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Keywords

meaningful work, meaningfulness, purpose, organizational culture, qualitative research, employee engagement, positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship

Disciplines

Business Administration, Management, and Operations | Human Resources Management | Industrial and Organizational Psychology | Organizational Behavior and Theory | Organization Development | Social Psychology | Strategic Management Policy

The Ten Principles of Highly Meaningful Work: A Qualitative Study of Leading Organizations

Wesley Adams & Tamara Myles

University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Andrew Soren

August 1, 2020

The Ten Principles of Highly Meaningful Work: A Qualitative Study of Leading Organizations

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In addition to being the primary source of income for most adults, work is also one of the main forums in which individuals pursue achievement and meaning in life. Despite increasing appreciation for meaningful work and the desire to cultivate it, a widely accepted framework for fostering meaningful work in organizations has yet to emerge. In an attempt to lay the foundation for such an effort, we conducted a qualitative study with representatives of exemplar companies to explore common practices that organizations follow to foster meaningful work for their employees. The ten principles that emerged from this study are presented and directions for future research are proposed. Finally, drawing from both theory and practice, we introduce a principle-informed methodology that can guide organizations to enable meaningful work.

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“Never have we expected so much from work. We want from work today what we used to get from religion and community - belonging, purpose, meaning, community.”

- Esther Perel (Grant, 2020)

Introduction

In addition to being the primary source of income for most adults, work is also one of the main forums in which individuals pursue achievement and meaning in life (Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger, 2019; Shin & Steger, 2014). Work is the activity to which individuals in the United States devote on average one-third of their waking time (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020) and provides a forum for social activity as well as professional (Cardador & Rupp, 2011; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). As such, finding (or being denied) fulfilling work has the potential to greatly impact an individual’s sense of meaning in life and well-being overall (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012).

A range of studies have shown that meaningful work – defined here as work that is personally significant, provides opportunities for growth, and is connected to something larger than the self (Steger et al., 2012) – is correlated with a range of positive outcomes at the individual level such as increased self-efficacy and positive affect (Grant, 2007). Meaningful work also has significant organizational-level benefits including increased performance, greater engagement, and reduced absenteeism and turnover (Lysova et al., 2019).

In recent years, individuals have increasingly sought work that is meaningful, while organizations increasingly acknowledge the importance of fostering meaningful work to attract and keep high-quality employees, as well as boost engagement and performance (Deloitte, 2017). Despite the increasing appreciation for meaningful work and the desire to cultivate it, a widely accepted framework for fostering meaningful work in organizations has yet to emerge.

Although a range of meaningful work studies now exist in the academic literature, those who have reviewed the literature such as Lysova and colleagues (2019) tell us the efforts tend to focus on singular components of meaningful work rather than the complex construct as a whole. Few studies exist that explore how the various factors of meaningful work across individual, organizational, and cultural levels interact to create the lived experience of it within a company. In addition, the current literature focuses extensively on theory, with a dearth of studies exploring the real-world experience of meaningful work in practice.

With additional research into the comprehensive interaction of meaningful work factors, as well as examination of how attempts to foster meaningful work play out in the real world, we believe it may be possible to develop an applied framework to guide organizations in their efforts to foster meaningful work among employees. Going beyond isolated interventions such as unlimited vacation, volunteer days, or free snacks in the office, a comprehensive, accessible framework could provide a roadmap for purpose-driven organizations that wish to build engaged, effective communities working towards a common purpose.

In addition to improving business-level outcomes, increased experience of meaningful work may increase the overall well-being of individual employees (Steger et al., 2012). In turn, this change in an individual's well-being may also impact the well-being of those in her network – customers, suppliers, families, neighbors, and others – creating a cascading increase in community well-being (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). In this way, we see a practical guide to fostering meaningful work as both a powerful tool for business and a path to improve societal well-being overall.

This paper reviews the current academic literature on meaningful work with an emphasis on its place within the larger fields of positive psychology and positive organizational

scholarship. In an effort to lay the foundation for a practical guide to meaningful work, we have conducted an original study with representatives of exemplar companies to explore common principles that organizations follow to foster meaningful work. The results of this study are explored and directions for future research are proposed. Finally, based on the research, we propose a set of principles to inform a future applied practice of meaningful work.

Positive Psychology

In his address as the president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman (1999) introduced positive psychology as one of his presidential initiatives. He argued that following World War II, psychology had become primarily focused on healing mental illness, which, while important, is also limited in scope. Recognizing the need for additional knowledge, research, and practical methods to sustain individual's inner strengths and overall well-being, Seligman set forth a vision for re-orienting the science towards exploring what makes life worth living and how humans can thrive (Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Positive psychology is rooted in the idea that well-being is more than the absence of ill-being. If psychology focuses solely on eliminating pathology, it will merely bring individuals to neutral, and not ultimately enable them to thrive (Seligman, 2011). Psychology, according to Seligman, had become like a gardener focused exclusively on pulling weeds. By re-orienting towards the positive, psychology could return to its three distinct original missions: (1) to cure mental illness; (2) to make the lives of all individuals more productive and fulfilling; and (3) to identify and nurture high talent (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A master gardener knows that in order for her garden to thrive, it needs more than solely clearing out weeds; it needs

nurturing, water, sun, and an active cultivation of the right conditions for growth and change.

Similarly, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued:

Psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best. Psychology is not just a branch of medicine concerned with illness or health; it is much larger. It is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. (p. 7)

Over the last two decades, the field of positive psychology has grown significantly, garnering the attention of the larger scientific community and integrating different scholars under a common mission (Diener, 2009). Although philosophers, religious leaders and social scientists have thought about happiness and human potential for thousands of years, positive psychology brings them together to empirically investigate these topics. Currently, there are many different theories of well-being in the field of positive psychology (e.g. subjective well-being, Tay & Diener, 2011; self-determination theory, Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008; psychological well-being, Ryff & Keyes, 1995; I COPPE, Prilleltensky, 2016). One such well-being theory is Seligman's (2011) PERMA framework, which outlines five elements that individually meet the following criteria: (1) contributes to well-being; (2) is pursued for its own sake; and (3) can be defined and measured independently. The five elements of PERMA are positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. Research has shown that these five areas are important pathways to increase well-being and help individuals flourish.

Just like a garden needs the right soil to blossom, human flourishing best occurs when positive institutions foster the conditions that nurture human strengths, peak performance, and

optimal well-being. Thus, a crucial area of scholarship within positive psychology is the study of institutions that enable human thriving.

Positive Organizational Scholarship

In the same way that positive psychology focuses on studying individual strengths rather than pathological states, positive organizational scholarship (POS) examines the generative dynamics in organizations that cultivate exceptional individual and collective performance (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Corporate organizations today are focused primarily on identifying and fixing what's wrong, or what is called a deficit theory of change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Positive organizational scholarship, however, takes a contrasting approach:

The fundamental assumption of POS is a eudaemonic one: all human systems are biased toward achieving the highest aspirations of humankind or excellence and goodness for its own sake. Adopting an affirmative bias prioritizes positive energy, positive climate, positive relationships, positive communication, and positive meaning for individuals and organizations (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012, p.12).

By studying organizations through a positive lens, POS provides fertile ground for understanding the ideal organizational states and underlying forces that can facilitate human flourishing (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Luthans & Youssef, 2009). It is important to note, however, that adopting a positive lens does not deny the existence of challenges and obstacles. Instead, it examines them alongside the generative processes associated with well-being and success. Cameron and Spreitzer (2012) outline four approaches that converge to illustrate what is meant by the term "positive" in POS: (1) adopting a positive lens; (2) focusing on extraordinary outcomes and performance; (3) fostering a sense of resourcefulness; and (4)

examining human virtuousness. Multiple positive outcomes result when these four methods converge to institutionalize positive practices in organizations: employees become more engaged, energized, inspired, proud of their work, fully immersed in their tasks, experience greater positivity, and find their lives to be more meaningful (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002; Steger, 2019). By cultivating the right environment for growth, providing meaning and purpose, fostering positive relationships, and encouraging the use of character strengths, organizations may be able to help individuals flourish, increase job satisfaction, productivity, and engagement (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017).

These findings are significant considering the grim landscape of today's work environment. According to the Gallup World Poll (Clifton, 2017), only 15% of the world's one billion full-time workers are engaged at work. Although the results are considerably better in the United States, engagement is still low, hovering at just 30%. Paradoxically, Americans expect more from work now than ever before. As participation in organized religion continues to decrease, particularly among millennials (Pew Research Center, 2015), American workers are now "deriving their sense of community, meaning, and self-identity from their work" (Lindzon, 2019, para. 3). The trend is so common that it has earned its own term: *workism*, defined as "the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose" (Thompson, 2019, The Gospel of Work section, para. 2). Although the idea of pursuing purpose and passion through work can be beneficial, only half of today's American workforce experience some level of meaning and significance at work and feel connected to their company's mission (Schwartz & Porath, 2014). Given this thirst for meaning, organizations who wish to prosper need to create the best possible conditions for the seeds of

meaningfulness to grow. This includes having a strong purpose, creating opportunities for growth and development, and allowing individuals to contribute to something greater than the self (Steger et al., 2012). Just as flowers in a garden will grow into their full potential under the right conditions, positive organizational scholarship uncovers the positive outcomes that occur when organizations create meaningful environments that compel individuals to fulfill their highest possibilities.

Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is an important part of well-being. Those who believe that their lives have meaning are generally happier, feel more engaged, and in control of their lives (Steger, 2018). Steger suggests that the relationship between meaning and positive emotional states is bidirectional, implying a continuous upward spiral of meaning and positive emotions. Nagel (1971) states that those seeking to find meaning in their lives envision a role in something larger than themselves. When we believe that we are part of something bigger, he argues, we worry less about ourselves and find our role in this larger enterprise to be fulfilling.

In his seminal book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1963) argues that it is imperative for people to have a clear sense of the purpose of their existence and that with it, one can endure suffering and find a deeper meaning in life. Scholars have since defined and deconstructed meaning in life in multiple ways. For example, Baumeister & Vohs (2002) present four levels of meaning – purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth; George and Park (2016) refer to the three components of meaning as comprehension, purpose, and mattering; and Smith (2017) proposes four pillars of meaning: belonging, purpose, storytelling, and transcendence. Martela and Steger's (2016) broader definition states that meaning in life is a subjective experience composed of three facets – coherence, purpose, and significance.

Coherence refers to the feeling that one's life makes sense; purpose refers to future-oriented, highly motivating goals that give life direction; and significance refers to the feeling that one's life matters and is worthwhile (Martela & Steger, 2016).

While believing that your life is meaningful is a subjective experience, meaningfulness best ensues under the right conditions and environment. One way in which individuals fulfill their purpose and derive a sense of meaning in life is through meaningful work, the focus of this paper. Steger (2019) states that “when people find work to be meaningful in positive ways, they also find their lives to be meaningful in positive ways” (p. 212). We will now examine meaningful work more closely.

Meaningful Work

Defining Meaningful Work

Various definitions of meaningful work exist in the academic literature, although most scholars agree that meaningful work is work that is both personally significant and has worthwhile outcomes (Bailey, Madden, Alfes, Shantz, & Soane, 2017; Lysova et al., 2019; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Steger, 2019). Steger and colleagues (2012) also include prosocial motivation, or the service of something greater than the self, as a third factor. In examining the construct of meaningful work, scholars frequently distinguish between “meaning” and “meaningfulness” (Lysova et al., 2019; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). Meaning, an individual's interpretation of the value of an experience or event, is a type of sensemaking (Lysova et al., 2019; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Making sense of an experience, or determining whether and how it fits into one's individual narrative, does not necessarily assume positive or negative valence or make the experience meaningful (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningfulness is the degree to which an experience is

personally significant and typically implies a positive valence (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010), although we recognize that a work experience with a negative valence could still be meaningful (see Limitations below for more on this).

For the purposes of this paper and our review of the literature, “meaningful work” includes work that an individual subjectively believes to be significant, advances growth towards a desired goal, and contributes to something greater than the self (Steger et al., 2012).

Why Meaningful Work Matters

“I think that giving people meaningful work has of course economic value, but I also believe it has great personal value in people's happiness. I think people are happier with their family and friends when they're happy and fulfilled at work. ... And, and so from our perspective, we think about our impact as certainly helping companies grow better, but also as helping our employees and their families grow better.”

