

# Why We Don't Talk About Meaning at Work

Meaningful work will remain elusive if managers don't learn to overcome four barriers to healthy conversations about what gives individuals their sense of purpose.

BY MARJOLEIN LIPS-WIERSMA, CATHERINE BAILEY, ADRIAN MADDEN, AND LANI MORRIS

**B**efore the COVID-19 pandemic, meaningful work was already high on the management agenda. Employees were exhorted to find their “calling”; leaders, their “why”; organizations, their “true north.” There were good reasons for this: Studies have shown that high levels of meaning and purpose lead to improved engagement, productivity, and innovation.<sup>1</sup> But the pandemic has raised the stakes even higher. It has caused many of us to pause

and reevaluate the role work plays in our lives and what truly matters to us. Employers who can't offer meaningful work risk demotivating or losing valued employees — the very people needed to drive organizational growth and renewal.

Faced with this challenge, managers may be tempted to amplify internal messaging around corporate purpose. While purpose beyond profit is vital for a host of environmental, social, and financial reasons, relying on this approach alone to raise levels of individual meaning can backfire.<sup>2</sup> The more employers try to *tell* employees where to find the meaning in their work, the less likely people are to actually find it. An authentic sense of purpose is not simply imposed; it is discovered.

In other words, meaning-making should be a grassroots process. But first, managers and employees must learn how to talk with one another about it. Engaging in dialogue is integral to discovering meaning. Talking with a trusted conversational partner helps us shape how we understand ourselves, interpret the world, and relate to others. And as we listen to others speak about meaning, and they listen to us, we help one another discover it.

We have found in our research and consulting work over the years that four barriers make such conversations difficult.<sup>3</sup> Let's look at each of these barriers — and how to overcome them.



## Talking About Meaning Can Be Unsettling

When we ask people what meaningful work means to them, we often hear nervous laughter and comments like “That’s a funny question to ask” or “I don’t know.” Concerned that they don’t have a ready answer, they often need to be coaxed into discussion. Existential contemplations like “Why am I here?” and “What is the significance of this?” can feel quite intangible.<sup>4</sup> In the workplace, where it is important to appear competent and in control, not knowing feels threatening to our identity.<sup>5</sup>

Talking about meaning at work can also be disorienting. As a school principal in New Zealand said to us, “You’re tapping into something a lot bigger than [what] we usually talk about at work, which is good and important but also feels a bit more boundless than comfortable.”

Having been silent on the topic for so long, many people lack the language to articulate their deeper feelings about how work can contribute to a sense of meaning. As a result, they may miss opportunities to deepen their engagement and satisfaction with work. In developmental reviews or career conversations, employees typically do not speak up about meaning and may end up with the same unsatisfied need for it even if they are able to re-craft their job or take on another role. They may also feel isolated: In our research, we found that employees are often surprised that colleagues are on the same quest.<sup>6</sup> Until conversations about meaningful work become more frequent and natural, employers will struggle to identify and meet individuals’ deeper needs.

### TRY TO: Let Employees Talk About Meaning in Their Own Words

Just as meaning is deeply felt, so are the words associated with it, whether positive or negative. For example, one person might say, “I don’t like the notion of *service* — that’s what my pastor always talked about, and as a child I dreaded going to church with my parents. I prefer to think about impact.” Yet someone else might have an aversion to the word *impact* because their last workplace used it all the time but failed to measure outcomes; it amounted to empty, insincere rhetoric.

The words *themselves* are not wrong. But given individuals’ strong associations with them, it is best to

enable people to choose their own language to describe what is meaningful to them. This will also help to ground them and make the conversations feel less disorienting. Sometimes, in our workshops, it takes people a while to come up with the right words, or they borrow language from one another. However they go about it, it is important that people find words that resonate for them rather than simply adopting corporate language. For example, employees may choose to talk about “quality relationships” rather than “internal networks” or even “collaboration” to assess whether their teamwork is meaningful.

