The Power of Mattering:

A Fail-Safe Strategy for Bolstering Employee Engagement & Injury Recovery

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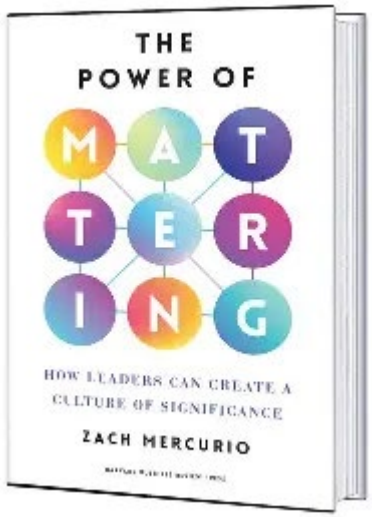
The Power of Mattering

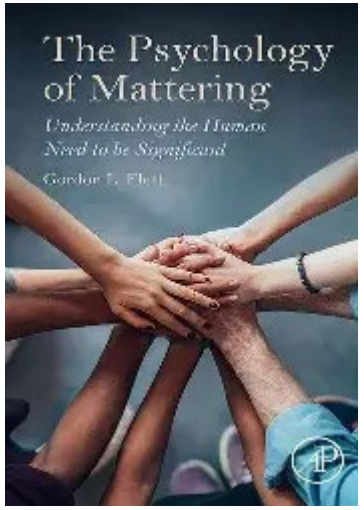
When do people NOT leave an employer?

- When they feel fulfilled
- They feel seen as a full person
- They're on a team with others who care about them



MATTERING IS THE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING SIGNIFICANT TO THOSE AROUND YOU

- If our need to matter is satisfied, we flourish
- Mattering is experienced through everyday interpersonal interactions
- Mattering is a learnable skill



Agenda

1. Mattering Matters
2. The NAN Framework
3. Mattering-Centered Leadership
4. Mattering Builds Resilience



Why Mattering Matters in Absence, Disability, and RTW



Injury disrupts identity and significance

Feeling "replaceable" delays recovery

Supervisor interactions are often the *decisive variable*

Mattering speeds psychological and functional recovery

Section 1: The Hidden Epidemic of Insignificance

- 68% of US workers say strong personal connections at work are important and 65% say they have these strong connections. BUT
- 27% feel flat-out ignored *
- 20% report that they're "miserable" at work **
- 59% said that their employer thinks their work environment is a lot mentally healthier than it actually is ¶
- 29% intend to look for another job in the next year (2024) ¶
- 65% feel lonely at work *
- Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy declared a loneliness epidemic: "Mattering at work" is an essential element of a healthy organization



* The Hartford Future of Benefits Study, 2024

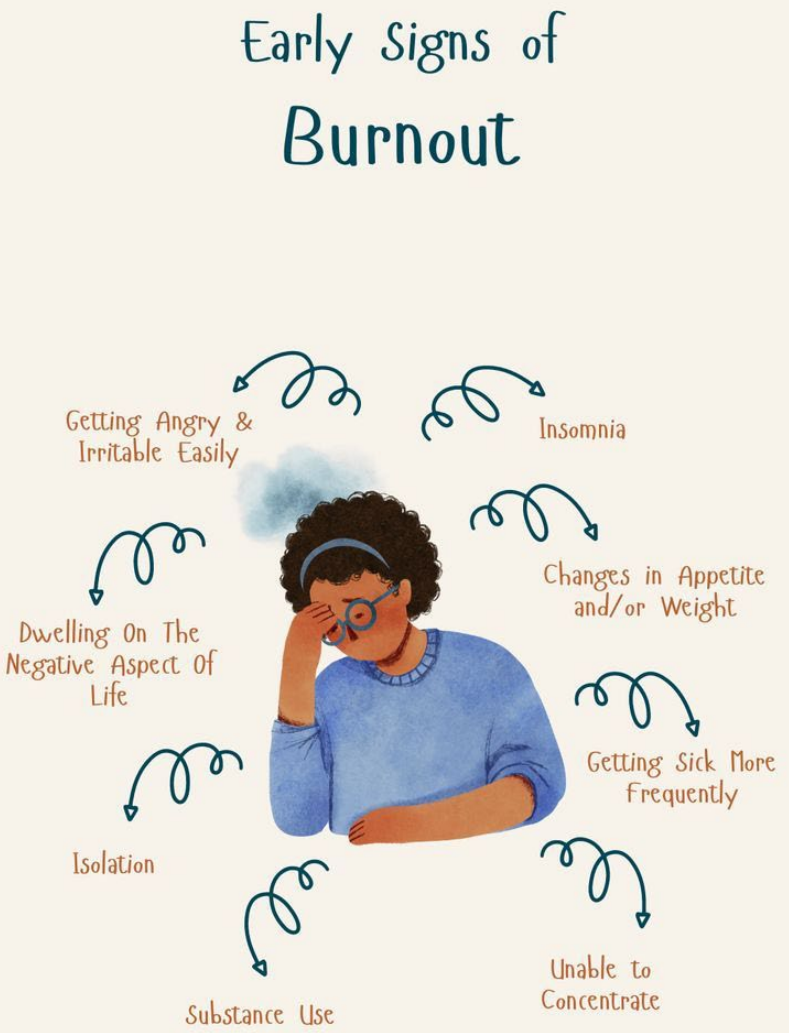
** Human Workplace Index: The Price of Invisibility