- Katie Burke, Chief People Officer at HubSpot

According to a recent meta-analytic study, meaningful work predicts a number of positive workplace outcomes including organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviors, employee engagement, and job satisfaction (Allan, Batz-Barbarich, Sterling, & Tay, 2019) (See Outcomes below for more detail). These outcomes in turn predicted self-rated job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (going above and beyond formal job duties to support one's organization), as well as reduced intentions to leave the organization (Allan et al., 2019). Employees who experience meaningful work also show reduced absenteeism (Steger et al., 2012) and reduced negative affect (Allan et al., 2019).

In addition to being the primary source of income for most adults, work is also one of the

main forums in which individuals pursue achievement and meaning in life (Lysova et al, 2019; Shin & Steger, 2014). Work is the activity to which individuals in the United States devote on average one-third of their waking time (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020) and provides a forum for social activity as well as professional (Cardador & Rupp, 2011; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). In addition to a range of desirable business outcomes, meaningful work can positively impact an individual's sense of meaning in life and well-being overall (Steger et al., 2012).

Meaningful work is positively correlated with life satisfaction, general health, and meaning in life (Allan et al., 2019). In a longitudinal study, Fowler and Christakis (2008) found evidence that happiness spreads among one's social network up to three degrees of separation. Given this, an increase in an individual worker's well-being should also increase the well-being of connected groups – customers, suppliers, families, neighbors, and others – creating a cascading increase in community well-being. In fact, research shows that when individuals are happy at work, well-being and personal relationships are improved, increasing overall life satisfaction (Cho & Tay, 2016). In this way, meaningful work can be both a powerful tool for business and for societal well-being overall.

Fredrickson's (2000) 'broaden and build' theory centers around the idea that positive emotional states broaden an individual's thinking and build important cognitive and emotional resources for the future. In a work setting, there is a range of evidence for this as experiences of positive meaning at work have been linked to increased innovation and creativity (Cohen-Meitar, Carmeli, & Waldman, 2009) and individual performance (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). The past few years have shown considerable increase in the discourse on purpose-driven and meaningful work, with more and more companies recognizing its business value and its centrality to attracting and retaining top talent (Deloitte, 2017). In a survey conducted in 2017 with close to

2,300 professionals across 26 industries, BetterUp Labs (2017) found that building greater meaning in the workplace has become imperative for companies who want to attract, retain, and engage top talent. The desire for meaningful work is significant, with 70% of employees stating that they value work that is meaningful, and reporting that they are willing to sacrifice 23% of their total future lifetime earnings in exchange for meaningful work (BetterUp, 2017). One study of 245 US-based participants across industries found that people were willing to accept salaries for personally meaningful work that were 32% lower ($M = 31.83\%$, $SD = 23.71\%$) than those they would accept for work they considered to be meaningless (Hu & Hirsch, 2017). In their 2019 Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte (2019) identified the need to improve the employee experience of meaningfulness at work as one of the biggest challenges facing organizations today, with 84% of the 10,000 global survey respondents rating the issue as important and 28% of those rating it as urgent.

While the importance of meaningful work continues to gain attention in the business literature, there is no clear agreement on how organizations can best foster meaningful work among employees (Lysova et al., 2019). Below we review the current state of academic research and some of the most prominent theories.

Meaningful Work Scholarship

A number of theories of meaningful work have been proposed in the past few decades, although no broad consensus exists among them (Steger, 2019). We review some of the key theories and scholarly frameworks below.

In their Job Characteristics Model, Hackman and Oldham (1976) propose that a worker's experience of meaningful work depends on three factors – the degree to which she is able to use diverse skill sets, the degree to which she is able to produce a complete and distinct piece of

work, and the degree to which the work positively impacts the lives of others. Their study found that meaningfulness, combined with additional dimensions of autonomy and feedback, positively correlated with internal motivation, performance, and job satisfaction, while correlating negatively with absenteeism and turnover (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). According to Hackman and Oldham (1976), all three dimensions of meaningfulness, autonomy, and feedback must be present to some degree for these outcomes to occur.

Pratt & Ashforth (2003) delineate between meaning at work, resulting from participation in something bigger than oneself, and meaning in work, resulting from one's individual efforts on the job. In this approach, individuals create meaning through the lens of identity. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) argue that individuals reach meaning via the construct of identity and that "meaningfulness arises through an integration of identity with roles (e.g. work and tasks) and/or membership" (p. 312). Within this framework, meaningful work is experienced through intrinsically motivating tasks that align with one's individual purpose as well as through membership in an organization that shares similar beliefs and values (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Pratt & Ashforth (2003) see this as an ongoing process that includes periods of meaningfulness as well as neutral or negative experiences.

Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) examine meaningful work along two major dimensions: (1) activities that are self-oriented versus activities that are oriented towards others; and (2) activities that promote individual agency versus those that promote communion and collaboration. According to the authors, these two dimensions create four major pathways to meaningful work (See Appendix A for diagram). Experiencing meaningful work through Individuation, characterized by Self and Agency orientation, happens through autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Contribution, where Others and Agency combine, fosters meaningful

work through self-transcendence, perceived impact, and prosocial contribution. Meaningful work through Self-Connection, combining Self and Communion, occurs through personal engagement, identity affirmation, and self-concordance. Finally, Unification, the intersection of Others and Communion, fosters meaningful work through shared identity, interpersonal connection, and common values (Rosso et al., 2010).

Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) cite three contributing factors to meaningful work: positive meaning, contribution to meaning-making, and greater good motivation. They developed a scale, the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI), to measure this theoretical construct. Pratt, Pradies, and Lepisto (2013) identify three potential mindsets that could lead to meaningful work – work that creates and improves relationships between people (kinship orientation), work that advances a greater good (serving orientation), and work that values expertise and achievement (craftsman orientation).

While the above theories focus primarily on individual experience of meaningful work, Bailey and colleagues (2017) have developed a model that includes four organizational factors – job tasks, roles, employee interactions, and organizational setting. Steger (2017) presents complementary individual and organizational frameworks for meaningful work with his SPIRE & CARMA models (See Appendix B). Others have examined socioeconomic factors (Autin & Allan, 2020) and societal factors such as access to decent work (Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Douglass, 2016). Most recently, Lysova and colleagues (2019) have comprehensively reviewed the meaningful work literature and proposed a multi-level framework that integrates individual, job, organizational, and societal factors that foster meaningful work (See Appendix C). In summing up this review, the authors state:

People are able to create meaningfulness when they have well-designed jobs with sufficient quality, type, and opportunities for job crafting that are embedded within organizations with facilitative leaders and cultures and a broader society that enables access to decent work. (Lysova et al., 2019 p. 383)

Lysova and colleagues (2019) acknowledge that testing the validity of this complex framework is challenging and suggest future research examining multi-level variables and modeling.

Table 1

Selected Scholarship on Meaningful Work

Author(s)	Year	Contribution	Summary
Hackman & Oldham	1976	Job Characteristics Model	Skill variety, task identity, & task significance contribute to meaningful work
Pratt & Ashforth	2003	Meaning <i>at</i> work & Meaning <i>in</i> work	Meaning can be found through enriching tasks and roles (<i>in</i>) or through enriching organizational membership (<i>at</i>); both together are ideal
Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski	2010	Four Pathways to Meaningful Work	Four major quadrants of meaningful work along two axes of Self-Others & Agency-Communion
Steger, Dik, & Duffy	2012	Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) scale	Scale to assess meaningful work based on greater good motivation, positive meaning, and contribution to meaning-making
Pratt, Pradies, & Lepisto	2013	Individual-level Orientation Framework	Individuals find meaningful work through belonging (Kinship Orientation), prosocial efforts (Serving Orientation), and/or mastery (Craftsman Orientation)

Bailey, Madden, Alfes, Shantz, & Soane	2017	Four Sources of Meaningful Work	Meaningful work comes from job tasks, roles, interactions, or the organization itself; ideally there is consistency across all sources over time
Steger	2017	SPIRE & CARMA Models	Individuals find meaningful work through strengths, personalization, integration, resonance, and expansion; organizations foster meaningful work through clarity, authenticity, respect, mattering, and autonomy
Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger	2019	Multi-level Integrated Framework	Comprehensive research-backed framework that includes factors at the individual, job, organizational, and societal levels

Meaningful Work in this Paper

The factors contributing to meaningful work are many and the construct is complex. While advancements continue to be made in examining the full range of individual, organizational, and societal factors that influence meaningful work as well as the myriad interactions among them, there is still much work to do (Lysova et al., 2019). At the individual level, the experience of meaningful work can be influenced and moderated by individual differences such as personality type or closely held values, personal narrative and interpretation of events, as well as degree of intrinsic motivation (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017; Lysova et al., 2019). Although meaningfulness is experienced at the individual level, creating meaning relies on a number of external factors for framing and feedback (Bailey et al., 2019). Determining personal significance and sense of growth rarely occur outside of a social environment that provides cultural norms and allows one to gauge progress and competency (Bailey et al., 2019). Prosocial impact, the degree to which work contributes to something greater than the self, by its very nature requires an external ‘other’ (Grant, 2007).

We have chosen to focus our research on the factors we believe to have the most significant impact and readiness for change. To this end, our original research explores organizational factors, which we believe have the potential to positively impact the broadest range of people. While organizations cannot force individuals to experience meaningful work, there are a range of factors at the organizational level that can enable (and also destroy) those experiences (Michaelson, Pratt, Grant, & Dunn, 2014). These include leadership style, job design, workplace relationships, and culture (Bailey et al., 2019). Our research explored the efforts of leading companies to enable and foster meaningful work among employees.

Research and Methodology

The main goal of our research was to understand how organizations intentionally enable the experience of meaningful work. Additionally, we were seeking answers to questions such as: Are there universal principles that guide the practice of meaningful work? How do the principles used in practice reinforce or expand the current theoretical frameworks in the academic literature? Do these principles work across different companies in different sectors? Why are individuals in some organizations more likely to find work meaningful than in other organizations? How does intentionally fostering meaningful work affect the organization? This section takes a closer look at the methods and procedures used for our qualitative research.

Methodology

The research was conducted using grounded theory methodology, a systematic process of research from which researchers can develop theories from the data, rather than starting with a predetermined hypothesis (Hansen, 2005). We chose this methodology because we hoped to identify patterns and discover relevant practices used by exemplar organizations to foster meaningful work, rather than force relevancy of current theories on the study. Moreover, we

hoped that through the identification of categorical themes, we could develop a set of common principles, and later a methodology to enable meaningful work in organizations.

To select companies for participation, we developed exemplar nomination criteria (see Appendix D), including attributes such as having been externally recognized by a major outlet as top place to work, and having a formal mission and/or values statement. The exemplar methodology is focused on examining organizations on the leading edge of the construct being studied, which in this case was meaningful work. Exemplar methodology is based on the premise that participants demonstrate the construct being studied in a highly developed manner. Therefore, the input they provide can subsequently be applied to companies that display more common development of the concept (Bronk, King, & Matsuba, 2013). By examining the meaningful work construct in exemplar organizations, we hoped to gain a deeper understanding “not only of what *is*, but also of what *is possible*” (Bronk, 2012, p. 9) in terms of fostering meaningful work across different organizations.

Once the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and permission was obtained from the participants through an informed consent form (see Appendix E), interviews were conducted and recorded virtually via the online video platform Zoom, and then transcribed. We conducted a total of 12 interviews, lasting an average of 52 minutes, from April 20 to July 7, 2020. Table 1 presents an overview of the participating organizations, including the name and title of the leaders interviewed, the size of the company, and its industry.

