

# BWF\_Zach Mercurio

**Zach Mercurio:** [00:00:00] Any time you see a human being as a means to your end, they cease to become a human being to you. You can use this yes to get more results, but what you have to understand is that those results are a mere byproduct of a human being experiencing the fundamental human instinct to matter.

**Tim Spiker:** As leaders, we get things done through others. But if we only see them as a means of production, none of us will reach our full potential. I'm your host, Tim Spiker, and this is the Be Worth Following podcast. On this show, we talk with exceptional leaders, thinkers, and researchers about what actually drives effective leadership across the globe and over time.

You just heard from Zach Mercurio, author, keynote speaker, and researcher. Zach has a PhD in organizational learning, performance, and change in his career. Zach has worked with over 100 organizations globally, [00:01:00] including familiar names, such as Delta Airlines, JPMorgan Chase, and Giardelli Chocolate. In his first book, *The Invisible Leader*, Zach digs into the connections between individual purpose, organizational culture, and team performance.

As you'll hear in this episode, Zach shares very practical tools that cultivate effective cultures and exceptional results. But the path he takes us on to get there is unexpected. Zach has a memorable way of articulating what he teaches that will have you scrambling for a pen to take notes. But before Zach developed his current knowledge and wisdom, he was a young, successful professional heading straight into an early life crisis.

And that is where we begin.

**Zach Mercurio:** I think the first thing to know is that I'm the youngest of three brothers. And if anybody is the youngest out there, you know, you get very good at both entertaining yourself and comparing yourself, right? So, trying to measure [00:02:00] up. Because of that, I was always searching for significance.

I sort of have that embedded within me is to, to see significance and to quote unquote measure up, right? What happened is, is that I, when I went to college and how most people are educated is to succeed. We educate people for success. We tell them here's the starting salary you can get. Here's the job you should get. Here's what you can acquire and achieve. And that led me into a job that

was outwardly successful. I was working in advertising in Washington, D. C. I was making good money. Everywhere around me, I saw despair. People would come in and they would talk about what they were doing last weekend, what they were doing the weekend coming up.

You know, it is astounding how many people live for two sevenths of their lives, the days that begin with the letter S. That was unsettling [00:03:00] for me. We would talk about how to get as much money out of clients instead of who they were as people. And as a result, I felt insignificant. I had all the outward symbols of significance, but I felt insignificant.

And the people along the way, from that moment into doing what I'm doing right now, really the people that have influenced my view on leadership more than anyone else, really, is the unnamed ordinary people that I meet every day who are doing ordinary things with an extraordinary perspective, whether it's the joyful cab driver, the custodian at the airport, who's doing their job, who knows why they're doing it. And they just exude that joy. The FedEx driver who talks to me about my family. I mean, those are really the people that have set me on my trajectory to where I'm at.

**Tim Spiker:** at. Wow. So, let's, let's go just a little bit further into that because [00:04:00] you know, I love the background and it's astounding to be able to say, I was achieving the things that I was told would cause me to be a success. And in the midst of that, I felt insignificant. How did that light bulb come on for you? Because it's a wonderful compact phrase of an idea at this point, but I'm wondering at the time, how did it reveal itself?

**Zach Mercurio:** I'm fortunate to have had an early life crisis. I always tell people that are having like the mid-twenties crisis, like be very grateful because you're likely asking questions of yourself that most people don't ask until they're 50, also known as the midlife crisis.

So, asking like, what am I doing? Why am I here? Why am I significant? Those are important questions, right? To investigate our lives. It was really messy. I mean, when I was in that job, I would actually just ride the metro around DC and I remember there was one moment I don't, I wasn't even really into poetry at that time. I just thought it would be a good idea to like peruse a [00:05:00] bookstore. That seemed like the reflective angsty thing to do for someone trying to figure out their life. And so, I went into this Barnes and Noble and DuPont Circle and I pulled out a book of poetry called everything else in the world. It was on one of those end caps.

And it was by this poet, American poet named Stephen Dunn, and I picked it up and I flipped it to the, the title poem, which was Everything Else in the World. And the last line of the poem says, I want a job so good I'll be finishing it for the rest of my life. I started thinking about that and that, that line really just, like, struck with me and burned into me.

Like, what would this job be? And so I ended up actually leaving that first job out of college and I went to go work back in higher education because I want to make sure nobody ended up like me and one of the things that I found that we were doing is we're teaching people to develop the form of their lives. What's your career? What's the job? What's your pay structure? What, what's your five-year plan? Without helping them to discern the function of their lives [00:06:00] and in good building design, you know, form follows function in good human design, I think, form should follow function. We should know why we are what our strengths are the difference we want to make and then form what we do. And so I did that work in higher ed and that led me to then work with those students in the companies they went to after, which led me to realize, yeah, I can research this stuff. And I got meaningfulness and work and mattering and work and purposeful leadership. But hey, it was that poetry book on the end cap, right? Of that store. I think when you're in these spaces, the practice of noticing and picking up that book and looking for the signposts is really important. And it was important for me, and it guided me to where I'm at today.