¶ U.S. workers adjust to the changing nature of employment: Highlights from the 2024 Work in America survey

What Happens When People Don't Matter

- Disengagement
- Absenteeism
- Burnout
- Poor mental health
- Turnover
- Reduced organizational performance

* Outcomes of Meaningful Work: A Meta-Analysis - Allan - 2019 - Journal of Management Studies - Wiley Online Library



Mattering as Learnable and Leadership-Driven

- Mattering is the experience of feeling significant to the peop around you
  - Feeling valued by …
  - Adding value to ...



Feeling significant = feeling seen, heard, and understood

- The need to matter is a basic survival instinct
- The quest for significance: Baby's first grasp reflex
- How do you feel when someone threatens the belief that you matter?
- People must first believe that they have a contribution to make in order to contribute: When people feel like they matter (Self-esteem), they act like they matter (Self-efficacy)

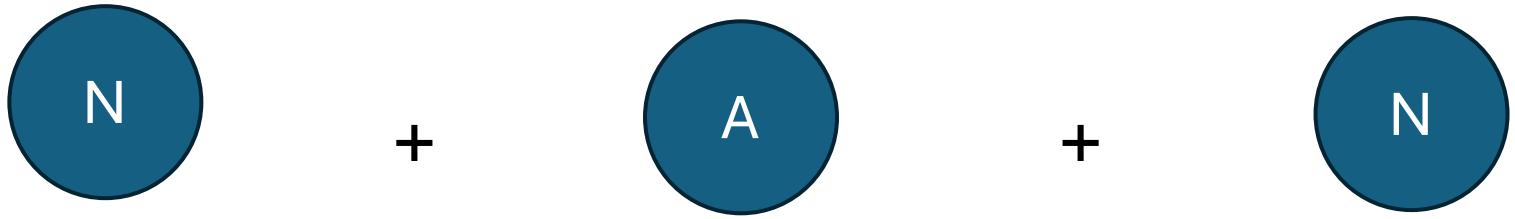
Moving from Why to How: Mattering as the Psychological Driver

- On the flip side, studies show that knowing how our work matters to others is strongly linked to better mental health and physical functioning *
- Mattering leads to enhanced motivation, resilience, and overall well-being
- And because organizations are made up of individuals, mattering is central to organizational thriving



* Outcomes of Meaningful Work: A Meta-Analysis - Allan - 2019 - Journal of Management Studies - Wiley Online Library

Section 2: The NAN Framework



NOTICED	AFFIRMED	NEEDED
I see you	I see your strengths	We can't succeed without you

People don't disengage because of policies, they disengage in moments

The NAN Framework

Mattering arises through 3 primary experiences:

NOTICING: The skills of truly seeing and hearing people

- Seeing: Acknowledge others and paying attention to the details of their lives
- Hearing: Demonstrate a real interest, and invite their perspective and feedback

AFFIRMING:

The skills of showing people how their unique gifts have a unique impact – how their work makes a difference

NEEDED:

The skills of showing people they're relied on, indispensable, and essential – how their work is necessary for a bigger outcome, part of the team

Do Managers Sometimes Kill Motivation / Engagement?