Table 2

Research Participant List

Company	Industry	# of employees worldwide	Interviewee name and title

15Five	Technology	150+	Courtney Bigony, Director of People Science & Jeff Smith, Director, Best Self Academy
BetterUp	Professional services	650+	Susan Hwang, Director of Special Projects (Office of the CEO)
Chick-fil-A	Food Service	27,900+	Dee Ann Turner, former Vice President, Talent and Sustainability
Curriculum Associates	Education	900+	Rob Waldron, CEO
Google	Technology/ Advertising	118,900+	Carla H. McIntosh, Head of Talent Acquisition and Senior Staff Solutions Consultant
HubSpot	Technology	3,300+	Katie Burke, Chief People Officer
KPMG	Professional Services	219,000+	Claudia Saran, Chief Culture Officer
Marriott	Hospitality	750,000+	Debbie Marriott Harrison, Global Officer, Marriott Culture and Business Councils
Microsoft	Technology	151,000+	Terri Jordan, GM, Global Data Center Operations
Nutanix	Technology	6,100+	Deep Mahajan, Sr. Director and Head of People Development and Culture

Schneider Electric	Energy and Electrical Equipment	135,000+	Tina Mylon, SVP, Talent and Diversity & Sonali Sapathy, VP, Diversity, Inclusion and Well Being
Zappos	Retail	1,500+	Christa Foley, Sr. Director of Brand Vision & Culture, Head of Talent Acquisition

Data Analysis

The interviews were semi-structured and while a standard script (see Appendix F) was followed, we also probed for stories and asked follow-up questions as appropriate. After the first four interviews were conducted, we coded the transcripts independently and generated a list of conceptual categories mentioned by the leaders. A distinguishing aspect of grounded theory research is the simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis, which allows for continuous reflection and refinement of emerging categories (Hansen, 2005). During this process, keeping memos and revising codes as needed is an important step to analyze, explicate, and revise categories.

We continued this iterative process until all 12 interviews were conducted. The next step was to discuss and refine the two lists, create analytic codes and categories, and subsequently code the interviews based on emerging theories. A total of 17 categories and 124 sub-categories were identified from the 12 interviews (see Appendix G). We addressed the data with an understanding of the theories of meaningful work from the academic literature, however we also recognized new conceptual categories emerging from the interviews, and thus tried to avoid overlaying a theoretical framework on the practices appearing in the data. A consensus was reached rapidly on the 10 principles presented below, however further discussions were needed

to agree on names, practices, and characteristics of each one. In order to ensure the quality of the results, we re-coded the data once the 10 principles were uncovered, and could thus carefully examine the significance of each principle. Below we present our findings and discuss the 10 principles that emerged from our interviews.

Discussion

Based on the coding and analysis of our interviews, 10 common principles emerged in exemplar companies' efforts to foster meaningful work. Foundational to all of the principles highlighted below is the task of explicitly articulating and clearly communicating the purpose and values of the organization. In this paper, *organizational purpose* answers the question 'Why does this organization exist?' and is generally an aspirational future state detached from outcomes (Mercurio, 2017). An example of this would be Google's purpose to 'To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful' (Google, n.d.). We distinguish *organizational purpose* from a *mission* or *vision*, which are outcome-based future states such as a food bank's goal to 'Feed 1M people by 2030'. A *mission* can be achieved and evolve or change, while a *purpose* remains constant (Mercurio, 2017). *Values* answer the question 'How should we work together?' and provide a framework for the operation of an organization. Values inform and manifest in the decisions and day-to-day behaviors of employees. One of the values prized at Nutanix is to "Start with Why" (Nutanix, n.d.). This value informs the discussion at the beginning of every client meeting and project launch, so that employees always start by understanding the purpose of what they are to work on.

No two organizations are alike and each needs to discover and develop these core beliefs on its own. Exemplar organizations studied here showed a broad range of organizational purposes from the transcendent, such as Chick-fil-A's "To glorify God by being a faithful

steward of all that is entrusted to us and to have a positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-fil-A.” (Chick-fil-A, n.d.), to the practical, such as Schneider Electric’s “Empower all to make the most of their energy and resources.” (Schneider Electric, n.d.)

Regardless of what the purpose drives towards or the types of behavior that the values encourage, our research indicates they are the foundation of an organization's ability to foster meaningful work among its members. It is possible in a valueless environment that an individual could still experience meaningful work through a sense of individual mastery or belonging (Cardador & Rupp, 2011; Pratt, Pradies, & Lepisto, 2013), but our research shows that a clear and shared understanding of organizational purpose and values is required to intentionally create opportunities for meaningful work at the organizational level. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) refer to this integrated system of organizational identity, membership, values, and purpose as the ‘ideological fortresses’ (p. 323) inside which all other efforts to foster meaningful work take place. The gates of these fortresses bound the organization’s activity (see Principle 6 - Empower with Value-bounded Autonomy) the heraldry create a sense of shared community (See Principle 3 - Encourage Collective Ownership of Culture), and the walls help the membership of the organization understand where they belong in the world (see Principle 5 - Connect Individual Work to Higher Purpose).

Below we outline the ten common principles that emerged from our research (See Table 3 for a summary). While the companies we studied had diverse purposes, value sets, and business interests, these principles were salient in nearly all of their respective efforts to foster meaningful work. We review each principle with respect to academic theory scholarly works and provide examples of how they shape the operation of participant companies. We also examine the perceived outcomes of participants’ meaningful work efforts and compare them to

scientific research. Finally, we propose a practical framework that could be used to implement a meaningful work practice in organizations and suggest directions for future research.

Table 3

The Ten Principles of Highly Meaningful Work

Principle #	Principle Name	Percentage of participants who discussed
1	Select for purpose and values alignment	75%
2	Make a strong first impression	75%
3	Encourage collective ownership of culture	100%
4	Model valued behavior	100%
5	Connect individual work to higher purpose	83%
6	Empower with value-bounded autonomy	75%
7	Engage and embrace the whole person	100%
8	Foster cross-organizational relationships	83%
9	Structure operations to reinforce values	100%
10	Recognize possibility and nurture potential	83%

Principle 1 – Select for Purpose and Values Alignment

Participants cited values alignment between employees and the organization as a critical factor in meaningful work. Most often, this manifested in the talent selection process. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) highlight greater person-organization fit as important contributors to meaningful work. From a broader organizational perspective, common purpose and shared employee bonds also contribute to meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Widespread person-organization fit supports the forming of cross-organizational relationships (see Principle 8 - Foster Cross-Organizational Relationships) by creating an environment with shared values and

social norms. As Bailey and colleagues (2019) state, “Individual accounts that resonate with social norms and values are most likely to confer worthiness through social validation and support.” (Bailey et al., 2019 p. 492). A sense of belonging, an individual’s feeling that she ‘fits in’ to the group, is a frequently cited factor in fostering meaningful work (Cardador & Rupp, 2011; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). An individual is more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging at an aligned organization (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). This sense of belonging can contribute to psychological safety within the organization allowing individuals to show up more fully in daily interactions (Rosso et al., 2010). Susan Hwang of BetterUp shared:

...our hiring bar is high in terms of not just skill sets, but also alignment to our values and mission. It allows people to develop trust quickly with each other because they understand, ‘Hey, I know you have similar values and we are all dedicated to achieving the same shared mission’ ... Trust becomes naturally built into those relationships. So, I find it's really easy to connect on a deeper level with everybody.

By screening carefully for purpose and values alignment, organizational leaders can improve the likelihood that individual employees will feel connected to the group and build relationships with others (Cardador & Rupp, 2011).

Most interviewees had a highly structured, uniform process for recruiting candidates and screening for values alignment. Some had dedicated training for values-based interviewing, and many assigned the role of ensuring values-alignment to a single gatekeeper. While this gatekeeper could be a group such as the recruiting department, we heard several times that the organization’s leader would screen each candidate personally. Rob Waldron, CEO of Curriculum Associates, met 345 candidates in 2019 as the company continued to grow rapidly. Until his death in 2013, Chick-fil-A founder Truitt Cathy interviewed every candidate for a

franchise before they were accepted. Zappos' HR team interviews every candidate for value fit and, even after they are accepted, the company goes so far as to offer new hires a month's salary to leave anytime during their four-week onboarding if they don't believe the company is a good fit for them. While experience and skills were prized, interviewees often shared that values misalignment with a job candidate was a deal-breaker. Christa Foley of Zappos shared the following about the company's recruiting process:

We'll do skills testing and we'll do technical interviews to assess that the candidate has the right skillset. But then we also do our core value interview with every candidate... to try to assess in the interview process, is this person aligned with our 10 core values? And recruiting has the final say on who we hire. So, as an example... finding tech talent is difficult. It's a tight market for developers and software engineers. And even if we have an amazing software engineer that the entire dev team loves, and they're going to really help us go to the next level, if they show red flags in the core values interview, we won't move forward.

While interviewees saw values-alignment as critical, many expressed that diversity of thought and background was equally prized. Meta-analysis of studies on diversity and performance do indeed show a positive correlation between increased diversity and overall team performance ($N = 2267$, $r = 0.11$, $p = .12$) (Bell, Villado, Lukasik, Belau, & Briggs, 2011). Rather than seeing potential conflict, several interviewees viewed values-alignment and diversity as closely connected. Christa Foley of Zappos clarified, “*you [don't] have to be a hundred percent in each value... we're not looking to hire clones. We need massive diversity of thought to be innovative at the company.*” This idea was echoed among other participants, who saw their efforts as seeking culture- or values-*add* instead of culture- or values-*fit*. Interviewees saw ideal

candidates are those that both share the organization's core values *and* would challenge or advance the thinking on them in the pursuit of continuous improvement.

Principle 2 – Make a Strong First Impression

Exemplar organizations place significant importance on the onboarding process. Research suggests that the early cues employees receive when they start their tenure with a new organization carry great weight in the creation of work meaning (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). Many of the organizations we spoke with view this time as a great opportunity to get to know the individuals' whole self, develop strong relationships across the organization, and acculturate new employees. Just like traditional psychology focuses on reducing pathology (see Positive Psychology section above), typical onboarding processes are designed to reduce ambiguity and anxiety about appropriate behaviors in the workplace (Green, Finkel, Fitzsimons, & Gino, 2017). For example, traditional onboarding practices tend to focus heavily on general rules and compliance, as well as orientation on mundane topics such as technology and paperwork. This can leave new hires feeling overwhelmed by a volume of information that is impossible to process and incorporate in a short period (Bradt & Vonnegut, 2009). In contrast, the organizations in our study aim to create an experience focused on the positive side of the spectrum by making new hires feel welcome, know that they belong, and understand how they are contributing to something greater than themselves. Susan Hwang highlighted the importance that BetterUp places on creating a strong foundation for the relationship by stating that they treat onboarding as a *“really sacred moment”* and that they *“want to make sure we give [new employees] an experience that is meaningful.”*

One of the ways in which these exemplar organizations create a memorable onboarding process is by the use of shared stories. Storytelling is a powerful strategy to provide inspiration

and direction (Aaker & Aaker, 2016) and can be an effective mechanism to reflect and reinforce strong cultures (Gottschall, 2012). Almost all of the organizations included in our study are intentional about the use of storytelling as an onboarding tool. Zappos, for instance, starts the onboarding process by doing a deep dive into their ten core values, outlining the exact meaning and expectations for each one. Then, they invite individuals from across the company to share a story about a particular core value, why it is personally important to them, and how it has helped their career at Zappos. By using stories instead of stand-alone facts to communicate core values and their associated behaviors, exemplar organizations leverage the power of narrative to connect and persuade (Aaker & Aaker, 2016).

As salient as enculturation through shared values and stories is to the onboarding process, it is only one way in which new employees are welcomed into these exemplar organizations. Our research uncovered that fostering strong relationships and building a network of support across the organization is another critical aspect of the process. Zappos does this by structuring their onboarding around new hire training classes of about 30 people spread across different levels of the organization – from C-level executives to call center employees. They treat these classes like a bootcamp with team activities centered around bonding and connection, so that by the end of their four-week training, the new employees have formed connections across the company in different departments. Similarly, Carla H. McIntosh told us that Google “*onboards many different folks, at different states in their careers, from all over the world at the same time, and they do a great job of ensuring that you have connectivity very early on and that you don’t forget those you met in your Noogler (new Googler) class.*” One of the ways Google encourages connectivity during onboarding is by leading new employees through the exercise of adding time on their schedules to connect with their Noogler colleagues once the onboarding process is over.

In addition to enculturating new hires and fostering strong relationships, a further approach that emerged in our study is the practice of encouraging new employees to share personal information about themselves during onboarding so organizations can support the whole individual (see Principle 7 - Engage and Embrace the Whole Person). Drawing on authenticity research, Cable, Gino and Staats (2013) found that highlighting new employees' best selves during onboarding can benefit both new employees and organizations. Five asks their new employees to share their strengths and what they're doing when they are at their best with others in the organization, treating the onboarding as a time for self-reflection. Similarly, Susan Hwang told us that BetterUp encourages new employees to “*speak up and share what is meaningful to [them]*” so that the company can in turn focus their efforts to provide meaningful work for each individual.

