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5 Tiny Leadership Acts That Matter Most

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Zach Mercurio is a researcher who specializes in purposeful leadership, mattering, meaningful work, and positive organizational psychology. He works with hundreds of organizations worldwide, and some his clients include the U.S. Army, USA Wrestling, J.P. Morgan, Delta Airlines, Marriott International, The Government of Canada, and the National Parks Service. He also serves as one of Simon Sinek’s “Optimist Instructors.”

What’s the big idea?

When we think about what makes an impressive leader, we often color it in terms like *inspiring*, *courageous*, or even *heroic*. But research shows that, when asked about great leaders in their own lives, people don’t talk about grand actions or noble qualities. More likely than not, people point out small interactions—*moments*—when a leader helped them feel seen or heard, illuminated gifts they didn’t know they had, or provided affirmation. Psychologists call this sense of significance *mattering*, and the best leaders have trained and practice the skill of showing people their value.

Below, Zach shares five key insights from his new book, *The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance*. [Listen to the audio version—read by Zach himself—in the Next Big Idea App.](#)



THE POWER OF MATTERING

HOW LEADERS CAN CREATE A CULTURE OF SIGNIFICANCE

ZACH MERCURIO

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

15 min

5 key insights

By the author

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1. We're facing a *mattering deficit*.

Let me take you back ten years to a hospital room. I was meeting my newborn son. I remember looking down at this tiny crying human, and he tilted his head, locked eyes with mine, and reached his arms out frantically. When I reached back, he gripped my index finger and wouldn't let go. His crying stopped, and his whole body calmed.

I was experiencing six million years of fine-tuned programming. Scientists call that grip I felt the “grasp reflex”—an automatic action we take to secure our first caring relationship. From your first breath, survival depended on mattering to someone. None of us would be listening to or reading this if, at some point, we hadn't mattered enough to someone so they'd keep us alive.

As we grow up and go to work, the survival instinct to matter evolves into the psychological need to feel seen, heard, valued, and needed. When this need is

met, we experience *mattering*. Mattering is distinct from belonging or inclusion. Belonging is feeling part of and connected to a group. Inclusion is being able to contribute to a group. Mattering is knowing you're significant to individual members of that group.

When we experience mattering, we flourish. We're more motivated and grittier and experience greater well-being. But when we feel that we don't matter, we languish and either act out in desperation or withdraw.

Imagine the absolute panic of a child reaching out and finding no one. In a way, that's what's happening today. Too many of us are experiencing the same stress of feeling insignificant. In January 2025, Gallup reported that employee engagement is at a ten-year low. If we were an organization, seven out of ten of us would be emotionally uninvested in our work. That's despite services to improve engagement becoming a \$1 billion industry.

“The average adult sends 30 to 40 text-based messages daily and spends more time in meetings than ever—yet we're still lonely.”

So, what's going on? Two data points stand out: Just four out of every ten employees in the Gallup sample group felt that someone at work cares about them as a person, and only 30 percent believe their potential is invested in. Last year, a different poll showed that 30 percent of people felt invisible at work, and repeated surveys reveal that six out of ten people feel underappreciated.

We're not facing a disengagement crisis. We're facing a mattering deficit. The most glaring symptom of this deficit is loneliness. The advice to solve this has been to connect more. The result has been that we're in more meetings and on more platforms. The average adult sends 30 to 40 text-based messages daily

and spends more time in meetings than ever—yet we're still lonely.

Research shows that the quantity of interactions doesn't matter much when it comes to reducing loneliness. The quality does. To have a quality interaction, people need to experience what researchers call *companionate love*—receiving the interpersonal behaviors of attention, respect, and affirmation.

The opposite of loneliness isn't having more people around you; it's feeling like you matter to the people around you. That's why just putting down our phones won't reduce disconnection; what we do after we put down our phones will. The solution isn't to connect more; it's to relearn the skills to connect better by showing people they matter to us.

