The Power of Mattering at Work

Improving everyday interactions can promote employee retention, engagement, growth, and well-being.

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For years, Jane was the live-in caregiver for a beloved family member. When he passed away, she felt *purposeless.*

Faced with the prospect of losing her housing, Jane (not her real name) took a cleaning position at a local university. During her first few shifts, she struggled with intrusive thoughts such as, *Why couldn't I have done something more with my life?* and *I wish I were more than just a janitor.*

One day a supervisor noticed Jane was having trouble. He handed her a dictionary and asked her to read the definition of custodian: a person responsible for looking after something. "That's you," the supervisor told her. "You're responsible for and take 'custody' of this building and everyone in it."

Something shifted inside Jane that day. Later, when she participated in my study on how service workers experience meaning at work, she reflected on how it was one of the first times in her life that someone had made her feel worthy. Her mental chatter brightened after that interaction, and she stayed on the job for 18 years. Jane had felt the power of mattering at work.

Mattering—a mainstay concept in the fields of psychology and sociology for more than 40 years—is the experience of feeling significant to those around us because we feel valued and know that we add value. It is a primal need. When people know that they matter at work, they thrive. Mattering enhances self-esteem ("I'm worthy") and self-efficacy ("I'm capable") and strengthens motivation, well-being, and performance. This is critical for organizations to recognize: Employees who believe they matter report greater satisfaction, are more likely to be promoted, and are less likely to leave. In one study of 7,900 business units, teams in which people felt cared for and valued by a leader had higher levels of customer satisfaction, productivity, and profitability.

If you're thinking that I'm just talking about "belonging" and you've heard it all before, you're missing a key distinction. Belonging is feeling welcomed and accepted in a group, whereas mattering is feeling *significant* to the group's individual members. Mattering is an even more fundamental need than belonging.

Today polls show that 30% of people report feeling invisible at work, 65% feel underappreciated, and close to 82% of workers feel lonely. Many of the workplace challenges currently plaguing leaders—a 10-year low in engagement numbers, demands for dignity and equity, increased labor action, declining employee mental health, and a few years ago, quiet quitting and the Great Resignation—can be traced to a growing mattering deficit.

These trends persist despite investments in new engagement surveys and platforms, well-being programs, better

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IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

Too many employees today feel that they don't matter. That sentiment lies at the root of many current business and societal challenges, including low employee retention and engagement, high rates of employee mental health struggles, and escalating labor disputes.

THE REASON

Our reliance on brief digital communications and our condescension toward soft skills have weakened our ability to convey to others that they matter.

THE SOLUTION

In their daily personal interactions, leaders must demonstrate to their people that they are seen and heard, affirm their value, and show them how they are needed.

hiring and retention initiatives, increased wages, and DEI initiatives. That's because mattering doesn't result from pay, policies, or perks. Guided by decades of research on what cultivates mattering, my team and I have worked with hundreds of corporate and public-sector groups—including teams at Marriott International, Delta Air Lines, and the U.S. Army—to uncover behaviors that foster mattering. We've found that creating a sense of mattering happens most fundamentally in the course of daily interpersonal interactions, like the one Jane experienced.

To be clear, creating a culture of mattering through individual interactions is not a substitute for paying livable wages, providing predictable schedules, and giving access to basic healthcare. But people are unlikely to feel they matter unless they experience an individualized approach.

In practice, that means leaders need to truly see and hear team members during daily interactions. They must also regularly affirm their people's significance. And finally, senior leaders need to scale these skills up to the organizational level so that mattering becomes a cultural norm. These behaviors may seem like common sense, but they've ceased to be common practice in a world of brief digital communications and condescension toward soft skills, and they're well worth relearning.