By taking a positive approach to onboarding, intentionally fostering a sense of belonging, and sharing stories that bring the culture to life, these organizations make a strong first impression and set the stage for the experience of meaningful work.

Principle 3 – Encourage Collective Ownership of Culture

There is a sense that everyone within an exemplar organization has a duty to protect and advance shared values. While this was often formally reinforced, it was also a significant part of the informal culture of the organization. In each culture, which we define as the unspoken assumptions, social norms, and expectations of an organization (Cardador & Rupp, 2011), employees were expected to live their shared values and contribute to the continuous growth and refinement of the culture as well as the company's products and services. These types of innovative and supportive cultures, characterized by initiative, growth, and shared responsibility, are linked with increased experiences of meaningful work (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). While

formally integrating values into day-to-day operation can help foster meaningful work (See Principle 9), the informal social norms and behaviors of employees can also significantly impact the experience of meaningful work (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). Just as a leader's alignment of values and behavior affects an individual's perception of the organization (See Principle 4 - Model Valued Behavior) (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), so too does the perceived values-alignment and authenticity of her colleagues (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). Broad engagement in the internal conversation about 'how we do things around here' sends the message that people are invested in the organizational paradigm and working towards common goals (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Our research focused on interviewing leaders about efforts to foster meaningful work at the organizational level, so it is unsurprising that many of our findings have a top-down perspective. However, interviewees were often quick to point out that an environment of meaningful work requires both top-down and bottom-up participation (as well as horizontal – see Principle 8). Deep Mahajan of Nutanix refers to this as the *software* of culture:

“...there are some things which are the hardware of carrying the culture. And then there are others, which are the software... not visible, which are very much driving the culture embedding process. So, talking about the hardware... how people write their goals, people do their performance management, their check-ins. Even our decisions around compensation, promotion, reward, and recognition... [then there is] the software of culture, which is in meeting rooms, in conferences, in regular email conversation... in what they are sharing on Slack. You will see arguments happening on Slack channels where you will have [debates about] cultural principles... you could see that the good side, the bad side of [a] cultural principle is being talked about... ‘what would you

prioritize?’ ... we have a lot of data... we have evidence [that] where culture got spoken about culture became the reason why we did something.”

This open discussion of how values translate into action can also bolster an individual’s sense of value when she feels her voice has been heard (Prilleltensky, 2014). Acknowledging perspectives and encouraging input both increase intrinsic motivation, a contributor to meaningful work (Deci et al., 2017). As companies grow and employees are no longer in the same building or even the same country, it is inevitable that subcultures will form. After HubSpot’s IPO, Katie Burke describes how they addressed cultural differences in a new Dublin office:

“Over and over again [we kept asking], ‘How do we make sure our culture in Dublin is the same as Cambridge? And how do we make sure we send enough leaders over often enough that it’s the same?’ And what we finally agreed after a while is our goal is not to be the same, it’s to add to our culture. So, the metaphor we use is, ‘siblings, not twins.’ People in different families are different and unique. You might know they’re from the same family because they have the same traditions or some funny shared language, but their mannerisms and [other behaviors] look and feel a little bit different. Once we explicitly gave permission to our offices to be unique, to be different, to not be the same, a lot of good things happened.”

A focus on creating common language and practice can help support a sense of belonging (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). However, interviewees felt that allowing employees to interpret, innovate on, or just add a fun spin to core values promotes a sense of collective culture ownership, which can deepen connection and belonging as well. Katie Burke shared the metaphor of a family recipe that is passed down from generation to generation. While many of

the core ingredients stay the same, each generation will add to, improve on, and modify it in a way that works best for them. In the same way, company culture continues to keep its core components even as various groups of employees riff on and adapt it to their individual needs.

Principle 4 – Model Valued Behavior

Exemplar organizations sought to maintain consistency of leadership in both word and action. The practice of matching ‘rhetoric and reality’ was cited as a critical factor for enabling meaningful work. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) highlight the importance of the integrity between spoken values and behavior. Management styles in which leaders emulate values, inspire and mentor employees, and promote shared goals are associated with the fostering of meaningful work in organizations (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1990; Cardador & Rupp, 2011; Lysova et al., 2019; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Leadership characterized by self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive modeling, has been shown to facilitate employee learning and also increase identification with leaders and the organization (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). By acting with integrity, leaders translate aspirational and abstract values into concrete and actionable behaviors (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Jimmy Collins, the former president of Chick-fil-A, was known within the company for exemplifying the values of servant leadership and putting customer satisfaction above all else. On the way to work in the morning, Collins could often be seen on the side of the road leading to Chick-fil-A corporate headquarters picking up trash. While Collins never mentioned or promoted these efforts to others, word got around within the organization. It was so important to Collins that visitors to the building, which often included store franchisees, had the best possible experience that he took the time to make sure the drive in was beautiful. Dee Ann Turner, the former VP of Talent, recalls that his dedication to customer experience and his willingness to

engage in whatever task was necessary set an example for other employees and inspired them to live up to the company ideals.

Frémeaux and Pavageau (2020) clarify that coherence between values promoted and practices adopted must include both an authentic commitment to moral values and consistency in the way those values are modeled over time. When words and deeds are not aligned, even if only occasionally, workers can feel a sense of cynicism and mistrust for leadership (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). This misalignment can erode the experience of meaningful work as well as negatively impact an individual's performance and engagement (Bailey et al., 2017). These negative impacts are heightened when leaders are intentionally misleading, perceived to be 'faking it', or outright abusive (Bailey & Madden, 2016). In this way, some scholars view coherent leadership as a necessary component of meaningful work, but not sufficient alone to foster it (Lysova et al., 2019). Leaders who consistently match word and deed also create trust among employees (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). This trust can help build psychological safety, the belief that one's thoughts and feelings can be shared without negative repercussion, which is another important contributor to meaningful work (Kahn & Fellows, 2013).

Embedded in the perceived importance among interviewees of modeling behavior was the idea that values and behaviors spread through an organization from the top down. Although many interviewees also highlighted the importance of bottom-up engagement (see Principle 3 - Encourage Collective Ownership of Culture), they viewed visible commitment from leaders as critical.

Several interviewees had recently undergone change management efforts within their respective organizations that involved updating values or rolling out new ones. Two of the interviewees, both of whom felt the change efforts to be successful, cited cascading roll out and

training on the new values systems. Efforts for both initiatives began in the C-suite, then cascaded down to senior managers, line managers, and finally individual contributors. At each level, senior employees were charged with both educating their reports and demonstrating valued behaviors. During the change effort at Nutanix, the CEO intentionally tied company decisions to values on earnings calls and other company-wide communication to reinforce their importance. This set an example for the rest of the company, where values now feature prominently in all decision-making conversations.

Principle 5 – Connect Individual Work to a Higher Purpose

Participants often shared examples of how they intentionally create connections between individual job tasks and the larger purpose or prosocial impact of the company. The idea of task significance, the extent to which a task is viewed as helping others (prosocial), has roots in the Job Characteristics Model proposed by Hackman and Oldham (1976) to account for employee motivation. Prosocial work, or work that contributes to something larger than oneself, is a major component of meaningful work as defined by Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012). Adam Grant (2007; 2008) highlights the importance of prosocial efforts in bolstering performance, dedication, and helping behaviors which in turn support individual self-worth and sense of mastery. In addition to connecting day-to-day efforts to larger outcomes, impact stories can also support an individual's sense of contribution and self-worth (Grant, 2007). In seeing the positive outcomes of their work, individuals are able to feel that they have added value to, and are also valued by, others (Grant, 2007). Understanding how an employee's day-to-day work connects with the organization's overall mission becomes especially important when workers are removed from the beneficiaries of their work and do not directly experience its prosocial outcomes (Allan, Duffy, & Collisson, 2018; Grant, 2007). One common practice among exemplar companies in

our research involved efforts to capture and share impact stories, specific examples of how an organization's work contributed to or changed someone's life for the better.

In Microsoft's Cloud Management unit, the majority of employees are tasked with physically setting up servers and maintaining close to 100% uptime in computer centers that are far removed from the companies and communities they serve. During the recent Covid-19 crisis, a huge proportion of workers across the country began working remotely. This required a major increase in computing power to support additional video calls, remote collaboration on documents, remote schooling, and sharing of critical pandemic resources. Business unit leader Terri Jordan, a research participant, shared that she was able to connect the work setting up new server boxes in the warehouse to the critical efforts of frontline workers in places like New York City to care for the critically ill and safeguard the broader community. This effort bolstered the team's morale and gave them a sense of contributing to the larger community in a meaningful way.

In one study, Allan (2017) found that task significance, an individual's belief that work has a positive impact on others, strongly predicted meaningful work. Studies have shown that when an individual believes a task to be prosocial, she performs better than if she believes it to be merely self-serving (Allan et al., 2018). Interestingly, this holds true across a variety of tasks, even if the task itself could be considered menial (Allan et al., 2018). A short-term spike in prosocial tasks (e.g. five in the same day) shows a stronger long-term increase in meaningful work than prosocial tasks spread out over time (e.g. one per week). Allan and colleagues (2018) theorize that many prosocial tasks in a short period of time may be perceived by the brain as more salient and therefore be remembered longer.

This indicates that tying daily tasks to prosocial outcomes will be more effective than occasionally sharing an organization's impact. Leaders can support meaningful work by helping workers make these mental associations (Carton, 2018). Creating these mental connections is a component of job crafting known as cognitive crafting, which focuses on changing perceptions of tasks rather than tasks themselves (Berg, Dutton, & Wrezniewski, 2013). Leaders, who strongly influence the creation of policy and practice within an organization, have an opportunity to set expectations for and share big picture aspirations with other employees (Carton, 2018; Lysova et al., 2019). In the way they communicate and translate an organization's values and practices, leaders both directly and indirectly mold an employee's sense of the significance of her work and the extent to which it serves a larger purpose (Lysova et al, 2019). In an examination of NASA employees in the 1960's, Carton (2018) found that efforts to connect daily work to NASA's ultimate aspirations helped improve individual experiences of meaningfulness. As employees shifted from a task focus (e.g. fixing electrical circuits) to aspiration focus (e.g. putting a man on the moon), the sense of meaningful work was increased (Carton, 2018).

This strong connection to larger purpose appeared often among study participants. For example, Zappos practices a self-organized management process called holacracy in which employees self-organize into teams called circles to accomplish the company's business. Each circle's work has to tie back to the company's purpose as Crista Foley shares:

Our purpose is to 'Live and deliver WOW!' at the top level. And then every circle, which kind of amoebas out below, has a purpose... and every purpose, wherever [the circle] falls in the company has to roll up to and be in support of the circle above and the circle above and the circle above, such that everyone's purpose is to 'Live and deliver WOW!'

As an example of ‘Live and deliver WOW!’, Foley shared that if Zappos does not carry an item, customer service representatives will frequently research other businesses that do and share a link with customers on the spot.

Principle 6 – Empower with Value-Bounded Autonomy

Exemplar organizations shared multiple examples of how they promote individual autonomy bounded by organizational values. Autonomy refers to an individual’s sense that their actions are self-directed and intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2002). However, under the right circumstances, extrinsically motivated activities can also be performed with a sense of autonomy, authenticity, and vitality (Deci et al., 2017). In one study examining the link between autonomy and meaningful work, internal motivation emerged as the largest predictor of meaningfulness (Allan, Autin, & Duffy, 2016). In fact, the relationship was so strong that the researchers speculated that autonomy may be a critical factor to experiencing meaningful work (Allan et al., 2016). Moreover, in their Job Characteristics Model of work motivation, Hackman and Oldham (1976) posit that autonomy is an integral part of motivation. When individuals feel personally responsible for the outcomes of their work, their internal drive increases, resulting in a self-perpetuating cycle of positive motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

An important nuance of our findings is that the autonomy granted to employees is bounded by the espoused values of the company. In the psychological literature, the concept of ‘bounded autonomy’ refers to the “interpretation of the extent to which free behavior is circumscribed by moral norms” (Folger, Ganegoda, Rice, Taylor, & Wo, 2013, p. 907). In the companies we studied, autonomy takes place within the cultural norms and values that shape behaviors in the organization. Individuals are encouraged to turn to these values and the behaviors associated with them to guide decisions about how to do their work. Schneider

Electric, for example, gives employees the flexibility to do things their way, structuring their work to fit their style and needs. Likewise, BetterUp believes that the most important factor for performance is purpose and values alignment and once that happens, individuals have autonomy to change their roles to better fit their interests and needs. Google takes this a step further, allowing employees to dedicate 20% of their time to the pursuit of special interests and projects, with weekly one-on-ones with managers ensuring alignment on values and priorities.