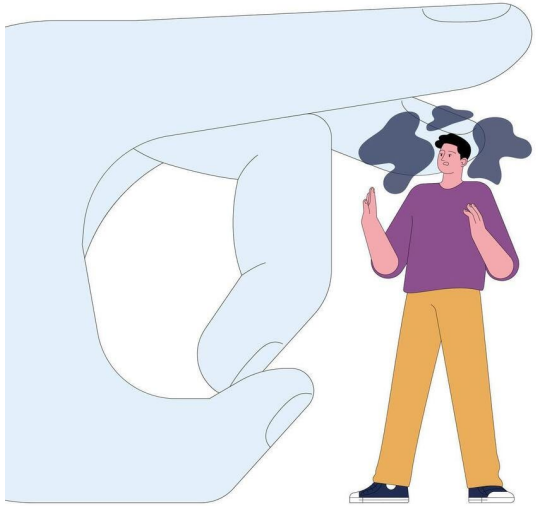
- "Thanks for pointing this out, but it's another department's problem. HR will handle it" *So why should I bother?*
- A delayed call after an injury: *Why did I have to wait two whole weeks to approval for my RTW after my surgery?*
- Procedural language replacing human language: *Can't you talk to me like I'm a person anymore?*
- Surveys show outright abusive supervision affects 13% of workers, and over 80% say they've worked for a boss who exhibited degrading behavior *
- How do people behave when they feel degraded? *Gossiping, complaining, blaming, sabotaging:* These may be a *normal* reaction to the *abnormal* situation of not mattering
- Anti-mattering ultimately leads to Learned Helplessness
- Conversely, Mattering enhances and speeds RTW ¶



¶ Butler and Johnson: Loss reduction through worker satisfaction: The case of workers' compensation. *Risk Mgmt & Ins. Rev.*, 2011.*
Abusive Supervision in Work Organizations: Review, Synthesis, and Research Agenda - Bennett J. Tepper, 2007

Sources of Insignificance

- To be UNSEEN: Through unintentional social ignorance, not making eye contact, not acknowledging the other person
- To be UNHEARD: Through dismissing someone's ideas, ghosting, not asking for an opinion, not following up on feedback
- To be UNVALUED: Through too much criticism, too little affirmation, micromanagement, not being given responsibility, no thank you
- To be FORGOTTEN: Through not remembering others' names, not asking for opinions, not noticing their absence, not acknowledging contributions
- To be DISPENSABLE: Through ignoring someone, not including them in communications, not inviting them to meetings, threatening job security



Hints at a Solution

- Workhuman report*:
- A leader is the most meaningful source of feeling seen and recognized
- Leaders' behavior accounted for over 50% of whether participants experienced increased feelings of mattering and meaningfulness at work
- All relevant component behaviors rely on interpersonal interactions:
  - Developing a personal connection
  - Recognizing a person's gifts
  - Showing someone the impact they make



Studies show that when people feel valued by supervisors and their organization, they are more committed and perform better – and so does the organization

* Human Workplace Index: The Price of Invisibility

Practices to Cultivate Mattering

- Noticing people is the foundation of building a committed team
- One of the most consequential outcomes of noticing others is trust
- If a relationship is damaged or was never formed, it's difficult for people to trust
- Google study: Teams whose managers showed interest in members' personal lives and well-being outperformed others



* The 3 Elements of Trust

Changing How You See: Five skills



1. Become aware of how you see someone. Take care not to create the Pygmalion effect or self-fulfilling prophecy.
2. Make time and space to notice them. When we treat people transactionally, they act transactionally. Take advantage of opportunities.
3. Pay attention. Attention is a leader's scarcest resource. Make notes about personal details and then follow up. Teach yourself to notice.
4. Connect deeply. Ask better questions: Clear, open, and exploratory. "What did you enjoy most about …?" "What's our take-away from …"
5. Practice compassion. A key part of Noticing is what we do when we encounter struggles. Imagine walking in their shoes: Can you help?

Changing How You Hear

While 96% of leaders think they're great communicators, only 8% of workers said their direct leader listened "very well" *

- Barriers to hearing others:
  - Automaticity: Listening on auto-pilot
  - Selective attention: We tend to focus on what is of interest to us
  - The difficulty of truly listening: Processing others' voices is exhausting



- Strategies to develop better hearing:
  - Listening for total meaning: Listen to the content AND how it is delivered
  - Acknowledging feelings: Feelings are mostly communicated non-verbally
  - Know when to act: Ensuring people get heard is not a one-time thing

* Research Shows Only 8% Of Leaders Are Great Listeners And Communicators | by Jacob Morgan | Jacob Morgan | Medium

