"Every single one of us wants to feel like we matter, and yet most of us are pretty bad at making others feel like they matter, especially at work. Now we have a tool to help: *The Power of Mattering* offers simple, straightforward guidance to ensure we create thriving, cooperative, and high-trust cultures in which people really feel that they matter."

—**SIMON SINEK,** optimist; *New York Times* bestselling author, *The Infinite Game*; and podcast host, *A Bit of Optimism*

"People aren't a resource or a stepping stone, they're the point. A must-read for anyone who manages or leads."

—**SETH GODIN,** author, *The Song of Significance*

"Creating a culture where people truly feel seen, heard, and valued is more critical than ever. Zach Mercurio's *The Power of Mattering* offers a transformative approach to leadership that resonates deeply with the core values we champion at VaynerX. This book is invaluable for anyone committed to building a thriving culture."

—**CLAUDE SILVER,** Chief Heart Officer, VaynerX

"In today's multigenerational workplace, the challenge of connecting with and valuing every team member has never been more pressing. In *The Power of Mattering*, Zach Mercurio provides a timely and essential guide for how leaders can truly see, hear, and value everyone."

—**LINDSEY POLLAK,** multigenerational workforce expert; *New York Times* bestselling author, *The Remix*

"*The Power of Mattering* equips leaders to unleash the hidden superpowers in each individual by addressing the fundamental human need to feel significant. Essential reading for any leader seeking to transform culture, drive results, and change lives through the profound power of truly valuing people."

—**MARK RUDE,** Senior Vice President, American Express Global Business Travel

"People matter, and treating people as individuals with their own purpose in life ensures that they feel valued. Making people feel like they matter isn't just a nicety; it's a necessity for a thriving organization. In *The Power of Mattering*, Zach Mercurio has captured the essence of what it means to truly lead in today's business world."

—**BRYAN KELLER,** CEO, Keller Logistics Group

"*The Power of Mattering* delivers a powerful reminder of the leader's role in making people feel seen, heard, and valued. Zach Mercurio brilliantly captures how creating a culture of significance drives engagement and well-being. In a world where connection is key, this book offers practical insights for leaders to make a real difference in their employees' lives. It's an essential read for anyone committed to building environments where people truly thrive."

—**GARRY RIDGE,** Chairman Emeritus, WD-40 Company; The Culture Coach

"There is no greater need in the workplace than making employees feel valued and creating opportunities for them to add value. In this magnificent book, Zach Mercurio shows leaders how to do precisely that. By translating research and theory into action, Mercurio has succeeded in writing an eminently practical book. I cannot think of a more urgent task for leaders than to follow his advice."

—**ISAAC PRILLELTENSKY, PHD,** author, *How People Matter*

"With *The Power of Mattering*, Zach Mercurio offers a compelling blueprint to address one of today's most pressing challenges: the epidemic of insignificance at work. Leaders who wish to recruit and retain talented and engaged employees will benefit from his clear, actionable framework for creating a workplace where all are noticed, affirmed, and needed."

—**JULIE HAIZLIP, MD,** Clinical Professor, University of Virginia School of Nursing

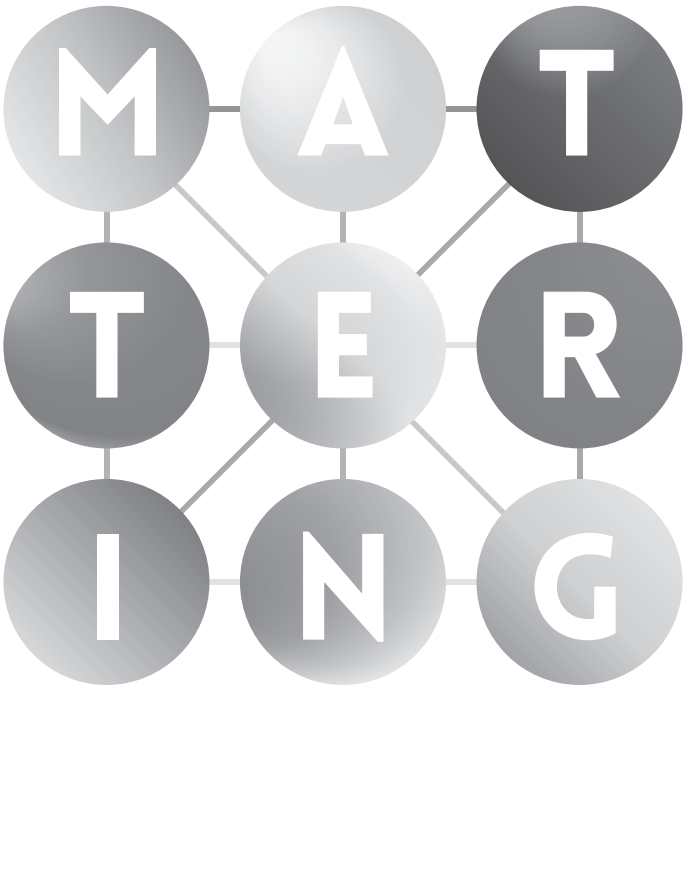
"One of the most important needs people have for thriving and being engaged at work is the need to find meaning. In *The Power of Mattering*, Zach Mercurio offers an inspiring yet practical framework that allows leaders to help team members find meaning in any role. I highly recommend this book to leaders who want to improve engagement and retention and consistently inspire greatness in others."

—**MATT TENNEY,** cofounder, PeopleThriver; national bestselling author, *Inspire Greatness*

"Yes, we know this stuff, but we don't do it. Mercurio's gift is showing us how to cut through the grey and make showing people how they matter practical, real, and simple."

