

Why Mattering Matters with Zach Mercurio - Part Two Transcript

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“Productivity remains incredibly inconsistent over the last 20 years because we’ve consistently expected people to care before we’ve done the rigorous work to make sure they feel cared for and make sure they know the difference that they make.”

When I went to business school everything was about finance, accounting, monetary policy ...basically everything I forgot later. I might have one class that touched on what many call “soft skills”. The ability to help people find purpose or meaning, understand how to look out for a team’s well-being, and to show people that they mattered was not part of the curriculum. But a new body of research is showing just how critical these leadership skills are for actually achieving a return on investment or those other “hard” results.

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I’m your host Chris Congdon and this is part two of my conversation with research and author Zach Mercurio. Zach is the author of the new book, “The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance.”

If you missed part one, go back and listen to it, and today, we pick up where we left off—understanding how leaders can notice, affirm, and show people they’re significant.

Enjoy the listen

Chris Congdon: Zach, I’m so glad to get an opportunity to speak with you on this issue of mattering, because I think it’s one that people maybe haven’t really thought about before. And I’d like to start out by just defining what mattering means, because I think we hear a lot of words in the workplace now about belonging, and inclusion and mattering is a little different take on that. So can you just explain to us for the audience that caught the first part of this series, or who might be joining us fresh today, like, what does mattering mean to you in the workplace?

Zach Mercurio: So belonging, right is feeling welcomed and accepted into a group and connected to a group as a whole. Inclusion is being invited and able to take an equal, active role in that group. But mattering is feeling significant to the people in that group.

I could feel like I belong in this conversation. I'm definitely included in this conversation, because I'm able to contribute. But I may not feel seen by you or heard by you, or feel like you can name my unique gifts, or that you remind me that I'm needed. So mattering is the experience of feeling significant to the people around you.

And why that nuance is so important is because mattering is a survival instinct. Meaning the first thing we did as human beings was, we actually reached out to be significant to someone. If we weren't significant to someone enough so that they'd keep us alive, we would be in big trouble.

So that instinct to matter turns into this fundamental need to feel, seen, to feel, heard, feel, valued as we grow up, go to school, go to work. And when that need is met, when we do feel that people notice us, they pay attention to us, they remember the details of our lives, they invite our voice out, they hear us, they value us and the uniqueness we bring. And they remind us how we're needed. That's when we experience what psychologists call mattering.

Chris Congdon: I just want to say it back to you to make sure that I'm really tracking the difference. So I feel a sense of belonging in my work here, because I feel like I'm part of a team, and that, you know, I feel like that team welcomes me into our group. I feel a sense of inclusion because my opinion might be asked or sought after, but I feel meaning when someone demonstrates to me, like my leader, demonstrates to me that the work that I'm doing is actually making a difference for the organization. Is that right? Am I tracking?

Zach Mercurio: That's right. Yes, someone else showing you the evidence of your significance. And this is also important as well, because someone may say, Well, Zach, can I believe that I matter on my own. Like, I build my own self-esteem, my own self-worth. Yes, you can believe that you matter on your own, but it takes someone else to show you how you matter.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. So I would like to talk about 3 things that you've identified in your work that are ways that whether I'm a leader or a good team member that I can be doing to show people that they matter. So we've already talked about noticing. That was the first one. Maybe you could just quickly remind us what noticing looks like.

Zach Mercurio: Yeah. Noticing is the practice of paying attention to the details, ebbs and flows of someone's life and their work, and then offering them a proactive action to show them that you're paying attention. And that's that first part of seeing somebody hearing somebody is digging into the meaning and feeling behind someone's words, having those skills to help someone feel understood and inviting their voice out.

The reason why noticing is a foundation of mattering, it's like the elemental factor that determines whether we feel that we matter. Which is why I have it coming before affirmation and showing people how they're needed is because noticing is required for trust.

We can care about people from afar, but to care for people means we have to get up close. You cannot care for something you don't notice or understand right? Noticing is the relational groundwork of truly seeing a person truly hearing a person, so that then you can affirm them and show them how they're needed.

Chris Congdon: Yeah. So let's talk about affirming. Then what does that look like?

Zach Mercurio: Yeah, I like, let's let's like, omit, do this by omission of what it's not. Because I like that, because I think that we hear words like appreciation and recognition.

Yeah, appreciation is important. It's showing general gratitude for who someone is for someone's presence. You can appreciate someone on an employee appreciation day. You can appreciate someone through an awards banquet, you can show symbols of appreciation. Recognition is showing gratitude for what someone does. So it's elevating someone's work or their performance right through awards or kudos, or whatever it is.