Seeing and Hearing Others

The first and most important step in cultivating a sense of mattering is to truly notice people. Noticing requires two skill sets: *seeing* people, which means acknowledging them and paying attention to the details, ebbs, and flows of their life and work; and *hearing* people, which means demonstrating a real interest in the meaning and feelings behind their words and inviting them to share their experiences, perspectives, and feedback within a climate of psychological safety so that they feel comfortable doing so. Remember how one small instance of having her struggles noticed changed the course of Jane's career.

Noticing people isn't the same as knowing them. You can know your best friend but fail to notice that she's having a hard time. You can know your team members but not notice that one is experiencing stress in another part of his life or feeling left out of discussions. We tend to think that seeing others comes naturally, but in today's rushed work world, that's far from the case. To notice others, try the following:

Make time and space. We're all busy, but it pays to set aside time to truly see people. In a 2014 study researchers compared employees who spent one hour a week or less interacting with their leaders with those who spent more than six hours a week interacting with them. Employees who spent more time with their bosses were more motivated and innovative and 30% more engaged than those who spent less time.

Although you can't control your time constraints, you can control how you prioritize and plan relationship building. Schedule regular meetings with your team, don't let one-on-ones go by the wayside, and make the most of watercooler conversations or the moments before a meeting starts. Periodically check whether anyone on your team needs more of your time. (See "Conduct a Mattering Audit" in the "Mattering Tool Kit" exhibit.)

Pay deep attention. Research shows that our ability to pay attention has decreased in the past decade. When interactions don't get our full attention, they become transactional rather than relational: We thank our delivery woman while we're on a call, and so we never learn her name; we speed through a meeting's agenda items without pausing to ask how people are really doing; we relay feedback without taking into account a team member's point of view.

Renew your intention to pay close attention to others. Begin by asking more-meaningful questions. We tend to begin conversations with "How are you?" or "How was your day?" These standard greetings don't give us any insight into the people we lead. Instead ask questions that are clear, open, and exploratory.

→ *Clear* questions have an object and a time frame. For example, instead of saying, "How are you?" you might ask, "What has your attention today?"

→ *Open* questions give people the opportunity to share their experiences. Instead of asking, "Did the meeting go well?" you might ask, "What was the most important insight you heard in the meeting?"

→ *Exploratory* questions seek to understand, not evaluate. Instead of "What did you get done today?" you might ask, "Which parts of today's projects were most challenging for you and why?"

Being part of a compassionate culture at work can increase emotional commitment to the organization, productivity, and quality of work.

Note what you learn from these exchanges so that you can follow up. One manager I worked with in a distribution center had trouble keeping track of the details of her large team, so every Friday afternoon she wrote down one detail she had noticed about each team member that week—nerves about an upcoming meeting, a struggle on a particular task, or a personal detail such as a child starting a new sport. On Monday she looked at her notebook and scheduled a three-minute micro-check-in with each team member, starting with, "I remember that last week…" and then asked about or commented on something specific. Her team consistently reported higher engagement than other teams in the center.

Listen for total meaning. As people share their perspectives, demonstrate a real interest in what they are saying and feeling. Active listening has long been touted as the ideal way to do this, but when it's applied to leadership, I've too often seen it diluted to mechanical advice to stay silent, make eye contact, and nod. Someone can be physically listened to and still not feel heard. Instead, participate in the conversation to draw out the other person's true perspective. (See "Are You *Really* a Good Listener?" on page 139 in this issue.)

To do this, be alert to what the psychologist and active-listening theorist Carl Rogers called "total meaning"—not just people's words but also their demeanor, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues—so that you can understand and respond to their underlying feelings and attitudes.

Here are four techniques you can use to get at the deeper meaning behind your team members' words:

→ Seek clarification by asking questions like "Can you tell me more?" or "What do you mean when you say 'fine'"?

→ Explore by asking questions that elicit details, such as "When that was happening, what were you thinking?" or "Can you give me an example?"

→ Paraphrase or "loop" by asking questions like "What I hear you saying is….Is that accurate?" or "Let me make sure I understand: [paraphrase their message]. Is there anything I missed?"