—**JEN MCMAHON,** founder and Chief Purpose Officer, Modern People

THE POWER OF



THE POWER OF

HOW LEADERS CAN CREATE A CULTURE OF SIGNIFICANCE

ZACH MERCURIO

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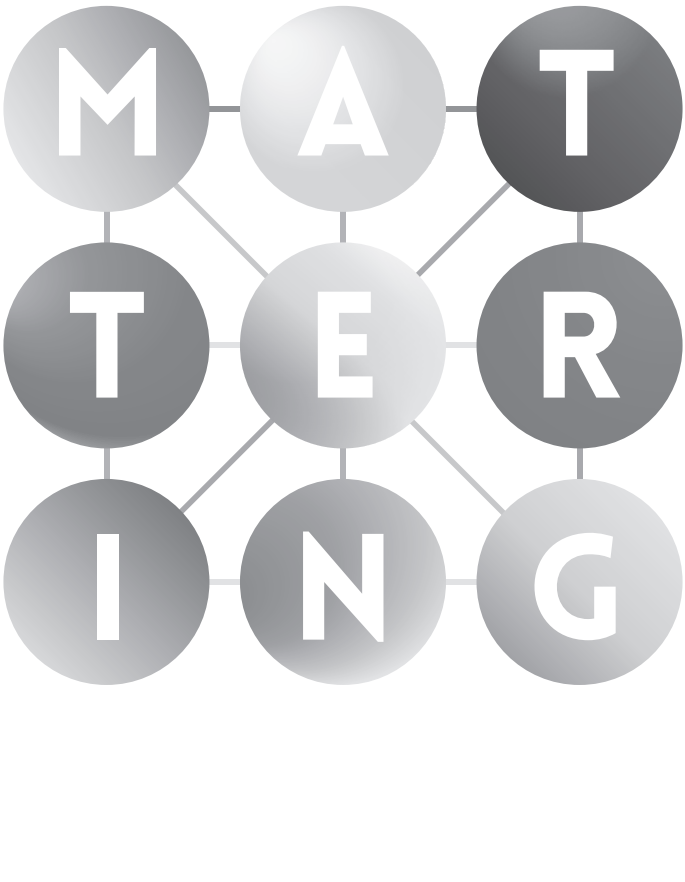
For Tapley and Jaxon
May you always know that you matter.

CONTENTS

PART THREE

SCALING SIGNIFICANCE

THE POWER OF



INTRODUCTION

When you were born, one of your first acts was to search for significance.[1] After you opened your eyes, you tilted your head upward, looking for someone to care for you. Then, you extended your arms to secure a caretaker's attention. Your survival depended on *mattering* to someone.

As we age, this instinct to matter crystallizes into the fundamental need to be seen, heard, valued, and needed. It never goes away. Our quest for significance permeates every culture, generation, and occupation.[2]

If our need to matter is satisfied, we flourish. When children feel important to adults, they develop a secure base from which they can head out into the world, experiment, take risks, and learn.[3] Similarly, when adults form caring and supportive relationships, they're more likely to contribute, create, and engage. People who feel that they matter have a higher sense of self-worth, are more confident, and develop healthier relationships. As a result, they're more motivated and grittier, and experience greater well-being in life and at work.[4]

If our need to matter is unsatisfied, on the other hand, we languish—and this is especially evident in the workplace. Not mattering can result in loneliness and acts of withdrawal like isolating oneself, underperforming, or leaving a job entirely. It also manifests in louder acts of desperation like complaining, blaming, gossiping, and other toxic behaviors. Feeling insignificant drives poor psychological and physical well-being, low motivation, relationship problems, and disengagement.[5]

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

For leaders—anyone who influences anyone—filling people's fundamental need for significance is imperative. There's mounting pressure to cultivate connected and engaged cultures amid the rise of hybrid work models and a fiercely competitive talent market. More people than ever seek meaningful work in environments where they feel dignified, respected, and included. With burnout and mental health issues escalating, there's a growing expectation of caring leadership that genuinely supports employees and their well-being.

Responding to these challenges requires leaders to show people how they matter through the skills of seeing, hearing, and valuing them.

Why Mattering Matters Now

More of us than ever report that we feel unseen, unheard, and undervalued. Surveys show that 58 percent of people feel lonely, nearly 50 percent feel forgotten, and 30 percent feel invisible at work. Predictably, alongside these feelings of insignificance, 59 percent say they experience adverse mental health outcomes because of their workplace.[6]

We can't have healthy organizations with unhealthy people. When people feel insignificant at work, they experience poor well-being, low commitment, and reduced performance. Over the last decade, engagement has flatlined despite increased attention on the employee experience. Productivity remains inconsistent. And voluntary turnover recently hit an all-time high.

At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic spurred mass reflection on what work means in people's lives. Many of us began to ask, "How do I want to spend my time? How do I want to be treated in the place where I spend one-third of my life? What's important to me?" Essential workers, for their part, now ask, "Do I *feel* essential?" The dual forces of job and health insecurity led people to reevaluate their priorities. Mainstream calls for social justice raised our collective awareness of the importance of feeling seen and heard.

The effects of these phenomena are unmistakable. When I synthesized the many studies of why people left organizations in the past four years, there were clear trends: disrespect, uncaring leaders, feeling unvalued, a lack of meaning, and feeling exploited. In a recent survey of over fifty-two thousand workers, the most important factors in keeping someone in a job were found to be whether they feel fulfilled, are seen as a full person, and are on a team with others who care about their well-being. Other surveys show that, for the first time, work-life integration has eclipsed financial stability as employees' top priority.[7]

Each of these dynamics is at play in an environment of infinitely increasing choice. With the continued rise in educational attainment, gig work, and hybrid work, people have more options for where, when, and how to earn a living. With more options comes more discernment. With more discernment comes an increasing focus on how we want to *feel* at work—and emerging evidence on worker priorities shows that people need and want to feel significant.