**Tim Spiker:** What I think lands with me in such a meaningful way is when we get a chance to hear the stories of people who have important messages to share and are doing research [00:07:00] like you are doing and have done, but to know where that came from and, you know, and if we, you know, we lean a little bit into, into Simon Sinek and starting with why, when I. You know, I wanted you to be on the podcast because I, I love your messaging. I love your ideas. I think they're so helpful and so poignant, but now getting to hear your why, it just causes me to lean even further into wanting to hear more of the story. And I, you know, I suspect that that's true for many people listening, not just for me to be able to say, oh, you know, Zach had this early life crisis that it caused him to ask some really important questions, and that's a large motivation for why he's doing what he is decades later.

**Zach Mercurio:** .Yeah, I think about really what I'm doing as what my five year old self needed. My why is to help people realize their own significance. When a leader realizes their significance, they take responsibility for that significance.

When a human being realizes that [00:08:00] significance it's incredibly powerful when someone believes that they matter, anything is possible. When a team of people believe that they matter, anything is possible, you know, and so it took me a while to figure this out. I went back to get my PhD eight years after I was in the workforce full time.

And I think this may be helpful for people listening. A lot of times, people like me come out and we're also known as thought leaders on purpose or meaning or mattering or anything in work. But it was not a path where I just like, started jumping up and saying tweetable quotes, you know. This was, is a journey of noticing, of difficulty, of struggle, of all of that internal struggle, of figuring things out as you go and then looking back and seeing what you've crafted.

**Tim Spiker:** I mean, I know it's cliché, but we, you know, we catch up with certain people at a point in their lives. And for, for us, it's like, oh, wow, this person has burst on the scene. But that's really only true for our experience. They were, they [00:09:00] were running a marathon and we just happened to show up when they were at like mile 20, 22 to be able to like, oh, and, but they've been meanwhile, they have been laboring sometimes on a direct path, sometimes on a curvy path and we get the benefit. All of the laboring, be it sideways or direct, that has happened before that, and now we get to experience it.

**Zach Mercurio:** Especially when we talk about, like, purpose and meaningfulness and creating mattering for each other. I mean, if you think you've arrived, you're further away than where you started. You know, because this is all, like, we're working against our human nature, right, to be self-oriented, and the society that rewards us to be self-oriented, and so, you know, to have that aspiration, what you're aspiring to, or what you're going towards, that it's work, it takes work, and nobody's perfect, especially in what we're going to talk about today, I think that's really important for people to know.

**Tim Spiker:** There's three words that have come up in the mix repeatedly here, even just in the [00:10:00] last five minutes as we talk about meaning, purpose and mattering, and I know that these things play together in your story rising and falling in emphasis. So, let's talk about the work that you've done, the ideas that have given birth over time. We can, we can start with any of those that you, that you like their connections, but I also know in your story, it hasn't been just going at one at a time or, you know, there's a, there's a story in terms of how they connect and what has unfolded for you.

**Zach Mercurio:** Well, what I've repeatedly found in my experience is that most of the most joyful people that I've met talk more about the contribution they make than what they're doing. You know, they tend to have what I call a so that mentality. I'm doing this. So that what they can link, whatever it is that they're doing with its inevitable human outcome.

And when we, when we interview people in our studies, or when we look at research really from around the world on what contributes [00:11:00] to having a purpose and having a purposeful approach to life, it's having that. So that mentality, right? That's so that perspective. And that's what purpose is. Right? And that's what we found. Purpose is the reason for which something is done or created something's use or usefulness. Purpose asks us the question, you know, of what use are we to the world? Being purposeful is contribution centered thinking, being, and doing. You can have a purpose statement and not be purposeful.

It's the difference between saying, what do I have to do today? And how is what I'm going to do today going to impact other people? So that's that first piece that captivated me was how do people learn to be purposeful? How do organizations of people learn to be purposeful in a system that incentivizes them not to be?

When you're in elementary school, you start getting arbitrary letter grades for the things that you do. You get things, right? And then you start doing things to get the thing, to get the grade. And then, [00:12:00] then you figure out, well, there's a game. So, if I do these specific things, I'll get these specific rewards.

And then we start saying, okay, you've gotten these things. Now, when you graduate, you got to go to college. So, it's all about you. You're going to college. And then after you go to college, get a good starting salary, get a good job. And then, here's how you're going to get promoted. And then here's your retirement plan.

We educate people in an if then argument, if you do this, then you'll be successful. Essentially, we're creating destination addicts. In psychology, it's called destination addiction. It's the false belief that when you get somewhere, you'll arrive or be fulfilled. And so, the system that is rewarding self-achievement gets what it rewards, which is a lot of self-oriented people.

You know, it's up to you to pull yourself up by the bootstraps and foster your own well-being. It's up to you to find meaning in your work. It's up to you to make it. Here, when in reality, all the research indicates that like individual well-being is [00:13:00] a community endeavor. In fact, to be self-actualized,

we need other people who are self-actualized to provide safety belonging and love for us.