→ Help them articulate feelings by asking, "How did that make you feel?" and "What were you feeling when that happened?" or "When you say [specific phrase], what feelings are behind that?" And validate people by saying, "I can see

that you're feeling X," or "I hear you, and it sounds as if you're really X."

Respond compassionately. The more closely you see and hear a person, the more often you will learn about his or her struggles—anxieties, stresses, challenges. Respond foremost with compassion. This seems obvious, but too often we normalize despair at work. "It's just that time of year," we say. "That's the nature of our business." "Everyone's overloaded right now." While these observations may be true, they don't help the person feel noticed. A compassionate response can reduce someone's response to stress, lower blood pressure, and increase trust. Being part of a compassionate culture at work can increase emotional commitment to the organization, productivity, work quality, and engagement.

Even small acts of compassion go a long way. Once I was in a virtual meeting with a leader checking in with his team when one member said that she was overloaded. He paused and said, "Hey, you know that standing meeting we have on Friday? Why don't you skip that and get caught up?" *Everyone* visibly relaxed.

Follow up. What you do after the conversation matters. Research about the listening behaviors of employees at one bank, for example, showed that whether or not someone felt heard hinged not only on the listener's responsiveness *during* the conversation but also on what happened *outside* the conversation and in the following weeks and months.

The actions you can take range from checking back in on something you heard to making concrete changes to the business. Consider United Airlines. Before CEO Oscar Munoz took the reins, the company was plagued with abysmal operational performance, poor financials, fraught labor relations, and the lowest levels of customer satisfaction and employee morale in the industry. Munoz began his tenure by embarking on a listening tour. When a flight attendant named Amy became emotional during their conversation, he stopped and gently asked for more details. "You know, Oscar, I'm just tired of always having to say, 'I'm sorry,'" she said. "I'm sorry our food isn't good. I'm sorry our coffee sucks. I'm sorry you can't sit next to your child. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Munoz realized that the company needed to regain the trust of its employees to solve its challenges with customers and investors. Promising Amy that he wouldn't forget

her words, he continued his listening tour and then made changes to address scheduling issues and improve working conditions. United catapulted into the top tier for airline customer satisfaction, employee engagement, and operational excellence, and the company's share price soared by 50% during his tenure.

Affirming People and Showing Them They're Needed

Once you fully see and hear people, you can affirm them meaningfully by showing them how they make a singular impact. Affirmation is not just thanking them for what they've done or who they are; it's about showing them their uniqueness. You can also help them see how they're needed by giving them evidence that people rely on them and that their efforts are indispensable.

Unfortunately, according to the data, most of us aren't very good at that. For example, 90% of people in a large survey by the John Templeton Foundation reported feeling grateful for people in their lives, yet less than half expressed that gratitude. A poll by the talent management software firm TalentLMS found that 60% of people say they've never had a manager at work who truly appreciates them.

Show people their unique gifts. People perceive their uniqueness relative to others. In a seminal 1977 study, psychologists told participants they would receive feedback on a personality test. The participants were each secretly given the same score, but half of them also got a "difference score" that indicated how distinctive their results were relative to their peers'. Those who were told they were unique reported more satisfaction and better self-perceptions than did the participants who weren't given a difference score.

This need to have our uniqueness valued is why we brush off generic feedback and why being told "thank you" at the same time every day doesn't mean much. It's also why awards, free lunches, incentives, and other employee recognition or appreciation programs are not a substitute for the interpersonal skill of affirming people. To feel that they matter, people must experience their unique significance through their relationships with others.

To affirm people's significance, consider their strengths, purpose, perspective, and wisdom. Strengths are the overlap between what people love to do and what they're good at. Purpose is the contribution a person wants to make in the world. Perspective is how people see the world, and wisdom is what they've learned from living their lives. By naming these gifts, showing their impact, and nurturing them, you help employees see how they matter.