Most of the organizations we interviewed empower their employees to make decisions and determine the best way to execute their jobs. They do this by clearly and consistently articulating their organizational values and defining the high impact behaviors associated with these values. Furthermore, these organizations prioritize outcomes over processes and genuinely trust their employees to perform at their best. By providing clarity around values, and articulating desired outcomes and expected behaviors, these companies actively provide limits and boundaries, while promoting autonomy and creativity, making the job seem less like a list of tasks (Berg et al., 2013). Katie Burke from HubSpot illustrated this idea:

A big part of our culture is autonomy. We really believe that the best people in the world don't want to be micromanaged. We could create a million different rules, but instead we rely on our culture to help guide those decisions.

By empowering individuals with choice and autonomy, these companies can foster a sense of responsibility and trust (Perrone, Zaheer, & McEvily, 2003). This balance between autonomy and accountability is captured in popular culture by the Peter Parker principle, “with great power comes great responsibility” (Whitbrook, 2019, para. 1). Indeed, interviewees mentioned that they expect individuals to actively participate in making the organization better by providing input and voicing opinions. When they do, their voice is heard and valued, creating

a virtuous cycle of empowerment and accountability. Rob Waldron, CEO of Curriculum Associates, emphasized the importance of asking for strategic input to both engagement and overall success. He stated, *“Our company was valued at \$13 million when I took over and is valued at over \$1 billion today. How did that happen? I hired great people and did what they said. That’s all I’ve done.”* Moreover, Katie Burke shared how leaders at HubSpot moderate this approach by sourcing input but retaining decision-making authority, a style she calls *“collaborative but not consensus-driven.”* Katie shared that when HubSpot was developing their culture code, the company’s CEO wrote the first draft, then asked a small group of leaders for feedback. He incorporated that feedback and presented it to the entire company, once again asking for feedback. The leadership team then went back and incorporated the input from employees into the final document, giving individuals a voice while retaining final decision-making authority.

Perhaps the ultimate example of autonomy that emerged from our research is the self-organizing holacracy system at Zappos. Employees at Zappos have the flexibility to take on various roles and move across teams within their 600+ circles. Each circle has a lead link who runs a governance process with team members to develop the circle’s set of accountabilities. Christa Foley told us that moving to this self-organizing system six years ago has been a long but successful process for Zappos, mainly because of the autonomy and trust they place in their employees.

By helping employees identify the significance of their work and providing support for autonomy and choice, these exemplar organizations promote internal motivation, which research has shown can lead to the experience of meaningful work (Allan et al., 2016).

Principle 7 – Engage and Embrace the Whole Person

Exemplar organizations actively create conditions that enable employees to bring their whole selves to work. In fact, many of interviewees mentioned having intentional practices in place to encourage individuals to engage authentically. Authenticity – defined here as the ability to show one’s whole self (Glavas, 2016) – may be a critical condition to finding meaning in work (Chalofsky, 2003). It is important to note that the manner in which these organizations promote authenticity is not prescriptive. Rather, they are intentional about fostering conditions where employees feel safe and encouraged to bring their whole selves to work. At Zappos, for example, one of their ten core values is to *Create Fun and a Little Weirdness*, which they describe as:

In our culture we celebrate and embrace our diversity and each person’s individuality. We want people to express their personality in their work. To outsiders, that might come across as inconsistent or weird. But the consistency is in our belief that we function best when we can be ourselves (Zappos Insights, n.d.).

When individuals are allowed and encouraged to express more of who they are at work, they create deeper interpersonal bonds, which can lead to the experience of meaningful work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Research has found that three psychological conditions influence the degree in which people authentically engage: (1) feeling worthwhile and valued; (2) the ability to reveal yourself without fear of negative consequences; and (3) the availability of necessary resources (Kahn, 1990). 15Five intentionally cultivates an environment where individuals feel safe and supported to reveal more of themselves. Embedded in their culture is the practice of facilitating informal connecting opportunities at the start of every meeting by asking questions

such as “*who is one person that you are grateful for this week and why?*” The company believes that this practice enables their employees to better integrate their work and personal lives, forge deeper bonds, and feel truly seen.

Encouraging individuals to share more of themselves is only one side of the coin; embracing them when they do is how these organizations make employees feel seen and valued. When employees are acknowledged and feel valued, it positively and significantly increases their engagement (Galvas, 2016) and can help them flourish (Seligman, 2011). According to Robbins (2018) two concurrent conditions are necessary for humans to thrive at work: (1) high expectations (see Principle 10 - Recognize Possibility and Nurture Potential) and (2) high nurturance, which involves being wholly seen, appreciated and valued. When others value us and make us feel important, noticed, and needed, we feel significant and trust that we matter (Elliot, Kao, & Grant, 2004; Smith, 2017). Mattering is a fundamental psychological human need that contributes to individual and collective flourishing and refers to the complementary experiences of feeling valued and adding value (Prilleltensky, 2019). Mattering is about feeling that we count (recognition) and that we are important (impact) (Prilleltensky, 2014), and is one of the components of meaning (George & Park, 2016). Rob Waldron, the CEO of Curriculum Associates, makes his employees feel noticed and valued by personally emailing each one to congratulate them on their employment anniversary. Additionally, he highlights their impact and significance by asking them to share what is going best, and subsequently sharing their stories through the company’s newsletter and other internal communications.

Practices to make employees feel safe, valued, and seen became critically important during the COVID-19 pandemic (when our research took place) and exemplar organizations did not disappoint. HubSpot, for example, realized that the needs of their employees would be

fundamentally different during the crisis and pivoted quickly to support them. Understanding that parents who were working from home while also homeschooling children “*needed the most TLC,*” they hired musicians to do concerts for kids the very first week in quarantine.

Additionally, HubSpot built programs to address employees’ mental health needs by bringing in experts to support employees while Alcoholics Anonymous was not yet offering online support. Another company who recognized and supported employees’ whole selves through the pandemic is Zappos, who encouraged managers to be exceedingly flexible with schedules, and set up a program to celebrate personal milestones. Christa Foley told us:

Many of us have teens who are missing out on graduation and prom and those kinds of things, so our Engage Team put together prom kits and graduation kits and sent packages to our houses to give to the kids. That obviously doesn't replace missing your graduation or your prom, but it was still a really meaningful thing to acknowledge for employees.

By recognizing, appreciating, and supporting the entirety of each individual, organizations allow them to better integrate their work and life dimensions. Research suggests that empowering people to bring their whole selves to work can provide them with a greater sense of identity integration and lead to more ethical behavior (Ebrahimi, Kouchaki, & Patrick, 2019), which can increase perceptions of meaningfulness (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). When organizations encourage employees to show up authentically and integrate their work and personal lives, they can positively influence the meaningfulness derived from work (Pratt & Rosa, 2003).

Principle 8 – Foster Cross-Organizational Relationships

Exemplar companies intentionally foster strong relationships and a sense of belonging to enable meaningful work. These organizations strive to make employees feel like they are part of a family by building supportive cultures of collective identity and encouraging care and connection (Cardador & Rupp, 2011; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Empirical research has shown that relationships are a major contributor to subjective well-being – how much an individual is satisfied with their life, and how often they experience positive and negative emotions (Diener et al., 2017). By facilitating frequent positive interactions with others and making employees feel cared for and valued, these organizations foster a sense of belonging, which may be the most important driver of meaning (Smith, 2017).

Debbie Marriott Harrison stated that fostering a family-like environment is critical to Marriott's success. Research supports her claim. Feeling that we belong to a community at work has been shown to increase our sense of connectedness and motivate us to commit to a task, a goal, or a group, which in turn increases the perception of work as meaningful (Schnell, Höge, & Weber, 2019). Marriott currently has an initiative called *The Take Care Program* with over 150,000 employees, or *take care champions*, enrolled throughout the world. The program is comprised of three pillars – opportunity, purpose and community, which Debbie described as: (1) the individual's career and how they can find meaning and fulfillment in their job; (2) the connection between team members, with the goal of fostering a "*family relationship with your coworkers and being there for each other;*" and (3) the relationship with the larger community in which a property is located, with the goal of improving communities by finding ways to enrich and sustain them. This initiative has yielded some remarkable stories of caring and connection. For instance, Debbie shared that coworkers in one of their properties pooled their paid time off to

enable one of their colleagues to take additional time off and receive chemotherapy treatment, because “*that’s how you take care of family.*”

Organizations who promote such environments of support and encouragement create a community of belonging, which in turn results in increased meaningfulness (Schnell, Höge, & Weber, 2019). That is because relationships with others create the context of a job (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003), and respectful, mutually energizing interactions are a primary means for deriving purpose and significance from work (Dutton, 2003). The organizations in our study realize the importance of fostering strong relationships for employee well-being and performance. They facilitate the development of strong relationships through shared experiences, such as group onboardings (see Principle 2 - Make a Strong First Impression) and team volunteering, which has been found to strengthen the relationship between employees and the organization (Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008). For instance, Zappos has its own in-house charity group charged with creating opportunities for employees to volunteer together and contribute to the communities they serve. Additionally, at the onset of the COVID work-from-home restrictions, Zappos created daily virtual trivia for employees to remain close and have opportunities to connect in a personal way. Another way in which organizations strengthen connection is by encouraging expressions of gratitude and recognition across colleagues. 15Five implemented a program called *High-fives* where employees are prompted to recognize each other’s accomplishments and share the impact that others have had on them in order to increase positive emotions and engagement.

Strong interpersonal connections have been found to enable employees to feel more engaged, produce higher quality work, and experience less illness and injury (Murthy, 2017). Feeling like we belong can lead us to engage with others in more meaningful ways which can

subsequently increase our sense of contribution and impact, creating a positive cycle of significance and fulfillment.

Principle 9 – Structure Operation to Reinforce Values

Study participants cited a myriad of ways that valued behaviors were integrated into the formal process and procedure of their organizations. Employees tend to experience meaningful work more often when values are integrated into the day-to-day operation of an organization (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). Organizational leaders are able to significantly shape culture and set expectations for other employees through formal organizational policies (Lysova et al., 2019). Policy, procedure, recognition, and rewards that are aligned with organizational values (collectively *process integrity*) help an organization to foster meaningful work by reinforcing valued behaviors among employees as well as creating cultural consistency (Cardador & Rupp, 2011). Process integrity provides a stable context in which employees know what to expect from the organization. This makes it easier to connect organizational identity to an individual's personal narrative creating greater internal coherence, a contributor to meaningful work (Cardador & Rupp, 2011; Martela & Steger, 2016). Formal processes that reinforce valued behavior also function as a form of feedback, something individuals need to feel they are making progress and doing well (Locke & Latham, 2019).

Exemplar companies formalize the expectation and promotion of valued behaviors by integrating them into performance reviews, peer recognition programs, and financial incentives. Research has shown this to be an effective way to maintain values alignment among the team and promote collaboration over internal competition (Lysova et al., 2019). Claudia Saran of KPMG warns against setting goals or key performance indicators (KPIs) that aren't clearly aligned with values as well as business outcomes:

...it's likely people in a resource management role are measured on the efficiency and the expediency with which they staff people. So, if you want to run down that road really fast, I could just callously and coldly bark out orders and assign people to different projects, and I would look really good from a KPI standpoint because I've staffed X number of people a day and gotten them all billable. But my week is a week of carnage because people feel that they had no say and people don't feel good about the assignments. They don't feel informed or involved in any way.

Values-aligned processes also contribute to an employee's belief that leadership is authentically invested in the values they preach (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Several of the exemplar organizations implemented regular values training for employees. These trainings typically focused on how the organization's values manifested in daily decision-making and operations. Most of the exemplar organizations integrated valued behavior into annual or semi-annual performance reviews, with some such as Zappos and BetterUp conducting regular reviews on valued behavior separate from performance. Schneider Electric believes that *how* individuals execute their jobs is as important as *what* they do, so they intentionally embed values-based behaviors in the performance review process. Tina Mylon stated:

I'm a strong believer in hard wiring certain things because you need that nudge to shift mindset and behavior. We always evaluate people on the how and we use the new core values in the [performance review] system... The how matters a lot and it should be considered.