Researchers call the experience of feeling significant to those around you *mattering*. Drawn from the work of psychologists Gordon Flett, Isaac Prilleltensky, and Gregory Elliott, mattering comes from feeling valued by others and adding value to their lives.[8]

The good news is that mattering doesn't require extensive new programs or initiatives—we experience it through everyday interpersonal interactions. This means *you*, the leader, can help fill the human need for significance for the people you serve. Creating mattering is a nonoptional leadership practice, and this book will reveal skills you can implement now to show the people around you how they're valued and how they add value.

You Can Create Mattering

This book exists because of an encounter with a university janitor eight years ago. I was a PhD student studying organizational development and struggling to find a research interest. I passed a familiar custodian

on my way to a professional development conference. She stopped me and asked, "What are you up to today?"

"Oh, I'm going to a free training," I replied.

"How did you hear about that?" she asked.

"I got an email," I said.

Her demeanor shifted. Her shoulders fell forward. She sighed. "I've been here for almost ten years, and nobody's shown me how to get my email up and running!"

The encounter led me to embed myself with a group of janitors. I sought to understand what makes work meaningful (or meaningless) in a challenging and often overlooked occupation. For each custodian in that study, it wasn't money, free meals, or awards that contributed to a sense of positive meaning. It was the small moments with supervisors, peers, or building users in which they were asked about their lives; were thanked, supported, or heard; or were shown the difference they made.[9]

Those who experienced meaningfulness also experienced moments of mattering. On the other hand, those who felt meaninglessness endured the opposite—being brushed by, minimized, unheard, or unsupported, like the custodian without access to her email account.

That was merely the start of my journey. After that study, I spent five years working with thousands of people in nearly every occupation on the skills to create moments of mattering. I found that military leaders, cleaning crews, finance executives, plumbers, accountants, doctors, and teachers all share the desire to matter. I observed that feeling seen, heard, valued, and cared for by leaders shaped careers and enriched lives—but feeling insignificant or degraded often derailed them.

Leaders greatly impact people's sense of significance. When my research team and I studied over one thousand employees in twenty industries, we found that those whose supervisors perform small acts like connecting with them personally, knowing and investing in their unique gifts, and showing them the impact they make through regular interactions are far more likely to experience mattering, feel mo-

tivated and engaged, and find meaning in their work. They're also less likely to leave their organizations and occupations.[10]

For this book, I conducted in-depth interviews with people in numerous occupations to understand how the experience of mattering develops over a career and a lifespan. We've learned that mattering is created through small, repeated interactions that ensure people feel noticed, affirmed, and needed. These three ingredients form the three leadership practices that are the structure for this book:

- **Noticing** is the practice of seeing and hearing others.
- **Affirming** is the practice of showing people how their unique gifts make a unique difference.
- **Needing** is the practice of showing people how they're relied on and indispensable.

Each domain is activated by interpersonal skills that can be learned and scaled. And while much of this feels straightforward, maybe even obvious, the reality is that it is not. Although creating mattering seems like common sense, it is *not* a common practice. But you can make it one.

What to Expect (and What Not To)

I spend 30 percent of my time teaching courses on the science of human flourishing at work and positive leadership at the Center for Meaning and Purpose at Colorado State University. That's also where I research the experience of mattering and meaningful work and how leaders can incite it. Additionally, I teach in a program called Organizational Learning, Performance, and Change, coaching students who are professionals to lead transformation across complex and diverse organizations.

But most of my time is spent on the ground with leaders, implementing the skills you will learn in this book. I've worked with

executives and frontline supervisors in *Fortune* 100 companies, government agencies, hospitals, the military, startups, nonprofits, and school districts. One of my specialties is working with people in the trades and those who manage wage-earning service work, where I've experienced firsthand the toll of not mattering at our jobs—and how leaders who commit to showing employees that they matter can change people's lives.

As a result of the combination of researching, teaching, and *doing*, I take a research-to-practice approach in this book. I believe that how people spend one-third of their lives—that is, working—is too important to be left up to practices that aren't supported by evidence. I also believe you can't care for something you don't understand. A leader's craft is people; all leaders, then, should understand some basic human psychology and sociology. They must also understand the actual costs of unmet basic needs. My emphasis on research in this book is meant to increase your understanding of people so that you can better care for them.

In that spirit, part one illuminates the *what* and *why* of mattering. We'll explore mattering as a basic need in work and life, the outcomes of feeling significant and insignificant, and the forces that necessitate the leadership skill of creating mattering. You'll also take a self-assessment to measure your mattering skill level.

In part two, we'll shift to the *how* of mattering, dig into the practice domains of noticing, affirming, and needing, and explore more than twenty-five skills used to activate them.

In part three, you'll learn how to scale these skills across organizations and maintain the belief that *you* matter.

Along the way, you'll engage with influential research, stories of leaders who embrace mattering, and people in a range of occupations who've experienced both mattering and anti-mattering.

As you read, I'd like you to keep a few notes in mind:

- **I know that the luxury of my job is that I don't have to do *your* job.** You're the person who knows the most about your daily

work (and life). I may be a "content expert," but you're the *context* expert. I get to study how people work; you *do* the work. So we need to work together. If you come across an idea while reading and think, "This won't fit into my job or organization," I challenge you to ask, "How might I make this work here?" I see my job as being not a "thought leader" but someone who supports *practice leaders*. That's you.