Affirming people doesn't mean ignoring areas that need improvement or avoiding critiques. On the contrary, affirmation plays an important role in addressing performance gaps. Your feedback is unlikely to matter to people who don't first believe they matter to you. The psychologist David Yeager and his team call affirming feedback "wise feedback." Using experimental studies, they found that people are more likely to improve when someone believes in them, reminds them of their strengths, offers support, and establishes trust before offering criticism or noting areas that need improvement.

Tell stories of significance. We tend to have a difficult time imagining the downstream impact of our work, especially those of us in roles several steps removed from an end user or customer. One way to remind people of the difference they make is to collect and share real, specific personal stories.

I was once hired to facilitate a discussion about purpose at work with a team of commercial plumbing contractors. They were exhausted after coming off a 14-hour shift, and they didn't do much to hide that they were just waiting for the right moment to sneak away. I began the session by showing a photo of my then-six-year-old son: eyes closed, stuffing his face at his favorite doughnut shop at a new plaza near our home. (Our trips there had become a special weekend tradition after his little brother was born.)

I asked the plumbers, "What do you see here?" It took a few moments, but one of the plumbers sat up and said, "We worked on that project!"

"Yes," I said, "Do you see that joy? That's because of you."

They spent the next two hours sharing stories of how their work mattered, from a senior center project to a research facility job. After the session a journeyman plumber told me, holding back emotion, "I've been doing this for 30 years. I've never thought about my job that way. I've never thought about the people who use these buildings."

Research by the organizational psychologist Adam Grant shows that hearing just one real story of how our work
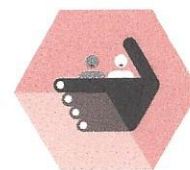
benefits someone else can increase motivation by upwards of 400%. So establish a process for collecting stories of significance and a cadence for sharing them, whether they're from customers and users or from peers and colleagues.

Show people how they're indispensable. One way to help people feel needed is to show them exactly how even their small tasks are crucial to a bigger goal or purpose.

A NASA janitor famously replied to President John F. Kennedy's question, "What do you do here?" by announcing his indispensability: "I'm helping put a man on the moon." That story may be apocryphal, but it's a fact that NASA deliberately showed all the people engaged in the moon mission—including some 300,000 dispersed contract workers—how their work mattered to achieving the ultimate goal.

The researcher Andrew Carton has found that NASA employees and leaders used various terms to describe this practice, such as building a "road to the moon" or "stepping stones." Owen Maynard, then NASA's chief of mission operations, wrote "ladder to the moon" on blackboards throughout NASA's Houston space center. At the bottom rung was the present task group. The next rung was the measurable objective the task made possible. The next was the measurable objective the previous objective made possible, and so on, until it connected to "putting a person on the moon by the end of the decade." Everyone could see exactly how each step led to the next.

Laddering links people and their input to a bigger output. Put a meaningful outcome at the top of the ladder—an organization's purpose, a department's values, or a team's vision—and the individual's input at the bottom. The more specific you can be, the better. Then work your way up each rung of the ladder to show how the individual's input is needed for a real, tangible outcome that connects to the ultimate outcome. People should see their ladder regularly to reaffirm their indispensability.

Scaling the Skills to Cultivate Mattering

Recently one of the largest retail-merchandising companies in the world asked me to help it scale up its "people first" culture. Although its executives could expertly recite the competencies, training systems, and measurement framework they had in place for tasks like creating store displays, when I asked what skills supervisors needed to ensure that people knew how they added value, the executives struggled to answer.

Spreading the basic interpersonal skills described in this article throughout an organization—which I've seen transform companies and their people in cultures worldwide—requires a focus similar to the one that we devote to other work competencies. It takes four steps.

Set the right intention and increase motivation. When we start talking about scaling up mattering in an organization, it's easy to begin thinking about employees as a means to an end—productivity, profit, success. But when people are just mechanisms of success, they cease to be human to us. Leaders who truly create mattering see and treat people as worthy ends in themselves, as humans who have vivid, complex, and important lives.

