

Outsource Inspiration

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When employee motivation is lacking, many leaders grab the loudspeaker. They stand up, deliver an inspiring speech, and hope for the best. There's reason to believe, though, that it's often more effective for leaders to take a backseat. Leaders can accomplish more by outsourcing inspiration to end users—the people who benefit from the organization's products and services. It's a different way of motivating and engaging employees, one that recognizes the power of leaders' actions to speak louder than their words. By making connections to end users, leaders can inject greater meaning into work, so that employees can identify their past and potential contributions.

Why Outsourcing Inspiration Matters

Meaningful work is a cornerstone of motivation.ⁱ For many years, researchers have recognized the motivating potential of task significance—doing work that affects the well-being of others.ⁱⁱ But all too often, employees do work that makes a difference, but never have the chance to see or meet the people affected by their work.

Ten years ago, I found this sign in a call center at the University of Michigan: “Doing a good job here is like wetting your pants in a dark suit. You get a warm feeling, but no one else notices.” A natural solution was to help the callers see how the money they raised was making a difference. At the beginning of a calling shift, a leader described how the funds contributed to new buildings, faculty and staff salaries, and—perhaps most importantly—the Michigan football and basketball teams.

My team's role was to track the effects, and there were none. The callers didn't work any harder or more productively. We realized that it might be the right message, but it was coming from the wrong source. When a leader articulated the importance of the work, the callers were suspicious. After all, the leader had an ulterior motive of convincing them to work harder.

We invited a scholarship student, Will, to talk firsthand about the importance of the work. He spent five minutes with a group of callers, explaining that their work had helped to fund his scholarship, it had changed his life, and he wanted to thank them for their efforts. A third of the callers were randomly assigned to meet Will face-to-face; others read a letter from him without any direct contact, and the remaining callers were in a control group, with no exposure to Will.

Over the next month, on average, the callers who met Will spiked 142% in weekly minutes on the phone and 171% in weekly revenue. The callers who merely read the letter or had no contact with him showed no changes in effort or productivity. A five-minute interaction with a single scholarship recipient was enough to dramatically increase motivation and effectiveness.ⁱⁱⁱ After

meeting Will, the callers developed a stronger sense that their work made a difference, felt more valued and appreciated—instead of rejected and disrespected by alumni—and recognized that other scholarship students were depending on them. Upon realizing that their work could be so valuable to others, they were motivated to work harder. They also gained new information that enabled them to work smarter, sharing scholarship stories on the phone with alumni.

In total, we replicated the effect five times with different callers and scholarship students. In one case, a short interaction with a scholarship recipient boosted the average caller's weekly revenue by more than 400%, from weekly averages of \$411.74 to \$2,083.52.^{iv} In contrast, there were no significant changes in callers' behavior of performance when leaders and managers delivered the same information^v, nor when we invited a former caller to address the personal benefits of the job for learning and career advancement.^{vi} The boost in motivation appears to be unique to seeing how one's work is beneficial to other people.

This is true in a wide range of health and safety jobs. Consider the evidence:

- Nurses: when assembling surgical kits, nurses who met healthcare practitioners who would use the kits worked 64% more minutes, completed more than twice as many pieces, and made 15% fewer errors than nurses in a control group who had no beneficiary contact.^{vii}
- Radiologists: in scanning an exam, when the patient's photo was included in the file, radiologists wrote 29% longer reports and achieved 46% greater diagnostic accuracy.^{viii}
- Lifeguards: after reading stories about other lifeguards performing rescues, lifeguards increased their average monthly hours worked by 43%, and supervisors rated them as 21% more helpful. These effects were driven by perceiving the job as having a greater impact on swimmers and feeling more valued by swimmers.^{ix}
- Physicians and nurses: merely mentioning that hand hygiene protects patients against diseases increased soap and gel usage by more than 45% and hand-washing by more than 10%.^x
- Pharmaceutical employees: hearing a patient talk for an hour about experiences with treating a disease significantly increased engagement scores on a survey two months later. Employees reported greater pride in the organization, a stronger sense of commitment and willingness to go beyond the requirements of the job, and a heightened belief in the meaningfulness of the organization's vision in their daily jobs.^{xi}

Research also shows that exposure to the impact of one's work can motivate greater effort and performance in more mundane tasks^{xii}:

- Giving feedback: when making suggestions to improve job application cover letters for a student who needed a job, people who briefly saw the student worked 18% longer than those who didn't see the student.
- Editing: when correcting grammar in an international student's research paper, people who saw a video of a student who benefited from this type of feedback in the past caught 34% more errors than those who saw a video of the leader describe the same information, and 37% more errors than a control group who saw no video.
- Generating a marketing campaign: when creating a pitch for a new service, the ideas developed by people who read a letter from a customer who benefited from the service were rated by experts as 11% higher in quality than ideas from people who read a letter from a leader describing the customer's experience.

