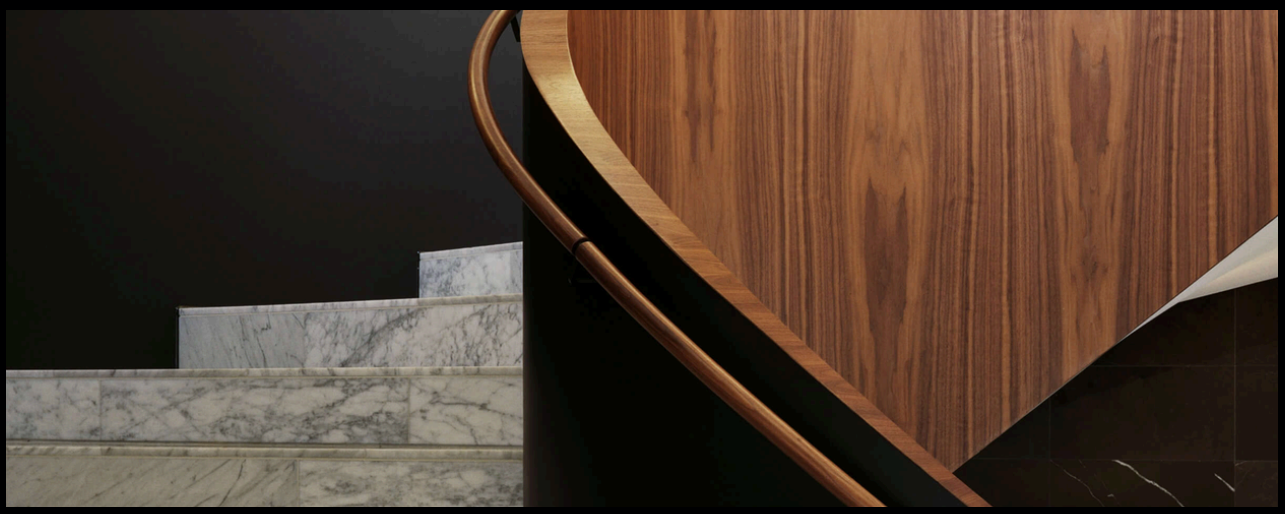
THE ENGAGEMENT CRISIS IS A LEADERSHIP PROBLEM. IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN A LEADERSHIP PROBLEM.

What the science of workplace happiness reveals about the obligations of those who lead.



Every year, Gallup publishes its State of the Global Workplace report. Every year, the numbers are difficult to read. In 2024, only 23 percent of the global workforce reported feeling engaged at work. Sixty-two percent were not engaged. Fifteen percent were actively disengaged, meaning they were not merely indifferent but working, in some measurable sense, against the organizations that employed them.

These are not new findings. Gallup has been tracking engagement for decades, and the numbers have moved stubbornly, incrementally, in directions that should concern anyone responsible for leading people. What is remarkable is not the data itself but the collective response to it, which has largely been to acknowledge the problem, commission another survey, and wait for the next report.

The science of workplace happiness, a field that has matured considerably over the past two decades, offers something more useful than alarm. It offers a framework. And for leaders willing to take it seriously, it offers a set of obligations that are more demanding, and more actionable, than most leadership conversations acknowledge.