Affirming: Showing Others They're Significant

Poll: 60% of employees report never having had a manager who truly appreciated them, and only 15% say "thank you" regularly *

When we show someone evidence of their significance, we firm up the belief that they matter

- Recognition: We acknowledge what they *do*
- Appreciation: We give thanks for who they are
- Affirmation: We demonstrate how they *uniquely* matter
  - **Humans have a need for uniqueness (individuation): Affirming means showing someone their uniqueness AND how their uniqueness makes a difference**



* Gratitude at Work: Why Is Gratitude in Leadership Important? | CCL

Affirming Relies on:

Learn	Learn your employees' strengths: Only 20% of employees believe their leaders even know their strengths *
Ask	If unsure, ask them!
Link	Link their strengths to purpose: "How do you see yourself using your strengths to better our team here?"
Learn	Learn how their strengths derive from a unique perspective: "What are some of your experiences that led you to develop …?"
Spell	And then you need to connect the dots: Show them (early and often!) just HOW they make a difference, how they add value
Use	Use actual numbers to show them how they're needed / what they've accomplished
Do	Don't just celebrate "wins," celebrate the people and their unique gifts that make the wins possible!



* Niemiec, R.M. Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners. Gottingen: Hogrefe, 2017.

Leadership is / Isn't …

- "Leadership isn't just about driving outcomes – it's about shaping environments"
- "Most leaders focus on performance metrics, but the great ones focus on people metrics"
- "Because at the end of the day mattering isn't a soft skill, it's the foundation of leadership" *



* https://johnrmiles.com

Why Mattering Matters: Gallup data 2024 * Employee Engagement and Outcome

Based on over 3 million employees, 347 organizations, 90 countries
Median percent differences between top-quartile and bottom-quartile units were:

- 10% in customer loyalty/engagement
- 14% in productivity (production records and evaluations)
- 21% in turnover for high-turnover organizations (> 40% annualized turnover)
- 51% in turnover for low-turnover organizations (< 40% or lower annualized turnover)
- 63% in safety incidents (accidents)
- 78% in absenteeism
- 28% in shrinkage (theft)
- **70% in wellbeing (thriving employees)**
- **and 23% in profitability**



* Gallup 2024 Q12 Meta-Analysis

Mattering drives the culture

Profits, Metrics are *lagging* indicators of an organization's performance

Mattering is a *leading* indicator of success, directly impacting:

- Enhanced employee engagement
- Attrition and associated costs
- Strengthened organizational culture
- Leadership development
- The goal is to create an environment where everyone feels they belong



Culture of Affirmation: Leading in a Way That Makes People Stay *

- Personal Mattering: Do you believe your leadership has purpose?
  - Does your leadership foster employee engagement?
- Relational Mattering: Do employees feel seen and heard?
  - Not just for results but for their efforts
- Organizational Mattering: Do employees have ownership?
  - Are you creating a culture of accountability?
- Legacy Mattering: Will your leadership have a lasting impact?
  - Organizations with strong engagement programs see a 23% higher profitability¶

* https://johnrmiles.com
¶ Gallup 2024 Q12 Meta-Analysis

A Little Self-Examination – This is diagnostic, not judgmental

- Mattering can't be outsourced to programs or tools. How are *you* doing? Could you do better?
- Choose one person on your team. Write down how you *currently* show them if / how they're Noticed, Affirmed, and Needed. Rate yourself on a 10-point scale. What would improve your scores? What one thing could you implement next week?

Team / Team member	Noticed	Affirmed	Needed

Section 3: Mattering- Centered Leadership

Operationalizing Mattering: Leadership behaviors that may prevent burnout, enable recovery and RTW



Mental Health at Work Key Insights

- **Gen Z faces the highest mental health strain and stigma but also leads in engagement with mental health resources.**
  - Gen Z, the youngest generation in the workplace, is more likely than other generations to say mental health affects their productivity, feel stigma prevents seeking help, and feel both their mental health improved and declined in a single year. They also use company resources and talk to managers about mental health more than any other generation.
- **Company-provided mental health resources are valued, but gaps in perception and utilization persist.**
  - While two-thirds of U.S. workers say their company offers mental health resources, only 27% feel their mental health impacts productivity—compared to 61% of workers who believe it does. U.S. workers at smaller companies are more likely to use resources and report improvement, while those at larger companies have greater access.
- **Managers are the most trusted source of support overall.**
  - 68% of workers feel personally cared for by their manager, compared to 53% who feel cared for by their company overall. This trust gap is especially pronounced among Gen Z and Millennials.

