DO GOOD TO
LEAD WELL

WITH CRAIG DOWDEN, PHD

Episode: Exploring the Science and Practice of Meaningful Work with Wes Adams and Tamara Myles

What You'll Learn

- ✔ Common Missteps in Creating Meaning
- ✔ Generational Perspectives on Meaningful Work
- ✔ The Importance of Meaning in Scaling Companies
- ✔ Engagement and Meaningful Work
- ✔ Counterintuitive Practices for Leaders

Common Missteps in Creating Meaningful Work

Listen at 13:58

Leaders often mistake purpose (a broad mission) for meaning (day-to-day contribution). For example, a company's purpose might be "to revolutionize healthcare," but employees need clarity on how their daily tasks directly contribute to that goal. Also, leaders risk disengagement by projecting their own values onto teams. A Gen X leader might prioritize financial incentives, while younger employees crave growth opportunities.

Action Step:
Break down organizational goals into micro-contributions. For example:

At weekly meetings, ask, "How did your work this week advance our mission?"

- Use storytelling to connect roles to impact (e.g., "Your report helped secure funding for X project").

"People very often conflate meaning and purpose. Having a purpose doesn't make a job meaningful. Seeing progress towards that purpose, understanding your day-to-day contribution, that's what we need to activate that sense of purpose. The other misstep is assuming that the thing that they get excited about is the thing that everybody's going to get excited about."

Generational Perspectives on Meaningful Work

Listen at 16:42

There's a myth that Gen Z uniquely values meaningful work. Instead, they highlight that career stage (not age) shapes priorities. Early-career employees, regardless of generation, seek growth and mentorship.

Mid-career professionals may prioritize flexibility or legacy-building. Leaders should focus on universal needs: fostering community, clarifying contribution, and offering challenges.

Action Step: Tailor recognition and development opportunities to individual needs:

- For a new hire: **"Let's schedule monthly shadowing sessions with senior leaders."**

- For a tenured employee: **"How can we highlight your expertise to mentor others?"**

"Meaningful work is important to everyone. We define it similarly: community, contribution, and challenge."

The Importance of Meaning in Scaling Companies

Listen at 28:46

"You're thinking about [meaning] backwards because this is the thing that drives those outcomes. If you weave it into the DNA of the company, the return on meaning is exponential. We often get a call when things break, and employees are upset. Leaders don't have the skills. If you do this work early, you avoid that moment of crisis."

Leaders of scaling companies often deprioritize meaning until problems arise (e.g., attrition, low morale). Investing in meaningful work before scaling prevents crises and accelerates growth. Even resource-constrained startups can model the "three C's":

- **Community:** Regular check-ins to ask, "How's your family?"
- **Contribution:** Share customer stories to show impact.
- **Challenge:** Assign stretch projects (e.g., "Lead this new client pitch").

Action Step: Create a "meaning audit" before scaling:

- Survey employees: **"What parts of your work feel most impactful?"**

- Identify gaps like lack of recognition, etc. and address them proactively.

Engagement Challenges and Solutions

Meaning Drives Engagement:

- Engagement metrics (e.g., retention rates, productivity) improve when employees feel their work is meaningful. For example, Microsoft's shift to measuring "thriving" (which includes meaningful work, energy levels, and growth) reflects this upstream approach.

Toxic Culture Kills Engagement:

- Inauthentic leadership (e.g., espousing values without role modeling them) erodes trust. Employees intuitively detect hypocrisy. Tamara notes: "When leaders don't walk the talk, they kill meaning instantly... it's really hard to recover."

Clarity = Connection:

- Employees disengage when they can't see how their work contributes to organizational goals. Leaders must explicitly connect daily tasks to broader impact (e.g., sharing customer stories).

Engagement isn't a standalone goal, it's a symptom of whether employees feel their work matters. By addressing root causes (clarity, community, and authenticity), leaders create environments where engagement thrives organically.

As Tamara notes: **"Meaning isn't about what we're doing, but how we're experiencing it."**

Counterintuitive Practices for Leaders

Listen at 50:44

Meaningful work thrives when employees are given balanced autonomy and clear boundaries tied to organizational values (e.g., "prioritize transparency") paired with creative freedom to innovate.

Instead of micromanaging tasks, define goals and let teams determine how to achieve them, fostering ownership and growth. For example, framing a project as "improve customer trust while meeting sustainability goals" empowers teams to problem-solve within defined guardrails.

Action Step: Implement "balanced autonomy" in 3 steps:

- **Define values:** Collaboration means seeking input before decisions.
- **Set goals:** Improve client retention by 10% this quarter.
- **Empower teams:** Say, "You own the how, just stay within these guardrails."

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