2. Mattering happens in moments.

Think about when you most feel that you matter to others. How many of you are thinking about getting your direct deposit, or when you won Employee of the Month? If you're like most people we posed this question to, you're thinking about small interactions



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Fortsätt

Jane is a custodian at the university. In a study we did on how frontline ser

vice she only took the job because she was nearly homeless and needed to put food on the table. Her friends kept telling her cleaning was a "dirty job," and she started internalizing that. She told me that during her first month, she would clock in, clock out, and continually think: *Why couldn't I have done something more with my life?* She said, "I felt useless and worthless."

But then, she described to me how a couple of minutes changed everything. A supervisor noticed she was struggling. He invited her into a training room, handed her a dictionary, and asked her to read the definition of *custodian*: "A

person responsible for looking after a building and everyone in it.”

“That’s you,” he told her.

She looked at me and said, “That was the first time in my life someone made me feel worthy and important.” Realizing she was responsible for a building and its people changed her beliefs about herself and her job. She’s been there for 18 years. That’s the power of a moment of mattering. The best leaders tend to turn regular interactions into moments of mattering.

3. There’s a difference between knowing someone and noticing them.

There’s a difference between knowing someone and noticing them. You can know your best friend but not notice that they’re struggling. You can know a team member but not notice that they feel unheard. Jane’s supervisor noticed she was struggling and took action.

Noticing is the deliberate act of paying attention to the details, ebbs, and flows of others’ lives and offering an action to show them we’re thinking of them. Noticing takes time, attention, and practice.

“You can know a team member but not notice that they feel unheard.”

In one distribution center where I worked, there were 20 teams that all scored low on employee engagement surveys, with one extreme outlier that consistently showed high engagement. When I met with that team, they all told me some version of: “It’s our supervisor. She just gets us. We’d do anything for her.” So, I asked her what she did. She pulled out a black Moleskine notebook.

Every Friday, she wrote down one thing she noticed about each team member —nerves about a meeting, a struggle on a task, a child starting a new sport. Then on Monday, she reviewed her notes and scheduled micro-check-ins, starting with, “I remember last week...” She said to me, “You know, Zach, there’s magic in being remembered.”

We’ve come call it her “noticing notebook.” She also asked her team two questions every week: “What would you do if you were me?” and “What are you struggling with and how can I help?”

Leaders who are great noticers tend to do these three things:

They have a process and practice for observing the details of people’s work and lives.

They note those details, which is a powerful way to retrain our attention.

They share back what they observed.

Noticing others creates understanding and understanding creates trust.

4. Affirmation can be more powerful than appreciation or recognition.

When Jane’s supervisor defined *custodian*, he provided her with indisputable evidence of her significance. That’s what makes affirmation different and more powerful than appreciation or recognition. Appreciation is a form of gratitude for who someone is. Recognition is a form of gratitude for what someone does. Affirmation reveals how someone’s uniqueness makes a unique difference.

One way to affirm someone is to give more meaningful gratitude. Any time you say, “Thank you” or “Good job,” go one step further and show people the difference they make and exactly how they make it.

First, name people's unique gifts. Everyone offers us four unique gifts every day:

Strengths: what they love and they're good at

Purpose: the impact they make

Perspective: how they see the world

Wisdom: what only they can teach us from living their life

Second, show them vividly the unique impact they make. For example, a facilities manager I worked with at the National Park Service would take photos of park visitors using projects his team worked on. He had a process of emailing them every Friday and attaching the pictures. He simply wrote: *Look what you did. Thank you.*

He gave them indisputable evidence of their significance.

5. When people feel replaceable, they will act replaceable.

To feel that we matter, we must feel needed. In 1913, the French agricultural engineer Max Ringelmann had groups of students pull on a rope as hard as possible. The rope was attached to a device called a dynamometer to measure force. Then, he had the same students pull the rope as hard as they could as individuals. He added up the force readings. Who do you think exerted the most total force, groups of individuals? It was the individuals. Why? Because they knew they and their effort were indispensable.