Younger U.S. workers are experiencing significantly higher levels of mental-health strain, stigma, and workplace impact than other generations

	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Boomer
My mental health is affecting my productivity at work	43%MXB	32%XB	24%B	12%
The stigma associated with mental health prevents me from seeking help or getting support	37%XB	31%XB	20%	15%
My company is more focused on profitability vs. employee wellbeing	56%XB	50%B	47%B	40%
Mental health is openly talked about at my workplace	57%XB	53%XB	41%B	31%
My mental health has improved in the last year	65%XB	58%XB	47%B	38%
My mental health has declined in the last year	37%XB	33%B	28%B	18%
I have gotten help for my mental health in the past year using company resources	51%MXB	35%XB	16%B	10%
I have discussed my mental health with my manager in the last year	44%MXB	29%XB	19%B	11%
My financial situation is affecting my mental health	50%XB	45%XB	33%	26%

M: Significantly different vs. Millennials
X: Significantly different vs. Gen X
B: Significantly different vs. Boomers

Employees feel more personally cared for by their manager than by their company overall. This highlights an opportunity to continue to strengthen the bond between the employee and the company

- **Feeling Cared for by**
- *(% Cares a little/Cares a lot)*

My company

53%

*U.S. workers at smaller companies (under 500) are more likely to say their company cares (**57%** vs. 50%) Gen Z (**62%**) is more likely to say that their company cares (vs. Millennial 54%, Gen X 49%, Boomer 52*

My manager/supervisor

68%

*Gen Z (**62%**) and Millennials (**74%**) are more likely to say that their manager cares (vs. Gen X 63%, Boomer 63%)*

The Hartford's 2026 Future of Benefits Study

Why This Matters:

- **Unlocking Productivity:** Prioritizing mental health is a lever for productivity, retention, and risk mitigation. Under-recognition and under-utilization of resources mean missed opportunities for both employers and their employees.
- **Tailored Engagement is Essential:** Gen Z's unique needs and openness to support require targeted, stigma-free, and digital-first approaches. One-size-fits-all solutions will not close the gap.
- **Manager Enablement Drives Impact:** U.S. workers trust managers more than the company overall. Equipping managers with simple tools and guidance is the fastest way to boost engagement, support, and outcomes.

What mattering actually looks like in supervisor behavior



Notice — see the whole person, not just the role

Check in beyond the task · remember what matters to them · acknowledge the struggle



Affirm — separate their worth from their output

Name specific strengths · recognize past contributions · drop “we covered for you” language



Needed — signal they still belong on the team

Invite them into return-to-work planning · connect their work to purpose, not just productivity

What not to do: anti-mattering leadership practice

- Act like people are interchangeable
- Ignoring unique strengths and contributions
- Not acknowledging effort or progress
- Only engaging when something is wrong
- Talking over people
- Not incorporating feedback
- Only pointing out mistakes
- Blaming instead of coaching
- Public criticism
- Not trusting people to own outcomes
- Exclude people intentionally
- Task-first, people last mindset
- No relationship building

Anti-mattering leadership looks like:

- No one noticed
- No one asked
- No one cared
- It didn't matter that I was there



Coaching leaders without turning them into clinicians

Leaders don’t need clinical skills to support mental health - they need relational skills

The instinct: solve fast

Most leaders are trained to solve. But in a moment of struggle, solving too quickly shuts people down.

When you jump to solutions, people feel:

Not fully heard · Rushed · Minimized

The practice: make people matter

Pause and validate the experience before you solve. People feel:

Seen · Heard · Significant

Say things like:

“That sounds really hard — tell me more.”
“It makes sense you’d feel that way.”
“I’m really glad you told me.”

People don’t remember what you solved — they remember whether you showed up



Why Return to work is a psychological transition

Return to work is not just medical clearance, it's feeling:

