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Mattering: The Key to Employee Engagement

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There's a new buzzword going around: Mattering.

Actually, it's not really new: Mattering has been studied by academic psychologists for a number of years now,[1] but a recent best-selling book by Zach Mercurio[2] has brought the concept to the attention of the public at large (and is the basis for this article). Mattering refers to knowing that your presence and contributions make a genuine difference. At a broad level, people who feel that they (and their contributions) matter are more likely to lead a meaningful life.[3] But at a more practical level, Mattering matters because when employees feel valued, seen, and heard, not only do they flourish, but so do their employers.

Mercurio argues that Mattering is a fundamental survival instinct that transforms into a psychological need. From infancy, babies reach out to others for evidence that they matter (initially, give me food!) and this grows into a broader need for validation and for being seen as significant.

It's important to differentiate Mattering from related concepts. Belonging means feeling welcome and accepted. Inclusion means being able to participate and having a voice. Mattering runs deeper: it means feeling significant to those around you and knowing that what you personally contribute actually makes a difference — and that others see and appreciate it.

Mercurio cites research indicating that there is currently an epidemic of insignificance in workplaces. Lack of Mattering leads to disengagement, burnout, and turnover. According to The Hartford Future of Benefits Study, 27% of employees feel flat-out ignored, 65% feel lonely at work, and 3 in 5 are experiencing burnout.[4] U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy declared a loneliness epidemic in 2023. Research shows that lack of Mattering has been a major driver of Return to Office pushback, surpassing financial incentives. According to McKinsey data, the top reasons employees leave without another job lined up are uncaring leaders (#1), unreasonable expectations (#2), and lack of support (#4) — money ranks #6.[5]

The NAN Framework

Mercurio advocates for the NAN Framework to develop and strengthen Mattering, built on three pillars: Noticed (feeling seen and heard), Affirmed (recognition of unique strengths), and Needed (feeling indispensable).

Noticing is more than casual recognition — it means actively seeking to understand important elements of a person's life. When practiced with authenticity, Noticing strengthens the bond between leader and team, as each member feels seen as a whole person.

Affirming focuses on specific, personal contributions that genuinely matter to the organization's goals. When practiced with authenticity, it enables team members to recognize and take pride in their unique roles.

Needing dispels the fear that most employees have that they are replaceable. To quote: "when people feel replaceable, they act replaceable." Practiced with authenticity, Needing fosters accountability, initiative, and dedication.

These skills are eminently teachable and do not require expensive programs or surveys — they require heightened self-awareness and daily micro-interactions with team members.

Practical Examples of the NAN Framework

1. Noticing: Making People Feel Seen and Heard

- Greet team members by name and acknowledge their presence each day.

- Pay attention to personal milestones (birthdays, work anniversaries) and celebrate them.
- Check in about well-being, not just work tasks.
- Actively listen — maintain eye contact, avoid multitasking, follow up on details previously shared.
- Keep notes on what matters to each person and reference these in later conversations.
- Remind them of company resources that may help (EAP, wellness, FMLA, other benefits).

2. Affirming: Recognizing Unique Strengths and Contributions

- Give specific praise highlighting unique skills or impact (e.g., "Your attention to detail prevented major cost overruns").
- Publicly recognize achievements in team meetings and company communications.
- Express gratitude for effort and attitude, not just outcomes.
- Link individual strengths to team or organizational goals.

3. Needing: Demonstrating That People Are Indispensable

- Involve employees in decision-making and seek their input on important matters.
- Assign responsibilities that align with their strengths and explain why their role is essential.
- Ask for help or advice in areas where they have expertise.
- Celebrate not just "wins," but the specific people whose gifts made those wins possible.

These actions build trust and strengthen relationships. Mattering-centered leadership is more than a soft skill — it is foundational to organizational culture. Gallup has found very significant differences between organizations with high and low employee engagement in turnover, absenteeism, safety incidents, employee theft, productivity, profitability, and customer loyalty.[6]

Mattering matters not only for organizational outcomes, but also for individual mental health. Mercurio argues that Mattering is foundational to human flourishing — a state of optimal psychological and social functioning.[7] When people feel noticed, affirmed, and needed, they engage more readily and reach their potential. When they do not, they become disengaged, lonely, and unsuccessful — a condition psychologists call languishing.[7]

"To someone who doesn't believe they matter, it's hard for anything to matter."

References

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