But affirmation is showing someone how their unique gifts make a unique difference. And this is what's very important about this, because you can appreciate someone through a symbol. You can recognize somebody through a symbol. What I mean is, you could give them a promotion.

Chris Congdon: Sure I can give him a raise. I can say in front in a meeting in front of everybody, "what a great job Kiara did in that project!"

Zach Mercurio: You can give them a front row parking spot. You could give them an employee, though, if they still do that employee reward. But those things are all inanimate objects, so they cannot actually value a person. They are symbols of value. But like money, can't value a person, it can't do the act of valuing. And that's what affirmation is.

The root word of affirmation comes from the Latin word *affirmaire*, which means to firm up or make stronger. And what I love about that is that, like we talked about, any belief requires the environment to feed back the evidence of that belief to keep it going, keep it strong. When we're showing somebody their significance we're showing them the evidence of their significance and it strengthens their belief that they matter.

I'm reminded of, I was in an auditorium working with teachers. And there's this large school, and I asked them to think about a time in their work when they most felt that they mattered. And there was a woman who I noticed in the middle of the room. She turned to the person next to her, and I was having a side conversation very loudly, and then there was kind of some laughter, and then she looked a little bit upset. And I said, "Hey, what's going on? Would you mind sharing with the rest of the group?" And she goes, "I don't think I can think of a moment." And she goes, "I've been a processor, I do the paperwork. And you know that's it. Basically, I'm just in processing." And she said that word "just."

And what happened in that room was really remarkable. There was a teacher on the other side of the room, who stood up and said, "Janine, like we would not, I would not even have a class of students without you." And then someone else stood up and was like, "yeah, what are you talking about? Like, you're so good. And you're so kind. And you're so fast with turning around grade reports and reports. We need like literally, students wouldn't be graduating and getting their diplomas printed if it wasn't for you." And in that room like it was amazing. She saw that she mattered around her, she saw the evidence of her significance. That is affirmation. When you can see how you make a difference. Right in front of you.

Chris Congdon: So, if you know, handing out an award or a raise, or whatever, I'm thinking about this as leadership coaching for a lot of people listening. You're probably in a leadership role, or at least on a team. What would be some other examples of ways that we could affirm somebody if we're not going to hand them a completion certificate or something like that.

Zach Mercurio: Yeah, the first thing is to collect and tell real stories of that person's significance. Real stories. So show them the downstream impact of their work. You can do this in a number of ways.

There was a facilities and maintenance leader that I worked with for the National Park Service, and he used to go around and take photos of projects that the team completed that week. So park visitors were walking across a bridge, or if there was a trail that was completed, or if there was a bathroom that had a shorter line because a bathroom was repaired and opened. And he takes pictures of it and he would send an email every Friday that just the subject line said, "look what you did." And he would just attach the photos. And he has one of the high teams with the highest morale, lowest turnover in the Park service, and you know we've gone and studied him. He always says to me, "I give people the photographic evidence that they matter so they can never question if they matter." I love it, right.

So think about how you can collect and tell stories of people's significance. We often, for example, do client satisfaction surveys. Satisfaction does not emotionally compel people, knowing how satisfied someone was. Knowing the impact that they made on somebody's life and the difference they made. That's what emotionally inspires people. So find ways to collect and tell stories of the work significance. It doesn't have to be on an end user. It can be on a team member that you notice. Maybe someone said something in a meeting and it changed the demeanor of a team member or someone's input on yourself like that. That is a real way to do that. So collect and tell stories of significance.

Chris Congdon: Okay. So then the next step is about showing people they're needed, right? Like that's after I've noticed them and affirmed them, I'm showing them they're needed, so help me understand the difference between what we just talked about with affirming and with.

Zach Mercurio: Yeah, so I'll go back because I want to give another tip for listeners. You know, we often say Thank you, and good job a lot as well. But just saying a blanket "Thank you." Doesn't really psychologically do much to somebody, because people have this inherent need for uniqueness to see their uniqueness relative to others.

So that's one of the reasons why just getting generic feedback actually can demotivate us and create some dissonance. Well, you know, they said, thank you, but they didn't really name anything unique that I did. It could have been anybody.

So one thing that we found is that there are four components of what's called meaningful gratitude, that whenever you say Thank you, you should be able to describe specifically the setting of when and where, whatever you're thanking the person for occurred within. So for example, at the beginning of this podcast interview you helped prepare me for this conversation. Right at the beginning of this podcast interview. It's very clear. We know that you're there. You know that I noticed that you were there. I'm not just saying Thank you at one o'clock every day.

But then the second is, describe the behavior. So you prepared me for our upcoming interview.