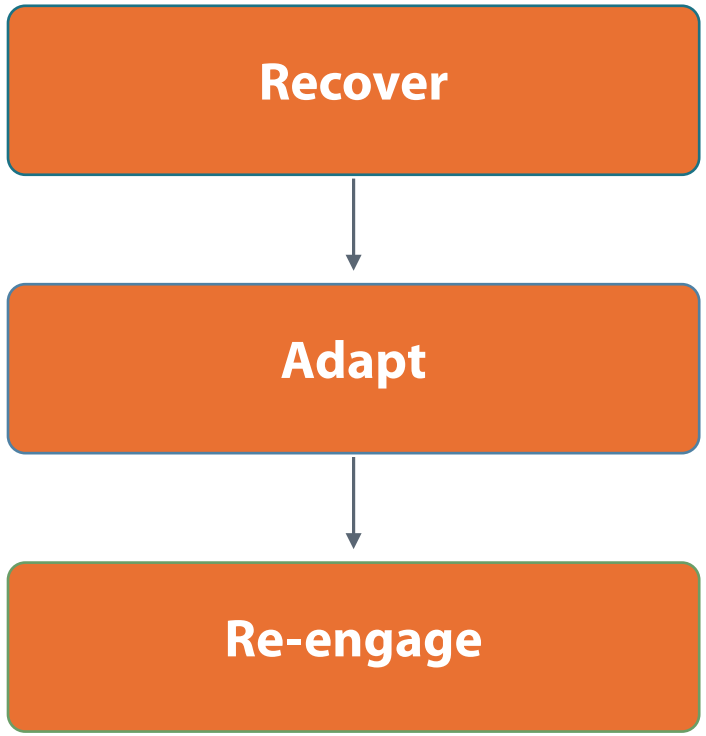
Confident | Valued | Or ready to re-engage

What we often miss

- Physical recovery doesn't mean psychological readiness
- Employees returning to work often carry:
  - Fear of being behind
  - Fear of being irrelevant
  - Fear of being judged
- Without addressing these, RTW becomes a threat experience
- When people don't feel they matter, their brain shifts to self-protection mode

Section 4: Mattering Builds Resilience

From recovery accelerator to sustainable RTW, engagement, and retention



Resilience is not "toughing it out." It is the capacity to return to participation with support, identity, and purpose intact.

APA, 2022; CIPD, 2021; Cancelliere et al., 2016; Etuknwa et al., 2019.

Reframe Resilience for RTW Audiences

Resilience is…

Recovering after disruption, adapting to changed capacity or context, re-engaging with role, team, and purpose

Resilience is not…

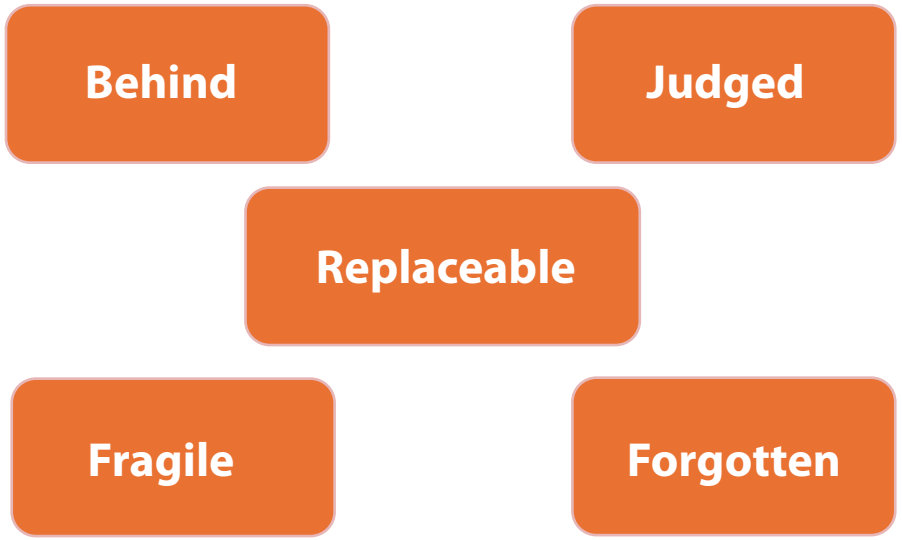
Grit or "pushing through," a fixed personality trait, the employee's job alone

Operational definition: the capacity to recover, adapt, and re-engage after injury, illness, psychological strain, or identity disruption.

APA defines resilience as successful adaptation to difficult experiences; CIPD evidence review links employee resilience to adaptive work attitudes and behaviors.

Return-to-work is a Psychological Transition

Functional recovery answers: “Can I do the tasks?”



Role reintegration answers: “Do I still belong here?”

- Fear decreases when contact is human and predictable
- Self-efficacy grows when strengths are affirmed
- Motivation returns when contribution is explicitly needed

Key message: RTW succeeds when the plan restores function and social significance.