Referenced: Tim Duggan Big Think, February 17, 2025

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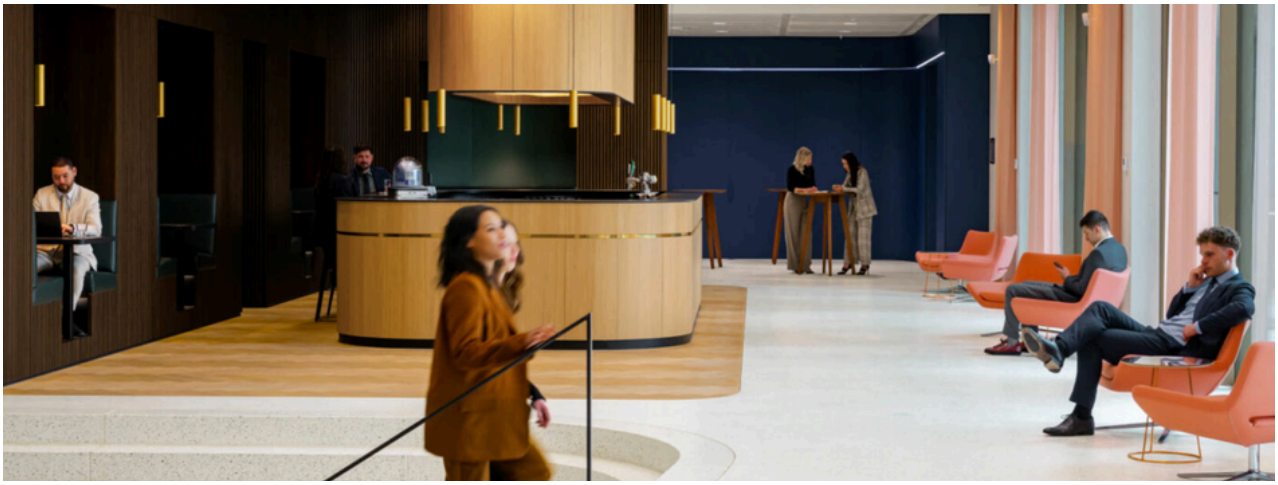
PROTECT MEANING BEFORE IT DISAPPEARS



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In 2009, researchers studying faculty physicians at a large academic medical center published a finding that deserves more attention than it typically receives. Doctors who spent at least 20 percent of their professional time on work they found personally meaningful were significantly less likely to experience burnout than those who fell below that threshold. The relationship was precise: below 20 percent, burnout risk increased substantially. Above it, the risk stabilized. More time on meaningful work, beyond that threshold, did not produce additional benefit. The dosage that mattered was modest. One day in five.

What this suggests for anyone who leads a team is both clarifying and uncomfortable. People do not require perfect jobs. They do not require roles defined entirely by work they love. They require, at minimum, a meaningful fraction of their time spent on something that connects to a deeper sense of purpose. When that fraction disappears, so does resilience. Burnout is not, at its core, a problem of overwork. It is a problem of overwork without meaning.

The implication for leaders is direct. If you have reorganized a role, layered on new responsibilities, or restructured a team in ways that have eliminated the parts of the work someone found genuinely meaningful, you have taken something from them without necessarily understanding what you took. The obligation is to know. And that requires the kind of sustained attention to individuals that is, in most organizations, systematically undervalued.

UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY DOING WITH THEIR ROLES

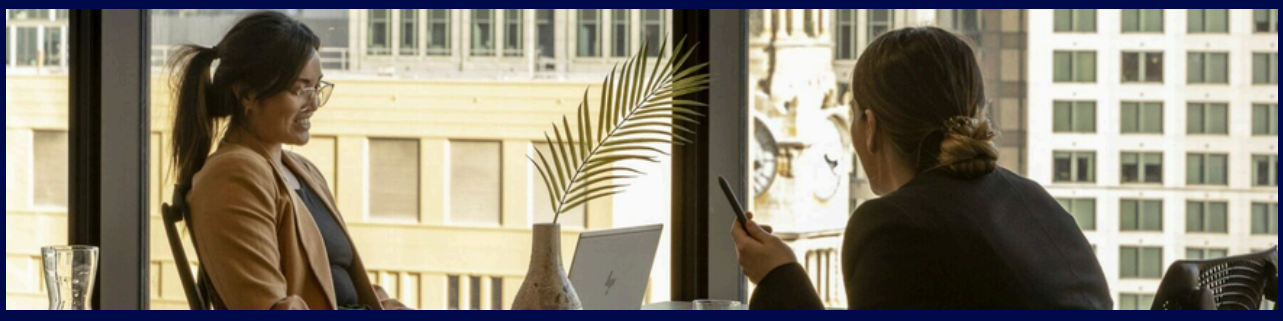
Understand What People Are Actually Doing With Their Roles

