

# Making Work Meaningful with Wes Adams (S6:E9) - Transcript

## PODCAST

00:00

00:00

 Listen to: Making Work Meaningful with Wes Adams (S6:E9) - Transcript

How to Subscribe

**Chris Congdon:** Welcome to Work Better, the Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon, and we are coming to you live from Atlanta at Gather 2025, the American Society of Interior Designers National Conference, celebrating its 50th anniversary—congrats, ASID! I'm so excited to be joined today by Wes Adams. Wes is the author of *Meaningful Work: How to Ignite Passion and Performance in Every Employee*. He's the founder and CEO of SV Consulting Group, and his research and consulting practice centers around the idea that to achieve high levels of employee engagement, productivity, and happiness, people need to find meaning in their work. So thanks for being here today, Wes.

**Wes Adams:** Thanks for having me, Chris. I'm excited to chat.

**CC:** I'm really excited too—there's so much in your work that feels crucial right now. And part of why we wanted to be here together is because your work and the work of the designers at this conference are surprisingly aligned. You're both problem solvers, trying to uncover what's really going on. What I love about your book is how actionable it feels.

**WA:** Oh, thank you. Yeah, I totally agree. Workplace design and the design of work itself are tightly connected and have a huge impact on each other.

**CC:** Absolutely. We'll get into that more, but I want to start at the beginning. I was really struck by how you opened your book—with a quote from Esther Perel, the renowned psychotherapist and author. You wrote: “Never have we expected so much from work. We want from work today what we used to get from religion and community—belonging, purpose, and meaning.” Why did you choose to start there?

**WA:** First of all, I'm a huge Esther Perel fan. She's brilliant in how she talks about relationships and building community. That quote was actually from an episode of Adam Grant's podcast a few years ago. They were discussing work design, and I think she captured this shift we've made—especially over the last 40 or 50 years—away from a transactional view of work. People now expect more than a paycheck. They want to feel like what they're doing matters.

**CC:** She really did capture that beautifully. Let's talk about those three words—belonging, purpose, and meaning. They're related, but they're not the same, right?

**WA:** Exactly. One of the biggest misconceptions people have is using purpose and meaning interchangeably. Purpose is about working toward a higher calling or contributing to something bigger than yourself. It's your goal. But having a purpose doesn't automatically give you meaning. Meaning comes from seeing progress toward that purpose—understanding how your work contributes to it. That's one of three ways meaning is created at work.

**CC:** Let's hold onto that for a second. Can you circle back to belonging and how that fits in?

**WA:** Belonging is part of what I call the Three Cs of meaning at work: community, contribution, and challenge. Community is that sense of belonging—being able to show up authentically and bring your full self and ideas to the table. Contribution is understanding how your work makes an impact. That could mean supporting a larger purpose, improving a client's life, or positively affecting your coworkers. And challenge is the opportunity to grow, learn, and develop your capabilities.

**CC:** I want to dig deeper into those, but first I want to reflect on something. When I started my career, my purpose was to get stories written and out on time. I don't think anyone cared whether I felt a sense of meaning. So what's the business case for meaning? Why should leaders care?

**WA:** Great question. There's decades of research showing that meaning is one of the biggest contributors to individual outcomes like wellbeing, engagement, and job satisfaction—and also to team and organizational outcomes like productivity and innovation. Newer research from Oxford even shows that the factors that create meaning contribute to higher revenue, profitability, and stock price.

**CC:** So if you care about business outcomes, meaning is the fuel that drives them.

**WA:** Exactly.

**CC:** Let's go back to those Three Cs. I want to make sure we spend enough time on each. Should we start with community?