That is what I'm talking about the system and the systems that we're in that incentivize individual sales goals, for example. And then you expect people to collaborate, or you judge the worth of someone by the quarterly earnings report that they get, and you expect them to demonstrate empathy. For someone who has a different idea, that's what I mean.

**Tim Spiker:** Okay, so you dig into purpose and you're doing this research, but then you start to actually work with organizations around these ideas. So, so talk about that because what I love for people to hear is, okay, Zach just said a lot of really smart things that would cause me to think. But what about the practical application side? You know, how does it show up in organizations as you look at the work that you've done with organizations around this idea of purpose?

**Zach Mercurio:** Well, so we can, you [00:14:00] can learn to be purposeful, right? You can learn that 'So that' mindset. So that's something that I've been working with people on. And when I started doing work on purpose, we were, we were talking about some practices of how to develop a purposeful mindset, right? 'So that' perspective is a, is a skill you can use asking yourself better questions. For example, what am I going to do in five years? What kind of impact am I going to make five years from now? What's my ideal job? What problems do I want to solve with my strengths? That's, that's a practice or, you know, collecting and telling stories of your impact.

So, you're, you're remembering the evidence of your impact. So, holding onto those stories where you saw yourself make a difference and reframing your internal narrative. So, you're thinking about that. Another practice is developing a statement of your contribution. You know, we call it a purpose statement, but really it doesn't matter what the statement says. As long as it's contribution focused, it's saying right now, today, this is the contribution I want to make. We were in organizations doing these things and it was [00:15:00] really profound. I mean, the results were, were profound. I mean, we worked with a car wash of people who are just getting their some of them are just have their GEDs is the only job that would hire them and the supervisors really brought this to life and connected right every time they got delegated a task they would connect to how what they're going to learn on that task would help them fulfill their own purpose.

And they had these development plans, they ended up washing three times more than the industry average. They're one of the most sought-after employers in the



region right now and their car wash attendance, right? Stories like that, that people have learned to be purposeful as leaders and organizations. So that's some of the practice that you can think about in terms of developing a mindset, right? So that mindset, asking yourself different questions, stating the contribution you want to make. And really optimize your environment to trigger you to think about your contribution.

**Tim Spiker:** Well, it's such a powerful word contribution [00:16:00] there in that. And when you talk about earlier, as we're going through and looking at what a traditional educational system will, will hand to us, which is you do this in order to get, and you're really flipping that now and saying, what if instead we're talking about, you do this in order to give. I do this in order to, to send this out in a way that's going to impact other people well.

I'm going to pause for just a second and be the kind of manipulative cynic for a sec, for a moment. I love the carwash example. So here we are with people who you might think is the last place in the world to create great purpose out of a role. And yet here we are doing that and then seeing a tremendous result.

What do you say to the leader who says, okay, all right, so what I need to do, according to Zach's research and experiences? I need to act like what we're doing around here connects to people's purpose, because [00:17:00] I'm going to get three times the productivity out of them, if they have the perception that this is somehow helping them fulfill their purpose.

So, I'm going to start using this language of contribution so that I can just, anytime we need to pick up the slack, I can remind them of this, of this purpose. And what you hear on that are, you know, elements of truth with the intent of manipulation, essentially is what I'm describing. What do you, what do you say to leaders who might be tempted to say, oh, what I heard of that story was three times, three times their productivity. And I'm just going to say whatever I need to say in order to get to that. What do you say to those kinds of leaders?

**Zach Mercurio:** Yeah, you're taking this and turning it into a tactic. Anytime you see a human being as a means to your end, they cease to become a human being to you. So, you can use this, yes, to get more results, but what you have to understand is that those results are a byproduct, a mere [00:18:00] byproduct of a human being experiencing the fundamental human instinct to matter.

And You have to believe it yourself. There is some research that says that if you tell people their job is meaningful, but they don't experience meaningfulness in their job, they don't experience that they matter to you and to the people around

them, that it can cause what's called existential acting. I know it's a big word, but what it really means is that the employee starts acting as if their job is meaningful, but they really don't believe it and it can actually result in burnout and cynicism and despair and cause you the opposite of what you want. So that authenticity, that integrity of your purpose and why you're doing it is important.

So, I would say to that leader, make sure you really understand, are you doing this just so you'll get some results from it? If so, eventually it will show through. Like your true beliefs will show through eventually and it could have the opposite effect, but I would take some time to really [00:19:00] think about what is the impact and legacy that you want to leave as a leader on people's life and not what you want your quarterly earnings report to be. And lead lead from there.

**Tim Spiker:** It's such an important thing for us to pause on because I think probably any of us at times will be tempted to just be focused on the end result we're after and perhaps even unintentionally at times end up not in the type of dehumanization that we see in these terrible news stories that companies do but just kind of a low level dehumanization that doesn't cause the best of what everybody has to show up including ourselves.

