William A. Kahn and Steven Fellows

Employee Engagement and Meaningful Work

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The concept of engagement was developed to explain what traditional studies of work motivation overlooked—namely, that employees offer up different degrees and dimensions of themselves according to some internal calculus that they consciously and unconsciously compute (Kahn, 1990). Traditional motivation studies implicitly assumed that workers were either on or off; that is, on the basis of external rewards and intrinsic factors, they were either motivated to work or not, and this was a relatively steady state that they inhabited (e.g., Taylor, 1911; Vroom, 1964). The engagement concept is framed on the premise that workers are more complicated than this. Like actors, they make choices about how much of their real selves they would bring into and use to inform their role performances (Kahn, 1990). They might truly express themselves, to the extent the role allows, or they might not, with varying degrees of expression in between. Rather than label workers as motivated or not, these personal movements

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into or out of role performances could change a great deal as various conditions shift. The engagement concept captures the process of moving into and out of roles.

When people engage, they move toward that which matters to them. Indeed, the word itself conjures images of movement: We engage the clutch in a car, which moves it out of neutral and allows progression; we become engaged in marriage, betrothing ourselves to a life together with a partner; we engage in conversation, moving toward insight and connection with others. Engagement is thus movement; it is the bringing of one's self into something outside the self. This movement can be fleeting: An individual cares briefly about a task and engages in it and then recedes, falling back into a steady state of some partial role performance. Engagement can also be the steady state, punctuated by interludes of relative disengagement. Engagement at work can thus be the foreground in a worker's life, or it can be at the edges of that life, moving to the front only at particular moments that flicker and fade. The difference between where engagement resides in workers depends on the largeness of that which matters to them.

Individual purposes are the broader context in which to ground our understanding of engagement and meaningful work. Engagement that represents the foreground of a worker's role performances requires individuals to feel some connection between the work that they do and larger meanings and purposes to which they subscribe (Baumeister, 1991; Hackman, 2002). As the theologian Frederick Buechner (1993) wrote, vocation "is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (p. 95). This connection is a necessary condition, without which engagement is short-lived. But this sense of connection between the particular (job, role, tasks) and the general (vocational calling) is not sufficient to sustain employee engagement (Dik & Duffy, 2009). The particular nature of the organizational context matters. Vocations can be pursued from any number of roles and organizations, as individuals seek out settings in which they can most clearly and easily do what they are called to do in the world (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010). Certain factors matter a great deal here, as they play out in the context of a worker's particular job, role, group, and organization.

In this chapter, we review the nature of employee engagement and then turn to the factors that shape the extent to which particular work settings offer necessary conditions for engagement to exist. Our discussion of these factors combines the theoretical and the practical. We discuss the relevant concepts and research and point to the ways in which those concepts shape what actually occurs in work settings.

What Engagement Looks Like

Imagine a police detective working a case. A jewelry store merchant has been robbed. The case is straightforward—no dead bodies, no ex-lovers turning up as suspects, no shadowy corporate deals in the background. Our detective is fine; this is not a story of his redemption from grief, drink, or idealism. It is just a large robbery and a competent detective.

The detective arrives at the diamond store. He moves thoughtfully through the store, noticing what there is to notice: the empty jewelry cases, unbroken glass, shattered video camera in the corner, nervous clerk, distraught store owner, muddy footprint near the backdoor exit. The detective directs a colleague to check for fingerprints, take a picture of the footprint, and see whether the video camera caught anything on tape. The detective moves toward the clerk, who nervously takes a step back until she is pressed against a display case. The detective smiles, asks whether she's OK, and is met with an unsure nod. The detective gently asks questions, nods encouragingly, takes notes, offers tissues when the clerk cries, reassures, asks more questions, hands her a card with his mobile number, and turns toward the store owner.

Our detective spends the rest of the day following up leads, considering various scenarios that might explain the ease with which the robbery occurred, with no witnesses, broken doors, and the theft of only the most valuable diamonds. He keeps replaying parts of the interview with the clerk in his mind, nagged by a certain feeling—a hunch—that he was being played, perhaps; that she was a shade too upset. He calls the store owner to ask for personnel records. He brings in another detective who knows the neighborhood in which the clerk had grown up before moving to a nicer section of the city. The detective's supervisor is unhappy with using two squad members on the case, but our detective insists, explaining his hunch. The supervisor nods his approval. Four days later, after much digging through arrest records, the two detectives piece together a possible trail linking the store clerk and a known criminal from her old neighborhood—a distant cousin, it turns out, with whom she had attended grade school before he graduated to armed robbery. One thing leads to another: The footprint places the subject at the store; the clerk, confronted, breaks into sobbing confession; and the detective makes the arrests. Our detective smiles and goes back to work.