- **All practices and skills for mattering are not represented here.** The ideas in the book are ones I've seen in action and have directly worked on with leaders. But many other skills can help people feel noticed, affirmed, and needed, too. Start with what I present, but continue to build and develop your own practices.
- **This is not a "systems redesign" book.** Creating mattering is not a substitute for essential aspects of employment such as paying livable wages, setting predictable schedules, and providing access to basic health care. Many other books exist on large-scale systemic redesign, societal mattering, or sociopolitical issues that affect employees. While I touch on the role of environment in part three, this is a book for leaders who have the ability to improve the experience of the person in front of them on a regular basis. At its core, this is an interpersonal relations book.

Now, if you're ready to take action to address our epidemic of insignificance and to revitalize your people's lives and your organization, let's begin.

PART ONE

WHY MATTERING MATTERS

1

THE MATTERING INSTINCT

To be of importance to others is to be alive.

—T. S. ELIOT

I met Jane before her overnight shift at an underlit university library.[1] She wore a warm smile and a weathered one-pocket custodial shirt.

For many years Jane had been the caretaker for a beloved family member. When he died, she felt purposeless. She had no job and a limited education. Faced with the prospect of homelessness, Jane took a cleaning position at the university where I do research, and volunteered for our study on how service workers experience meaning.[2]

Jane told me that during her first few shifts, she endured incessant negative thoughts like, *Why couldn't I have done something more with my life?* and *I wish I were more than just a janitor.* Those insidious ideas were implanted by some friends and family, who told her cleaning was a "dirty" job.

"Why did you stay?" I asked.

After a pause, Jane wiped away a tear and shared the moment that changed everything. In her first month, a supervisor noticed she was struggling. He invited her into a training room and handed her a dictionary. He told her to open it and read the definition of *custodian*: "A person responsible for looking after something."

"That's you," the supervisor told her. "You're responsible for and take custody of this building and everyone in it."

Something changed inside Jane. She told me it was one of the first times in her life that someone made her feel worthy. Her mental chatter brightened. Despite friends telling her that cleaning was unskilled and lowly, she said, "Realizing I was looking after these buildings and everyone in them changed my belief patterns about myself and my job. It kept me here for eighteen years."

Jane felt the power of mattering.

What Is Mattering?

The experience of feeling significant to the people around you is called mattering. Psychologist and researcher Isaac Prilleltensky describes two factors that induce it: feeling valued *by* the people around us, and adding value *to* the people around us.[3] We feel valued when we're fully seen, heard, and understood by others. We experience *adding* value when we see the unique difference we make and feel needed. In that moment with her supervisor, Jane felt valued by her leader and saw how she added value to everyone in the building she cleaned.

The need to matter to others is a basic survival instinct encoded in every person you lead. When my first son was born, I remember him tilting his head back to lock eyes with me as he stretched out his tiny hand and gripped my index finger. I didn't realize it then, but I was experiencing six million years of fine-tuned programming that directs us to seek to matter to another person immediately after birth. That first impulse my son felt is called the *grasp reflex*, one of several reflexes designed to secure our first caring relationship.[4] Our primal urge to seek mattering commences what psychologist Arie Kruglanski calls our *quest for significance*, the unending search to satisfy the universal human motivation to matter. Our quest for significance, Kruglanski writes, is "the essential force animating human behavior."[5]

To see how mattering animates our lives, consider this: To get through the day, you must believe at some level that you matter and

that your life deserves your unrelenting energy. Today you got out of bed. You ate. You drank. You may have gone to work. You considered how you would spend the day's hours and minutes. You decided to read this book. Essentially, you believed that you and your actions can make a difference. Pursuing any human activity first requires believing that we and our lives are important.

Now, consider the absence of the belief that you matter. Imagine that you opened your eyes this morning and presumed that your life was insignificant and unimportant. It's unlikely you would've done much of anything today. Think about how sensitive, angry, or sad you become when someone threatens the belief that you matter—a partner talks over you in a conversation, your child ignores you, a colleague takes credit for your idea, or a friend passes you by without a "hello."

When we feel like we don't matter, our energy fades and our will to actively engage in life wanes. The consequences of feeling insignificant at work are profound, manifesting as chronic disengagement, absenteeism, loneliness, low self-esteem, and even depression. These are all driven, in part, by the unrelenting conviction that we don't, can't, and never will matter. Philosopher Rebecca Newberger Goldstein calls the need for significance our *mattering instinct*. Fulfilling that instinct, Goldstein says, is "inseparable from pursuing a coherent human life."[6]

To satisfy the mattering instinct as individuals, we must believe that we matter to others. Maintaining that belief hinges on what's in our environment—we must see and feel the evidence of our significance around us. That's what Jane's supervisor did in that interaction. He showed her the evidence of her significance, and Jane drew on it to pull her through the highs and lows of almost two decades. This kind of power—to build relationships that can fulfill a primal human need—is what makes leaders so influential.

Jane's story also illustrates how small interactions, in which we see how we're important to others, are pivotal to satisfying our mattering instinct. Over time, these interactions construct our *self-concept*, the collection of beliefs we hold about ourselves.[7] We forge these beliefs

through what are known as "reflected appraisals," signals we interpret from other people. When Jane told me that hearing how she took responsibility for an entire building and its occupants changed her belief patterns, she expressed her new sense of identity as a worthy and essential person, introduced through the interaction with her supervisor.

I see this phenomenon in my research and daily work with organizations. When I ask people to describe a time that they've felt they mattered, I don't hear things like, "When I got my paycheck" or "When I won employee of the month." Instead, they recall small moments of being seen in their struggles, helped, thanked, shown the difference they made, checked in on, remembered, or told they were needed. As one employee told me, "Don't give me a free sandwich or certificate. Remember my name and say thank you." His quip underscores that mattering is built through small interactions, not perks or programs.