And, you know, am I really in this? Do I really believe the words that I'm saying, or am I just using those words? And I think it's the type of thing, as you describe it there in the short run, there, there are so many things that are possible that may or may [00:20:00] not be valuable in the long run, but in the long run of this, I just think, as you say, it, it's not the type of, you can't game this in the long run. One of the things I'll challenge, you know, hopefully first myself and then other people around sometimes is look, let's unpack the next 30 years of your career. We can either spend the next 30 years with you attempting to convince other people that you actually care about them. You're going to do and say the things that a person who cares about them would do and say, and you work really hard at that every single morning when you wake up for 30 years, Or, you can just care about them and if we work to actually become people who care about them then hey you know what the first few years becoming that type of person it might be a little harder and a little slower but you're not gonna have to act for the twenty seven years after that it's just gonna be a part of who you are. And in the long run, isn't that a [00:21:00] more efficient way for us to lead and live than saying, oh, I'm going to put on a face every day for the next 30 years, tougher at first, but much more much, much easier, actually, not that it's easy, but much easier over the long run. What would you, what would you say to that?



**Zach Mercurio:** I would say, and that that is exactly what we try to do before doing any of this. Which is why developing that mindset shift, that purposeful mindset, and in, and investigating whether you have just a results achievement-oriented mindset is such important base work for the individual leader to do before doing this for your employees. Because as you said, if you go into it with, oh, well this'll create X, Y, and Z, you're going in from a results mindset perspective versus a purposeful mindset perspective, which is I'm doing this to give this.

**Tim Spiker:** Good. All right. So, here's the crazy part about your story is that you did all this work around purpose. [00:22:00] And then over your time, You're like, wait a second, hold on. Something actually has to show up before we get to purpose in order for this to actually work. So, unpack that for us a little bit. I think it's a fascinating part of your story and so important because I think it would be so easy at this point to say, man, at Zach, he's got some great ideas around purpose and I can see how they're really meaningful. And, and I just want to go right at purpose, but, but you're now in the space of well, there's a story before the story of purpose. So, let's talk about that.

**Zach Mercurio:** Well, I started getting called in by schools, school districts, teachers or hospital systems, especially after that first year. Groups of trauma surgeons. I got to do work with the National Park Service. And I'm like, wait a minute. These people save people's lives, teach the future, and like, preserve the nation's natural [00:23:00] resources for generations to come. What is going on? Like, why am I talking to these people? Their contribution is so clear.

And I remember sitting out on my back deck, it was during the pandemic, and I was reading an article by this guy. Psychologist named Gordon Flett at York University, and he was talking about how the pandemic has revealed an anti-mattering epidemic where people don't experience mattering. Now experiencing mattering is experiencing yourself as significant and needed and valued by the people around you.

And it clicked with me. These people had a purposeful job. They had a job that mattered, but they weren't experiencing mattering in their job. I started digging into this concept of mattering and mattering has to come first. So I can't tell you like, Tim, go find your contribution until you believe you're worthy of contributing.[00:24:00]

I can't tell an employee to soar with your strengths. Here, let's do strengths quest. Identify your strengths. If they first don't believe they have strengths, I

can't ask somebody for feedback and say, hey, share your voice. We really want to hear your voice. If they don't first believe their voice is significant.

And then I started tracking this all the way back to when we're born. And I was reading this book called *The Earliest Relationship*, which is on the instincts that babies have when they're born that last through our lives. And one of the first instinct that you had as a baby was not to search for food. It was actually, you tilted your head upward at a specific angle, and then reached your hand out to grasp someone. So, they would care for you, you sought to matter to somebody before you sought food. And that instinct, that survival instinct to matter, just like the survival instinct to eat never goes [00:25:00] away.

And many people in our organizations are malnourished from a psychological perspective. And when an instinct is not met, what do we do when we're really hungry? What do we do? We usually act out in desperation, or we withdraw and go take a nap. The same is true with when we don't feel like we matter. And I was looking at all the conduct issues, all the burnout issues, all the loneliness issues people leaving organizations and was realizing that this fundamental instinct has been overlooked.

**Tim Spiker:** So, people need to matter. We all need to matter. And that is a precursor to really living a purposeful existence. And so now let's go back to the car wash. All right, so we've got people who are thinking about their purpose as it connects to this idea of washing cars, but wait, wait, wait. We've got to know that we matter first.

So, in the practical sense now, as you begin to, you know, transition to the work of helping [00:26:00] leaders help those, they lead, feel a sense of mattering, where do those practices, where do those ideas take leaders now, as you focus in on matter?

**Zach Mercurio:** Yeah. What's really exciting about this. Is that mattering is built through interpersonal interactions.

It's not built through a big award ceremony or a pay raise, or a kudos board, right? It is built through interactions. So, mattering is interpersonally constructed. And there are three predictors of experiencing matter. One is that we're noticed, a practice for noticing someone can be as simple as asking a better question instead of, Hey, how are you? Hey, what have you been working on today? Hey, what has your attention today? What have you been struggling with today? How can I help?

