning. The clarity of NASA's strategic objective helps remind managers of another important point about meaning: namely, that employees must see clearly how their organization is trying to contribute to a higher purpose, in the form of concrete strategic intent.[12]

Research confirms that people are more motivated and persistent when they think about why they are doing something (for instance, losing weight to become healthy) instead of what they are doing (eating a salad).[13] After the fund-raisers met the student, they focused less on what they were doing (making unpleasant phone calls) and more on why (helping students fund their college education). When people understand and believe in the reasons behind their actions, they display greater resilience and stamina.

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The idea that employees perform better when they feel a deep connection to their work is a fundamental part of many corporate reorganizations, where agile systems and other efforts are designed to tap a company's greatest asset: the personal creativity of its employees. But it is not enough to institute systemic changes and hope that employees will rise to the task. Instead, senior executives should take the sorts of practical steps that help employees in their search for meaning at work. When successful, these efforts provide a road map for aligning the personal aspirations of employees with the most important goals of the organization—a combination that benefits everyone. ⓠ

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[12] For a deeper look at the importance of strategic clarity as it relates to meaning, we recommend the work of Claudine Gartenberg. See, for example, Claudine Madras Gartenberg, Andrea Prat, and George Serafeim, "Corporate purpose and financial performance," *Organization Science*, forthcoming, ssrn.com.

[13] Daniel M. Cable, *Alive at Work*.

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