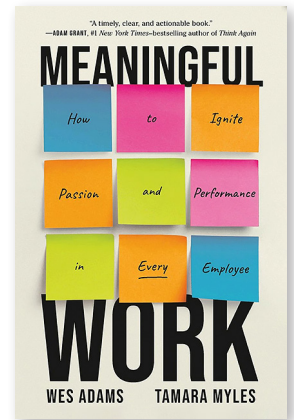


Meaningful Work

How to Ignite Passion and Performance in Every Employee

by **Wes Adams and Tamara Myles**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Great leaders cultivate the conditions their people need to thrive. They know that none of us dream of mediocrity. What we really want, what we hope for, and what we all deserve is the opportunity to do meaningful work.

In *Meaningful Work: How to Ignite Passion and Performance in Every Employee*, Wes Adams and Tamara Myles have developed an evidence-based framework for meaning-driven leadership. Drawing from the experiences of thousands of people from twenty-five industries, they identified specific leadership practices and organizational structures that make work more meaningful. With the three pillars of meaningful work—community, contribution, and challenge, readers are able to discover the elements of their jobs that tell them that they matter, that their work matters, and that they are growing into better versions of themselves. When they are present, people thrive. When they are missing, people languish.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Learn about the power of meaningful work
- Discover how to align behavior and values
- Create meaning through community, challenge, and contribution
- Make connections through embracing authenticity

Part I: Every Job Can and Should Be Meaningful

The Power of Meaningful Work

Meaningful work is the difference between connecting wires and connecting people. It is the essence that transforms everyday drudgery into work that makes us feel connected, fulfilled, and engaged.

I COULDN'T BE MYSELF

The positive effects of finding meaning at work extend beyond the individual, impacting the organization and touching families and communities. That is the power of meaningful work.

A WIN-WIN STRATEGY

Decades of research show that when employees like Rushmie experience meaningful work, they are happier, are more engaged, and stay with their companies longer. When that happens, organizations become more innovative, adaptable, and profitable. Employees who report high levels of meaning at work are 64 percent more fulfilled, 4.5 times more engaged, and 69 percent less likely to quit. Additionally, research shows that work well-being has the strongest impact on overall well-being.

MEANINGFUL WORK IS GOOD BUSINESS

In April 2021, Marriott was named one of the 2021 Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For by Great Place To Work for a record twenty-fourth year in a row, the only hospitality company with this distinction. Marriott's long history of success is built on their commitment to putting their people first. The company continually invests in creating meaningful work opportunities for their associates with a focus on development, recognition, compensation, career advancement, and skills training. As a pioneer in the hospitality industry, Marriott was also one of the first companies to introduce a global well-being program more than two decades ago, focused on nurturing the physical, mental, and financial health of associates worldwide.

RECLAIMING MEANINGFUL WORK

Although often used interchangeably, meaningful work isn't just about purpose. We define meaningful work as work that provides community, helps us contribute to something that matters, and challenges us to learn and grow. Our research shows that leaders have an outsized impact on whether employees experience work as meaningful. Leaders who build

community, help people understand how their contributions matter, and challenge them with opportunities to learn and grow, foster meaning for everyone on their teams.

How Leaders Make Work Meaningful

UPSTREAM LEADERSHIP

Meaning-driven leadership is the upstream strategy that leads to innovation, creativity, performance, retention, and engagement. Many leaders try to solve one employee crisis at a time. They deal with issues like faltering productivity, low engagement, chronic burnout, quiet quitting, and high turnover as individual problems to be solved. Only a few look upstream for a systemic solution that will not only prevent future problems, but will also unlock the full potential of every employee.

DESIGNING FOR MEANING

Human nature is shaped by human design. This means that leaders need to design for meaningful work. The idea of intentional business design is not new. Just as a house requires proper tools, materials, and a blueprint to be constructed successfully, meaning at work requires leaders who design workplaces around community, contribution, and challenge and give individuals the tools to build them.

THE THREE C'S OF MEANINGFUL WORK

Community: Meaning-driven leaders help employees thrive by encouraging social connections. Dedicating time to promote positive social interactions at work can be a powerful way to build community.

Contribution: Meaning-driven leaders help people understand how their work adds value. When people are able to see the positive impact their efforts have on others, or how their day-to-day tasks ladder up to the larger goals of the organization, work becomes more meaningful.

Challenge: Meaning-driven leaders help employees reach their full potential. When leaders believe in us and provide challenging opportunities, we stretch our capabilities and feel that our work supports our personal growth.

