

Leaders, It's Time to Make Work Meaningful Again

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Over the past couple of months, I've had numerous conversations with leaders in both the private and public sector, discussing some of the key issues they face today and what they see as the main challenges they'll face going forward.

In many of those conversations, a common theme inevitably surfaces - how do I get my employees to care more about the work we do? How do I create that environment where people are internally motivated to bring their discretionary efforts to the table?

Naturally, such questions invariably lead to discussions of how can we make work more meaningful for our employees; of how do we help them make contributions that matter to

them as much as it matters to our organization.

It's a train of thought that came to mind a few days ago when my oldest daughter returned home from high school happy to share some great news - "Leslie's back working at our school".

To help put this news in context, my daughters' high school has had to make some serious budget cuts this academic year, which unfortunately included having to let go of some valuable and greatly-appreciated personnel at our high school.

Without question, Leslie is one of these employees. But thankfully, the school's administration has found some other way to keep him involved and present in the school community, much to the excitement and delight of the students.

Now I'm sure many of you are probably thinking that Leslie is one of the 'cool teachers' at my daughters' high school. The truth, however, is that Leslie is not one of the teachers - he's the school's security guard.

So why would my daughter and the other students be excited about his return? It's not because they go to a dangerous school - far from it. Rather, it's because of how Leslie approaches his job.

Since the day he started, Leslie made a point to not simply sit in his security booth. Instead, he would reach out to engage with the students, wanting to learn about their successes, and taking part in the fun activities meant to break up to monotony of the school routine.

So when news broke out that Leslie would no longer be working at the school, many of the students were sad to hear it because for many of them, he was the smiling, friendly face that greeted them at the end of their school day. He was also the cheery presence that kept them company while they waited for their parents to come pick them up.

The way Leslie approached his job reminded me of a study I share in some of my talks which found that all of us view our work in one of three ways: as a job, as a career, or as a calling.

Now, it wouldn't be a surprise to hear a pediatrician or a firefighter talking about their work as being their calling. But for the majority of us, the more likely response we'd give is that we view our work as being our career.

In Leslie's case, given how he used to be a professional guitarist whose work can be heard on certain album recordings, it should be a given that he'd view his current work as a high school security guard as nothing more than a job.

And yet, in my numerous conversations with him, it was obvious that Leslie never saw his role at my daughters' high school as just a job, and he certainly didn't view it as a career.

Indeed, it's clear to anyone who spent time interacting with him that he definitely sees the work he does in our school as being his calling. Why is that? The answer is surprisingly

simple - the role he plays in our school allows him to do meaningful work; work that matters not just to the school or to the students, but to Leslie as well.

This, of course, is the main stumbling block we all face when it comes to understanding what's required for our employees to be fully engaged and willing to dedicate their discretionary efforts to work they do. In fact, many of the leaders I've spoken with have told me it's almost impossible for them to provide each of their employees with work that's remarkable or exciting.

And yet, the simple truth is that **work doesn't have to be exciting or glamorous for it to be meaningful; it just has to matter**, both for the organization we work for and for ourselves.

For that to happen, though, means that we need to foster relationships with our employees; to understand what matters to them and how we can connect that to the work they do. This, of course, means that we can't limit our approach to simply giving our employees work we see them being good at.

Instead, we need to focus our efforts on discovering what makes our employees feel like they're making a difference; that it makes them feel like they're a part of something bigger than themselves, as opposed to feeling like another cog in the organizational wheel.

Looking at Leslie's example, nothing that he does is particularly remarkable or extraordinary, but that doesn't mean it's not special or meaningful to those he serves. That's why when word got out about his imminent departure, it wasn't just the students, but parents and teachers alike who talked about the loss his leaving would have on our school community.

It's this kind of workplace environment that we create when we give our employees the permission and the opportunity to bring their full selves to the work they do. Indeed, to drive success in today's faster-paced, interconnected global environment, we need to make sure that our employees are not limiting their involvement, their ideas, and their solutions to their job title or function.

Instead, we need to encourage and support them to step up and share their insights, their creativity, their talents on how we can do better going forward.

A few years ago, I was involved in [a study with Phillips North America looking at what factors are involved in improving employee engagement levels in today's organizations](#) and one of the more fascinating findings was that more than half of the respondents said they'd gladly take a pay cut in order to do meaningful work.

That finding alone speaks to the power and drive behind providing our employees with work that matters. The past decade or so has clearly demonstrated that the management notions that fuelled the Industrial Age simply no longer apply - we can't dismiss our employees as being 'lazy' and only motivated by what's on their paycheck stub.

Indeed, today's employees want to be challenged, they want to learn and grow, and they want to know that they are doing meaningful work in their organization.

This is something that every leader has the capacity to provide because **creating meaningful work requires less focus on what we do and more on what matters to those we lead**. That our employees are able to feel that sense of accomplishment, not only when key milestones are achieved, but because they feel that sense of connection and belonging both to the people around them and to the work they do.

This is why we're seeing so much being written about how leaders need to make that shift from managing processes to developing people; to understanding what their ambitions and dreams are and how we can connect that to the shared purpose of our organization.

Creating meaningful work is a two-way street linking a leader's efforts with their employees' needs. After all, we can't simply show up and do meaningful work. Instead, what's required is that dynamic where employees are given the opportunity to bring their full selves to the work they do because those in charge inspire them to bring nothing less to the table.

Indeed, the only reason why Leslie has become such a valued presence at my daughters' high school is because the school's leadership didn't limit his role or how they viewed him based on what he does in that organization.

Instead, they gave him the opportunity to do something important, something that the students would end up caring about, thereby allowing him to become a valued member of our school community.

That's why to succeed at leadership today, **we need to see our employees as more than what they do; we need to see them for who they are**. Of what unique insights and experiences they can bring to our organization that can help us to be better than we are today.

And the simple truth is that if a security guard at a high school can feel that sense of purpose, to treat the job he does as a calling because of the way he's allowed to approach his role in this organization, then the opportunity is there for each of us to use our leadership as a driving force to make work meaningful again for all under our care.

About the Author

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