Strategies for Connecting to Your Own Impact

In light of these motivational benefits, what can you do to increase your own awareness of your impact? Over the past decade, I've encountered four different ways that leaders can connect the dots between what they do on the job and its consequences for others.

1. Pay Periodic Visits to End Users. In many organizations, leaders have little contact with the end users who benefit from their work. Busy schedules make it difficult to prioritize trips to see clients and customers, and this often means an impoverished understanding of the impact of your work. By making it a priority to spend time with end users, you can gather information about their needs and your contributions. At IBM, for example, Lou Gerstner required his top 50 senior executives to visit at least five of IBM's largest customers in a three-month period.^{xiii} As one observer explains, "That empathic connection to real-world customers helped managers to see whether a particular decision added value for customers or destroyed it."^{xiv}

2. Seek Internal Feedback. As a leader, much of your impact is on people inside the organization. It's surprisingly common, though, for leaders to lack awareness of how their work makes a difference in the lives of employees. Evidence suggests that one of the most reliable steps for solving this problem is to meet twice per month with each of your employees.^{xv} Regular meetings serve to increase trust and communication quality, enabling employees to more clearly articulate the impact of your relationship. (Interestingly, whereas many leaders view such meetings as time-sapping distractions, research suggests that they actually save time, in part by reducing interruptions by up to 80%—employees save their requests until meetings.^{xvi}) At each meeting, it's worth asking what you've done that has been most and least helpful—and how employees and mentees have implemented the advice and suggestions that you gave in the previous meeting.

3. Keep a Journal About Your Contributions. It's easy to lose sight of how your actions make a difference. In high-pressure jobs, with many strategic priorities and interactions, many leaders are too busy doing work to reflect on its significance. One small step for combating this challenge is to keep a journal about how you've made a difference. In an experiment with fundraising callers, Jane Dutton and I found that writing about contributions for less than an hour per week was enough to boost hourly calls by more than 29%.^{xvii} The journaling process appeared to reinforce their sense that their jobs mattered and strengthen their identities as helpful, giving individuals, energizing them to contribute more. It's important to note that timing matters here in two ways. First, the boost doesn't always occur right away: evidence from firefighters and rescue workers suggests that on days where they've made a big difference, they experience gains in energy only after they've had time to reflect.^{xviii} Second, research indicates that journaling about positive experiences is more beneficial once a week rather than once a day, likely because writing weekly feels more novel and allows time for a few meaningful contributions to add up.^{xix}

4. Become an End User. One of the easiest ways to understand how your work makes a difference for clients or customers is to become a client or customer. Using your organization's products or services can shed new light on the consequences of your job. For example, at

Patagonia, founder Yvon Chouinard encourages leaders and employees to field-test outdoor sports products, and at Four Seasons Hotels, new employees are invited to do a “familiarization stay” overnight in their own hotels.^{xx} The more experience you gain with your organization’s offerings, the more you can internalize the end user’s perspective and understand the past and future impact of your work.

Connecting Employees to Their Impact

Beyond seeing your own impact more clearly, you can take the initiative to help employees across the organization see how their efforts make a difference. Leaders at several innovative organizations have introduced three kinds of strategies that serve this purpose.

1. Make the Face-to-Face Connection. The most direct way of connecting employees to their impact is to invite end users to visit the organization.^{xxi} At John Deere & Company, many employees who built tractors had no interaction with the customers who would one day drive the tractors. Leaders decided to invite farmers who bought their first tractors to bring their families to the factory. Employees who worked on those tractors come to congratulate the farmers, give them a gold key, and see the joy on their faces as they turn the key to start the ignition. At Medtronic, engineers who design medical devices and salespeople who sell them to hospitals are able to see their impact at the company’s annual holiday party. Six patients share their stories about how the company’s products have transformed their lives. Many employees break down into tears, and walk away with an enriched understanding of the purpose behind their jobs.