**Tim Spiker:** time out time out. I got to interrupt you, Zach, because [00:27:00] people need to hear this. When we got on this call, it was. Before we started the recording part, the first thing that Zach said to me was, what are you up to?

What do you have going on? So yeah, what's been going on? So, lest you think Zach is a researcher that doesn't practice what he preaches. Inherently with me, the person who's hosting this podcast interview, you began to so into that idea of mattering by asking me that question. I, I see you leading well, Zach.

**Zach Mercurio:** This is great because this is not all pie in the sky stuff. So, let's talk about what it did for us in our initial conversation. Instead of just jumping into the podcast, you shared with me something about was it your daughter today? Your kids and the school project that they were doing at school and what you felt through that, right?

If I didn't ask that question, I would not have that data to notice you. So, when I see [00:28:00] you in a month, I can now ask, how's your daughter doing at the school, the classical school, right? Many times, as leaders, like, we don't ask questions that give us the data to actually notice people. So, we run around saying, starting meetings, like, hey, how's everybody doing? Good? Or they'll say in the start of the meeting, everyone would be like, all right, I know, you know, it's Thursday, we, we got to get through the, let's just get through the agenda. Right? So, we go. So, you have to, and if you want to notice people, you have to create space to see people. Like you have to have this little buffer we had at the beginning of the podcast.

You have to have space at the beginning of a meeting, at the beginning of a one on one to make sure you're meaningfully checking in with people. And so, you're getting data to actually notice them and see them. Because when people, if it doesn't matter, if people don't feel noticed by you, and it doesn't matter what you say, because if someone, it's impossible for anybody to care for anything until they feel cared for.

I was working with the special forces officer. Who was responsible for [00:29:00] training special forces officers last year. And he said to me at the end of a session we did on matter, and he said, you know, I've been thinking about how to communicate this and in all of my years, like the key predictor of a, high performing lethal unit behind enemy lines is not my toughness, it's my love. My people will not sacrifice for me if I don't know their kids' names, if I don't know what they're struggling with, if I'm not there for them. And that's what noticing is.

**Tim Spiker:** Wow. Wow. So that's, that's the first one out of the three noticing. I mean, if you get a sense that Zach could probably do the next three days on noticing, and we have two more things to get to, I think you're probably assessing.

I'm sorry. No, no, no, no. I'm saying that to folks because you know, you're here on this podcast in part, because I want people to know who you are and spend more time with you in these ways. So don't apologize at all. I'm having to resist the fact that, you know, we're going to do a three [00:30:00] day podcast, but what you're talking about with noticing it's, it's really clear, like, I'm like, wait, where's the part of this that's hard to understand. And in reality, it's not hard to understand. I feel like we just need to slow down long enough to participate in it. And I'm even having a sense, like, I'm sure there's some leaders out there be like, I don't care about any of this. I just want to get the result and I'm going to use people to do that. That's fine. This isn't going to be for you. You know, you're not going to be interested in this. You're not going to be interested in long term leadership success. You're just trying to maximize the moment. In which case I'm surprised you find this podcast in the first place. However, for the rest of us, for the rest of us, as you kind of lay out the very simple of what do you have going on? What's got your attention recently or today?

My sense is this, as we invite others, and frankly, let's be honest, as we invite ourselves as well, to participate in the types of conversations that you're suggesting, it's, it's my sense and observation. That when we lean into those kinds of [00:31:00] conversations, it's actually pretty rewarding for us as leaders as well, because we begin to get that information that really does invite us to see this person as a person, to see them as a whole story, not just an FTE that shows up here to work, in which case it might feel like it's complicated and hard, but I bet that as we lean into this. That there's a deep level of fulfillment when we really do take the time to notice people and it, and it's some, there's some self-fulfillment there I would see.

**Zach Mercurio:** I mean, I'm going to go, I'm going to be really big here and I'm going to say, I think it can heal society. For example, I don't label you based on your last tweet. I can see you as a father. Right? And I think that that's what we've lost right with people is that you know in our rush to get things done when we [00:32:00] don't spend time understanding who people are and how people are we can start labeling them by their last worst behavior. Instead of like who they really are and the little details and ebbs and flows of their life that's as important and vivid and as complex as my own and I think it's like a really important practice. So, I want to go back to what you said about the leaders who are just care about results. this is not for them. I would argue that it

is for them. I know what you're saying. The people who are aiming just to achieve for themselves, this may not be the, like, the best route to go initially. But I would argue that if you're, or results, if you care about results, you care about driving results and your worth is driven by results, that's not necessarily your fault. I mean, it is your problem, but your system is, I have a lot of empathy for a leader. Who has woken up for the last 20 years and their worth has been determined by a P&L sheet. If I were in that [00:33:00] situation because I'm a human being, I would be that skeptical leader probably right now listening. So, I think there's a lot of empathy there.

