

Why Mattering Matters with Zach Mercurio

People want their work to matter, yet they're often expected to care without being shown they are cared for. Researcher Zach Mercurio, author of "The Power of Mattering," joined the [Work Better Podcast](#) to explore how "mattering" — feeling seen, valued and needed — is a basic human need and a powerful performance driver.

Work Better: What is "mattering" and how is it different from belonging or inclusion?

Zach Mercurio: Belonging is being welcomed into a group and inclusion is being invited to participate. Mattering goes a step further. It's the lived experience of being significant to those around you. It's everyday interactions that help people feel seen, heard and essential, not just present. That distinction matters: Mattering is foundational, a primal human need that fuels motivation and wellbeing.

WB: Why should leaders care about mattering when they're under pressure to drive productivity?

ZM: You can't get sustained productivity without people feeling they matter. When people feel valued first, they build the confidence and energy that power quality and quantity of work — the outcomes organizations seek. Treating these skills as "soft" has led many teams to overlook the rigor required to cultivate them.

WB: What are practical ways to build a culture where people feel significant?

ZM: Think in moments. Three repeatable practices are key: notice, affirm and show people they're needed. Ask better questions that invite real answers ("What has your attention today?"), then affirm with specific, meaningful gratitude that names the situation, behavior, person's unique gifts and impact. Finally, make the impact visible. Collect stories, photos or customer feedback and say, "Look what you did," so no one has to guess how their work helps others.

WB: How can the workplace reinforce mattering?

ZM: Design visible links between daily tasks and bigger outcomes. One example: NASA sketched a "ladder to the moon," mapping each unit's work to mission goals so people saw why their role was indispensable. Also, create places for caring conversations that build trust. Make it easier — not harder — for leaders to notice and support people.

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