PUTTING ON YOUR OXYGEN MASK FIRST

Start by examining the Three C's in your own work and reflect on how you can increase each one. Taking time to reflect on your own experience of meaning at work is important and will help you become even more intentional about making work meaningful for your team.

Meaning-driven leaders are intentional about cultivating connection to increase feelings of belonging.

Alignment: The Foundation of Meaning at Work VALUES IN ACTION

Values guide employees' behavior while also forming the basis of an organization's culture. They communicate to the group which behaviors are rewarded and which are punished. The more clearly these guides and guardrails are defined, the better the ability of leaders to foster meaning at work.

VISIBLY MODELING VALUES

Research on social learning, the process of learning by observing others, shows that the actions of leaders strongly influence a group's understanding of appropriate behavior. This is especially the case when it comes to values alignment in organizations. Alignment between what a leader says and how they behave sets the tone for the rest of the organization.

MODELING IN THE MODERN WORLD

In today's work environment, hybrid and remote structures can make it more difficult for employees to consistently observe their leaders. For those leading in these environments, alignment won't always be obvious. Many decisions may go unobserved. The small, day-to-day actions of leaders are harder to see through a flood of emails, Slacks, and Zoom meetings. When we are separated by this digital distance, it's often unclear how the limited behaviors that are seen connect to an organization's values. Bridging this distance requires more intentional communication from leaders.

ALIGNMENT IN CRISIS

When your values and your behavior are aligned, they are meaningful signposts for the road ahead. On the other hand, if you don't walk your talk, employees see organizational values as just empty words on the wall. Trust erodes and cynicism takes root. Meaning is quickly destroyed.

THE COSTS OF MISALIGNMENT

In the face of a major misalignment that erodes trust and stifles meaning, it can be difficult to fully recover. In addition to keeping their own behavior aligned, leaders

must also align the policies, procedures, and processes of the organization around its values.

VALUES-DRIVEN SYSTEMS

Policies and practices that are misaligned with values quickly erode trust. They send the message that values aren't a priority and destroy meaning on the job. Misalignments are especially destructive to meaning when they exist in performance reviews, financial rewards, and formal recognition programs.

ALIGNMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Regardless of which values your organization prioritizes, alignment with those values lays the necessary foundation for meaningful work. Our research found that high alignment is a prerequisite for building meaningful work, while low alignment quickly erodes it.

Part II: Creating Meaning Through Community

Cultivate Connection

SUPERORGANIZATIONS

In healthy forests, trees operate less like individuals competing for resources and more like communal beings, sharing resources to increase their collective resilience. These forests are so interconnected and codependent that scientists have referred to them as superorganisms. Like these healthy forests, high-performing "superorganizations" also leverage the power of connection and cooperation to thrive.

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Supportive relationships at work are a source of growth, well-being, and meaning. Leaders who facilitate frequent positive interactions with others, strengthen the connective tissue of their superorganizations. Meaning-driven leaders are intentional about cultivating connection to increase feelings of belonging. There are two powerful ways in which leaders can increase the quality of connections at work:

Building Trust-By understanding the different pieces that make up trust, we can more easily work on improving it. The first element of trust is integrity. The second element of trust is competence, your ability to perform your job well.

Designing Shared Experiences-Shared experiences create a feeling of belonging, where everyone is part of something fun and meaningful. More than that, they create lasting memories that become part of the office culture, help break down barriers, and strengthen bonds.

LOWER-DIFFICULTY, LOWER-PURPOSE EXPERIENCES

On the lower end of the purpose-difficulty continuum are casual connections, a great opportunity for people who don't know each other well to become acquainted and form friendships. These activities are what most organizations are already doing to increase belonging. One way to design more inclusive casual connections is to incorporate them into the workday. Successful shared experiences have to have an intentional design. Examples: Synchronized breaks and home base teams.

HIGHER-PURPOSE, HIGHER-DIFFICULTY EXPERIENCES

Experiences on the higher end of the purpose-difficulty continuum help teams deepen their connections through more substantial and challenging interactions. They can be instrumental in fostering lasting relationships and a sense of belonging among team members. Example: Volunteer opportunities

THE CONCIERGE OF CONNECTION

Our research leaves no room for doubt: fostering relationships across the organization is critical to making work meaningful. It is how superorganizations make every individual feel connected. Whether these bonds are nurtured during existing meetings, shared meals, volunteering together, or other shared experiences doesn't matter. What truly matters is that leaders prioritize building belonging to strengthen everyone's sense of community at work.