This scenario offers us a way to think about engagement at work. Although we are not all detectives, we all have projects to do, problems to solve, and work that must get done. Across the vast array of industries and jobs, our engagement can look remarkably similar to

that of our detective. Indeed, we know engagement mostly by what people actually do—the actions that they take when presented with tasks. The most clearly observable behaviors that suggest engagement are people's efforts. We believe that people are engaged when we see them working hard, putting in effort, and staying involved. They truly show up for their work. They remain focused on what they are doing while at work. They strive to move their work forward. They put energy into what they are doing. Our detective showed such behaviors. He worked hard on the case. He followed leads, interviewed witnesses, researched files, and made calls. He followed the evidence to where it led and kept trying to move the case ahead. We can be similarly engaged in other sorts of jobs. Programmers, bankers, teachers, consultants, project leaders—we all have tasks that we can focus on, put energy into, try and move forward, and work hard on (Bateman & Porath, 2003). We stay with our work and are not easily distracted. We keep plugging away at it. We work to solve whatever problems and puzzles are getting in the way.

Yet engagement is not simply about the vigor with which people work, their high levels of involvement. It is about putting ourselves—our real selves—into the work (Kahn, 1990, 1992). This begins but does not end with effort. Our real selves show up when we say what we think and feel, in the service of doing the work the best way that we know how. Our detective did this when he pushed on his supervisor to assign another detective to help him. When we deeply care about what we are doing and are committed to doing the best that we can, we feel compelled to speak rather than remain silent (Hirschman, 1970). We use our voices. Voice is part of engagement (Beugré, 2010). When we are engaged, we express that self rather than defend or withdraw it from view. An accountant tells her supervisor that she does not feel comfortable using a certain financial technique that seems to hide certain budgetary practices. A project manager tells a colleague that he is frustrated by the lack of communication across departments. A consultant tells a client that she feels like she is wasting her time and their money on a project that has no senior management support. These workers are expressing rather than hiding their thoughts and feelings.

We fully show up at work when we allow the full range of our senses to inform what we do. Our detective honored rather than dismissed a nagging feeling about the store clerk, in effect bringing all of his self to his work. This bringing of the self is different than following routines and procedures to go through required paces, processes that can require little of workers except their simply showing up at work and putting in their time (Ashforth & Fried, 1988). The detective placed his ideas, his hunches, and his feelings into the case that he was trying to solve. It mattered that it was this detective working on this case. It mattered that something about the situation—how the clerk was pressed

against the unbroken jewelry case, a tightening of her face, her refusal to look at the store owner—flickered into a feeling and then a thought in the detective, which later turned into a hunch that he followed. When we are fully engaged, we bring to our tasks our personal connections to the work, our commitment to see tasks through to completion in ways that enliven and gladden us (Hall, 1993; Tulku, 1978). This matters to the work. For example, a line worker on the manufacturing floor senses that the wooden handles he creates on the lathe are smaller than usual in his hands. On a break, he checks the specifications on the machine and discovers that the settings are wrong. A bank clerk senses something odd in the manner of someone making a large wire transfer and takes an extra moment to examine paperwork that proves identity theft. These workers are bringing a depth of which they may not even be fully aware to bear on their work (Kahn, 1992).

What It Is Like to Be Engaged

Being present is not simply physical, although it begins with people showing up at work. Being present is psychological (Kahn, 1992). Such presence is experienced along four salient dimensions that describe people who are fully engaged: attentive, connected, integrated, and absorbed.

ATTENTIVE

When workers are engaged, they are alive to what is around them in their immediate surroundings. They pay attention (Langer, 1984). We might have seen this if we looked closely enough at the detective. His eyes were clear and focused; his gaze was steady on colleagues, witnesses, and suspects. He was absorbed in what he was discovering—the physical evidence in the jewelry store, the nervousness of the store clerk, his own unease about her story—and open to what he might find. He did not make the case routine. He remained open and attentive to whatever he could discover.