In exemplar organizations, leaders are also evaluated for their actions and alignment with company values. At the organizational level, exemplars invest in company-wide surveys and

polls to measure perceptions of values alignment. This data helps exemplar organizations identify areas of success, areas of improvement, and continue to refine their policies. Courtney Bigony of 15Five, a company that provides culture- and performance-measurement and evaluation software for leading companies (including some of our other study participants), had this to say:

...employees [take a survey] every single week. They identify how they're feeling and how they're making progress on their objectives. So we can see pulse trends and managers can see if their team members are trending or up week over week. We want to identify tremors before they turn into earthquakes. So we have that more regular check in and then we are also building a survey to measure a lot of key psychological constructs, like psychological safety and strengths and intrinsic motivation.

As discussed in Principle 1, many exemplar organizations formally designate an individual or group to screen for values in the recruiting process. Similarly, several exemplar organizations appoint individual employees or groups to help maintain values and culture within the organization. For example, KPMG has nearly 4,000 ‘Culture Champions’ who receive training and are responsible for sharing and modeling values across the company’s more than 200,000 employees. It is also common practice among exemplars to have formal peer-to-peer recognition programs that center on valued behavior (See Principle 3).

Principle 10 – Recognize Possibility and Nurture Talent Potential

Exemplar organizations foster meaningfulness by nurturing talent potential and actively seeking possibilities for their growth and development. In fact, many of the organizations in our study are intentional about stretching and challenging employees by ensuring that their assignments push them beyond their comfort zones. Research has found that when employees

perceive high demanding tasks as a challenge and have access to adequate resources, they tend to become highly motivated and engaged (Moeller, Ivcevic, White, Menges, & Brackett, 2018). Additionally, when individuals see challenge as an opportunity for growth and embrace the high expectations placed on them, they can find meaning and purpose (Frankl, 1963).

At Schneider Electric, for instance, Tina Mylon told us that their philosophy is “*to create a space where talent flourishes by ensuring that all of their employees have access to learning and development opportunities.*” Sonali Sapathy described being given a highly challenging assignment in her early days at Schneider. She was charged with fully designing a global leadership program for their high-potential pool in a three-week span. This request had come directly from Schneider’s CEO, but Sonali had no experience with developing these types of programs. She told us that what inspired her to rise to the challenge was that her boss believed in her so completely, that Sonali “*didn't want to let her down.*” She dedicated herself fully to developing the program, asking for help from different departments and seeking the necessary expertise. The program was rolled out successfully six years ago and has become a part of the company’s jargon, eliciting a “*quiet sense of pride*” in Sonali. As she put it, “*it feels good even today to have gone through that struggle.*”

This principle of seeing possibility and nurturing potential is closely tied to the principles of value-bounded autonomy (see Principle 6 - Empower with Value-Bounded Autonomy) and whole person engagement (see Principle 7 - Engage and Embrace the Whole person). Challenging employees without empowering them (autonomy) or considering their strengths (whole person) may lead to increased anxiety and lower performance (Rodell & Judge, 2009). Instead, exemplar organizations provide an optimal level of challenge, with an ideal balance between the individual’s skills and the challenge at hand. This optimal balance between skill and

challenge can lead to flow, or complete absorption in the present task, which is intrinsically rewarding and fosters the further development of skills over time (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). The state of flow leads to an upward cycle of engagement and growth, which can in turn cause work to become more meaningful (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). Marriott intentionally provides opportunities for all of their associates to grow, learn, and cross-train. Debbie Marriott Harrison told us that 50% of their general managers started out as hourly associates. She stated, “*We do extensive training and provide so much opportunity that we feel like we give people great careers. And we're really proud of that.*”

Another way in which the organizations we studied nurture potential is by normalizing mistakes and fostering environments where learning is encouraged. Failure is seen as an expected part of the process. At BetterUp, for example, this happens at all levels of the organization. During leadership team meetings, the company’s CEO frequently shares his own mistakes, enabling others on the team to reveal how they also may be struggling or growing. By de-stigmatizing failure and transforming setbacks into opportunities for learning and development, these exemplar companies foster growth mindset cultures. A growth mindset is the belief that personal traits, such as ability and intelligence, are malleable and can be developed with practice and effort (Dweck, 2006). When work provides opportunities for personal growth and continuous development, employees with a growth mindset are more likely to be highly engaged and better able to respond to challenging situations (Dweck, 2006). BetterUp builds a growth mindset into their process by encouraging individuals to ask questions such as “*what are we trying to learn?*” before starting a new project. Research has found that when individuals approach challenges with curiosity – a motivational state associated with growth and exploration – it can lead to the development of new skills and capabilities (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009). When

work provides opportunities to advance an individual's growth or purpose it can become more meaningful (Steger et al., 2012).

Remarkably, the organizations in our study see possibilities and potential in employees before they are even hired. In fact, several interviewees mentioned actively hiring for future potential and inspiring employees to envision possibilities “which are not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized” (Frankl, 1963, p. 116). Dee Ann Turner, former Vice President of Talent and Human Resources for Chick-Fil-A told us, *“if you're going to grow a remarkable culture and have meaningful work, your people have to have opportunities to grow into new roles. Selecting talent that you see can fit future roles, maybe some that don't even exist within the company yet, is really important.”*

These exemplar organizations take a positive, strengths-based approach to appreciating and nurturing what is best in people. By actively seeking to uncover potential, reflecting what is best in individuals and teams, and providing challenging assignments, these organizations help uncover possibilities and encourage employees to reach new levels of performance. As Frankl (1963) beautifully stated, “by making [them] aware of what [they] can be and of what [they] should become...these potentialities come true” (p. 116).

Outcomes

During our interviews, we asked participants how they believed that their investments in fostering meaningful work contributed to the success of their organizations, and whether they could point to specific outcomes. Below we review their responses and compare to research. The participants' perceived outcomes were anecdotal and it was outside the scope of our study to examine empirical data. Further, it is likely that most, if not all, of the outcomes below result from the combination of multiple factors.

Talent-Level Outcomes

All of our interviewees perceived that meaningful work had positive outcomes on talent management. From recruiting to engagement to retention, exemplar companies viewed meaningful work efforts as a powerful way to attract, motivate, and keep the best people. These perceptions line up clearly with empirical research, which shows strong links between meaningful work and positive outcomes on talent.

A meta-analysis, sometimes called a ‘study of studies’, aggregates data from many existing studies on the same topic and uses a statistical approach to combine the data, which reduces possible error and yields more precise results (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). In social science, a correlation effect size (r) represents the strength of the relationship between two variables (Cohen, 1992). A correlation value of 0.1 is considered small, 0.3 is considered medium, and 0.5 or greater is considered strong (Cohen, 1992).

According to a recent meta-analytic study, meaningful work correlates with a number of positive employee outcomes including organizational commitment ($N = 10,537$, $r^{adj} = 0.75$, $p < 0.01$)¹, engagement ($N = 6391$, $r^{adj} = 0.74$, $p < 0.01$), and job satisfaction ($N = 3962$, $r^{adj} = 0.74$, $p < 0.01$) (Allan et al., 2019). In addition to the strong correlations above, the meta-analysis indicated that engagement, commitment, and satisfaction in turn predicted self-rated job performance ($N = 1743$, $r^{adj} = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) and organizational citizenship behaviors (going above and beyond formal job duties to support one’s organization) ($N = 1927$, $r^{adj} = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$), as well as reduced intention to leave the organization ($N = 11,108$, $r^{adj} = -0.49$, $p < 0.01$) (Allan et al., 2019). Employees who experience meaningful work also show reduced

¹ r^{adj} = meta-analytic effect size corrected for unreliability (Allan et al., 2019)

absenteeism (Steger et al., 2012) and reduced negative affect ($N = 1085$, $r^{adj} = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$) (Allan et al., 2019).

According to the Gallup World Poll, only 15% of the world's one billion full-time workers are engaged at work (Clifton, 2017). Although the results are considerably better in the United States, engagement is still low, hovering at just 30 percent (Clifton, 2017). Given that engagement and job satisfaction are critically low in most companies, the strong effect sizes above indicate that fostering meaningful work could be a significant way to improve these numbers more broadly. There is also an indication that the opportunity for meaningful work has real value for individuals. One study of 245 US-based participants across industries found that people were willing to accept salaries for personally meaningful work that were 32% lower ($M = 31.83\%$, $SD = 23.71\%$) than those they would accept for work they considered to be meaningless (Hu & Hirsch, 2017). Another study by the same authors of 441 US-based adults across a range of jobs and income levels found that participants were significantly more likely ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$) to refuse a job with higher pay at a different organization if they were experiencing meaningful work in their current role (Hu & Hirsch, 2017). It should be noted that there is also some indication that an individual must meet a minimum income threshold before being willing to accept a lower salary for meaningful work (Hu & Hirsch, 2017) or even the opportunity to pursue it (Autin & Allan, 2020).

In addition to business outcomes, several participants mentioned increases in overall employee well-being as a perceived outcome of meaningful work efforts. Two went further to claim increase in employees' family well-being as well. A meta-analysis shows that meaningful work correlates highly with life satisfaction ($N = 2275$, $r^{adj} = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$), overall meaning in life ($N = 2966$, $r^{adj} = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$) and general health ($N = 986$, $r^{adj} = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$) (Allan et

al., 2019). Other studies (see Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Allan, Autin, & Duffy, 2016) have also found positive correlation between meaningful work and overall increase in life satisfaction and meaning. It is likely meaningful work leads to increased positive affect at home, and improved overall well-being and better relationships outside of work (Cho & Tay, 2016). Given research on emotional contagion, the phenomenon of emotionally influencing other individuals in your networks, it is also likely that the well-being of family members and other connected groups are positively affected as well (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Carla H. McIntosh of Google shared an example:

...when that person [I was working with] was promoted to become a manager, there were tears involved. I felt really fortunate to be able to give someone that moment. And it was something that didn't resonate just with the broader team... it was a moment that this person shared with me was meaningful to her family. That was amazing to know that you are not just impacting someone at work, but also in their own personal environment.

Organization-Level Outcomes

In addition to positive effects on talent, participants also perceived secondary effects on the business overall, including increased revenue, greater visibility and recognition, and increased customer loyalty and recommendations. According to Dee Ann Turner:

When Chick-fil-A established its corporate purpose in 1982, they had just experienced their first sales slump ever. I definitely think that determining their why, [it] really drove them. They were about something other than just money. They were about the significance of glorifying God by being a positive influence and a faithful steward. And so, those principles, people rallied around that. Since

then, Chick-fil-A experienced phenomenal sales growth for as long as I worked there.

Research shows that the increases in employee engagement and job satisfaction caused by meaningful work can contribute to business-level outcomes including customer satisfaction and increased profit (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). A meta-analysis of 7,939 business units in 36 companies showed that employee engagement and job satisfaction had small to moderate correlation to customer satisfaction ($r = 0.16, p = 0.32$) and overall business performance ($r = 0.32, p = 0.37$) (Harter et al., 2002).

We conducted interviews during April-June, 2020 just as the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic hit the US, forcing offices to shutter, individuals to quarantine, and teams to adapt to a new style of work in an incredibly uncertain and volatile environment. While we focused much of our inquiry on backward-looking accounts, there was significant discussion of Covid-19's impact and participant companies' responses to it. Overall, interviewees believed strongly that their investments in fostering meaningful work contributed significantly to their organizations' abilities to more quickly adapt to the crisis and navigate ongoing challenges. Several small studies have found positive correlations between meaningful work and resilience (e.g. Britt, Adler, & Bartone, 2001; Kim, Kim, Newman, Ferris, & Perrewé, 2018; Van Wingerden & Poell, 2019), although more research is needed to empirically investigate the relationship between resilience and meaningful work.

In addition to the current crisis, the technology landscape continues to evolve at a rapid rate. According to a Deloitte's 2020 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 53% of organizational participants indicated that they expected to need more than 50% of their employees to change skills in the next three years, while only 17% of participants believed they

would be able to anticipate what those skills would be (Deloitte, 2020). If recent months are any indication, it is likely that uncertainty around the pandemic and its effects on work will continue and potentially increase in the foreseeable future. Added to an already uncertain and evolving work environment, the potential impact of meaningful work on an organization's ability to adapt to and navigate change is a topic worth exploring in future research.