Whether you're a CEO, a team leader, a coworker, a friend, or a parent, you play a key role in building others' sense of significance. This reality can feel uncomfortable—after all, it's easier to grasp that we're individually responsible for our sense of significance. But our sense of mattering (or not mattering) is crafted through our daily connections, and in understanding this, your role can become much more exciting and empowering. Creating mattering for someone else requires interpersonal skills and a set of habits you can learn.

For leaders, learning those skills is elemental. Because mattering is a primal instinct and an essential driver of behavior, ensuring people feel significant comes before many of the things we say we want in our organizations. For example, if we want people to contribute, they must *first* believe they're worthy of contributing. If we want them to use their strengths, they must *first* believe they have them. If we want them to share their voices, they must *first* believe their voices are significant. If we want them to care, they must *first* feel cared for. If we want something to matter to them, they must first believe that *they matter to us*.

The Mattering Deficit

While the need to matter is foundational, the interpersonal practice of showing employees how they're significant is neglected. In a time of declining mental health, when we need more people's unique contributions to solve complex problems, we face a mattering deficit.

The first symptom of the deficit presents as workplace loneliness. The percentage of people who consider themselves lonely increased from 46 percent in 2018 to 58 percent in 2021.[8] One survey of over four thousand workers shows that 82 percent of respondents have felt lonely at work.[9] People are also starting to seek support for feelings of disconnection. At 1-800-Flowers.com, the most popular online chat group among its five thousand employees is titled, quite bluntly, "Loneliness."[10]

Feeling lonely affects our well-being and workplace performance. One employee at a logistics company told the *Wall Street Journal*, "I feel sort of an emptiness. . . . It makes it harder to go in and give it your all if you don't feel like anyone is there rooting for you."[11] Employees who feel lonely are less likely to work efficiently and will struggle to be mentally and emotionally present. They're also three times more likely to have low job satisfaction and much more likely to have mental and physical health issues.[12] But despite the widespread awareness of the loneliness epidemic in the last decade, the percentage of people who feel disconnected at work continues trending upward. What are we missing?

Conventional wisdom suggests that the solution is to connect more. Over the past several years, this advice spurred efforts to reengage an increasingly hybrid workforce by creating more connection opportunities—often in the form of meetings. Since 2020, some reports show, American workers' time spent in meetings nearly tripled.[13] Another common solution to disconnection is technology. More apps are available to increase virtual interaction, and they're being used more than ever. In three years the daily users of the business messaging

app Slack increased from twelve million to thirty-two million.[14] Yet high rates of workplace loneliness persist.

Leaders must realize that employees can have frequent interactions and still feel lonely. (One study revealed that people's loneliness *increased* in proportion with their meeting load.[15]) When closely examining the latest evidence on what drives loneliness, the lesson is clear: the quality of interactions matters more than the quantity.[16] So, what constitutes a "quality" interaction?

In one study of nearly 700 employees in 150 work groups, management researchers Hakan Ozcelik and Sigal Barsade found that a key predictor of reduced loneliness was, to use their phrase, a culture of companionate love. The researchers defined the experience of this love as receiving the interpersonal behaviors of attention, care, and compassion—all acts that help people feel valued. The perceived closeness of a relationship is a key determinant of the relationship's quality. When employees in the study felt attention, care, and compassion from one another and their leader, they were far less likely to feel lonely and more likely to perform better.[17]

In other words, loneliness isn't an outcome of being alone—it's an outcome of feeling that you don't matter. That's why the opposite of loneliness is not having more people around you, but feeling significant to those around you—feeling truly seen, heard, and valued.

Emerging evidence signals the relative absence of quality relationships in workplaces, though. In a study of over one thousand workers, Workhuman, a provider of culture-supporting software, released sobering data showing that 27 percent of workers have felt "flat-out ignored," and over half feel undervalued. Rates were even higher for women and people of color, which means that when it comes to fostering mattering, more barriers exist for some groups than others.[18] Other large surveys have found that 65 percent of workers say they feel underappreciated.[19] In an American Psychological Association poll of over 2,500 employed adults, one in five say they're in a toxic culture characterized by disrespect and exclusion. Those who report feeling insignificant in their job were almost 25 percent more susceptible

to chronic stress. At the same time, 95 percent of respondents said feeling valued at work was important, a testament to the universal need to matter.[20]

The consequences of the mattering deficit are palpable. One report found that 60 percent of people are emotionally detached at work, and close to 20 percent self-report that they're "miserable." Despite increased attention on the employee experience over the last twenty years, about 85 percent of the global workforce remains persistently disengaged.[21] In a survey of more than 1,500 employees, 76 percent had experienced at least one mental health challenge. Those who feel unsupported by leaders and have unaddressed mental health symptoms perform at just 70 percent of their total capacity.[22] Unsurprisingly, workplace productivity recently saw its steepest decline since 1947.[23] A record 4.5 million Americans quit their jobs in one month in 2021, and rates of chronic absenteeism at work are increasing.[24]

October 2022 saw an announcement from the highest-ranking medical doctor in the United States that amplified the urgency of restoring people's sense of significance. In a first, the US surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, weighed in on what needed to change in workplaces to address the nation's mental health crisis. He officially named "mattering at work" an essential element of a healthy organization, underscoring that when the primal need to matter stays unmet, it's an insidious driver of poor individual and organizational health.[25]

While the challenges seem daunting, there *is* a way out. Leaders and the cultures they cultivate greatly affect people's sense of significance and resulting well-being. In the Workhuman report, a leader was the most meaningful source of feeling seen and recognized. One systematic review of thirty years of data concluded that quality relationships with leaders predict emotional well-being and lower stress.[26] Among one thousand employees in twenty-two industries, my team and I found that a leader's behavior accounted for almost 50 percent of whether participants experienced increased feelings of mattering and meaningfulness in work.[27] The behaviors we measured—developing a personal connection, recognizing someone's gifts, showing someone

the impact they make—all occurred in interpersonal interactions that a leader could directly and immediately control.