2. Encourage Employees to Swap Stories. In situations where it’s not easy to facilitate face-to-face interactions, an alternative is to invite employees to share their own stories of making a difference. For example, at Merrill Lynch team starts weekly meetings by opening the floor for employees to relay experiences about helping clients, and at Ritz Carlton hotels, employees have daily 15-minute meetings to exchange “wow” stories about how they’ve gone above and beyond the call of duty to benefit customers. When employees hear stories about impact from their colleagues, they can become more aware of the significance of their past contributions and recognize greater potential to make future contributions.

3. Become a Linking Pin. Giving end users the microphone doesn’t mean watching the game from the sidelines. As you a leader, you serve as a linking pin^{xxii} to fill the gap between employees and end users. By leveraging your network, you can often find clients, customers, patients, and other beneficiaries of your organization’s products and services who have novel stories to share. Further, recent studies show that among nurses^{xxiii} and fundraising callers^{xxiv}, meeting end users is even more powerful when it happens in tandem with an inspiring speech from leaders. When you articulate your vision, you can invite end users to help bring the vision to life. At Medtronic’s annual party, for example, senior leaders describe Medtronic’s mission in conjunction with testimonials from patients. Along with connecting employees to end users, you can build a bridge between end users’ specific stories and the organization’s broader vision.

Putting It All Together

Outsourcing inspiration may sound like common sense, but it isn't common practice. Surprisingly few leaders take the initiative to link show how the organization's day-to-day work has meaningful, lasting benefits to other people. By forging these connections, it's possible to create work environments that are infused with richer meaning, deeper relationships, and greater productivity.

Sidebar: Outsourcing Inspiration at Wells Fargo

At Wells Fargo, manager Ben Soccorsy took over a low-interest personal loan. For five years, the product group was languishing, having failed to grow the business. Soccorsy knew the loan had rescued some customers from severe debt—in one case, a customer facing 18 years of debt was able to become debt-free in a third of the time—but bankers were detached from this impact on customers. “You have 70 million customers and 200 loan products, and you're busy in meetings and pulling information in Excel. It's really hard to create that connectivity: how does that end up helping people?”

Soccorsy decided to reposition the loan as a pathway to getting out of debt. His aim was to connect the product to everyday customer needs. He wanted to communicate the message to a wide range of bankers efficiently, but also powerfully. Knowing that videos were an important part of banker training, he proposed to create videos that conveyed how the low-interest loans had saved customers from debt.

Initially, some insiders were skeptical. “They didn't understand why we would take my precious time and other people's precious time to do storytelling or make a video. Didn't I have a business to run?” To overcome resistance, Soccorsy highlighted how the initiative was intertwined with the vision of the company, which focused on helping customers succeed financially. After gaining internal support, he created a proposal and a budget. Then, his team began reaching out to bankers and customers to identify powerful stories from around the U.S., and filmed five videos. A typical video started with a customer problem, profiled the banker-customer interaction, and showed the consequences for customer. “Customers felt like they had a massive weight lifted off their shoulders,” Soccorsy says, and the videos displayed “the raw emotion with customers when bankers helped them find some light at the end of the tunnel.”

When bankers watched the videos, “It was like a light switch turned on,” Soccorsy says. “They really were connecting the impact on the customer to their day-to-day work. Bankers realized the impact their work could have—that this loan can really make a difference in customers' lives. It was a really compelling motivator. They gave the whole effort another look. It humanized our work and how important it is to customers. It's a way to connect the dots—a secret weapon that we don't use enough.”^{xxv} The product became a major source of growth for the company, and doubled in size in the span of just a few years.

Tweets

- Outsource inspiration: instead of motivating employees with your words, give the microphone to customers.
- Leaders are linking pins: they connect employees to the people who find their work meaningful
- Meeting one person who benefits from your work can boost your productivity by more than 400%.

Bio

Adam Grant is Wharton's youngest full professor and the author of *Give and Take*, a *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling book that is being translated into more than two dozen languages. He received his B.A. from Harvard University and his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. He has been recognized as Wharton's top-rated teacher, one of *BusinessWeek*'s favorite professors, one of the world's top 40 business professors under 40, and one of Malcolm Gladwell's favorite social science writers. He was profiled in the *New York Times* magazine cover story, "Is giving the secret to getting ahead?"

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