A Methodology for Enabling Meaningful Work

The 10 principles that emerged from our research serve as a philosophical underpinning, or a guiding orientation, for meaningful work efforts. As practitioners, an additional goal of our study was to develop a methodology for a values-agnostic practice of meaningful work, so that other organizations could implement these principles to proactively enable meaningful work.

Organizations increasingly acknowledge the importance of cultivating meaningful work (Deloitte, 2017), however a widely accepted methodology has yet to emerge. During the course of our study we spoke with multiple scholars and practitioners who confirmed the growing demand for a framework that allows leaders to organize their experience around meaningfulness. Author and researcher Tom Rath told us, "leaders don't need to be convinced that they need to provide meaningful work, they are looking for methodologies on how to get there." (personal communication, June 11, 2020).

Below we propose the beginnings of a principle-informed meaningful work methodology, drawing from both theory and practice, that can guide organizations to enable meaningful work.

Discovering and Developing PRISM

“A composition is always more than the sum of its parts. In other words, a really good piece of music is more than itself. It's sort of like a prism, which you can see from each facet a single totality.” Yo-Yo Ma (Ho, 2013, para. 23)

As we scrutinized the results of our study and the practices shared by exemplar organizations, a new metaphor emerged for addressing the multifaceted dynamics of fostering meaningful work, that of a PRISM. Just as a prism allows us to see beyond what we know, so does our methodology reveal higher possibilities for organizations by capitalizing on the potential for Purpose, Relationships, Individuation, Storytelling and Measurement to foster meaningfulness.

The PRISM metaphor was selected to illustrate the transformation that happens when these elements are adopted intentionally across an organization. When a ray of light passes through a prism, it changes direction and reveals a spectrum of color that is critically different from the light that entered it. Similarly, when work is filtered through the PRISM methodology, it can change course and become infused with meaning, revealing higher possibilities for individuals and organizations.

Because of the uniqueness of organizations and the individuals who comprise it, a prescription or formula cannot be written that is appropriate for all organizations to create meaningful work environments. However, we believe that PRISM provides a methodology that organizations can customize and adapt to intentionally foster meaningful work. It is important to note that the individual PRISM elements alone are not enough to foster meaningful work. Rather, it is the magic that happens when these elements are combined that create the environment where meaningfulness ensues.

While the full development of the PRISM methodology is outside the scope of this paper, we have started outlining the high-impact practices that fall under each of the categories. Table 4 presents our initial attempt at introducing these practices. Our next step will be to further develop the process for the implementation of PRISM across organizations, pulling from the exemplar practices revealed during our interviews, as well as academic literature and additional research. Once the PRISM methodology is fully developed and systematized, we hope to work with organizations to implement these practices and measure their impact on enabling meaningful work.

Table 4*PRISM Methodology Practices*

Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop clear and aspirational purpose and value statements ● Draw a clear line from everyone’s role to the greater purpose ● Select, onboard and train talent based on purpose and values ● Have gatekeeper(s) that ensure all decisions align with the purpose and values ● Imbue values in decision-making process, incentives and recognition ● Demonstrate and model values-based behavior
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create psychological safety (trust/share mistakes) ● Allow and encourage individuals to show up as their whole selves ● Create opportunities for shared experiences (group volunteering) and non-professional interactions (trivia games, happy hours) ● Formalize ways for people to recognize each other ● Ensure that individuals know <i>that</i> they belong and <i>how</i> they belong ● Create an environment where individuals sense that they are “in this together” by connecting everyone’s role to the higher purpose
Individuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengths-based management ● Assign goals, not processes ● Allow individuals to job craft ● Celebrate and support personal lives ● Set stretch goals for business and values

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide opportunities for mastery, growth and development
Storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Leverage storytelling as a mechanism to enculturate new employees ● Identify the organization's signature stories and ensure they are managed as a strategic asset ● Actively collect and manage a repository of stories that demonstrate valued behaviors ● Collect and share impact stories ● Encourage individuals to tell the story during peer recognition ● Train leaders on storytelling techniques
Measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Conduct pulse surveys regularly to measure individual's experiences of meaningfulness ● Align organizational and individual goals to values ● Encourage use of hashtags of values in informal communication channels, such as Slack ● Formalize measurement and recognition of not only <i>what</i> individuals do, but <i>how</i> they do it

Future Directions & Limitations

While we believe our research has helped bridge the divide between theory and practice, we recognize it is not without limitation. Our sample size was small ($N = 12$) and at the same time crossed a variety of business sectors. It is possible a larger sample size would have reduced potential error and revealed richer data. The principles we have proposed are a starting point and should be further interrogated and explored in future research. We also recognize that there is no true 'one size fits all' approach to fostering meaningful work, which is why we believe an adaptable framework such as PRISM would be most broadly useful. We plan to gather more data and develop PRISM in future research.

Our goal was to uncover ways in which organizations intentionally foster meaningful work, and we focused our study largely on meaning derived from positive experience. That said, there is significant scientific evidence for the creation of meaning from negative events and, in

particular, traumatic ones (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). We do not believe it ethical or desirable for an organization to actively create negative experiences for employees, even if it might lead to a meaningful outcome. That said, further study of meaningful work derived from negative experience could add to the literature.

Researchers have also identified a ‘dark side’ to meaningful work, in which work that is perceived as meaningful leads to adverse consequences to individual well-being (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). In a study of zookeepers, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) found that individuals who saw their work as deeply meaningful were also more likely to make sacrifices for their job and labor on through a sense of moral duty even at personal cost. At the same time, it is possible for employers to selfishly leverage meaningful work solely to squeeze longer hours, greater productivity, and overall financial gain from their employees. Even when this is recognized, employees face ethical dilemmas and may continue on at the cost of personal well-being (Bailey et al., 2017).

As we only spoke to organizational leaders, and did not survey any employees, we recognize that we are missing data from critical stakeholders - the individuals who are actually experiencing (or not experiencing) meaningful work. This is something we hope to address in future research.

Conclusion

This paper set out to uncover principles that shape meaningful work in leading organizations and provide a roadmap for purpose-driven companies that wish to build engaged, effective communities. We started by reviewing the meaningful work literature within the larger fields of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship. Although there has been a recent proliferation of studies within these fields seeking to explain the multiple factors that

contribute to the experience of meaningful work, empirical studies investigating how organizations directly enable meaningful work are limited. Because of this, we conducted our own qualitative research with exemplar organizations, seeking to uncover common practices that foster meaningfulness.

We presented our research and the ten principles that emerged from our data. Having a higher purpose and clearly stated values, hiring for value alignment, tying employee's individual roles to the greater good, providing a positive onboarding experience, encouraging collective ownership of the culture, providing autonomy, encouraging positive and personal relationships, and nurturing talent potential tend to make work meaningful. In addition, we proposed the initial outline of a principle-informed meaningful work methodology, drawing from both theory and practice, that can guide organizations to enable meaningful work. Multiple benefits have been linked to meaningful work, including increases in employee engagement and job satisfaction, which can lead to positive business-level outcomes including customer satisfaction and increased profit (Harter et al., 2002). Ultimately, our goal was to help organizations create the conditions that enable individuals to experience work as meaningful.

Work is often thought of as a tedious source of pain and drudgery, or “just a job to get by” (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 54). However, our interviews revealed an alternative reality, one that is the antithesis of what we sometimes see reflected in the popular discourse. The exemplar organizations we studied illustrated how they break free of a common societal view of work, transcending what *is* and creating what *is possible*. The organizational milieu that we inhabited over the past six months is one in which work can become a source of meaning and fulfillment; a place where individuals have the opportunity to fulfill their purpose, contribute to something larger than the self, and use their strengths and skills to grow. The stories we heard

were both revealing and inspiring. They revealed the remarkable workplaces that become possible when leaders intentionally cultivate practices that foster meaningful work. And they inspired both of us to continue working as practitioners to help workplaces become beacons of meaning.

Chiang (2016) insightfully notes that “aspiration means both hope and the act of breathing” (para. 27). By aspiring to breathe meaning into the daily experience of work, exemplar organizations create environments that can compel individuals to fulfill their highest possibilities and provide hope for what work can become.

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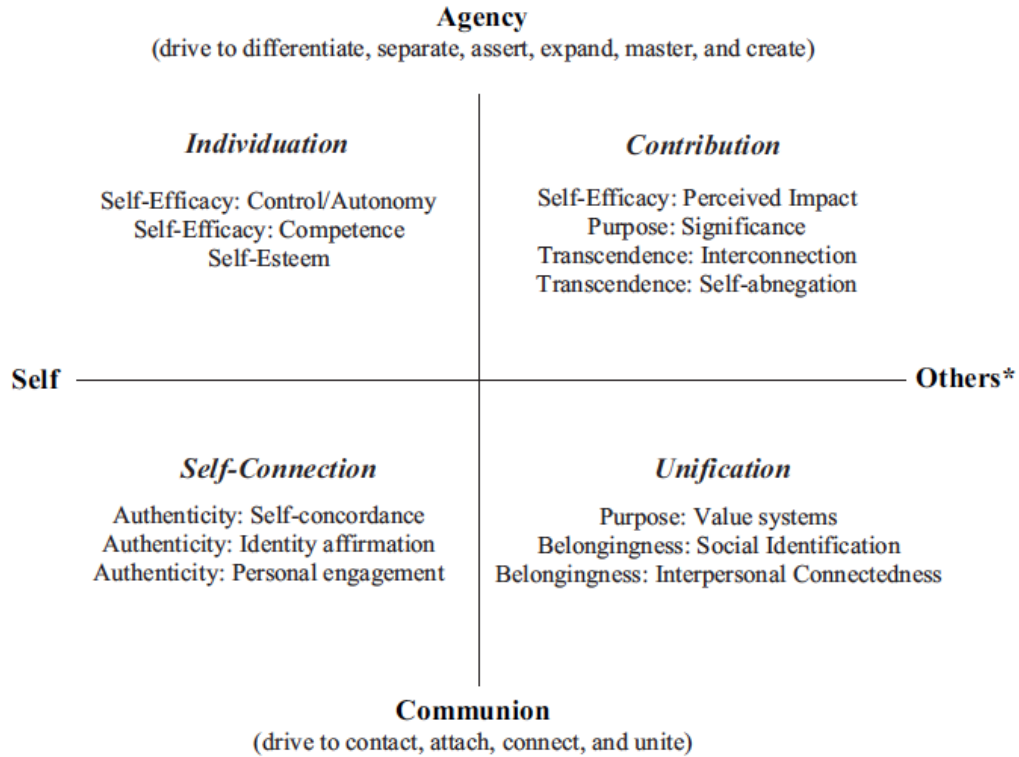
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Appendices

Appendix A - Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski’s Pathways to Meaning²

B.D. Rosso et al. / Research in Organizational Behavior 30 (2010) 91–127



*Others = other individuals, groups, collectives, organizations, and higher powers

Fig. 1. Four major pathways to meaningful work: a theoretical framework.

² Note. From “On the meaning of work: A theoretical integration and review,” by B. D. Rosso et al., 2010, *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, p. 114. Copyright 2010 by Elsevier Ltd. Reprinted with permission.

Appendix B - Steger’s SPIRE & CARMA Models³

SPIRE		CARMA	
Finding pathways to more meaningful work		Fostering meaningful work for your employees and followers	
S	Strengths	C	Clarity
	Know your unique strengths and talents, and use them in executing your work, even if that means going above and beyond your basic job duties		Organizations need a vision and mission to be clearly shared across all levels, if a company lacks purpose, its workers might follow suit
P	Personalization	A	Authenticity
	Bring more of yourself to work, align work with your values, take responsibility and adopt an ownership mentality for your work and your organization		Organizations must follow their own mission, leaders must behave ethically and honestly; phony purpose and exploitation kill meaning
I	Integration	R	Respect
	Integrate the motivation of and execution of your job with other elements of your life, work in ways that bring meaning to the rest of your life		Building positive, effective relationships in an organization begins with leadership modeling respect and creating chances for beneficial interactions
R	Resonance	M	Mattering
	Learn your organization's core values and mission, find ways in which it resonates with your personal mission and meaning through your everyday work		Leadership must convey to each worker exactly how their contribution is vital to the success and health of the organization and its mission
E	Expansion	A	Autonomy
	Seek ways in which your work can be grown to benefit some greater good, expand your concerns to embrace broader interests beyond your self		Allow followers increased self-expression by providing opportunities for self-direction, trial and error, innovation, and idea interchange

³ Note. From “Creating meaning and purpose at work,” by M. F. Steger, 2017, *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Positivity and Strengths-Based Approaches at Work*, p. 74. Copyright 2007 by John Wiley & Sons. Reprinted with permission.