A critical part of addressing the mattering deficit is returning to a focus on what we can all take action on: ensuring the next person we interact with feels seen, heard, and valued. Developing and implementing the skills to create moments of mattering is more than a nice-to-have. Several forces are conspiring to make these skills imperative for the future of work.

The Mattering Imperative

Upheaval events amplify our search for mattering. Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, a friend remarked that it felt "apocalyptic." He used the right word. The Greek root of *apocalypse* is *apokaluptein*, which means to uncover or reveal. The pandemic didn't introduce the need to matter, but it did reveal the need to matter at work for many who hadn't consciously considered it. Routines were interrupted, and more time became available. With time came the space for self-reflection. What millions uncovered was that work no longer worked for them. With more flexibility in how, when, and where they earned a paycheck, people reevaluated their priorities. They thought about the parts of their lives they had sacrificed for organizations that didn't sacrifice for them.

The opportunity to step off the hamster wheel helped people finally realize they were on one. In a survey of over one thousand employees, two-thirds said the pandemic spurred them to reflect on their purpose in life, over half reconsidered the type of work they do, and 70 percent realized that work was a significant source of meaning. Another study, of two thousand employees in Britain, showed that 40 percent contemplated quitting their jobs, and 22 percent said the pandemic prompted them to realize their job was "pointless."[28]

For people who didn't get this reflection time—the fifty-five million deemed "essential" early in the pandemic—new light illuminated

the shadows of frontline work, the labor that keeps society safe and running. In those jobs, the crisis uncloaked dehumanizing, disrespectful, and devaluing practices. The consequences of this newfound attention peaked in August 2023, when more frontline workers went on strike in a single month than in the rest of the twenty-first century. Nearly 4.1 million aggregated workdays were lost that month.[29] As essential workers realized their value, they increasingly demanded to *feel* valued.

The pandemic also prompted more people to become aware of health risks. With many directly or indirectly seeing those around them lose their lives, society developed a collective spike in what researchers call mortality awareness. An increase in it drives powerful outcomes like greater anxiety or angst, a search for meaning, a reinvestment in relationships, gratitude, and a general search for more purpose. Philosopher Roman Krznaric calls these moments of mortality awareness "death nudges," and they stimulate a legacy mindset—a renewed focus on the bigger purpose of our lives, and a greater concern for how our lives matter.[30]

Amid this surge of critical self-reflection, social movements fueled by our technological interconnectedness demanded justice and equity and called attention to marginalized and overlooked voices. The #MeToo movement shed light on the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, fueling a lasting dialogue about gender equity in work. LGBTQ+ rights advocacy and grassroots Indigenous rights movements captured international headlines. Incidents of police brutality against Black individuals focused the mainstream media on the ongoing struggle against racial prejudices and catalyzed an international conversation about race.

These movements affected what people expected from their employers. A CNBC survey in partnership with the Executive Leadership Council found that 88 percent of companies have made new commitments to inclusion and belonging since 2020.[31] As part of these commitments, many companies openly acknowledged the importance of fostering an environment where historically marginalized employees

can feel safe, respected, and valued. Mattering is the opposite polarity of marginalization, as professor of education Nancy Schlossberg described in her influential essay "Mattering and Marginality: Key Issues in Building Community."[32] Movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter are critical reminders that people face different and unique barriers to experiencing mattering. As a leader, it's imperative for you to be aware of the weight of the daily struggles many employees silently deal with. It's also the job of a leader to mitigate those hurdles, and committing to developing the interpersonal skills to see, hear, understand, and value people is a crucial step forward. These essential issues are not going away. Among more than eight thousand employees surveyed in 2021, 80 percent said they preferred to work for a company that values inclusion and actively fosters a culture where people feel respected.[33]

These forces are coalescing as choices of where, when, and how to work expand exponentially. Rates of literacy and educational attainment are the highest they've ever been globally and are increasing; both are key predictors of increased career choice. Psychologists call a stronger sense of personal agency *volition*, and increasing it predicts more self-belief and incites more strategic future-oriented goal-setting.[34]

Many observers have commented that Generation Zers and Millennials want more purpose and meaning in their work. But the drive to experience mattering is fundamentally human. No one prefers to feel insignificant to those around them; every person, regardless of age, seeks to matter. What seems to be happening is that younger generations have more avenues for earning a living. Almost 16 percent of US workers do so via gig work. By 2027, projections estimate, almost 50 percent of Americans will participate in the gig economy.[35] Unsurprisingly, people who saw their parents struggle silently under transactional organizations are exercising their newfound choice. Organizations can't simply rely on "giving someone a job" or "providing a paycheck" as motivation for people to work for them. In the context of greater self-reflection, the *quality* of the experience of everyday work will matter more than ever.

Organizations are experiencing the effects of high volition. The wave of pandemic-era voluntary turnover—what some commentators called the Great Resignation—saw tens of millions people leave their jobs.[36] Importantly, though, research shows that people largely left not for more pay, benefits, or flexibility but because of disrespectful cultures, noninclusive climates, and uncaring leaders.