**WA:** Sure.

**CC:** Let's talk about that.

**WA:** Community is that sense of belonging—being able to show up with your full self and ideas. My co-author, Tamara Miles, and I have spent the last five years researching the leadership practices and organizational structures that create meaning for employees. We focused on how leaders can foster meaning for a couple of reasons. First, there's already a lot of advice out there on how individuals can find meaning in their own careers. That's important, but we believed leaders and managers play a critical role. Second, we wanted to understand how to create impact at scale—how to equip leaders with tools to help others find meaning and accelerate those positive outcomes.

We identified specific leadership practices and organizational structures that increase meaning, and they fall into those three buckets: community, contribution, and challenge. In terms of community, it's about building authentic relationships—with managers, leaders, and coworkers. One of the most telling indicators we found was how people responded to the statement: "My leader cares about what's happening in my life outside of work."

**CC:** Outside of work.

**WA:** Not my leader knows, but my leader cares what's happening outside of work. And that can be as simple as, "Hey, what did you do over the weekend?" or "Tell me a little bit about what's going on in your life," and then actually paying attention to and engaging with that answer.

**CC:** Right.

**WA:** One of the things we've found—especially as we've moved into more hybrid and remote environments—is that we forget to do that. We don't ask. We don't intentionally create the space for it.

**CC:** We get so busy that we just forget.

**WA:** Yeah, absolutely. It's natural. We're going from one Zoom or Teams call to the next, checking boxes, doing the things. And we don't create time to get to know the people we work with. As a result, there's a huge sense of loneliness. There's been some recent research on this across the country. The former Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy—you may be familiar with him—

**CC:** Yes.

**WA:** He's done a lot of work on this topic of loneliness. Great book, also worth reading. He instituted a practice on his own team called "The Full Story." It's just five minutes at the beginning of every meeting, where one person brings something meaningful to them—a photo, or maybe a scarf from their grandmother, something that holds personal significance. Then people can ask questions about it. It's a way to invite people to bring a little of themselves into the conversation.

What he found was that people discovered connections they didn't know they had. They'd talk about those things outside of meetings and build closer relationships. That led to much better collaboration across the organization—people felt more open to sharing ideas, picking up the phone, calling someone.

**CC:** That's really great. We've been thinking about community too, and looked at the work of Eric Klinenberg from NYU. He uses a phrase that really struck us: "social infrastructure." You can have physical infrastructure in a city or building, but you also need places that create opportunities for people to build relationships. Even the setting we're in right now is intentionally designed.

**WA:** I love this. It feels kind of like we're on a porch, just hanging out and having a chat.

**CC:** Exactly. We can see other people and they can see us, but if we needed a quiet, more confidential conversation, we'd just go into the enclave. Then we can talk more privately. I think designing work and spaces to help people build community is something people really need to be thinking about.

**WA:** I totally agree. Intentional design is so needed today. Organizations have to build a new kind of capacity—something akin to event planning or experiential marketing. How do we bring people together in a space and use that time effectively to build connection, brainstorm, innovate? That's not a capability most companies have had in-house before.

If I could talk a little about Reddit, one of the companies we studied in our research: after the pandemic, Reddit kept a number of their offices but said, "You don't have to come in if you don't want to." But if you do come in, they put together a whole team to help design how you interact in the office—how you spend your time there.

**CC:** How did that go?

**WA:** Really well.

**CC:** Oh, good.

**WA:** We interviewed a woman named Michelle, the Director of Experience at Reddit. Her team thinks about what a team's day will look like when they come into the office—how they'll interact, what fun things they'll do together, and how they'll get work done. They redesigned their office space to feel more like event space. There are larger areas for big gatherings and smaller pods for focused work or collaboration. That kind of intentional design contributes immensely to the quality of connections people build.

**CC:** Thinking about space and experience together is so important. There's so much I love about your book, but one of the things I especially appreciate is how practical it is. I always love when there's a way to get feedback. You've got a meaningful leadership assessment in the book—and you can also take it online, which I did.

