
The Meaningful Workplace



In a meaningful workplace people feel there's a real point to what they and their employer are out to do.

This white paper introduces the "meaningful workplace," an idea which seeks to address many of the pain points businesses are feeling as they try to get their enterprises fit for the future.

It explains the notion of "meaningful" and what it means in the context of creating a meaningful workplace.

This paper sets out the advantages of building a purposeful, values-driven workplace with a meaningful culture that better balances the needs of both the employer and the employee.

It explores how businesses can reach out to their employees on a new and more engaging human level that reduces the static inherent in typical company/employee interactions.

It argues that when senior management seeks more meaningful outcomes from their employee engagement activities, they not only achieve their traditional objectives, but also something of great and enduring value: a new, higher-order, and meaningful alliance with their employees.

This paper suggests that the traditional notions of "purpose," "values," and "culture" need to be rethought in light of the changing attitudes, expectations, and aspirations of both current and prospective employees. It presents the alternative ideas of "ambition," "feelings," and "behavior," which are better aligned to the needs of the modern, meaning-seeking employee.

It details what composes the ideal master plan for a meaningful workplace, and how that master plan can be used to fuel a range of plans designed to engender meaning at the corporate, workplace and individual levels.

Finally, this paper points out the need to rethink how to engage employees who are seeking meaning and urges businesses to think beyond mere "messaging" programs.

While this paper challenges a number of established employee engagement principles and practices, it demonstrates how the meaningful workplace concept addresses the same business objectives of improved morale and increased productivity and engagement – albeit from a more compelling human perspective.

Context

The workplace is in crisis. Workers are not engaged. Productivity is down. Morale is low. Many employees obviously don't see the point of what they, or their employer, are doing.

How can a business turn the tide of employee dissonance?

How can it become fit for a future that's bound to be more competitive, complex, and commoditized?

How can it connect with people who are no longer blindly accepting corporate propaganda? People who are more "we" than "me" focused? People who are more discerning about the ideas, products, and brands they buy into, the businesses they buy from, and the companies for whom they work?

Tomorrow's most successful businesses will have shifted their workplace to a more meaningful employee engagement platform.

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Using meaning as a springboard, these winners will have built places in which people want to work, are proud to work, and excel at their work.

Understanding What Makes Something Meaningful

In the course of a day, our senses open us up to millions of stimuli, each of which presents itself and demands our attention. To cope with the avalanche of input, our system quickly decides which stimuli are significant enough to be acknowledged, and which are so significant that they must be remembered.

In other words, what matters...and what doesn't.

The stimuli we remember can be significant in two ways. On a primal level, some of our memories help us survive against danger. On a higher-order level, some of our memories are cherished because they are relevant and emotionally important to us. These memories are meaningful because they directly connect us to what we hold to be important: our needs, beliefs, interests, and aspirations.

When something remembered is meaningful to us, it resides with one foot in our brain and one in our heart. When a situation provokes us, we rapidly bring the memory to mind as a thought wrapped in emotion. The resulting feeling often spurs us to action and re-engagement with the source of the memory. Assuming the second experience is in the same vein as the first, there is a compounding effect that makes the memory even more meaningful.

For a business looking to better engage its employees, being meaningful by doing things that matter is the key to being cared about enough to be remembered and cherished. Creating a meaningful workplace is about establishing a high-order connection with employees and benefiting from the compounding effect that comes from a constant stream of meaningful experiences tied directly to the needs, beliefs, interests, and aspirations of employees.

Toward the Meaningful Workplace

Meaningful workplaces are built by companies that aim to produce a more meaningful outcome from, and for, their people.

To become meaningful, these companies adopt a new stance vis-à-vis their relationship with their employees. They strive to reduce the distance that's been imposed through organization structures and prevailing attitudes. They seek stronger emotional connections up, down, and across their enterprise. They see their task as making their company fit for the future by making it fit for humans.

They create a meaningful workplace master plan that defines their compelling reason for being, identifies how they want to leave people feeling, and states how they wish the company and its employees will behave.