In 2022, for example, Massachusetts Institute of Technology lecturer Donald Sull and his team analyzed data from 1.4 million people who quit between April and September 2021, hoping to uncover the top reasons for their departures.[37] They found that compensation didn't even rank in the top 10 of over 150 factors—which is consistent with decades of research showing that money has a limited long-term effect on retention.[38]

What factors were more significant? A culture in which people felt disrespected, excluded, and unvalued was *ten times more predictive* of them leaving than were pay or benefits. Unnoticed performance and a lack of recognition were three times more predictive than money. And other surveys support Sull's findings. For example, one poll of 587 employees who left their jobs in 2020 and 2021 without another lined up showed that uncaring leaders and a lack of meaningful work were two of the most common reasons.[39] It's clear now that what happened over the last few years wasn't a Great Resignation. It was *a demand for dignity.*

I don't believe anyone intends to be an uncaring leader. We just haven't paid enough attention to developing the skills to care. As writer David Brooks observed, "There is one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community, organization, or society: the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen—to accurately know another person, to let them feel valued, heard, and understood."[40] Honing the skills to create a culture of significance is at the heart of revitalizing the health of our workplaces and workers.

A leader's ability to do so will be nonoptional in the coming decades. As artificial intelligence eclipses our technical, operational, and analytical skills, our human skills will be needed more than ever. Seventy percent of surveyed executives say relational skills will be more

What Mattering Isn't

Now that we've explored what mattering is, why it matters, and how you can cultivate it, we need to define what it *isn't*. Often the concept is confused with other terms. As a leader, understanding several distinctions before you proceed with this book is vital:

1. **Mattering is not the same as belonging.** When we feel that we belong, we feel welcomed, accepted, and approved of by a group.[a] When we feel that we matter, on the other hand, we feel significant to group members—seen, heard, valued, and needed. Belonging isn't enough on its own, because people can feel welcomed or accepted but not feel seen, important, or needed by individuals in the group.

2. **Mattering isn't the same as self-esteem.** Experiences of mattering *sustain* self-esteem—that's why trying to build self-esteem on your own isn't enough to enable well-being. A significant portion of our mental health depends on how much we experience mattering *to others*, which makes mattering as unique as it is actionable. Mattering is simultaneously one of the most potent predictors of well-being and arguably the most dependent on other people.

3. **Mattering isn't a buzzword, a generational preference, or a trend.** Feeling significant is not a personal or generational preference, a "touchy-feely" self-help concept, or a short-lived workplace trend. The need to matter is akin to the need to eat, so making someone feel that they matter is about as touchy-feely or trendy as feeding someone who's hungry. Unfortu-

nately, the evidence we've reviewed shows that organizations and the people in them are malnourished psychologically and emotionally.

4. **Mattering isn't about being soft or entitled.** Showing others the evidence of their significance isn't about coddling them or giving them a participation trophy. When people are noticed, affirmed, and needed, they'll have no need for a trophy at all. The widespread criticisms of younger generations feeling entitled at work should focus instead on what creates the need for entitlement: a pervasive, perpetual, unmet need to matter. It's no coincidence that surveys show close to 75 percent of Generation Zers, those born between 1995 and 2012, say they feel lonely, the highest rate of any generation.[b]

5. **Mattering is not a substitute for decent work.** Psychologist Ryan Duffy describes work as decent when it provides a physically and emotionally safe environment, a livable and consistent schedule, a fair and livable wage, and access to health care.[c] Fostering mattering can buffer the stress of indecent work, but it is not a replacement for creating good jobs.

a. Psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky describes this distinction in this interview: B. Steward, "The Science of Mattering with Prof. Isaac Prilleltensky," Barry-Wehmiller, February 3, 2023, https://www.barrywehmiller.com/post/podcast/2023/02/02/podcast-the-science-of-mattering-with-prof.-isaac-prilleltensky.

b. B. Coombs, "Loneliness Is on the Rise and Younger Workers and Social Media Users Feel It Most, Cigna Survey Finds," CNBC, January 23, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/23/loneliness-is-rising-younger-workers-and-social-media-users-feel-it-most.html.

c. R. D. Duffy et al., "The Development and Initial Validation of the Decent Work Scale," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 64, no. 2 (2017): 206–221.

important than technical ones for the future of their organizations, and 78 percent of the top-employing occupations now classify uniquely human skills as "critical."[41]

Minouche Shafik, former president of Columbia University, captured this shift to a "relationship economy" when she told the *New York Times*, "In the past, jobs were about muscles. Now they're about brains, but in the future, they'll be about the heart."[42] The ability to ensure people feel significant is a fundamental human skill.

From Common Sense to Common Practice

If fully seeing, hearing, and valuing people is foundational, why isn't it common practice? Why aren't leaders already enacting these essential skills?

There's a gap between what we know is important and what we intentionally do. For example, look at your task list today. How many actions are written down that are specifically aimed at seeing, hearing, or valuing someone? If you struggled to find one, you're not alone. When we see something as basic, we sometimes subconsciously label it "simple." And when we see something as simple, we approach the action less rigorously.[43] The unhelpful tradition of calling essential human relations skills "soft" is one way we've cognitively downplayed them.

Minimizing relational skills leads us to inadequately develop them. For example, one poll showed that just 35 percent of employees are offered training in relational skills.[44] Many educational, management, and leadership programs focus on giving people the ability to acquire, achieve, and compete for themselves rather than to see, understand, and affirm each other. For example, you (or your organization) most likely have a process for developing and evaluating skills to strategize, perform, and produce. Do you also have a process for developing and evaluating abilities to ensure people feel seen, heard, and valued? We tend to have practices for everything that matters in our organizations except ensuring our people feel that *they* matter.

One result of our tendency to overlook relational skills is that we've largely developed leaders by relying on intuition. We tend to promote people with technical skills and accumulated knowledge and trust they'll do the right thing and be "good people." But *intuition doesn't scale*. Skills and habits in the right environments do. Filling a survival instinct and a basic need as consequential as mattering is too important to be left up to intuition.

It's easy to tell people they matter. But it takes intention and skill to show people exactly *how* they matter. To develop those abilities and move from common sense to common practice, we must be able to name and categorize them. That is the purpose of the Noticing, Affirming, and Needing (NAN) model, which serves as the framework for the rest of this book.

