

The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance by Zach Mercurio

Ada T. Cenkci
Northern Kentucky University

Zach Mercurio's *The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance* explores the widespread "mattering deficit" in organizations, where many people feel invisible, ignored, and underappreciated at work. Mercurio explains that this lack of mattering negatively affects individuals' work experiences and personal lives, including mental health. Based on his professional experience and research, the author offers practical and evidence-based ideas for fostering mattering at work. As he says, "We can't have healthy organizations with unhealthy people. When people feel insignificant at work, they experience poor well-being, low commitment, and reduced performance" (p. 2). Mercurio emphasizes that addressing these issues does not require complex organizational initiatives. Instead, people can experience mattering through everyday interactions, and creating such a feeling is a core responsibility of leaders.

Why "Mattering" is Essential?

Mercurio explains that mattering is the experience of feeling significant to those around us. This concept builds on the work of psychologists Gordon Flett, Isaac Prilleltensky, and Gregory Elliott. The author distinguishes the concept from those of belonging and self-esteem. He explains that "when we feel that we matter..., we feel significant to group members—seen, heard, valued, and needed" (p. 22). The author argues that small daily interactions, such as looking a person in the eye or remembering one's name, helps people feel that they matter. He adds that for employees to care about their jobs and stay engaged, they must first feel cared for themselves. However, at a time when organizations increasingly rely on unique ideas and contributions to solve complex problems, this practice is often neglected. Such situations result in what the author calls a "mattering deficit." One consequence of this deficit is workplace loneliness, which affects employees' well-being and job performance.

The central argument of the book is that the need to matter is a basic survival instinct encoded in everyone. When people experience mattering, it promotes thriving for individuals and teams. In contrast, a lack of mattering creates feelings of neglect and poor organizational results. The main message of the book resonates well with entrepreneur Mary Kay Ash's well-known quote: "Everyone has an invisible sign hanging from his or her neck saying, 'MAKE ME FEEL IMPORTANT!' Never forget this

message when working with people" (Ash, 2018, p. vii).

The book is written in an easy-to-read style and is based on Mercurio's interviews with individuals on mattering, in addition to the author's experience working with different organizations. His professional background reflects this integration of research and practice used in the book. The author holds a PhD in organizational learning, performance, and change management from Colorado State University, where he serves as an instructor and senior fellow at the Center for Meaning and Purpose. Mercurio also advises organizations on practices for building cultures that cultivate well-being, motivation, and performance. He is the author of the book *The Invisible Leader: Transform Your Life, Work, and Organization with the Power of Authentic Purpose*.

Book Structure and Content

The Power of Mattering is organized into three parts. Part One "Why Mattering Matters" explains both what mattering is and is not. The author underlines that mattering does not replace the need for decent work, which includes psychologically and emotionally safe environments, a regular schedule, fair wages, and healthcare access. He then discusses why mattering is important in both professional and personal contexts.

In Part Two, "How to Create Mattering," the author continues with how to create mattering and explains his practical framework that leaders can use to make everyday interactions more meaningful. This NAN model focuses on Noticing people by truly seeing and hearing them, Affirming them by showing how their unique strengths matter, and Needing them by showing they are relied on and essential.

Part Three, "Scaling Significance," focuses on how mattering can be expanded and sustained over time. Mercurio discusses how the skills in the NAN model can be scaled, whether for a leader to create mattering in their team or turning mattering behaviors into habits. This section encourages readers to see their significance by focusing on the difference they create in others' lives.

Throughout the book, Mercurio offers exercises (e.g., mattering self-assessment for leaders) and planning tools (e.g., mattering blueprint) to help readers assess their strengths and weaknesses related to mattering and develop strategies for fostering it. Each chapter ends with a list

of Points to Remember that underline key concepts and encourage application.

Overall, Mercurio urges leaders to pay closer attention to mattering, an often overlooked topic in organizational research and practice. In doing so, *The Power of Mattering* is a pioneering book that emphasizes the importance of the topic with real-world examples.

Final Thoughts

Drawing from multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and leadership, *The Power of Mattering* is a timely examination of what it means to feel significant. Mercurio underlines that mattering is a fundamental need, and leaders play a critical role in creating these experiences in their teams. By basing his arguments on research and real-life examples, the author bridges the gap between theory and practice.

This is essential reading for practitioners, academics, and students of leadership and human resources who seek to create thriving cultures in which people feel valued. Researchers and practitioners interested in belonging, loneliness, and inclusion will especially find valuable insights throughout the text. In sum, this book is beneficial to anyone in formal or informal leadership roles (e.g., coaches, educators, and organizational leaders) who want to foster environments in which people feel genuinely seen, heard, valued, and needed.

Teaching Prompts for Classroom Discussion

Instructors can incorporate this book into a variety of topics, such as leadership, inclusion, human resources, and talent management. They might consider opening their discussion questions, such as:

“Think about a time when you most felt that you truly mattered to a leader? This person can be a formal or informal leader and in any context such as work, in school, student organizations, volunteer work, or in sports. What did the leader do to make you feel that way? What skills did they use?” (The author asked a similar question during the interviews for the book).

“What can leaders do daily to show that people matter?” “Does everyone value mattering at work, or are there employees who view work just as a source of income?” “The author indicates that ‘caring for someone means we must understand them. Understanding takes time. That’s why hurry and care can’t coexist’ (p. 81). Accordingly, how can leaders balance everyday task demands with a genuine care orientation towards employees?”

“Regarding remote work, Mercurio states, ‘The problem with remote work seems to be not technology but how we use it to lead people’ (p. 84), and he proposes a mattering-centered approach to leadership. In your opinion, what are some specific actions leaders of remote teams can take to ensure that employees feel they matter? How do these practices differ from those used by leaders who mostly work with face-to-face teams?”

“Cultivating a sense of mattering is not just a leadership responsibility, but a shared responsibility between leaders and followers. What is one thing you can do this week to help someone on your team (in any context, such as work, school, student organizations, volunteer work, or sports) feel that they matter?”

Such prompts allow participants to self-assess their experiences and develop plans for fostering a culture of mattering. In an era marked by increasing technological connectivity but diminishing human connection, *The Power of Mattering* offers timely and valuable guidance for fostering a culture of mattering.

References

Ash, M. K. (2008). *The Mary Kay way: Timeless principles from America’s greatest woman entrepreneur*. John Wiley & Sons.

Mercurio, Z. (2025). *The power of mattering: How leaders can create a culture of significance*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Ada T. Cenkci (cenkcit1@nku.edu)
