

# How to Make Work More Meaningful for Your Team

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There is a well-known story about a cleaner at NASA who, when asked by JFK what his job was, responded “[I’m helping to put a man on the moon.](#)” This anecdote is often used to show how even the most mundane job can be seen as meaningful with the right mindset and under a good leadership.

Today, more and more employees demand much more than a good salary from their jobs. Money may lure people into jobs, but purpose, meaning, and the prospect of interesting and valuable work determines both their tenure and how hard they will work while they are on the job. Finding meaning at work has become so important that there are even public rankings for the [most meaningful jobs](#). Although there are many factors determining how appealing jobs tend to be, those that contribute to improving other people’s lives are ranked top (e.g., health care and social work). Interestingly, meta-analytic studies indicated that there is only a [marginal association](#) between pay and job satisfaction. A lawyer who earns \$150,000 a year is no more engaged than a freelance designer who earns \$35,000 a year.

[Research](#) consistently shows that people experiencing meaningful work report better health, wellbeing, teamwork and engagement; they bounce back faster from setbacks and are more likely to view mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures. In other words, people at work are more likely to [thrive and grow](#) when they experience their job as meaningful. This is why businesses with a stronger and clearer sense of purpose tend to have better [financial performance](#). Unsurprisingly, the most successful companies in the world are also the best places in the world to work.

Over the past few decades, a great deal of [research](#) has shown that leaders play a significant role in helping employees understand why their roles matter. Furthermore, the leadership characteristics that enable these cultures of meaning and purpose to engage employees are a reflection of a leader’s personality — which has been [proven](#) to have a strong impact on team and organizational performance.

In particular, research suggests that there are four key personality characteristics that determine leaders’ ability to make other people’s jobs more meaningful, namely:

**They are curious and inquisitive.** [Studies](#) show that people tend to experience work as meaningful when they feel like they are contributing to creating something new — especially when they feel able to explore, connect and have an impact. Curious leaders help people find meaning at work by exploring, asking questions, and engaging people in ideas about the future. In a way, curious leaders help employees find something meaningful by providing a wider range of possibilities for how work gets done, as opposed to being very prescriptive and micromanage people. Curious leaders are also more likely to get bored and detest monotony, so they will always be looking for people to come up with new ideas to make their own experience of work more interesting.

**They are challenging and relentless.** One of the greatest problems organizations must solve is the inertia and stagnation that follow success, or even its anticipation. [Research](#) shows that optimistic people who expect to do well don't try as hard as people who expect to struggle or fail. Leaders who remain ambitious in the face of both failure and success, and who push their people to remain dissatisfied with their accomplishments, instill a deeper sense of purpose in their teams and organizations. As a result employees feel a sense of progress, reinvention, and growth, which in turn results in a more meaningful and positive work experience.

**They hire for values and culture fit.** [Research](#) shows that people only find something valuable if it aligns with their core needs and motives. This is why the [fit](#) between an individual's personal values and the culture of the organization they work in is such an important driver of their performance. In fact, you are better off [not hiring the best](#), but instead people who are a good fit for your organization. Values function like an inner compass or lens through which we assign meaning to the world. Leaders who pay attention to what *each* individual values are more likely to hire people who will find it easier to connect with their colleagues and the wider organization, all of which help to [drive](#) a sense of meaning.

**They are able to trust people.** Most people hate being micromanaged. Overpowering and controlling bosses are serious source of disempowerment for employees. This drains the impact from the work they do and makes them feel worthless. In stark contrast, leaders who know how to trust people are more likely to give them room to experiment and grow. In particular, they help people mould their roles — something researchers call [job crafting](#). Employees who customize their job tend to feel a much greater sense of importance and value because they feel that their manager actually trusts them.

Note that all the above four qualities ought to exist in concert. A boss who is relentless but not trusting might seek to “keep people on their toes” by being [erratic or unpredictable](#) — a sure way to hurt performance and morale. A boss who is challenging but not curious may come across as a bully, while a boss who's trusting but not challenging will seem like a pushover. In short, there is a clear difference between making work meaningful and making it fun or easy, just like there is a big difference between an engaged and a happy employee. Whereas engagement results in enthusiasm, drive, and motivation— all of which increase performance and are therefore valuable to the organization — happiness can lead to complacency. To be a good leader, focus on helping employees find meaning in their achievements, rather than just enjoy their time at the office.