They use the resulting master plan to create a common ground of understanding, respect, and ambition. The master plan then serves as the foundation for other initiatives designed to realize a business' ambition, feelings, and behavior, including: "macro plans" that adapt the company's structure, policies, and procedures; "mini plans" that engage groups of employees; and "micro plans" that engage employees individually.

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These initiatives inspire employees to align their intent, attitudes, behaviors, and actions to the meaningful outcome the business seeks. As this kicks into action and becomes increasingly contagious within the workplace, the work experience fundamentally changes for the better, from top to bottom, across silos, disciplines, borders, and cultures.

Employees Respond Positively and Actively to a Meaningful Workplace

As the company transforms the way it reaches out to their employees, their employees change the way they respond back to the company.

Employees eagerly engage in the work at hand, align with the company strategies, collaborate with one another, and contribute their energy and skills. They confidently deal with peers, prospects, customers, partners, and suppliers. They proudly tell their family and friends about the company they work for.

And all the other people vital to the business' success (customers, partners, suppliers, investors, community leaders, influencers) start to sense, appreciate, and are drawn toward the new spirit of shared ambition that emanates from the business.

Why People Are Looking for Meaningful Workplaces

Disillusioned by the age of conspicuous consumption, worried by the state of the planet and its people, rocked by war, corruption and financial crises, and immersed in a swirl of information, news, opinion, and gossip, people are searching for meaning in their lives.

Today they feel a need to align with people, ideas, and companies that make them feel they're part of something bigger than themselves.

People are seeking a sense of purpose, a reason for being, and the answer to the question, "Why is this good?" Today their idea of good is shaped by an increased awareness of their own needs, beliefs, interests, and aspirations – and a heightened concern for the planet and empathy for its people.

These factors have made people more discerning than ever. They no longer simply accept slick marketing messages. They scrutinize the products they buy, the companies they buy from, and the employers they consider. They reject products, companies, and employers that don't share their values, mutual ambitions, or offer the opportunity for a meaningful connection.

We believe people seek out employers that clearly state – and live out – their meaningful ambition for the greater good. They don't simply want to feel good, they want to feel their jobs are creating good for themselves, for the company, and for the world.

Why Workplaces Aren't Meaningful Now

"Where do you find people, our most important asset, on a balance sheet? Under expenses."
–Paul Herman, HIP Investor

Business has long been focused on producing widgets, growing market share, managing costs, and delivering shareholder value. And, while employees are a very costly factor, both in terms of monetary and management time, the

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process-driven, measurement-hungry, and org chart world of business has been lacking in human respect, empathy, and meaning.

As such, businesses have been far more focused on the “what” and “how” of their enterprise and have played scant regard to their “why.”

Lacking a compelling reason for being, it’s not unreasonable that employees might feel ambivalent about their work and their employer.

Also, most businesses haven’t yet figured out how to evoke positive emotions in a credible and meaningful way. They may know how to stage a glitzy motivation campaign that cause short-term bumps in performance, but they don’t realize the value in consistently and subtly evoking a set of positive feelings through their attitudes, behavior, and actions.

As such, most workplaces feel pointless and emotionally neutral to employees, hence the litany of employee-related problems and challenges facing today’s business leaders. To thrive in a hyper-competitive, fast-accelerating, and harder-to-differentiate-within world, businesses need to rethink how they reach out to employees.

It’s time for businesses to make their workplaces more meaningful.

Making Your Workplace More Meaningful

“How do you build an organization where people are willing to bring their gifts of initiative, creativity, and passion?”
–Gary Hamel

You can’t build a workplace that is meaningful to people using the old mentality and out-dated tools that have rendered your current workspace meaning-neutral or, at worst, meaningless.

To forge meaningful alliances with meaning-seeking employees requires new ways of thinking and acting. Familiar business constructs that have formed the foundation of employer/employee relations are being rethought and retooled to make business fit for the future.