But the second thing I would say is that every lagging indicator that you say you care about is mediated through a human being. There is no good result, right, without a well human being. It's impossible. It's impossible to produce sustainable results with people who don't have the energy to produce sustainable results.

Yeah. Results aren't bad, right? Results become really negative when we detach them from who is driving them and taking care of those people first. So, if you are results driven, that's not bad, but if you can shift to acknowledge that pouring into people as the cause of those results can get you both, you'll start feeling a lot better about yourself. Your legacy will be better, and you know what the results will [00:34:00] follow.

**Tim Spiker:** I love it now I'm gonna do something that might be uncomfortable for you but I'm gonna read something back to you that you wrote because we're dead in the middle of it yeah you posted this on LinkedIn not long ago we must stop expecting people to perform well without first helping them to be well there is no sustained human productivity or performance without human well-being if you expect high performance. You must cultivate high wellbeing. In my experience, many leaders devote too much time and energy to getting people to perform and produce and too little time and energy to create environments that enable sustainable wellbeing. I mean, that's what you're talking about right now, isn't it?

**Zach Mercurio:** Yeah, yeah, that's it. We get so wrapped up in the lagging indicator. But my kindergartner knows that you can't get an effect by pursuing an effect. I can't all of a sudden be like, oh, I want to go run 10 miles. So, I just go out and run 10 miles. I have to start [00:35:00] training my body to be able to run 10 miles, right? That's the, that's the cause most of the time we try to like, let's go get more profit. Let's go get more customers by trying to, Hey, in the meeting, how are we going to get more customers? You're basically saying to someone who hasn't trained for running, how are we going to run 10 miles

today? Instead of investing in the cause, which is people, people are always the cause.

**Tim Spiker:** If the question is, how do we invest in high level performance that is sustainable over the long haul? You're proposing that the answer is to invest in the well-being of the people that can cause that sustainable performance over time.

**Zach Mercurio:** Yes, and there are many other people talking about other dimensions of well-being, but I'm gonna, I, I am right now talking about the fundamental pillar of well-being, which is that if people don't feel like they matter, nothing's gonna matter to them.

**Tim Spiker:** I'm just going to invite everybody to hit pause on the podcast now and spend the next 15 minutes just thinking about that statement because it is [00:36:00] so profound. I do want to get to two and three only because, you know, I don't want to, I don't want to miss out on the stuff here. So, noticing if, if noticing others or being noticed by those around us, especially our leaders, is an important part of mattering. What are, what are the other two pieces here that we need to have in mind as well?

**Zach Mercurio:** And they build off of each other. So, when we notice people, we can actually meaningful, meaningfully affirm them. So, like, affirmation is when we show people how their uniqueness makes a unique difference. It's different than appreciation or recognition, right?

Recognition is showing gratitude for what someone does. Appreciation is showing gratitude for who someone is, but affirmation is showing people the specific evidence of their significance. So, it's like me saying, Hey Tim, you know, you do a really great job on this podcast. That's like appreciation, but affirmation is saying, Hey Tim, I've noticed [00:37:00] that you, you really listen with your nonverbals and you're really good at connecting the dots and then putting it in a way where people can get a lot of actionable information from what we've been talking about and you know I've heard people who have listened to your podcast that have been changed by it. And so, I just want to thank you for that.

That's affirmation, right? Because an affirm, affirm comes from the Latin roots, which mean to firm up or make strong. And I think that what's powerful about that is you're giving people the evidence in their environment to make their belief, their self-belief stronger. And that's how we come to believe things about ourselves is through what's in our environment.



So, you know, just like what we did just they're giving a better. Thank you. Anytime you say thank you or good job, make sure you tell people the difference they make and how they make it as a great practice, collecting and telling stories of their impact.

If you get to see like, someone make an impact down the line, cause you're a leader, [00:38:00] oftentimes we take that for granted. We take sort of our perch that we can see the. The field for granted when somebody can only see a limited field of vision and so get giving them the glimpse showing them. Here's what I see. Here's where your work goes. That's another way you can affirm people's and show them the specific difference that they make.

**Tim Spiker:** Let's talk about the 'if it weren't for you exercise' because, well, I'll say more about it in a second, but I want you to explain it to folks in how it can be applied.

**Zach Mercurio:** Yeah. So great transition, Tim, because affirming people is showing people the difference that they make. And then that leads into showing people how they're needed, showing people how they're relied on.

This is not manipulating people. to feel like they're obligated to you. That's very different. Feeling obligated to do something is not the same as authentically feeling relied on. So, I want to make that clear. But when people feel replaceable, they tend to act replaceable, right? They don't show up, they don't [00:39:00] commit. And one of the, the most powerful five words I've heard leaders say is "if it wasn't for you." I was working with a bank and this woman at the, at the end of the week, she is the head of this branch of this bank. And she writes emails to people and says, if it wasn't for you doing this, this week wouldn't have been what it was for us.