CONNECTED

Engaged workers feel joined with something outside themselves. They are connected to some larger mission or purpose, infusing them as they occupy roles and perform tasks (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). They feel connected to others who are working toward similar ends. Such connections sustain people as they pursue their vocations (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Kahn, 1998). Our detective's engagement

was thus partly a matter of feeling joined with others on a mission—solving a crime, seeking justice, repairing the world, or however he would have defined it—that offered him a sense of purpose. The sense of connection keeps such engagement a very real possibility for people as they go about their work.

INTEGRATED

Engaged workers make themselves—their thoughts, feeling, intuitions, energies—fully available to the work that they do. The detective took various pieces of information, gathered from the crime scene and from his own sense of unease, and followed them as he would a path. The path derived from his ability to piece together bits of information that he gleaned in various ways—from analysis, intuition, and feeling. This bringing together of multiple aspects of the self is an integrative process. People feel integrated rather than internally split off from their roles when they are able to bring into their work role performances whatever material they need to draw on (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). The lack of engagement involves the sense of standing apart and away from one's actions, as if observing some other person; energies are thus split between observing and acting (Kahn, 1992).

ABSORBED

Engaged workers also feel absorbed by and into the work that they are doing in ways that resemble the idea of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is as if they have set themselves on quests that constantly (pre)occupy them. Our detective was absorbed in such a fashion. Even as he worked on other cases, a part of him remained focused on the store robbery, sifting through information, reflecting on bits of information, acknowledging his hunch, and remaining optimistic. Such ongoing awareness is a matter of being absorbed by a situation, even as we work on other parts of our jobs (Rothbard, 2001). The lack of absorption is remaining distant and apart from a situation, an absenting of our selves.

Conditions for Engagement

Remaining present is not a simple matter. It requires a depth of intensity and focus that cannot be constantly sustained. Workers need intervals, moments of absence, of being away. They need space in which to recharge before their next engagements (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The brief scenario of our detective did not show those

moments—long lunches reading the sports pages, talking with his teenager about her use of the car, sitting through an interminable presentation at headquarters, flipping through a magazine while waiting to testify in another case. These moments are necessary, but they are not entirely sufficient. People do not become engaged simply because they get enough breaks, just as runners do not train simply by scheduling intervals of running and resting. Engagement is a far more delicate phenomenon, trickier to create and sustain.

We should note here that there are no guarantees about when individual workers will fully engage. There are some workers who may never become engaged and others who will do so easily and often. Such variations in engagement may be explained partly by individual differences. People's temperaments, life experiences, support systems, and aptitudes (to name a few) are important determinants of their level of engagement at a particular point in time (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986; Wildermuth, 2010). People's shifting needs and desires, related to phases in adult development and career progression, also shape the weights they place on the variables that determine the nature and extent of their engagements (Hall & Schneider, 1972; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). So too are deeply ingrained ways in which individuals experience and relate to their environments, manage relationships, and express themselves: personality dimensions that can close down or open up workers to the possibility of fully engaging in their tasks (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977; Wildermuth, 2010). Yet the extremes of individual differences, in which workers will never be able to engage because of their temperaments, are relatively rare. In truth, most workers are waiting, some optimistically and others pessimistically, for leaders to create the conditions under which it is more likely that they will choose to engage and feel as if they have made the right choice. The original research on engagement indicated three such conditions: meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990).

In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on the first condition for employee engagement: the extent to which workers experience meaningfulness at work. In some respects, the other conditions are, like Herzberg's (1968) hygiene factors, necessary but not sufficient for motivation to exist. Workers need to be psychologically available if they are to engage. And they need to feel safe enough to say what they think and feel. But to be available and safe is not sufficient; there must also be the internal drive, the desire to engage. The sense of meaningfulness is that drive. It is, therefore, quite important for managers, researchers, consultants, counselors, coaches, and academics to know as much as possible about what factors are most likely to enable workers to feel a sense of meaningfulness.

Sources of Meaning

Research and theory point to various sources of meaning that are likely to influence people's choices to engage at work. These sources are of two types: *foundational,* which focus on the nature of the work role and its implications for workers; and *relational,* which focus on the relationships that workers build with others and the implications for their work experiences. This is not to suggest that all sources of meaning are neatly contained within one category or the other; after all, the way people construct the meaning of the tasks they perform is often the result of a collective understanding developed with coworkers (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). For ease of discussion, however, we address these sources of meaning according to the worker's perception of whether they reside primarily in the work itself or as part of associated interpersonal connections.