Appendix C - Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger’s Integrated Multi-Level Framework⁴

E.I. Lysova et al.

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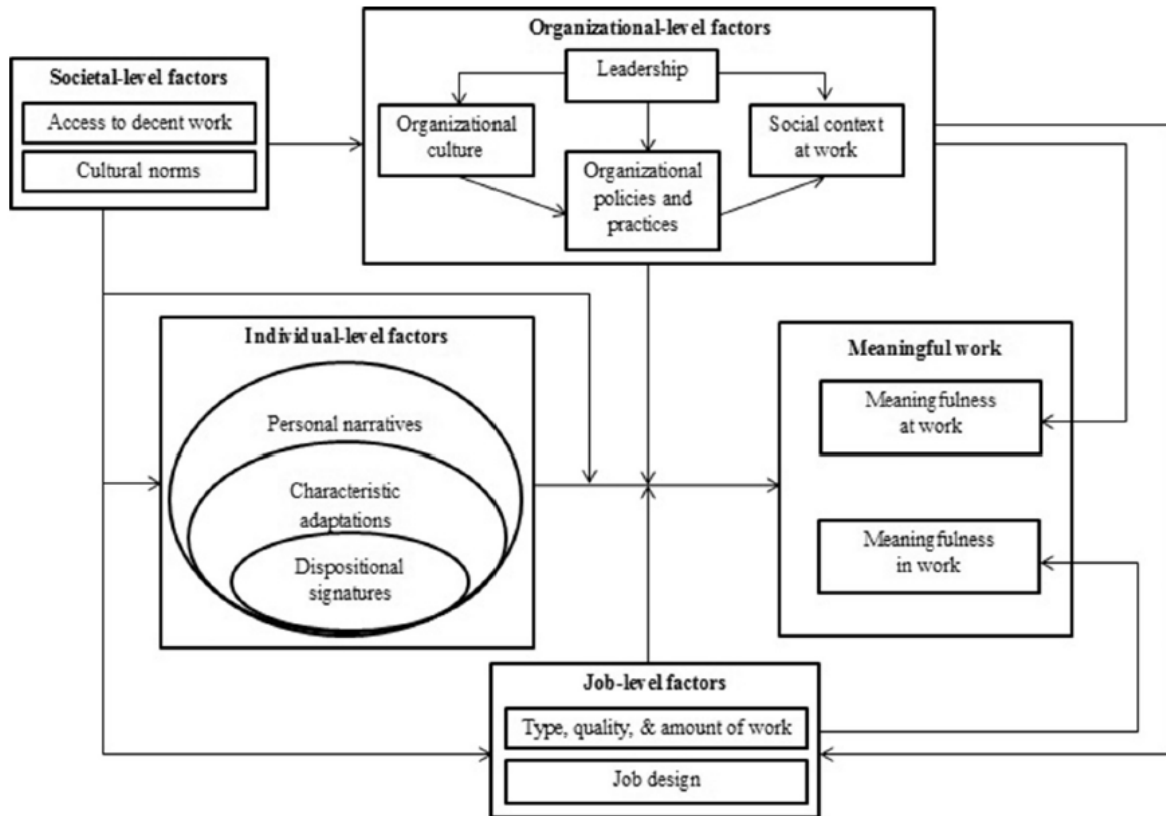


Fig. 1. An integrative multilevel framework of factors fostering meaningful work.

⁴ Note. From “Fostering meaningful work in organizations: A multi-level review and integration,” by E. I. Lysova et al., 2017, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 110, p. 384. Copyright 2017 by Elsevier Inc. Reprinted with permission.

Appendix D - Exemplar Nomination Criteria**Exemplar organizations will meet the following criteria:**

- Externally recognized by respected outlet as a “Top Place to Work”, “Best Culture”, or equivalent
- Company has formal Mission and/or Values statements
- Company has been in operation for at least five years
- Company is financially successful and/or considered a top performer in its market

Once an exemplar organization is identified, a representative will be selected for interview based on the following criteria:

- Representative is a Senior Vice President or more senior officer of the company
- Representative has had direct exposure to development of organization strategy
- Representative is positioned to have regular contact with broad range of organization stakeholders
- Representative has been employed by the company for at least three years

Appendix E - Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

You are being asked to participate in an interview for a research project. Your participation will help us, graduate students in the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania, uncover common practices, values, and principles currently driving businesses that are recognized for fostering meaningful work environments. Your involvement in this research and the insights you provide will help us develop a set of foundational principles and create a structured framework for an applied practice of Meaningful Work.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to answer questions about how you define meaningful work, and what meaningful work looks like in your organization in the context of operations, culture and attributes. You do not have to answer or do anything you don't want to. Your answers may be used in our study and attributed to you by name.

What happens if I don't want to participate?

You can choose whether you want to be in the study or not. There is no penalty if you decide not to be in the study.

Can I leave the study before it ends?

You can quit the study whenever you want to.

What are the risks?

This study should not be risky for you, and you cannot get hurt from doing anything for this study. You might get tired or bored from answering some of the questions. Because we may attribute quotes or other data from your interview to you, you might receive media or other public attention as a result of your participation in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to.

How will I benefit from the study?

Your answers will help researchers learn about common practices, values, and principles currently driving organizations that are recognized for fostering meaningful work environments. Your involvement in this research and the insights you provide will help us develop a set of foundational principles and create a structured framework for an applied practice of Meaningful Work. Your participation will benefit the general public knowledge, although it might not directly benefit you personally.

How will you record my responses?

We will record audio during the interview and may also take written notes during the session.

Will my answers be kept confidential and private?

Your answers will not be confidential as we may attribute quotes, anecdotes, and other data from the study to you. Data will not be de-identified, and could be stored and distributed for future research. We believe this will benefit the quality of the research presented and help inform future scholarship in the field. You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to and

may withdraw from the study at any time before it is published. Should you choose to leave, any collected personal data will be destroyed and you will be removed from the study

Will I be paid for participating in the study?

No, participants will not be paid for participating in the study.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the study?

If you have questions about the study, please email wesley@svcg.co or tamara@tamaramyles.com. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in the research study, please contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania at 215-898-2614.

Participation Agreement

I have read this form. Any questions I have about participating in this interview have been answered. I agree to take part in the interview and I understand that taking part in this program is voluntary. I do not have to take part if I do not wish to do so. I can stop at any time for any reason. If I choose to stop, no one will ask me why.

By signing below, I agree to participate in this interview. By doing so, I am indicating that I have read this form and had my questions answered. I understand that it is my choice to participate and that I can stop at any time.

Signature:

Date:

Appendix F - Interview Script

Principles of Meaningful Work Interview

1. Please tell us your name, title, and organization.
2. What makes work meaningful for you?
3. Tell us about a time you experienced meaningful work in your organization.
4. Why does your company invest in making work meaningful?
5. In what ways do you make sure you are fostering meaningful work in your organization?
 - a. How has this influenced the operational structure of your organization?
 - b. How has this influenced the culture of your organization?
 - c. How has this influenced the attributes and characteristics of what your organization looks for in its leaders and employees?
6. What are the outcomes of your meaningful work efforts?
7. How do you feel meaningful work has contributed to your company's success?
8. How has your experience of meaningful work changed during the Covid-19 crisis?

Appendix G - Interview Coding Categories

Major Category	Sub-Category
Brand/Culture Connection	
Common Language	
Creativity/Innovation?	
Culture	Shared ownership/culture champions
Culture	Continuous investment
Culture	Keep what's best and build
Culture	Top-down
Customer Focus	Service/human connection
Customer Focus	Training
Customer Focus	Hearts & Minds
Employee-Employee Relationships	Social interaction; playfulness
Employee-Employee Relationships	Group volunteering/philanthropy/community involvement
Employee-Employee Relationships	Feeling valued
Employee-Employee Relationships	Collaboration
Employee-Employee Relationships	Supportive relationships
Individual	Autonomy
Individual	Use of strengths
Individual	Intrinsic motivation
Individual	Mastery/Flow
Individual	Coherency with story of self
Individual	Salient moments (temporal)
Individual	Adding value
Individual	Complete piece of work
Individual	Growth & Development; Challenge
Individual	Personal Significance; Pride
Leadership	Modeling Behavior
Leadership	Soliciting input from everyone; your voice counts; responsiveness
Leadership	Principle-based management
Leadership	Consistency

Leadership	Facilitate E-E relationships
Leadership	Decentralizing power
Leadership	Servant Leadership
Leadership	Provide needed resources
Leadership	Psych safety
Leadership	Long-term thinking
Leadership	Direct interaction with staff (formalized)
Leadership	Accountability
Leadership	Transparency
Leadership	Growth mindset; embrace change
Leadership	Transformational Leadership
Leadership	Authenticity/Integrity/Vulnerability
Leadership	Grit
Leadership	Empathy
Measurement	Seeing impact
Measurement	Internal and external metrics
Measurement	Values-specific polls/reviews
Measurement	Upward feedback
Org-Ind Relationship	Loyalty
Org-Ind Relationship	Strong role clarity
Org-Ind Relationship	Developing/nurturing talent
Org-Ind Relationship	Mutual Investment
Org-Ind Relationship	Formal onboarding processes/infrastructure
Org-Ind Relationship	High expectations
Org-Ind Relationship	Onboarding
Org-Ind Relationship	Feedback
Org-Ind Relationship	Whole person engagement/humanity
Org-Ind Relationship	Individual differences/equity
Org-Ind Relationship	Office-level differences
Org-Ind Relationship	Values-based recognition
Org-Ind Relationship	Family/team spirit
Org-Ind Relationship	Trust
Org-Ind Relationship	Incentives
Org-Ind Relationship	Teaching skills around valued behavior
Org-Ind Relationship	Minimize distance to CEO
Org-Ind Relationship	Job crafting

Outcomes	Better retention
Outcomes	Competitive advantage
Outcomes	Better customer relationships/loyalty
Outcomes	Better talent attraction; reduced recruiting costs
Outcomes	Organizational citizenship behaviors
Outcomes	External recognition
Outcomes	Financial
Outcomes	Internal talent growth
Outcomes	Better engagement
Outcomes	Employee performance
Outcomes	Recommendation (Customer & Employee)
Outcomes	Employee job satisfaction
Outcomes	Employees riffing on principles
Outcomes	Adaptability & Resilience
Purpose	Clear Articulation
Purpose	Eudaimonic
Purpose	Consistent Over Time
Purpose	Forged in crisis/challenge
Purpose	Common Purpose
Purpose	Challenging Mission
Purpose	Prosocial
Purpose	Discovered not created
Purpose	Prime driver / North Star / Keystone
Storytelling	Repetition & Consistency
Storytelling	Communication Method
Storytelling	Reinforcing Culture
Storytelling	Prosocial outcomes
Storytelling	Sharing what's best, successes
Storytelling	Create psych safety
Storytelling	Formal vs informal
Storytelling	Go deep
Storytelling	Intentional language
Talent Selection	Passion
Talent Selection	Values alignment
Talent Selection	Future Growth Potential / Long-Term Relationships
Talent Selection	Diversity

Talent Selection	Complementary Strengths (Culture Add)
Talent Selection	Diversity vs Culture Fit (uniformity)
Talent Selection	Most Important Thing to Invest In
Talent Selection	Single Gatekeeper
Talent Selection	Consistent Business Process
Talent Selection	Purpose Alignment
Values	High-impact behaviors; values in action
Values	Values-based decision making
Values	Top-down AND bottom-up
Values	Evolve/Change over time
Values	Aspirational
Values	Single gatekeeper
Values	Included in performance review
Values	Values over performance
Values	Practical wisdom / balance
Values	Co-creation
Values reinforcement	Physical space
Values reinforcement	Performance & development
Values reinforcement	Common language
Values reinforcement	Co-location
Values reinforcement	Conflict with KPIs
Values reinforcement	Financial incentives
Covid	Stay true even in bad times