And just that language, right? If it wasn't for you shows people that they're indispensable. To you, you could do this in your personal life. You could do this at work, but it is so powerful. Humans are really optimized when they feel needed.

**Tim Spiker:** And so, if it wasn't for you, in some ways, does that combine both the I'm affirming and I'm expressing why somebody is needed is kind of a combo on that one.

**Zach Mercurio:** I think it can, but it goes to one step further and says, you know, you are relied on. And that's what needing people is, affirming people, showing them the difference that they make. But the, the feeling relied on is a

different aspect. And [00:40:00] when we look at the research on what people experience when they experience mattering, that last one of feeling relied on is really important.

There are studies done of, of people who are thinking about self-harm. And they're right that what they write down is some version of no one would miss me if I was gone. No one cares about me. No one relies on me. There's been many studies that have shown that feeling relied on is so essential to our sense of self and our mental health in work and beyond because as humans, we're built to be interdependent. We're wired that way. So again, when that's not, when we don't feel depended on, it can really have catastrophic consequences.

**Tim Spiker:** Well, and it's not hard to see. It's not a big leap then to go the next step to your, to back to the issue of purpose. Once we can complete the story of mattering, now I can have a purpose and the connection point between I'm relied [00:41:00] upon and I have purpose that doesn't feel like a big leap at all.

**Zach Mercurio:** And then once you start doing. So, I think all this stuff can be done concurrently because once you start doing this, you can start to say to people, hey, and that bigger thing we're working towards, that's our purpose, right? And then when people are experiencing it every day through the interactions they have around them, then they can believe in the purpose.

It doesn't just because become, oh, we have this We have this like grand purpose that a brand consultant came in and helped me do right. It's and I don't experience it every day. It's like, no, like I know that I'm needed. Like I experienced that from you. You've helped me see that I'm needed. So, when you introduce this big purpose, yeah, of course I am.

It's something else in the environment that points, you know, that pulls me forward, not a decorative sticker. On the wall. The only thing that may be ringing in someone's ear right now is “Zach, what if people [00:42:00] depend on other people for their mattering? What happens if people depend on other people doing this for them to give them worth?”

And there is a dark side to mattering where when someone experiences perpetual, unmet mattering in their life, they can over rely on people to give them a sense of mattering, which is actually a key precursor to narcissism. Yeah. So, a lot of like narcissism is the result of unmet attention needs and unmet attachment needs and unmet mattering needs that have resulted in an over need for external validation.

So, what I would say to that is there are always dark side to these phenomenon, but what's important to remember is that it's the accumulation of unmet mattering needs that result in these things. Right? So you may have someone on your team that is acting out like this because they're desperate for the attention they're not getting somewhere [00:43:00] else and what I would what I would encourage you to do is resist labeling them as a difficult or self-centered person and think about them as someone who's acting out for the significance they're not getting elsewhere and commit to showing them how they're significant to other people, not boosting their ego.

Because this is also a question I get, Zach, would this just boost people's ego? Mattering is not about that. You're trying to tell someone they're the center of the universe. Mattering is showing somebody how others in the universe rely on them. It actually takes people out of narcissism sometimes when done right.

I just want to make this point because there is, you can overdo it. At an individual level, but at the leadership cultural level, it's important then to keep showing people the impact they have on other people, not telling them how great [00:44:00] they are.

**Tim Spiker:** As you talk about things like life and death as you talk about self-harm and its related in here. Now we're talking about mattering and we're talking about purpose. *Man's search for meaning* by Viktor Frankl is coming back to me in spades here in terms of the idea that as we go to satisfy kind of the wants of life, that, that somehow that actually isn't really enough, the, the, hey, what do you want? But. What he found and what he made known throughout the world then is this connection to purpose in terms of, of meaning of life versus the things that make us happy, I guess, would be another way to see it. So, it just, it feels like what you're talking about is not only so connected to people and to leadership, but to obviously to, to psychology and, and how we operate as human beings, the need for mattering and the need for purpose.

**Zach Mercurio:** Yes, one of my favorite books is called *Deep* [00:45:00] *Survival* by Lawrence Gonzales, and he studies people in survival scenarios, and what are the characteristics of people who live, and what are the characteristics of people who don't? And one of the things that he finds is that the people that thought I have to get home to my daughter. I have to get home because I want to finish this thing. I have to get home for this person. The person who put that at the front of their mind, kept repeating it to themselves, kept it in their mind, just like Frankel did in his situation. This was one of the key outlying characteristics of people who survive in survival scenarios.

It's that will to meaning, the will to survive, the will to carry on, right? And that will comes from knowing that we matter.

**Tim Spiker:** Well, and so as we talk about the space of leadership, ultimately, as we talk about these things, we're, we're talking about in the best way possible, tapping into the core needs that we have as human beings, [00:46:00] how do we as leaders and tap into is almost a verbiage I'm uncomfortable to use because I don't want it to be in that manipulative space.