And then 3. Name the gifts the person used, and this is very important. So every human being brings us at least four gifts every day. Their strengths, what they love and what they're good at, their purpose, how they uniquely impact the team, the people around them, their perspective, how only they see the world because of their position, their life story, and then their wisdom what only they have learned that what only they can teach us, right? So name their gifts.

So for example, you know, at the beginning of this podcast interview you helped prep for the conversation. But you were very intentional and very creative about how you wanted to have this conversation really build upon our previous conversation and that intentionality, that creativity, and then show them the impact they make. The fourth piece made this conversation go much smoother, and if just one person leaves this conversation, says thank you to someone in a way that reveals their gifts, and that person has never heard that they have those gifts, it could change the trajectory of someone's career. So I just want to thank you, Chris.

Chris Congdon: And I just want to say that I really value your perspective. So if I didn't say that shame on me because that was why we thought this was such an important conversation again. Because I do think it's tapping into something that we're not aware of. You know we don't think about it on a day-to-day basis.

And so I want to delve into that a little bit, because I do think people are under a lot of pressure right now to be more productive. For example, I hear this all the time, and you and I have talked about this issue that we keep hearing about engagement, loneliness, a lot of different well-being factors. But productivity is one that I hear a lot from business leaders that they're just really worried. And so when I think about like, okay, if I'm worried about productivity and how much you know work, I can get out of you, Zach, you know, like what I can get you to do today. Then I'm just wondering how that gels with me, taking the time to go, you know. But, Zach, I really appreciate the insights that you gathered from your research, you know, because you're able to give us again kind of a different view on the world. So help me understand, maybe we can coach our listeners about, how do you marry up this need for productivity with this need to demonstrate people matter?

Zach Mercurio: Yeah. And I mean, I think that they're not only not mutually exclusive, that you need one for the other.

Chris Congdon: Okay, talk more about that.

Zach Mercurio: You can't have productivity without mattering. Think about the last time. Right? Think about the last time you cared about something. Yeah? And simultaneously felt uncared for. Think about the last time you worked really hard on a project, and you thought it was futile. So you can't have one without the other. The problem is that people don't realize that it takes work and skill to do human relational work to build a sense of mattering. And that's what we've overlooked. We've tended to leave it up for chance, for example, you know you can like metaphorically, I guess. Raise your hand right now, if you've ever gone to a session on how to give positive feedback to someone. Right? I bet not.

Chris Congdon: I'm not actually raising my hand right? No, me neither.

Zach Mercurio: Yeah, me, neither me, either. I deliver them. But I've never been to what I've never seen it. Right? Raise your hand. If you had a budget meeting, and you had training on how to create psychological safety. And they're both overlapped, and you need to cancel one to get more time. How many of you would cancel the psychological safety meeting, honestly, right? So over and over and over again we've left the human that's good, that cultivates the energy needed to produce up to chance, and we've devalued them. Productivity has two components, quality and quantity.

Chris Congdon: Right. So quantity is, how much someone does, how much how many widgets I produce? Right.

Zach Mercurio: To achieve quantity. You need energy right? And energy is just code word for motivation in psychology. And the most important way to compel motivation is called psychological meaningfulness. And that is, knowing that I and what I do matters. So the second part of productivity is quality. And what do you need for quality? You need care. Someone needs to care about what they're doing.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, if you don't care that anything is good enough, it's yeah.

Zach Mercurio: And people won't care because you give them a paycheck. People will be satisfied if you give them a paycheck. But a satisfied employee is not a motivated employee. Right? I think it's important for leaders to understand that, taking a long view on productivity and doing the work and taking the time to cultivate the relational groundwork, making sure people feel cared for making sure they know how they're making a difference will result in more sustained energy and sustained care that results in the quantity and quality you want from productivity.

Chris Congdon: And so I'm curious what you think about how we could do a better job. Those of us who are thinking about physical environments, of creating places where it's more likely that people will have these kinds of conversations, the conversations that begin with, if it wasn't for you. I mean, I know you can have that conversation anywhere but.

Zach Mercurio: Yeah, well, I think that having, I think, having spaces that actually remind you of your significance is important in terms of the design of the actual space.

You know, one of my favorite examples was when NASA was launching their Moon missions and John F. Kennedy went to go to a Space Center to launch the Apollo missions, and he said to a janitor, Hey, what are you doing here? And the janitor very calmly said, Oh, I'm putting a person on the moon. It was so cool.