FOUNDATIONAL SOURCES OF MEANING

Attractive Identities

People value work roles by which they create identities that matter to them. An identity is a way to be known to oneself and to the world. Identities that matter to people are those that fit with how they wish to think about themselves and be thought of by others (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Ibarra, 1999). Our detective, for example, may gather meaning from his identity as a protector, as an officer of the law, or as serving the powerless and the wronged. This identity is meaningful because it allows him to act in accordance with his values and beliefs, such as the importance of lawfulness over lawlessness. Similarly, a computer programmer may derive meaning from her identity as a cutting-edge problem solver, reflecting her belief that technology can positively influence the world. Work identities that matter are those that enable us to see our lives as having meaning (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Challenging Work

The actual tasks that workers perform can challenge them, forcing them to develop skills, deepen knowledge, and learn new behaviors. Or tasks can be routine, requiring little of people except to do, over and again, what they already know how to do. Researchers know a great deal about how to structure roles, tasks, and authority in ways that challenge workers to expand repertoires of knowledge and skills (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980; Lawler & Hall, 1970). Routine tasks tend to dull our senses; they ask little of us other than to go through motions that we have already long mastered; they lead to boredom and

disengagement. Yet tasks that are too complex and challenging lead to despair, for we have no hope of completing them. The work that challenges us is neither thoroughly boring nor impossible (Hackman, 2002; McClelland, 1985). It allows us to grow in ways that we have not yet grown. It calls on us to use different parts of ourselves in the way that a new sport calls on both familiar and unfamiliar movements. In that challenge lies meaning.

Clear Roles

People are more likely to find meaning in roles that are clear rather than ambiguous (Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1974). Our detective knew what his role was: He was the lead investigator on the robbery case, responsible for following police procedures in charging those responsible for a crime. He knew what his tasks were: to collect evidence and follow leads, narrow possibilities, develop a theory of the case borne out by facts, and act on that theory. He knew what his authority was and the decisions that he could make with and without consultation and permission. Such clarity—of role, tasks, authority—creates a clearly defined path down which the detective could walk. The lack of such clarity takes away from the meaning of our work. When people are not sure of what they are supposed to do, the steps that they need to take, or whether they have the authority to make decisions, they are less likely to bring their selves into their work (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). They hold themselves in reserve, unwilling to risk wasting their efforts.

Meaningful Rewards

Unavoidably, the meaning that people ascribe to their work is shaped by the rewards that they get from that work. Much organizational research over the years has explored the nature and impact of rewards on effort, motivation, and job performance (e.g., Herzberg, 1968; Kerr, 1975; Pfeffer & Lawler, 1980). We thus know a great deal about meaningful rewards. Workers need to feel that there is a clear and fair relation between the work that they do and the resulting extrinsic rewards, such as money, promotions, status, and visibility (Vroom, 1964). They also need a sense of intrinsic reward from the work that they do—that is, that the work feels good to do and complete, that they are recognized and valued by others, and that what they do makes a difference (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Herzberg, 1968). They need to feel that the measurement systems by which they are evaluated provide clear, sensible, and justifiable feedback and lead to fair outcomes (Hackman, 2002). When these dimensions are missing, it makes it difficult for people to see the meaning in what they do. If our detective felt that the rewards were few in his work—being passed over for promotion in favor of less deserving but better connected colleagues, receiving pay raises that did not keep

up with costs of living, getting evaluations that focused on paperwork completed more than cases solved—he would be less likely to find the meaning in his work.

RELATIONAL SOURCES OF MEANING

Voices That Are Heard

People at work derive meaning from knowing that their voices matter. We use our voices to offer opinions, ideas, suggestions, warnings, agreements, and support (Beugré, 2010). Our detective used his voice. He said what he thought to his supervisor. He shared his developing theory of the case with his colleague. He instructed others to gather evidence. His ideas were taken seriously. When our voices are heard, we feel a sense of efficacy: a sense that what we say is valued and valuable, makes a difference to others and to our work, and has influence around us (Spreitzer, 1995). When people's voices are not heard, they react accordingly. They stop saying what they think and feel. They use their voices badly rather than well, with cynicism, rumors, and misinformation. People are remarkably adaptive. When their voices are dismissed, they stop wasting them, as one would stop talking to those clearly not listening (Martinko & Gardner, 1982; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). When their voices are taken into account, they keep using them, to inform, help, and contribute. For example, the bank teller suggests a different way to exchange currency and is greeted with appreciation. The project manager warns of an impending conflict with a supplier and heads off a potential snafu. When people speak and are heard, they feel as if they matter; they feel meaningful (Axelrod, 2000).