RTW evidence identifies modifiable psychological and workplace factors such as self-efficacy, expectations, coordination, and workplace supports. Cancelliere et al., 2016; Etuknwa et al., 2019.

How Mattering Becomes a Resilience Mechanism



Reduces isolation + uncertainty

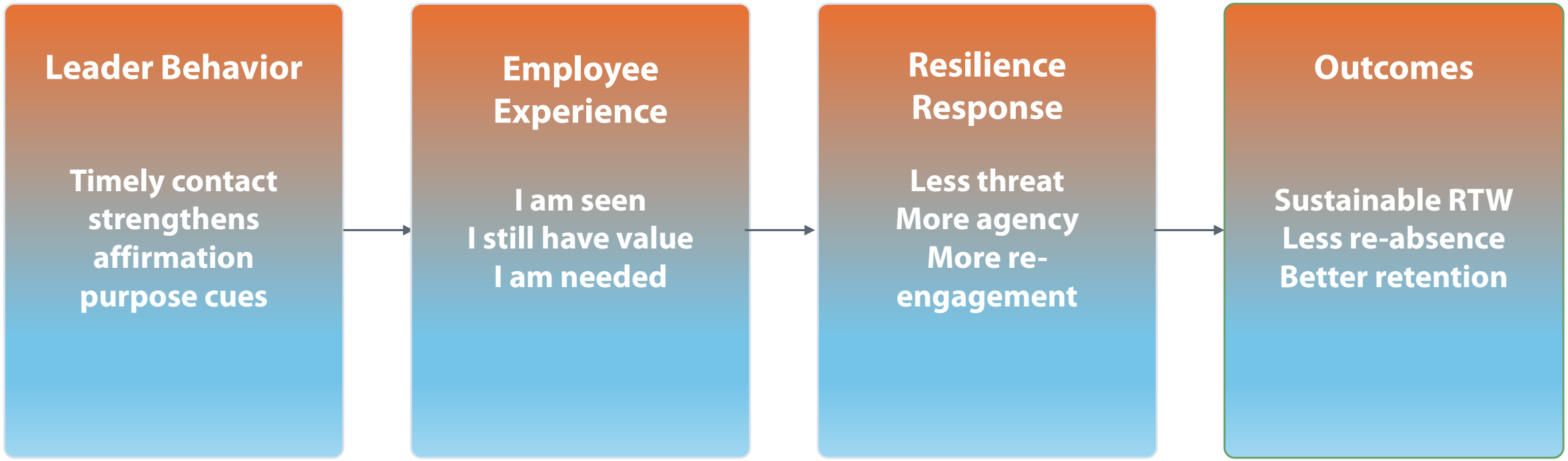
Protects identity + self-efficacy

Restores purpose + motivation

Resilience is not built after crisis. It is built through how people are treated during crisis.

Mattering framework aligned to the existing deck: Noticed, Affirmed, Needed. Workplace mattering is shaped by interpersonal and organizational interactions (BMJ Leader scoping review, 2025).

Mattering Changes the Resilience Pathway



The practical goal is not to "make someone resilient."
It is to create conditions where resilience can show up.

Social support and workplace factors are associated with sustained RTW and wellbeing after RTW. Nigatu et al., 2019; Etuknwa et al., 2019; Cancelliere et al., 2016.

Sustain Mattering after RTW: Prevent the Drop-off

Risk: "welcome back" energy fades, while the employee is still rebuilding confidence.

Weeks 1-2

- Frequent, short check-ins
- Clarify workload and energy realities

Weeks 3-6

- Normalize gradual reintegration
- Ask what is working and what is friction

Weeks 7+

- Shift from accommodation to contribution
- Name visible impact and future value

Reinforce contribution without spotlighting disability:
"Here is the impact your perspective is having on the team."

NICE guideline NG146 recommends planning and ongoing workplace support to help people return to work and reduce recurring sickness absence.

What Leaders Can Say: Resilience-building Language

Noticed

"I wanted to check in early rather than wait. What would be useful for us to talk through?"

Affirmed

"Your judgment and client knowledge are still important here. Let's plan around what is realistic right now."

Needed

"The team benefits from your perspective. How can we keep you connected to the work in a way that supports recovery?"