## People Have a Limited Definition of Meaning

In our research, we have identified four key, equally valuable sources of meaning in work: service to others, realization of full potential, unity with others, and self-integrity (which includes authentic behavior, self-discovery, and character development).<sup>7</sup> However, in interviews we have noticed that people typically emphasize just one or two of these sources. Some say that work is only meaningful if it serves others, whereas others primarily focus on personal accomplishment. Because “making a difference” and “achieving excellence” often dovetail nicely with corporate priorities and language, those aims are reinforced at the organizational level, while feeling a sense of unity with colleagues and acting with personal integrity are riskier to discuss in an impersonal workplace. Individuals decide what information they will share about themselves, how much, and with whom in light of what they presume to gain or lose from such disclosures. When sources of meaning challenge or do not directly match corporate language, employees may avoid self-disclosure for fear of being judged as naive or not fitting in. This can lead to marginalization.<sup>8</sup>

When individuals leave things unsaid, discussions about meaning remain incomplete throughout the organization. For example, when leaders don’t explicitly talk about the need for belonging and feeling supported in a team, employees may interpret that as a signal that unity is not a legitimate source of meaning. They, in turn, are likely to keep silent about their desire for it. Similarly, employees often don’t reveal how organizational decisions support, or don’t support, their drive to engage in

self-discovery, behave authentically, and even become better people.

If only one or two sources of meaning are well understood and articulated, one risk is that individuals will not feel “whole,” and their engagement and performance will suffer. Another risk is that considerations of unity and self-integrity (and other unspoken sources) will be omitted from critical decisions on highly relevant topics — say, organizational change. With some needs for meaning met and others ignored, employees may experience heightened stress or other problems associated with well-being and leave their organizations out of exhaustion or frustration. Nurses and teachers make a difference to others but are still quitting their jobs in record numbers.<sup>9</sup> While they have no lack of opportunity to serve, they often miss other sources of meaning, such as unity, expressing their talents, or self-integrity.

### **TRY TO: Define Meaning More Broadly**

To expand everyone’s understanding of meaning, speak explicitly to a range of potential sources — not just serving others and realizing one’s full potential (the usual suspects), but also feeling unity with others and upholding self-integrity. This can be done periodically through simple in-house workshops led by a staff member or an outside facilitator. In workshops we run with teams and organizations, we use visuals on flip charts around the room to illustrate the four sources of meaningful work. People move from easel to easel answering questions like “How does my job enable me to feel connected with others?” and “When was the last time that doing my job well mattered to someone else?” At the end of the session, the flip charts are brought together, and the facilitator can then highlight gaps and strengths for discussion.

In one PR agency we worked with, this exercise revealed that people felt a strong sense of achievement but lacked opportunities to share their successes with clients and colleagues. Thus, they fared well on realized potential but not on unity. After having the conversation about meaning at work, the agency introduced brown-bag lunch sessions specifically aimed at sharing ideas, celebrating achievements, and building community. That may sound like a token effort, but it cut to the heart of the problem. People overwhelmingly felt isolated in their respective silos and were craving connection.

They told us they relished the opportunity to get to know their colleagues better in an informal setting.

In organizations we’ve studied, we’ve observed that sources of meaning can be made more visible in other ways as well. For example, at an offsite event or during a team-building session, leaders and employees can share stories about meaning they’ve found in unexpected ways. Or at meetings where big decisions are made, those agenda items can be checked against the four potential sources of meaning. Meaning can also be cocreated during developmental reviews through a series of questions that prompt employees to reflect not just on their personal growth but also on what opportunities they had in the previous quarter to see the impact their work has had on others, how their role has enabled them to be true to what matters most to them, and what management can do to remove obstacles to meaningful work.

### **Complaints Aren’t Recognized as Quests for Meaning**

Meaningful work generates feelings of contentment and purposefulness, which are often conveyed through positive comments and contributions — expressions of appreciation, for instance, or solution-oriented statements. So the presence of meaning isn’t usually difficult to recognize. However, its *absence* can be, for both leaders and employees, especially when a sense of meaning has gradually eroded (as often happens through mismanaged organizational change programs, or poor leadership). Feelings of discontent, emptiness, and sadness — stemming from a lack of meaning, but not necessarily understood as such — often lurk behind complaints about management. For example, when moved from one department to another, employees may say, “They don’t bother to understand how we work here,” but they might not identify or express important information, such as their sadness about losing close working relationships and the grounding they got from those connections.

Even if employees grasp and try to articulate the feelings behind their complaints, leaders may fail to see the underlying quests for meaning. Many leaders also have little patience with negativity and demand that people bring them solutions rather than problems.<sup>10</sup>

Because people are not trained to listen for, or collectively find, words that convey the absence or loss of meaning, leaders and employees alike miss out on important information. It can be easy to interpret a complaint about ideas and suggestions being ignored as, “The boss doesn’t respect or agree with us.” But if all parties listen for frustrated meaning, they may learn that the group feels they can’t perform to their full potential because they can’t use their creative ideas to improve the situation.