OTHER PEOPLE MATTER

When leaders build trust and design shared experiences, they foster belonging. In order for these meaningful connections to not only survive but also thrive, it is crucial for leaders to also embrace authenticity.

Embrace Authenticity

In the extensive research that we have conducted during

and since the program, we found that meaning-driven leaders build belonging by welcoming everyone's full selves and welcoming their full range of ideas.

DROPPING THE MASK

A recent survey found that a staggering 60 percent of workers regularly engage in covering. This has negative consequences not only for the individuals who cover, but also for the performance of the organization. On the other hand, when leaders create space for people to drop their masks and show up fully, they foster belonging and strengthen connections.

EVERYDAY STORYTELLING

Storytelling can be a powerful tool to create belonging. Leaders facilitate everyday storytelling by sharing the everyday experiences of their own lives and by actively inviting others to share theirs. When people regularly talk about the things that are happening in their lives outside of work, it sends the message that everyone's experiences are welcomed and valued.

WAS THAT OK?

It is hard to be genuinely engaged when we have multiple demands on our time and attention. Responding in the Engage and Elevate style involves actively engaging when someone shares something positive with you. What matters is that when someone shares these moments with you, they are seeking to capitalize on that positive experience and hoping to feel seen and validated.

EVERYONE WANTS TO HAVE A VOICE

Only when people are comfortable being themselves can they bring their real and diverse perspectives to the table. After all, you can't expect someone who doesn't feel included to share what they really think. When others make us feel like our ideas and perspectives matter, our sense of belonging increases and work becomes more meaningful.

THE POWER TO CHOOSE YOUR RESPONSE

Responding productively when people raise concerns, disagree, or challenge our assumptions can be tough. To help you respond productively, we created the PEAR model, which stands for pause, explicitly acknowledge, ask questions, and reflect.

Leaders can set the stage for a meaningful relationship by creating a meaningful hiring and onboarding experience.

FROM MUSCLES TO BRAINS TO HEARTS

Fostering a workplace culture that embraces and values each individual's authentic identities and ideas is not just a commendable goal but also a strategic imperative. The future of work calls for leaders who are not only intelligent but compassionate, not just skilled but understanding.

Beginnings Matter

Leaders can set the stage for a meaningful relationship by creating a meaningful hiring and onboarding experience. This starts with hiring carefully for values alignment and continues through an intentional social and cultural onboarding process.

VALUES-ALIGNED RECRUITMENT

Earlier, we highlighted the importance of values alignment in fostering meaningful work. When making hiring decisions, alignment is especially critical. Assuming they are competent, hiring a candidate whose values are aligned with the organization's generally enhances performance across the board.

THE NBA OF FAST FOOD

By making values, not just skills, a focal point in your recruitment process, you gain insights into the candidate's character and also provide them with a transparent view of your organization's culture. This alignment is crucial for fostering a work environment where individuals feel a sense of belonging and are inspired by the shared values that drive the organization forward.

CHARACTER COUNTS TWICE

Talent × Effort = Skill

Skill × Effort = Achievement

This means that when trying to hire for character, you need to understand how a candidate's values show up in their day-to-day lives.

THE VALUES INTERVIEW

1. Ask candidates about their values.

2. Create a scorecard.

3. Look for values-added, not just values-conformity.

THE INGREDIENTS OF A MEANINGFUL ONBOARDING

Leaders who want to start as they mean to go on, focus on two essential (and mostly overlooked) ingredients to create a meaningful onboarding experience—cultural mastery, which involves orienting employees to their unique culture through storytelling and shared rituals, and authentic relationship building, which includes helping new employees show up authentically and cultivate connections right away.

ONBOARDING BUDDIES

An onboarding buddy is your first office friend—someone whom you can ask questions from the trivial, such as where to find the bathroom or where to eat lunch, to more nuanced questions about cultural norms and office dynamics.

AUTHENTICITY IN ONBOARDING

Even if you don't have control of your organization's onboarding process, you can still use cultural mastery and authentic relationship-building practices when new people join your team, when you kick off a new project, or even when hosting a special event.

Part III: Creating Meaning Through Contribution

The Power of Positive Feedback

We crave positive feedback from others because it lets us know that our work matters. When employees receive positive feedback from their leaders and colleagues, their sense of contribution increases and their work becomes more meaningful. Leaders can inspire us to greater heights when they let us know what we've done well. Research shows that people are more likely to learn from positive feedback than they are from critical feedback.