How to Create Mattering: The Noticing, Affirming, and Needing Model

The practices and skills in this book are based on more than forty years of psychological and sociological research on what cultivates a sense of significance.[45] While the need for significance is instinctual and fundamental, social psychologists Morris Rosenberg and Claire McCullough first formalized the mattering concept in the 1980s. Studying what predicted the health of 6,500 adolescents, they found a crucial indicator of well-being was whether the young people felt significant to their parents.[46] When mattering was present, adolescents had higher self-esteem, lower incidences of anxiety and depression, and more positive emotional states. Rosenberg coined the term *mattering*, which spurred a stream of studies with adults that replicated these findings and demonstrated that feeling important to others is a critical driver of mental and physical health in life and work.

Through the last few decades of research, psychologists have been able to identify and measure what constitutes mattering through testing with tens of thousands of people. As summarized by psychologist Gregory Elliott, mattering arises through three primary experiences:

feeling acknowledged and paid attention to, perceiving that others invest in us and our potential, and feeling that others rely on us.[47]

Naming these components helps us understand what mattering feels like and what constitutes its experience. What's been missing are practices and skills that leaders can learn and implement to cultivate these experiences. So, over the last five years, I investigated each ingredient of mattering to identify and categorize the leadership practices and skills that foster it. I interviewed people across various occupations and worked with hundreds of diverse groups—from military leaders to bankers to maintenance workers—to answer the question: When someone makes you feel that you matter, what are they *doing*? At the same time, my team and I embarked on a study with over one thousand employees to statistically identify the leadership behaviors that drive experiences of mattering and meaningful work.

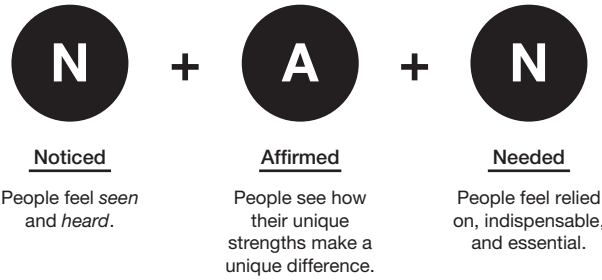
Through this research, I pinpointed three practices people use to create experiences of mattering. When people feel they matter, they are repeatedly *noticed*, *affirmed*, and *needed*. (See figure 1-1.) A "practice" is the repeated exercise of a skill. That's why there are several informing skills for each area. The three leadership practices that create mattering for others are as follows:

1. **Noticing** comprises the skills of truly seeing and hearing people. *Seeing* others is acknowledging them and paying attention to the details, ebbs, and flows of their lives and work while offering actions to show them you're paying attention. *Hearing* someone means demonstrating a real interest in the meaning and feeling behind their words and inviting out their experiences, perspectives, and feedback within a climate of psychological safety. At its core, the noticing practice helps people feel understood.

2. **Affirming** involves the skills of showing people how their unique gifts have a unique impact. It consists of knowing, naming, and nurturing people's gifts, showing how they and their work make a difference, giving meaningful gratitude, and providing affirming critical feedback.

FIGURE 1-1

The NAN model



3. **Needing** shows people how they're relied on, indispensable, and essential. We do this by demonstrating exactly how they and their work are necessary for a bigger outcome, that they and their work aren't disposable, and that they're integral members of our team and organization.

I've taught this model and skill set to thousands of leaders. It's relevant to both individuals and organizations, and it's useful to leaders for two reasons. First, the NAN model helps us name and categorize skills often relegated to intuition. When we name something, we can invest in it or change it, we can continue doing it—and we can bring it from common sense to common practice. Second, the model gives us an evaluative question to ask ourselves daily: "Do I make sure the people around me feel *noticed*, *affirmed*, and *needed*?"

At the end of part one, you'll find an assessment to evaluate your skills for each practice area, which will help you engage in the practices in part two and develop your plan to activate them.

Leaders Matter

Jane couldn't recall the name of the supervisor who gave her a newfound sense of responsibility and self-worth. She told me he was

reassigned to another team shortly after their conversation. "Did you ever have the chance to tell him what that interaction meant to you?" I asked. She shook her head. That supervisor likely doesn't recall those few minutes he intentionally and skillfully spent with a new custodian, yet that moment charted Jane's eighteen-year career. This is a reminder that what may seem like a small interaction to you can greatly impact the people you lead.

In my work, I often hear stories like Jane's. When people talk to me about what makes their leaders great, they rarely mention big ideas, projects, product launches, or quarterly results. They talk about feeling noticed, affirmed, or needed by those above them. Great leaders optimize interactions.

On average, people spend more time with their colleagues and leaders than their families or friends.[48] A leader is partly responsible for how a person spends almost one-third of their lives. How you show up in your daily relationships matters.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- *Mattering* is the experience of feeling significant to the people around you, and it comes from *feeling valued* and *adding value*. Mattering is a survival instinct and a fundamental need that animates human behavior.
- People *feel valued* when they're fully seen, heard, and understood. People experience *adding value* when they see the unique difference they make and feel needed.
- The experience of mattering happens through interpersonal interactions, not through programs or perks.
- Mattering is not the same as belonging. When we feel that we belong, we feel welcomed, accepted, and approved by a group.

When we feel that we matter, we feel significant to group members.

- In 2022, the US surgeon general named "mattering at work" a vital ingredient for healthy workplaces. Yet evidence shows we're facing a mattering deficit, indicated by increasing rates of loneliness and reported feelings of being invisible, undervalued, and disrespected.
- There are three major practices that leaders can learn and enact to create experiences of mattering: noticing, affirming, and needing.