When quests for meaning are expressed and heard as complaints, the collective mood takes a negative turn via emotional contagion. This fuels dissatisfaction at the team level and ultimately harms organizational performance in areas such as productivity, problem-solving, and innovation.<sup>11</sup> If the quests for meaning remain unaddressed, the complaining can spiral, leading to more (and more defeatist) complaints expressed in killer phrases, such as “We tried this before, and it will never work.”

### TRY TO: Listen Deeply to Understand How Things Really Are

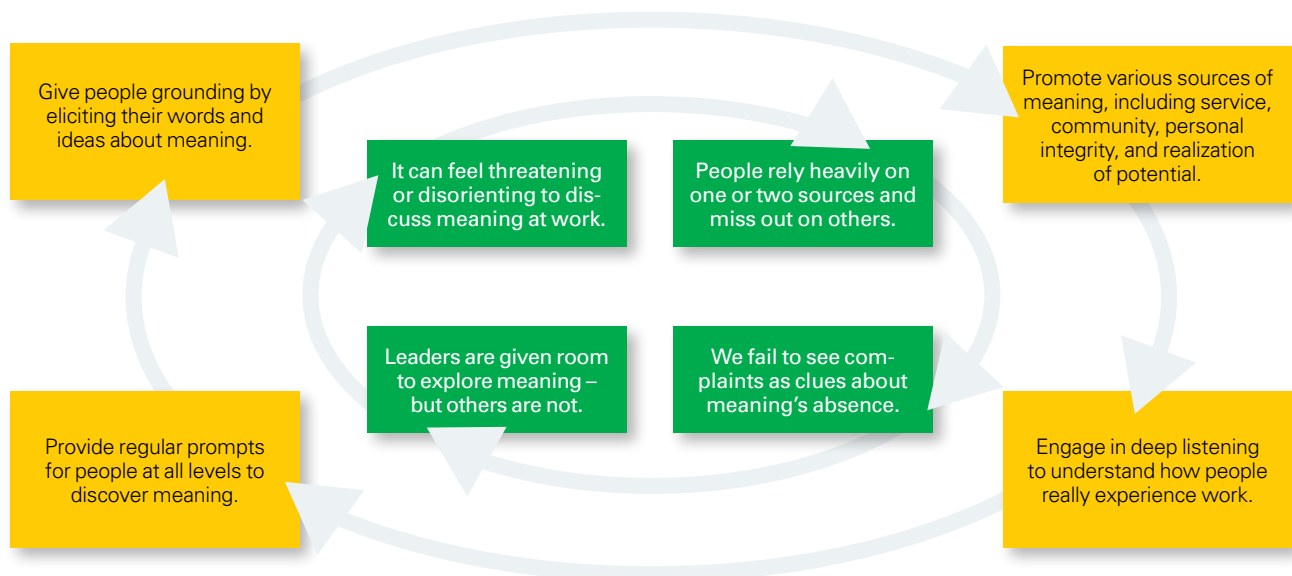
While listening for meaning requires that people spend time together, leaders especially need to be *present* when they spend time with employees and colleagues, and vice versa. This is a joint

responsibility. Being present means that you listen for expressions of how work is actually experienced rather than how you wish it was or think it should be. Sometimes this gets uncomfortable. While you might be tempted to quickly change the mood by balancing negative comments with a positive statement or identifying solutions to problems, sit with the discomfort first. Be curious: Probe for how and why things aren’t working for people, and listen for actual or potential losses of meaning. If employees complain about a new program or product, they might really be worried that it won’t align with their personal values. Phrases like “I’m not sure I see the benefit” and “People won’t buy into it” can provide clues about deeper concerns.

Listening for meaning requires very different skills from chairing a meeting about budget or strategy; it’s not about finding solutions but instead about allowing people to be seen and heard. Managers can convey active listening through body language — nodding their head, making eye contact, leaning forward. They can also summarize what they hear to check for understanding. And they can defer judgment about the employee’s comments and complaints to show that they are fully focused on the conversation and ensure that they hear expressions of meaning or its absence, however these are presented.

## WAYS TO BREAK THE SILENCE

Moving beyond four key barriers to talking about — and cocreating — meaningful work in your organization can improve employee engagement, productivity, and innovation.



Once people feel seen and heard, they feel better equipped to translate a complaint into a request for more meaning. It won't seem futile. For example, if they don't think they are given room to use their creativity, they may say something like "My creative solution from last week was ignored, but I am not quite ready to let it go. Can I take a little time to work it out and come back to you?" As people start to stand stronger in their own quests for meaning (rather than just becoming despondent and giving up) and leaders continue to actively listen for meaning, new insights and practices will emerge, creating more opportunities for meaningful work.