In 2001, organizational psychologists Amy Wrzesniewski of Wharton and Jane Dutton of Michigan's Ross School of Business published research that introduced the concept of job crafting into the scholarly literature. Their central observation was deceptively simple: most employees do not perform their jobs as written. They adapt them. They emphasize certain tasks and minimize others. They invest in particular relationships and let others remain transactional. They reframe the meaning of their work in ways that align it more closely with their own values and sense of purpose.

This is not insubordination. It is, the research suggests, a natural and largely healthy response to the gap between how jobs are designed and how human beings actually find meaning in them. The administrative professional who understands her role not as calendar management but as the person who makes it possible for others to do their best work is practicing job crafting. The facilities manager who sees not maintenance requests but the physical conditions of someone's entire working day is doing the same.

What Wrzesniewski and Dutton found is that this reframing, when done consciously and with intention, produces measurable improvements in engagement, performance, and wellbeing. The implication for leaders is that the most engaged people on any team have likely already found their own way to make the role meaningful. The least engaged have not. And the difference is rarely about aptitude. It is about whether anyone has created the conditions for that kind of active relationship with the work.

The obligation, then, is not to craft people's jobs for them. It is to understand how they currently experience their roles, and to create space for the kind of deliberate reshaping that the research suggests is both possible and effective.



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QUESTION WHAT YOU THINK YOU KNOW ABOUT WORK

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Perhaps the most disruptive finding in this literature comes from Brendan Burchell, a sociologist at Cambridge whose Employment Dosage Project set out to answer a question that turns out to be surprisingly underexplored: how much paid work do people actually need in order to access the mental health benefits that work provides?

The answer surprised Burchell himself. Working one eight-hour day per week delivered the same mental health benefits, in terms of reduced anxiety, improved sense of purpose, and social connection, as working five. The benefits of work, in other words, are not proportional to the hours invested. They plateau early, and everything beyond that plateau is adding stress without adding wellbeing.

Burchell was careful to note that this finding is not an argument for four-day work weeks or the wholesale restructuring of professional life. It is an argument against assumption. Many of the beliefs that shape how organizations design work, how leaders manage time, how cultures measure commitment, are built on intuitions that the evidence does not support. The most dangerous version of this is the conflation of presence with productivity, and of hours with dedication.

For leaders in demanding environments, this requires a particular kind of honesty. The cultures that reward the longest hours, that treat availability as a proxy for commitment, that mistake exhaustion for excellence, are not high-performing cultures. They are cultures that have confused the appearance of work with its substance.

WHAT THE SCIENCE ASKS OF LEADERS

The Mirror the Data Holds Up and What It Reflects.

It would be convenient if the findings above pointed toward a set of programs to implement or metrics to track. The literature does not cooperate. What it points toward is something harder: a sustained, individual-level attention to the people being led that most organizational systems are not designed to support, and that most leaders, in the press of daily operational demands, find genuinely difficult to sustain.

The three obligations that emerge from this research are not new to the best leaders. They are, in fact, closely related to what separates exceptional service cultures from ordinary ones. The finest hospitality organizations in the world have understood for decades that you cannot deliver a consistently extraordinary guest experience without a consistently engaged team. You cannot have a consistently engaged team without understanding what each person on it finds meaningful. And you cannot understand that without asking, listening, and acting on what you hear.

The Gallup data is not a mystery. It is a mirror. It reflects, with uncomfortable precision, what happens in organizations where leaders have stopped asking those questions, or never started.

The science of workplace happiness does not ask leaders to make work easy. It asks them to make it meaningful. That is, and has always been, one of the more serious obligations of the role.

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