Rule of thumb: presence over performance; curiosity over certainty; contribution over accommodation

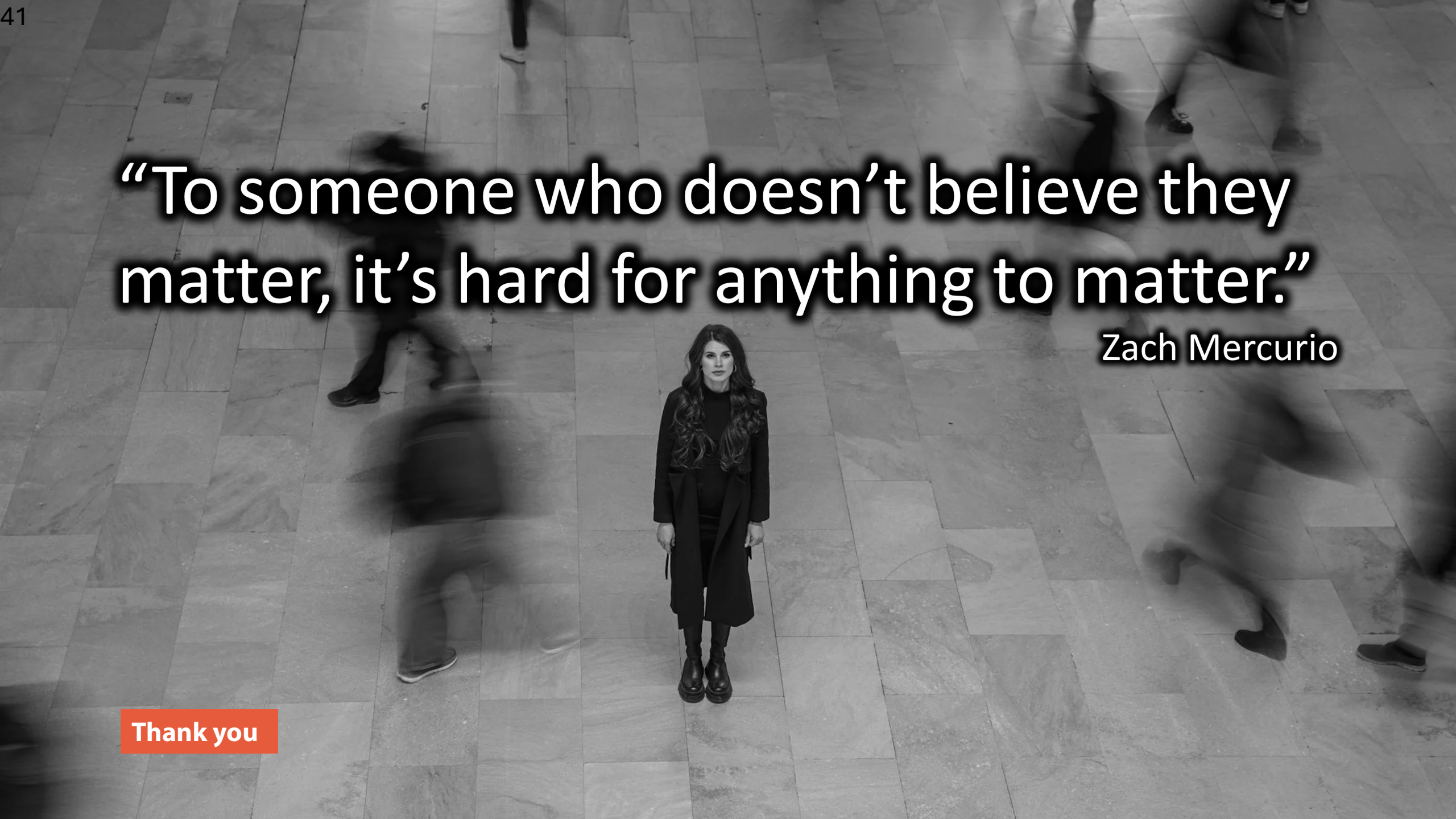
Built from the NAN framework and RTW evidence emphasizing workplace support, coordination, self-efficacy, and sustainable reintegration.

From Intervention to Culture

When mattering becomes how work gets done, resilience stops being a recovery strategy and becomes an organizational asset.

- **Faster psychological re-entry**
- **More durable RTW**
- **Less burnout and re-absence**
- **Higher engagement and retention**

Reference anchors: APA (2022); CIPD (2021); Cancelliere et al. (2016); Nigatu et al. (2019); Etuknwa et al. (2019); NICE NG146 (2019); BMJ Leader scoping review (2025).


“To someone who doesn’t believe they matter, it’s hard for anything to matter.”
Zach Mercurio
Thank you

Questions?

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