As you scale up mattering across the organization, it's imperative to keep in mind that the results of showing people how they matter are increased engagement, lower turnover, and decreased burnout—but you should not implement mattering as a tactic to achieve those ends. You should do it because showing people how they matter fulfills the basic human desire for dignity and the primal human need to be seen, heard, and valued. This difference may seem like a nuance, but understanding and internalizing it is fundamental to the process and makes it more likely that your efforts will be met with success rather than cynicism.

After you've set the right intention, create an emotional anchor to incite motivation. If you don't show people what it's like to experience mattering in their lives, they're unlikely to embrace the idea; they'll see it as just another initiative. The first exercise I do with a group of leaders is to have them answer these questions: When have you most felt that you mattered to someone else? What did it feel like? What did that person say and do? What skills did that person use? (For more detail, see the exhibit "Mattering Tool Kit.") The conversations that result are powerful. Leaders are inspired to foster the feeling of mattering in others, and they recognize that doing so requires learnable skills.

Develop and practice the right skills. Naming those skills and building requirements for their practice is a critical part of the process. The skills you choose should ensure that people feel noticed, affirmed, and needed, but they

Mattering Tool Kit

Three activities will help your
leaders build their mattering skills.

Conduct a Mattering Audit

Perform an audit to find the gaps in mattering in your organization. You can do this by yourself or with your peers for a broader audit.

In one column list the names of your team members. (Or if you want to review a larger organization, list employee groups.) In the next column note the things you do to see and hear that person or employee group. If you don't do anything, leave it blank. In a third column write what you do to affirm and show that person evidence of his or her significance. In the final column indicate what you do to show how that person is needed.

Once you've completed the audit, identify the gaps. Who might be feeling unnoticed? Why? Who might be under-affirmed? Why? Who might not experience feeling needed? Why? What practices can you implement?

Identify Mattering Motivation

Leaders and managers are unlikely to embrace the work of mattering unless they are shown what mattering has meant in their own lives. To do so, ask the following questions, and share the group's answers.

When have you most felt that you mattered to someone at work? Choose a specific moment: When was it? Who made you feel that way? What did that person say or do?

What skills did the person exhibit? (For example, if you said, "My coworkers made me feel that I mattered when they sent me a thank-you email," you might say, "They knew how to write an effective thank-you, they found time to write and send it, they remembered what I did.")

How can *you* be the person in your story for someone else?

Give Your Leaders a Mattering Self-Assessment

Use this questionnaire to get a sense of how well you and the leaders in your organization are building a culture of mattering. This isn't an exercise to rank yourself or your people; it's meant to build awareness and provide guidance on which skills to improve. Read the following statements and use a scale of 1 to 5 to rate how often you display the behavior described.

1 *Never* **2** *Rarely* **3** *Sometimes* **4** *Frequently* **5** *Always*

	Score		Score
1. I ask about and remember the details of others' lives, such as the names of their family members and friends, values, interests, and personal goals and aspirations.		**8.** When I assign a task, I first explain its purpose and the difference it makes.	
2. I remember and check in on the details of others' personal and work lives during routine conversations.		**9.** I go out of my way to provide opportunities for others to use and develop their gifts.	
3. I ask others for their opinions, listen to what they say, share that I value their voices, and follow up to ensure they feel heard.		**10.** I express gratitude verbally to others regularly.	
4. I notice others' moods, and when I sense someone is struggling, I seek understanding and offer to help.		**11.** I tell others how I rely on them.	
5. I check on people's energy levels and emotions.		**12.** When people return from an absence, I tell them I missed them.	
6. I name others' unique gifts, such as their strengths, purpose, perspective, and wisdom.		**13.** I remind people how I and the organization need them and their work.	
7. I show people how they and their work impact others both inside and outside the organization.		**14.** I ask others for help.	
		15. I tell people how it's better when they're around.	