Ambition Is the New Purpose

“The nearest way to glory is to strive to be what you wish to be thought to be.” –Socrates

Workplaces become meaningfully relevant when employees see the point of what they and their employers are out to do: the company’s why, it’s reason for being, it’s meaningful ambition.

When presented in a credible, inclusive, and authentic way, the company’s meaningful ambition is respected, admired, and embraced by employees because it aligns to their personal values and answers their desire for meaning.

Employees can see themselves within the company’s meaningful ambition. They see how they can actively make it possible. They feel inspired to make it happen. They discover a way of achieving a meaningful outcome for themselves, their employer, and the world in general.

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Feelings Are the New Values

"People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel." –Maya Angelou

The goal of employee engagement is to drive employee attitudes, behavior, morality, and ethics in such a way as to improve their productivity, morale, satisfaction, and usefulness within the organization. However, many companies have struggled with converting their proclaimed values into compelling, work-changing experiences for their employees.

Often, the problems have been that the values are typically expressed with meaning-neutral (if not meaningless) corporate-speak or that the values aren't of a first-order nature (that is, they don't touch on what truly constitutes the "good" for people inside and outside the organization).

As such, employees simply haven't been able to internalize the values. If asked, they may be able to repeat the values verbatim, but their recitation will not be heartfelt. Furthermore, too often their conscious knowledge of the values does not lead to the desired changes in attitudes, behavior, morality, and ethics.

There is a way businesses can get employees to live the company's values. Ironically, it is by never using the word "values." Rather, it is by bringing people to the company's values through feelings.

This is a new way of engaging employees in corporate values. It doesn't ask employees to buy into potentially bland statements crafted in corporate-speak. Instead, it prompts employees to think about how they want themselves, and others, to be left feeling by the business.

To make this work, the business determines a set of higher-order feelings based on their ambition. These feelings are selected based on their ability to help propel employees in their pursuit of the ambition and their ability to serve as an employee-friendly way of deploying values through employee engagement initiatives.

The business then engages its employees around these feelings, using them to shape, change, improve, and make more consistent, the employee's attitudes, behavior, morality, and ethics as it drives them forward toward the ambition.

For example, employees can be engaged in a process by which they explore how the business can better make them feel the selected feelings through changes and additions to the company policies and procedures. At the same time, employees can affect change within by questioning how they, and the policies and procedures they control, can be changed or added to in order to make their superiors, peers, and reports more likely to feel the desired feelings.

By focusing on feelings rather than traditional value statements, a business instantly forges a fresh and new emotional connection with its employees. By using feelings as the platform by which it instills its values, businesses discover a better way to engage their employees and to get them to internalize both the business' ambition (purpose) and its feelings (values).

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Behavior Is the New Culture

"If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed."

–Albert Einstein

A business' fate is determined in large part by its culture. A business culture is the reality created by how people act, react, and interact with each other based on their attitudes, beliefs, and ambitions.

The most damaging business cultures are those in which aggression, neglect, and punishment leave employees feeling they have no reason to commit their energies and skills, share their ideas, or help the company advance.

A culture built principally around rewards for individual or group performance pits individuals and teams against each other, often in ways that create class systems, in-fighting, and divisive loyalties. The winners in such cultures find meaning in their rewards. The rest are left wondering what the point is for them and their employer.

A passive, benign, and inert business culture leaves the business subject to the aggregate confusion that results when each individual employee's quirks, tendencies, and potentially questionable morality and ethics are accommodated.

The most beneficial business cultures are those that unite employees around an ambition, make them feel emotionally connected, and surround them with people who share their ambition, feelings, and behavior.

By consistently and intentionally conveying a meaningful ambition and evoking a set of unique and positive emotions, businesses can transform the meaningful outcome of every aspect of the work experience:

- The physical environment – the aesthetics and functionality of the workplace
- The policies and procedures – the actual rules of the company as well as the way in which employees experience them
- The attitudes and behavior of fellow employees – the feelings evoked when dealing with superiors, peers, and reports
- The moment of contact – the nature of company/employee and employee/outside world interactions

A meaningful workplace culture is based on the way employees experience these factors – what meaning is conveyed and how they are left feeling.