Important Work Relationships

Work relationships serve a number of functions. Our colleagues can help us get work done. They can offer personal support (Kahn, 2001). They can provide mentoring (Kram, 1985). They can help us make sense of ambiguous situations (Weick, 1995). And they can help provide us with a sense of meaning (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Our work lives matter to us more when we feel connected to others at work and less when we feel isolated and alone (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; McClelland, 1985). Work has more meaning when we are joined with others—doing things together, spurring one another on, having fun, and learning about ourselves in relation to others (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). It becomes meaningful as well when we are treated with a certain amount of dignity, respect, and appreciation by others with whom we work—particularly by supervisors and other figures of authority (Bandura, 1986; Kinch, 1963). Our detective seemed to experience this

dignity in relation to colleagues who respect him and a supervisor who trusts him. Those relationships offered the space and the support in which he could do his job. Such relationships are an important source of meaning.

Competent Supervision

Workers' relations with their supervisors have a demonstrated impact on their experiences of their work (Sparrowe & Liden, 2005). Competent supervisors are trustworthy (Brower, Lester, Korsgaard, & Dineen, 2009), supportive (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006), evenhanded (Pillai, Schriesheim, & Williams, 1999), and thoughtful (Kegan, 1994). As supervisors give employees the space to pursue their own ideas—as the supervisor of our detective did—those employees are likely to feel challenged in their work, experience their voices as valued, and have their identities affirmed (Hackman, 2002). The lack of competent supervision undermines the meaning that employees find in their work. Supervisors who remain too close (micromanaging, untrusting, suffocating) and those who remain too distant (ignoring, unavailable, abandoning) in relation to their employees too often sap the meaning of the work from employees (Seltzer & Numerof, 1988). Competent supervision draws employees more tightly into their work, offering them an attachment figure to whom they can turn when they need support and insight and a sense of connectedness to the larger meaning of what they do (Podolny, Khurana, & Hill-Popper, 2004).

Useful Interventions

To the extent that these sources of meaning are present, they enable employees to answer positively the question that they pose to themselves, consciously or not: Is it worthwhile for me to fully engage at this moment, in the context of my role and this task? How individuals answer this question determines their willingness to put effort, energy, and focus into the enactments of their roles. When they are able to answer this question affirmatively, it is because they feel certain ways about themselves and their work: They feel useful and valued. They like who they are in their roles and what it reflects about them. They are challenged and stretched by their work. They like the results of their efforts. They feel appreciated, supported, and validated. They feel a sense of collaboration with their coworkers and that they are well led. When workers experience these things, it is more than likely that they are engaging fully in their roles at work.

The question, of course, is what supervisors, senior leaders, human resources staff, and consultants can do to ensure that employees experience these reasons to fully engage. We describe here two levels of useful interventions. The first set of interventions focuses on creating the contextual conditions under which it will become more rather than less likely that workers will perceive specific situations as worthy of their engagements. The second set of interventions focuses on ennobling individual workers—that is, engaging them in ways that call forth the deeper vocations and purposes that move them and can be expressed in the context of their roles. The first set of interventions works from the outside in, shaping the work context in ways that are inviting to workers. The second set of interventions works from the inside out, bringing forth the callings and purposes that give meaning to workers' lives and channeling these callings and purposes into the roles the workers perform. Both sets of interventions are crucial to an understanding of how engagement is created and sustained at work.

CREATING CONTEXTS

The sources of meaning described previously offer a reasonably clear outline for interventions that make it more likely that employees will engage in certain situations. They include structures that enable workers to have appropriate involvement in decisions, processes that help clarify their roles, team-based work, and effective reward systems that provide incentives for superior efforts and performances. Such structures and processes (see Table 5.1) are developed on behalf of organization members more generally. They make it more likely that all employees will move toward engaging in their roles.