But Andrew Carton, at the Wharton School did an archival study of NASA's environment during that time, and he took pictures of NASA facilities. He took pictures of meetings, minutes. He took pictures of agendas, and he studied what NASA managers did to get a workforce of 300,000 people to believe so deeply in what they were doing that a janitor could just calmly say, "Oh, I'm putting a person on the moon," one of the things in their environment. They had on all the blackboards at NASA. They had what was called a ladder to the moon, every group. Then they drew it where every group could see. Every time they came in. Every day they could see the tasks they were working on that month. Then they could see a tangible, measurable objective on the next rung of the ladder that that task was needed, for then they saw a tangible, measurable objective that that objective was needed for all the way up to putting a person on the moon by the end of the decade to advance science.

And what I will love about that is that it was an environmental reminder constantly, and it wasn't a value on the wall. It wasn't a mission statement on the wall, it was measurably here's how what you're doing today is needed on the wall. So I think there are some creative ways visually, that we can remind people of their significance.

I also think there are ways that we can connect people with the people they serve more. For example, you know, one of the things I see often is that there's like, especially if you're in a customer facing industry. There's like the interface with the customer. And then there's all the people in the back, right. I would like to see spaces where there's more contact between everybody in the organization. And customers and users moving in and out of that space, because, for example, Adam Grant, at the Wharton School, finds just having one contact with a beneficiary of the work that you're doing can increase motivation upwards of 400% in experimental stuff. So more of that space where customers behind the scenes workers are interfacing is very important for helping people feel affirmed. I think we mentioned this last time. I also think like distance is very important to think about. We talked about the long conference tables.

The really long conference tables, and if you want. Getting people literally together. Because one of the things that's important is mattering. The currency of mattering is attention and time. And we're more likely to perceive someone's paying attention to us when we perceive they're close to us when there's some proximity, sure. And so, making sure spaces are conducive to when somebody leaves a meeting room. Is there a space right outside the meeting room with 2 chairs facing each other? So that if I notice you're frustrated in that meeting it, the environment prompts me to say, "Hey, let's have a seat and just talk about this real quick."

So if you think about all the things that we talked about in the last 2 episodes, this episode and that episode, then you think what in my environment would trigger somebody to do this right now, it really helps from a design perspective, because I just was thinking about that coming out of a room. You have people who are just discussing something intense. Is there right after that? Is there some space for them to sit down. Instead of just walk back to their cubes.

Chris Congdon: Yeah, this is something we do very intentionally where we think about meetings, not only for you know how you arrive at a meeting and what experience you have beforehand. But then, afterward, you know a lot of times we all talk about the meeting after the meeting.

Are you creating a place for somebody to do that, or creating a place for somebody to decompress even for a minute, you know. Sometimes you come out of intense meetings, and you need a minute to gather your thoughts, you know, like we could begin to create those kinds of spaces that can either create those interactions or even just value people by acknowledging what they need as human beings, to be able to do their work.

Zach Mercurio: Can I add one thing to this?

Chris Congdon: You can.

Zach Mercurio: One of the biggest barriers to doing these behaviors is what's called automatic attention. It's the thing that allows you to brush your teeth without thinking about it, but it gets a grip on relationships as well. So the more the more we see the same, the more we see the same people every day in the same place, the more your brain goes on autopilot. So the one on one is the same, the meeting starts the same. Even getting feedback is routine. The closer we are to somebody like the more we see them, the less interested we tend to get in them.

Chris Congdon: Oh, that's that's interesting!

Zach Mercurio: Yes, there's experiments that have been done, that if I had you go and I had you get directions from a stranger, and then I had you go and get directions somewhere from a spouse or partner, or someone, you know really well, you would be you would you would exhibit more attentive cues to the stranger. Ask more questions to the stranger than you would to the person you quote unquote, know really well. And that's because of automatic attention. It's called the closeness communication bias. So the reason why I bring this up when it comes to space is one of the best ways to get out of that is to switch up where, when, and how right interacting with people. So if you always interact with a specific person in a specific place in the office. Saying to someone, Hey, let's let's go meet over here.

But it's a comfortable place. Let's go meet in the library up front, near the books. Let's go for a walk. Your brain will have to jolt out of the automatic attention. So I mentioned that because, having a variety of spaces that serve the function of a variety of functions, one on one meetings group meetings

Chris Congdon: Yes, that makes so much sense. It is hard for me to notice and affirm you, and let you know that you're needed. If I'm on like autopilot and so breaking out of that can help me. It can be an aid.

So Zach you joining me today helped my day at work feel a little bit better, for sure, and I think it's going to help a lot of our listeners feel the same way. So thank you so much for joining me today. It's been a great conversation.

Zach Mercurio: My pleasure, glad to be here.

Chris Congdon: Thank you.