SCORING

Noticing total: Add your score for items 1–5. ____ /25

Affirming total: Add your score for items 6–10. ____ /25

Needing total: Add your score for items 11–15. ____ /25

Reflection: *In which area did you score the lowest? What is a skill in this area you want to develop? In which area did you score highest? What is one deliberate practice you want to deepen in that area?*

> Don't reward and promote high-performing people who treat others poorly. Reward and promote leaders who dignify, include, respect, and affirm people while performing well.

must be tailored to your organization. Ask yourself which capabilities described in this article your leaders need to develop. Ultimately, your organization might create a "leadership checklist" that defines how leaders must behave daily or a more comprehensive guidebook that communicates the company's approach to fostering mattering.

Measure mattering. You won't see improvements in these skills without measurement and accountability. One challenge of measuring people's skill at noticing, affirming, and needing others is that we all tend to overestimate our efforts in this area. I recommend two methods for giving the organization and leaders themselves a more accurate picture of where they might improve:

→ *Self-assessment.* I suggest doing this at least quarterly in a group setting so that there's an opportunity for peer coaching. (See "Give Your Leaders a Mattering Self-Assessment" in the "Mattering Tool Kit" exhibit.)

→ *Team assessment.* Self-assessments aren't enough, however, since we tend to be generous with ourselves even in the face of concrete, fact-based questions. Ask teams to rate their leaders on the same behaviors. (For example, the item "I remember and check in on the details of others' personal and work lives" becomes "My leader remembers and checks in on the details of others' personal and work lives.")

Optimize the environment. Frankly, many organizations make it difficult for leaders to cultivate mattering. If you're in a distribution center that tracks every minute of your day, taking the time necessary to show you care becomes nearly impossible. And even in organizations where it's possible to show appreciation, it's usually still left up to chance: There is no requirement to show care.

Formal or informal rewards are potent ways to influence human behavior. If we recognize, incentivize, and promote caring behaviors, we'll get more caring leaders. To create a culture of mattering, stop rewarding and promoting leaders for how much they get people to do, and start rewarding leaders for how they make people feel. Don't reward and promote high-performing people who treat others poorly. Reward, develop, and promote leaders whose assessments show that they dignify, include, respect, and affirm people while performing well.

I worked with American Express Global Business Travel and its senior vice president Mark Rude to introduce these ideas a year or so after Covid lockdowns ended. The pandemic had been brutal to the company's employees, many of whom were on the front line handling large companies' business travel. Attrition mounted as morale fell.

First I described the power of mattering, the costs of not mattering, and the centrality and purpose of mattering to the organization's leaders in various regions—including the United States, Ireland, and India. One leader volunteered that talking about her experiences of mattering with her peers "gave her permission to be human again." The mattering concept resonated in every culture.

In phase two I divided the leaders into smaller groups where they brainstormed specific behaviors and skills related to noticing, affirming, and needing that would make sense at the firm. The behaviors included "be face-to-face and share your video on all calls and demonstrate active listening," "proactively offer support when an employee discloses a struggle," and "describe the 'why' before 'what' and 'how' when assigning tasks."

After narrowing the behaviors down, we put them in a "How People Matter Here" blueprint that began with this statement: "We believe each employee should feel noticed, affirmed, and needed." Each behavior was then accompanied by skills and implementation advice. This blueprint and the resulting strategy became the guiding curriculum for the organization's leadership skills development, leader evaluations, and team assessments. The result has been a 50% reduction in attrition that's persisted for a year and a half and a significant increase in employee engagement scores.

"TO BE OF importance to others is to be alive," T.S. Eliot once wrote. By genuinely seeing, hearing, affirming, and expressing how we need and value one another across our organizations, we can do more than foster connection. We can reignite a sense of interdependence and bring our workplaces—and one another—back to life. ∎   **HBR Reprint** R2503J
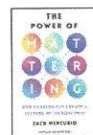
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