The recommendations in Table 5.1 are made on the basis of the premise that the meaning workers ascribe to their role performances depends mostly on external conditions that can vary across leaders, situations, projects, and groups. Engagement is thus likely to be heavily situation based, depending on the extent to which these conditions exist. Although the recommendations are not simple to implement, they are within the realm of what supervisors, senior leaders, human resources staff, and consultants are often working on in the context of performance management processes.

ENNOBLING WORKERS

A different type of intervention involves ennobling the workers themselves—that is, treating them in ways that elevate and make noble the meanings of their work. These interventions involve calling forth the individual worker's self as it gets expressed and expanded in the course of work. This calling forth occurs in different ways (see Table 5.1). It

involves bringing larger purposes—both those of workers themselves and those of their organizations—into conversations about what people are doing. This process of alerting employees to the larger purposes of their work raises people's sights up from the particular tasks that they perform and onto the larger meanings of those performances. When those meanings matter to people—when they resonate with how they wish to be in the world and how they wish to see themselves—their engagements are likely to be sustained. Their selves expand in the context of their work; work becomes the vehicle through which the selves are expressed. Workers feel as if they belong to something larger than themselves, in terms of larger missions or communities of others.

The interventions in Table 5.2 are made on the basis of the premise that the meaning that workers ascribe to their role performances depends mostly on their own willingness, abilities, and imaginations to connect what they do with who they are. Engagement in this regard is more likely to be located within individuals than in their situations. People who are more oriented toward work as a calling rather than as a job or career are more likely to make the deeper connections between their work and who they are—and thus understand their work as the context for sustained engagement (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Such workers have the capacity to frame their work as *quests*—pursuits of larger purposes in the world that give their lives a larger sense of meaning. Quests require companions. People lose their bearings; they lose their faith; they lose the larger perspective as daily events take them over. The role of supervisors, senior leaders, human resources staff, and consultants in this regard is to help keep people's quests alive. The recommended interventions are ways to do this. The interventions involve calling forth people, reminding them of who they wish to be and what they wish to accomplish in the world. The interventions ennoble workers, offering them ways to connect to and engage in being part of that which is larger than their individual selves.

Future Directions

This chapter contains implications for developing theoretical and practical knowledge about the relation between meaning and engagement. There is a great deal already known about what it means to design jobs, coordinate efforts, reward performance, and manage in ways that motivate workers. Less understood are the structures, processes, and behaviors by which the authentic selves of workers are called forth into the work that they perform. Engagement at work is not simply about

the effort and vigor that people put forth. It is also about people fully employing their selves—calling forth and expressing their selves in the performance of their roles, as our detective did earlier in this chapter. For this to occur, workers' selves need to be called forth and welcomed into the contexts of their work. In considering future directions in the relation between meaning and engagement at work, we need to examine both parts of this process.

CALLING FORTH THE SELF

Calling forth the self in the context of work involves making the meaningfulness of what people do more evident as they go about their daily role performances (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). There is more that needs to be understood, in theory and in practice, about how to actually do this. We have suggested in this chapter, for example, the importance of ongoing conversations at work that bring to the surface the identity-related dimensions of people's work. The premise is straightforward: The more that people talk about how their identities are or might be expressed through their work, the more mindful they will be about engaging meaningfully in their work. There are practical questions here related to how such conversations can be developed and sustained. There are theoretical questions as well, related to the relation between such identity conversations and the nature of performance management, career development, and mentoring.

It is also important to develop knowledge about a different sort of ongoing conversation by which workers are reminded of the meaning and impact of what they do in the world. It is through these conversations that workers are likely to expand the narrowed focus that they often adopt as they solve particular problems in specific situations. The questions here focus on the practical dimensions of creating and sustaining such conversations—who participates, in which settings, with what framing, and with what follow-up. There is also more research to be done in the promising area of job crafting, which focuses on expanding the task and relational dimensions of jobs in ways that create larger senses of meaning and impact for workers (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). It is through these efforts that we can increasingly develop knowledge about the nature of the conversations that sustain meaning and engagement.

WELCOMING THE SELF

Welcoming the self of the worker into the context of his or her work is necessary to sustain the meaning of that work and therefore engagement. This formulation goes against the implicit assumption that workers' orientation toward the work is a matter of individual temper-

ament, histories, personality dimensions, and the like. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) identified three work orientations. People can view work as a *job,* focusing primarily on the material benefits of work; as a *career,* focusing on the rewards related to promotions; and as a *calling,* focusing on the fulfillment associated with doing the work. These three orientations are located within individuals and are relatively immutable, perhaps changing in the context of adult development but otherwise reasonably stable within individuals. It is possible, however, that there can be some movement here; that is, workers with job or career orientations might well be able to bring themselves into calling orientations and thereby find more meaning in their work (Wrzesniewski, 2003).