**WA:** How did you do?

**CC:** Well, you tell me. I scored a 107.

**WA:** That's pretty impressive.

**CC:** Is that good?

**WA:** Oh yeah, absolutely. Maybe I should be studying you.

**CC:** I do think I'm fortunate—our organization really thinks about these things. But talk about why you decided to include the assessment. I'm sure people will want to access it and get feedback. How do they do that?

**WA:** Absolutely. The assessment is based on our research—empirically validated behaviors that we know increase meaning. It's a self-assessment, so you get an indication of how you're doing on each of the Three Cs: where you're strong and where you might want to improve. We included it to help people level-set and guide them toward the chapters and practices that might be most helpful.

**CC:** I loved that it had recommendations.

**WA:** You've got some homework, though.

**CC:** I do! I care deeply about the people I work with and what's going on in their lives. But like we said earlier, you get busy—back-to-back meetings, deliverables—and sometimes you forget to ask, "How's your mom doing?" or "What happened with your kid's graduation party?" All those little things that matter.

**WA:** Yeah, it's really important—and we have to make time for it. We have to design that time into our day to make sure we're nurturing those relationships. And I think you and I were talking a little earlier about positive feedback. Just saying thank you, or "Hey, I really appreciated how you prepared me for this podcast and told me what you wanted to ask"—that gave me the opportunity to be thoughtful in my responses. That takes five or ten seconds, and it has such an immense impact on someone's sense of contribution and understanding how their work matters.

So often we forget to do that, especially as leaders and managers. We're running from one thing to the next. Just engaging with someone for a couple of minutes—"What's going on with you?" or "I really appreciated what you did last week"—it's incredibly powerful. These are small moments of meaning that have a huge impact.

**CC:** That's really helpful. I have to ask you before we wrap up today about a topic people are probably thinking, "How can we not talk about AI?" Because it really is changing the way we work—the nature of our work. I think interacting with AI and thinking about it in the context of our own humanity and this topic of meaning... I'm curious. You said something interesting: that AI can offer us more opportunity to craft meaningful work. Can you talk about that a little?

**WA:** Sure. I have two things to say about that. First, because of AI, human capabilities—creativity, innovation, persistence, resilience—are more important than ever. Developing those core human skills is what we're going to be asked to do, because AI will handle a lot of the repetitive, transactional stuff.

Second, how we design AI and integrate it into our businesses will determine the direction it takes us. One approach I see is companies using AI to drive efficiency—cutting costs, streamlining tasks. That's a very transactional, short-term way to think about it.

But there's another way: yes, create efficiencies, but also use AI to elevate human skills. Use it to give people time for deeper, more meaningful work—so they can be creative, navigate challenges, and seize opportunities. Use it to expand possibilities in your organization or community. The companies thinking about it that way are the ones I believe will succeed long-term. Things are changing fast, and we need people at their best to thrive.

**CC:** Yeah, I agree with you so much. And I'd also add—from the work we're doing to understand how it impacts physical space—just how mentally draining it can be to start incorporating AI. It's exhausting. Your brain gets tired. Are we creating environments where people can actually get some respite throughout the day? Can they recharge as they learn new ways of working and adapt and build resilience?

**WA:** Absolutely.

**CC:** Wes, I'm so grateful you came here to join me in person at the ASID conference. We're really excited to have you and to talk about your book. Thank you so much for being here today.

**WA:** Oh, thank you for having me. This has been a lot of fun.

**CC:** Fun for me too. My big takeaway from this conversation is that as leaders, we can learn the skills to help people feel a sense of meaning in their work. It is a skillset—and it pays off in very real ways: wellbeing, productivity, performance, all those hard metrics we care about.

The Work Better podcast now drops every other week, so make your life easier and follow us wherever you get your podcasts so you don't miss a single episode. We also have a weekly Work Better newsletter that brings you the latest insights, research, and design ideas—delivered right to your inbox. Please subscribe at [steelcase.com/research](http://steelcase.com/research).

Thanks again for being here with us today. We hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.