BEST FEEDBACK

B: Behavioral-The feedback focuses on the actions someone took. Instead of praising an outcome, behavioral feedback highlights the specific actions you observed that led to that successful outcome.

E: Explicit-The feedback is explicit about the impact the person’s behavior had on you and others.

S: Strengths-Based-The feedback references a strength that the person showed.

T: Timely-The feedback is delivered as soon as possible after the behavior occurred.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM COLLEAGUES

Peer recognition, like recognition from leaders, satisfies our deep desire to know that our work matters. Peer feedback activates contribution at the same time that it helps strengthen community.

CELEBRATING BIG MOMENTS

Big moments of celebration help cement a long-term sense of contribution for people. In addition to incorporating positive feedback into your organization’s daily work, investing in big, celebratory moments can create big doses of contribution that last all year long.

Communicate Bigger Impact

Leaders have to invest intentionally in connecting daily tasks to work’s bigger impact. Meaning-driven leaders do this in several ways—by directly connecting employees with customers and other stakeholders, by capturing and sharing stories of moments that matter, and by reframing daily tasks as opportunities for positive impact.

Part IV: Creating Meaning Through Challenge

Balanced Autonomy

Our innate desire to make our own decisions is evident at an early age. Autonomy, the freedom to determine our own actions and make our own choices, is an essential human need. Our ability to learn and develop a sense of self-efficacy relies largely on the challenges of having to choose our own way forward. Decades of research show that autonomy is a critical component of a healthy and productive job. Autonomy leads to increased productivity, satisfaction, and well-being.

BALANCED AUTONOMY

Balanced autonomy exists when leaders empower employees to make decisions within the boundaries of organizational values. First, leaders can empower employees to do their work and accomplish goals in their own way. Second, leaders can give people flexibility to choose a work environment that is most effective for them, such as at home or at an office. Third, leaders can provide people with self-directed opportunities to learn and grow by taking on new roles within the company.

The Zone of Possibility

Our research has found that nurturing potential and challenging people to grow creates meaning at work. When leaders push people beyond their comfort zones while giving them the support they need to succeed, they lift them into what we call the Zone of Possibility.

WHEN HIGH EXPECTATIONS MEET HIGH SUPPORT

A leader with high expectations believes in someone’s potential and challenges them to reach their full capabilities. These leaders raise the bar by providing meaningful opportunities for someone’s development.

High expectations without adequate support can thrust people into the Zone of Anxiety. High support without high expectations can lead individuals to the Zone of Boredom. In the Zone of Wasted Potential, where low support meets low expectations, people are deprived of the opportunities, challenges, and care needed to grow. Only in the Zone of Possibility—where high expectations meet high support—do we experience increased engagement, motivation, and meaning.

WHAT’S STRONG WITH YOU?

People flourish at work when they’re able to use their signature strengths. In a study of ten thousand people, those who used their strengths consistently were eighteen times more likely to be thriving at work than those who didn’t.

THE MARIGOLD EFFECT

The marigold is one of the best companion plants around. Marigolds repel pests, enrich the soil, and attract pollinators. Not only do they protect plants and vegetables from pests and weeds, but they also help them grow and thrive. We can find marigolds in our workplaces too. They are the leaders and colleagues who encourage, support, and nurture us as we grow.

Despite seismic shifts shaping the future of work—the rise of generative AI, the shift to hybrid workplaces, and changing expectations about the role that our jobs should play in our lives—one constant remains: the human search for meaning. No matter how work evolves, our needs to experience a sense of belonging, to believe our efforts matter, and to fulfill our potential will endure.

We're in the middle of a disruptive and transformational moment in human history. Global events of recent years have forced a reckoning in our collective understanding of why we work. Nearly half of meaning at work is tied to the actions and decisions of our leaders.

By focusing on the Three C's, leaders can help us find and cultivate meaning in every job. Leaders, like gardeners, help create the conditions needed for us to thrive. As we look to the future, we don't know what the world of work will bring. It's almost certain that increased change and disruption are on the horizon. We can't predict what will happen next, but we do know that finding meaning has never been more important in the eyes of employees.



Wes Adams is founder and CEO of SV Consulting Group. He has led teams that were recognized as one of Fast Company's Most Innovative Brands, won multiple Webby Awards, and received two James Beard Award nominations. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia. Tamara Myles is a consultant and international speaker with over two decades of experience helping leaders improve business performance. She is a professor at Boston College, an instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, and author of *The Secret to Peak Productivity*. She lives in Concord, Massachusetts.

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