The shift toward the calling orientation is likely to involve coaxing forth, welcoming, and validating the moments when workers venture past the boundaries of their given roles and infuse their selves more deeply into their work. Any movement that individuals make toward self-expression, the enlarging of jobs and job crafting, and the conversations by which they seek to understand or explore the larger purposes and impact of their work must be encouraged and validated. How such positive reinforcement occurs, who provides it, and in what systematic structures and processes all need to be understood on a practical dimension. A theoretical question involves the extent to which supervisors, leaders, human resources personnel, and peers are the appropriate locus of intervention efforts, given the nature of their roles and the nuanced relationship between the individual development of workers and the management of their performance. The processes by which workers make sense of their work experiences, link their efforts to larger purposes, and create and sustain the deeper meanings of their work are inherently social (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). How this occurs in practice is worth examining more closely.

Conclusion

Engagement at work is intimately related to the meaning of that work for people. People can work really hard at a job. They can show up regularly and put in long hours. But real engagement requires a sense that the work matters in some fashion, that it is deeply meaningful. Leaders and supervisors, consultants and human resources staff, and peers all have the potential to create the settings in which such deeper, larger meanings can surface in ways that inspire workers to explore their relations to such meanings. We have suggested in this chapter the nature of useful interventions—creating the contexts in which the

TABLE 5.1

Focus on the Workplace: Creating Contexts

Recommendations	Tested in practice	Derived from theory	Supported by research
Create structures and processes to link employees' roles and tasks to larger missions and purposes.[a]	✓	✓	✓
Develop and maintain clear expectations about employees' tasks, roles, and decision-making authority.[b]	✓	✓	✓
Create transparently fair processes to reward employees and encourage outstanding efforts.[c]	✓	✓	✓
Involve employees appropriately in diagnosing and solving problems, making decisions, and implementing ideas.[d]	✓	✓	✓
Create, authorize, and support small groups and teams to take on important, prominent assignments.[e]	✓	✓	✓
Invest prominently in selecting, training, evaluating, and rewarding highly competent supervisors and leaders.[f]	✓	✓	✓

Note. [a]Bunderson & Thompson (2009); Duffy & Sedlacek (2007); Emmons (2003); Pratt & Ashforth (2003). [b]House & Rizzo (1972); Ivancevich & Donnelly (1974); Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman (1970). [c]Blader & Tyler (2009); Tyler & Blader (2003). [d]Beugré (2010); Feldman & Khademian (2003); Spreitzer (1995). [e]Burpitt & Bigoness (1997); Hackman (2002); Richardson & West (2010); Wageman (1997). [f]Bass & Avolio (1990); Segers, De Prins, & Brouwers (2010).

TABLE 5.2

Focus on the Workplace: Ennobling Workers

Recommendations	Tested in practice	Derived from theory	Supported by research
Developmental reviews that allow for ongoing discussions with supervisors about employees' sense of purpose and meaning in relation to their work and roles.[a]	✓	✓	✓
Job crafting that enables workers to expand their sense of contributions to the larger world.[b]	✓	✓	✓
Validate and value workers through the regular practice of caring behaviors, appreciative inquiry, and celebrating efforts and achievements.[c]	✓	✓	✓
Build organizational communities that provide members with the sense of belonging, connectedness, and meaningful attachments.[d]		✓	✓

Note. [a]Clifton & Harter (2003); Kegan & Lahey (2009); Schaufeli & Salanova (2010). [b]Bakker (2010); Berg, Grant, & Johnson (2010); Wrzesniewski & Dutton (2001). [c]Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman (2006); Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher (2004); Kahn (1993, 2001). [d]Baumeister & Leary (1995); Dutton & Heaphy (2003); Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton (2000); Grant (2008); Reis & Gable (2003).

meanings of work are likely to be enhanced and ennobling workers so they call forth and express their own deeper selves in the context of their work. Sustained engagement is a direct function of these types of interventions insofar as they excavate the hidden depths of the meaning beneath people's daily work.

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