Making It Happen: The Meaningful Workplace Master Plan

A meaningful workplace is built from the company's master plan – a strategic platform used exclusively by senior management – that defines the three core elements of ambition (purpose), feelings (values) and behavior (building a culture). This master plan drives all subsequent activities, which include:

- Macro Plans – how the business itself will be evolved
- Group Plans – how groups of employees will be engaged
- Solo Plans – how individual employees will be personally engaged

Macro Planning puts the business' structure, policies, and procedures through the filter of the master plan to identify opportunities to better align the work experience to the agreed ambition, feelings, and behavior.

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Group Planning develops tailored interactions between the company and groups of its employees (e.g. by location, discipline, seniority, etc.) that engage employees in the principles and practices of the master plan (note: not the master plan itself).

Solo Planning creates the means by which individuals come to personally identify with and internalize the principles and practices of the master plan (note: not the master plan itself).

Going Beyond Sending Messages

“The words printed here are concepts. You must go through the experiences.”

–Saint Augustine

It was earlier noted that people today, including employees and prospective recruits, are looking for more meaning in their lives. This shift has not only prompted companies to reconsider their business models, product offerings, and workplaces, it has made them re-think the terms on which they engage people.

This is especially true when trying to build a meaningful workplace. It becomes far more involved than simply sending a PDF of the master plan to every employee or hanging posters in the cafeteria. Indeed, every aspect of the master plan’s deployment needs to be done in a highly sensitive and respectful way.

It has been said that messaging is dead, meaning that the idea of simply creating and broadcasting a bank of words, no matter how charmingly poetic they may be, simply doesn’t cut it any more. Such business transmissions smack of company speak, and worse, of marketing. Eyes glaze over. Defensive shields are erected. Pure messaging attempts fail.

The goal, after all, is a meaningful outcome that seeks to bring the employer and the employee closer together. This is not to say messaging doesn’t play a role in the development of a meaningful workplace. What it does say is that messaging cannot be the primary tool for instilling a sense of ambition, for evoking feelings, and for creating a meaningful culture.

A Process of Self-Discovery and Self-Identification

“Individual commitment to a group effort – that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” –Vince Lombardi

The focus in the development of a meaningful workplace really needs to be on self-discovery and self-identification. It’s about helping employees to be aware of, to identify with, and to connect to the ambitions, feelings, and behaviors the business seeks in its workplace.

The efforts to build a meaningful workplace must not result in dictates, mandates, or rule books. There is no need to appoint “meaning police” to monitor employees and hand out tickets. There are no trainers, only mentors. There are no short-lived campaigns, but rather a constant undertow of meaningful actions.

The goal is to become a self-propagating meaningful workplace. A workplace in which employees embrace the ambition and align their efforts to it. A workplace to which employees feel emotionally connected. A workplace in which employees enjoy making their coworkers feel the same emotional bond. A workplace in which the attitudes, behavior,

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morality, and ethics of employees create a truly meaningful culture. A workplace in which meaning simply replicates itself every time an employee comes in contact with the business, a coworker, or someone in the outside world.

Summary

Armed with engaged and motivated employees, housed in a meaningful workplace, a business becomes a powerful force against what Gary Hamel calls, “the threats of accelerating change, hyper-competition, and commoditized knowledge.”

The meaningful workplace is the workplace of the future. Its clearly stated ambition serves as a beacon to everyone in the workplace. The way it leaves employees feeling makes them eager to participate, collaborate, and create. The behavior of the employees creates a meaningful culture that serves as a magnet to prospective recruits, customers, partners, suppliers, investors, communities, and influencers.

By forging a meaningful alliance with the employees – by establishing, managing, and nurturing a meaningful workplace – businesses can become better fit for the future.

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