“To feel that we matter, we must feel needed.”

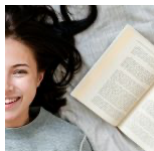
When people feel replaceable, they act replaceable. But when people feel irreplaceable, they tend to act irreplaceable. When I interviewed people and

asked them when they most felt that they mattered, people frequently mentioned some version of these five words being said to them: “If it wasn’t for you...”

Think of someone you rely on. Now think of the last time you’ve told them, “If it wasn’t for you...” If you say these words to them, you’ll see and feel the power of mattering, and you’ll be putting into practice a skill that sets great leaders apart from the rest: showing people how they matter.

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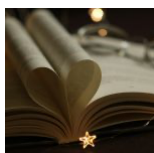
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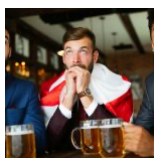


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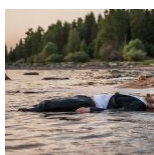


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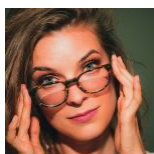
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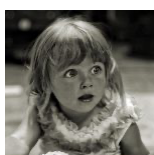
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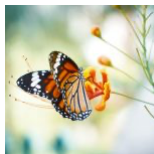
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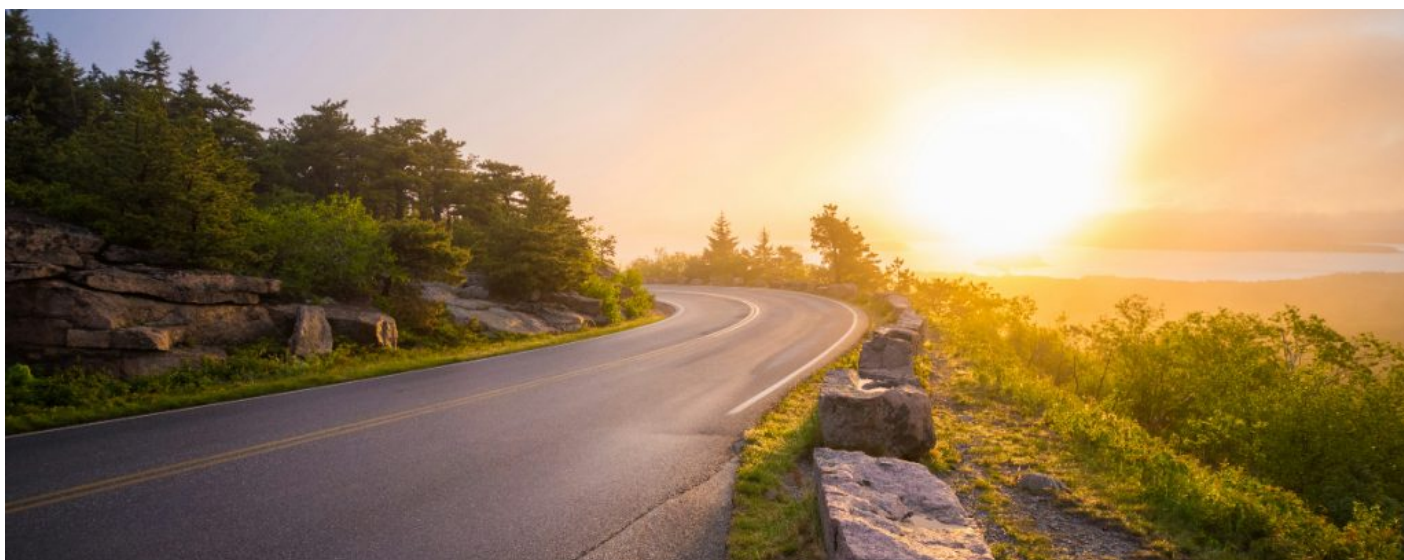
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