We're not using people to get something done. So, we're going to pretend like they matter and like they have purpose. No, they actually do matter. They actually do have purpose. And when we as leaders tap into that in the most genuine way possible, it's not just us and the endeavor that benefits, but those people do as well.

And perhaps as a leader, that's part of my purpose, which is to say, how can I help them feel that? Because it's not just our endeavor. That's going to flourish when we do that. What's the legacy that I want to have? Do I want to be a leader who, great, our profits were escalating every year for a decade?

And I got all my bonuses. We have options as leaders. Do we want to go for the most of leadership or the least of leadership? And what I just described? In hitting those numbers consistently for a decade and getting all your bonuses, that's the least of leadership. [00:47:00] That's like, okay, great. You got that. The most of leadership would be okay.

Yeah, you hit all those numbers, but you are also doing something so much more significant and meaningful that people are going to remember you for the rest of their lives, even when they're not working for you anymore. And so, I think I think we have a challenge as leaders to ask ourselves, what am I really after? Am I after the least of leadership? Yeah. Or am I after the most of leadership? And if the answer is the most, then we've got to be thinking about things like mattering and purpose.

**Zach Mercurio:** And sometimes I think that what stops us from doing that is we think it's just work, like it's just work or I'm in this job.

I'm, yeah, I'm not making. I'm not saving the world. I'm putting mirrors on cars or whatever it is. I'm washing cars, right? But when you're a leader, when you become responsible for where other human beings spend upwards of a third of their lives away from the people that love them, your job is inherently purposeful and legacy building.

And so, it doesn't matter where you [00:48:00] are, it doesn't matter what you're doing, if you are at least partly responsible for where a human spends 35 percent of their life, you should be listening right now. David Brooks has one of my favorite columns, I read it every year. He calls it the difference between resume virtues, and eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are the things that you add up, what you call the least of leadership eulogy virtues are the things you want people to say at your funeral about you.

Are you going to want them to say, oh, Tim, and in 2023, Tim really boosted shareholder value.

**Tim Spiker:** It is laughable, isn't it?

**Zach Mercurio:** Or do you want them to say, "You know, when something happened in my family, Tim was the first one there who called me." That's what this is about. That's what this is about.

**Tim Spiker:** So good. So good.

Alright, I want folks to know what you're up to [00:49:00] right now. You've got some important irons in the fire. Let's hear a little bit about the projects that you have working so people can have their eye and ear out for what you're bringing into the world coming up here.

**Zach Mercurio:** Yeah, so, next year we're going to be launching a new book. And the title is still up in the air, but it's really going to be about how mattering comes first and the framework of **noticed, affirmed, and needed** with much more depth on each practice and how leaders can go out and, and do it. But yeah, so we're doing a lot and really going out and trying to make what you said, Tim, like this is common sense, but turn it into common practice.

And that's what the book, I hope to be, I hope that, you know, it's these, like those moments, like in our conversation where you're like, ah, yeah, that speaks to like a truth, you know, because, because I can't stop thinking about this mattering stuff once I started understanding it. And the book is going to be about why that is, you know, why does that, what is the truth?

And then really what are the practices, simple [00:50:00] practices that we can use to do it with the people around us. Great leadership, really, when you think about it, comes down to what happens in everyday interactions.

**Tim Spiker:** Good. What an unbelievably thick episode that was. It felt like just about every idea and comment that came out of Zach's mouth was full of nutrition for all of us to pause and think about. And Zach's spending. Time with us, you know, if we had to take that entire episode and boil it down to two words, the words would be purpose and mattering.

And just to reiterate something that Zach found through his work is that while we really do want the people that we are leading to be clear on what their individual purpose is, that there is this very interesting thing lurking behind that, which [00:51:00] is if people don't know that they matter. Then they won't be able to pursue that purpose well, and so there's a step zero, a step that comes before getting clear or helping the people we're leading, getting clear about their purpose, and that is making sure that people understand.

That they matter and how they matter. So, there were so many quotable things that Zach said. I won't get into all of them. Hopefully you had a pen handy nearby as you are listening. And if not, maybe the right next move would be to go back and listen to it again with a pen in hand. As I exit this episode, I'm not sure if it's my head that's exploding, my heart that's exploding, my soul that's exploding, but there were so many valuable things that Zach shared as he has experienced, been working with companies and through his research as well. So, I am full up as we round out this [00:52:00] episode today, the idea of mattering really challenges me. This idea of, am I doing a good job to make sure that the people that I'm leading and influencing know that they matter and how they matter specifically, how they're impacting the world around us that really makes a difference.

So that I'm explicit about making sure. That they know that am I doing a good job of pointing that out? And I will say that my, you know, my biggest conviction in that, as I think about it right now is not on the business side, but on the personal side, when I think about my family, when I think about my wife and my kids as a leader in our family, am I making sure that they know specifically how they matter? It's a challenging thing for me today, and perhaps it's challenging for some of you as well.

So that leads me to the question I want to leave you with today, and that is this. Did the people that you are leading know that they matter? [00:53:00]

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