## Meaningful Work Is Treated as the Preserve of Leaders

Due to the explosion of interest in purpose-driven leadership, organizations now regularly allocate time and resources so that members of the C-suite and other senior leaders can participate in workshops where they can talk about their personal purpose and learn how to impart organizational purpose to their teams.<sup>12</sup> However, most employees aren't given opportunities to find and articulate what is meaningful to them. Paradoxically, at a time when leadership is increasingly seen as shared, relational, and conversational, meaning is usually defined and bestowed by those at the top.

This approach isn't working. Research shows that people rarely mention their leaders when talking about meaningful work. When they do, it is often to describe obstacles that leaders put in the way — destroying a sense of achievement and connection by switching people off project teams before the work is finalized, or thwarting their ownership of problems and tasks by continually overriding their judgment.<sup>13</sup> Because meaning is often treated as the preserve of leaders, it can be hard for employees to say that they have lost meaning because of leaders' actions or that they have received mixed or confusing messages about sources of meaning.

It's not news that leader-centered, individualistic, and heroic styles of leadership, which focus on how leaders should change their "followers," fail to tap multiple perspectives to make sense of a complex, volatile world. So it should come as no surprise that such styles also fail to confer meaning to individuals and teams and to the work they do.<sup>14</sup>

Followers don't want to be told what they should find meaningful. Especially when they have been hurt by bruising organizational practices in the past, they worry that conversations about something so intensely personal could leave them vulnerable. Tuning leaders out when they talk about meaningful work can feel like the most sane and healthy response.

What's more, when leaders try to define meaning for others, they may feel out of their depth, or even fraudulent — after all, when it comes to how to work meaningfully themselves, they know no more about it than anyone else. Those who view leadership as taking charge may persist in imposing meaning rather than exploring it with others as equals. Employees are observant; they notice when their managers are faking it or protecting their own interests. This undermines trust, further shutting down opportunities to build honest relationships and cocreate meaning.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in cases where leaders aren't willing to share power in general, they are likely to meet with resistance when trying to impose meaning, and "purpose work" will become just another set of mechanical exercises eliciting cynicism from employees.

### TRY TO: Have Everyone Participate as Equals

Effective conversations about meaning require a significant shift in mindset. They should be meetings of equals and should emerge from solid relationships between leaders and employees rather than from what the leader "knows." In the words of the CEO of a tax software company with very high employee ratings on Glassdoor: "Thinking that you can infuse employees with meaningful work is an illusion. It requires getting closer to employees, listening for their meaning, and treating it with the sensitivity it deserves."

To surface meaning, it is particularly important to focus on the process in addition to the outcome. Process is what empowers others to express their ideas and needs, holds us all accountable for inclusive and ethical behavior, and provides a structure for discovering purpose. Leaders should ask themselves: Do employees and leaders talk openly about meaning and purpose and listen to each other? At what points in decision-making, planning, and execution does meaning sometimes get overlooked,



and who is responsible for making sure that doesn't happen at each stage? For example, when deciding to launch yet another change initiative, do leaders think about how it is likely to affect employees' sense of purpose? Who considers this in the design phase of the change process? As employees execute the initiative, are they asked how it affects the meaning of their work? And are they speaking up? Becoming attuned to these process issues so that everyone has a voice helps build trust all around.

When process prompts leaders and employees to continually question and improve their conversations about meaning, their relationships become less hierarchical. While embracing this approach to leadership may require upskilling through coaching, workshops, courses, and other tools, fundamentally it is about seeing the other person as a fellow human being and regularly asking oneself, "What is it like to work with me?" If employers want to take meaningful work seriously, anyone in a position of power must have the courage and desire to experience conversations about meaning on equal footing.

**PEOPLE ARE WILLING** to leave their employers in search of meaningful work, but organizations can help them find it where they are by clearing the conversational barriers that we have described.

Talk of meaning tends to get crowded out by talk of efficiency and effectiveness. By ignoring or sidestepping conversations about meaningful work, employers unwittingly lose opportunities to motivate people, strengthen their connections with one another, and improve performance. Organizations serve everyone, including themselves, much better when they create safe spaces for conversations about meaning and include people at all levels in the quest.

*Marjolein Lips-Wiersma is a professor of ethics and sustainability leadership at Auckland University of Technology. Catherine Bailey is a professor of work and employment at King's College London. Adrian Madden is a senior lecturer at the University of Huddersfield. Lani Morris is a cofounder (with Lips-Wiersma) of The Map of Meaning International Charitable Trust, a not-for-profit that helps organizations apply the ideas in this article.*

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