

Meaningful work not created – only destroyed – by bosses, study finds

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Bosses play no role in fostering a sense of meaningfulness at work - but they do have the capacity to destroy it and should stay out of the way, new research shows.

The study by researchers at the University of Sussex and the University

of Greenwich shows that quality of leadership receives virtually no mention when [people](#) describe meaningful moments at work, but poor management is the top destroyer of meaningfulness.

Published in MIT Sloan Management Review, the research indicates that, rather than being similar to other work-related attitudes, such as engagement or commitment, meaningfulness at work tends to be intensely personal and individual, and is often revealed to employees as they reflect on their work.

Thus what managers can do to encourage meaningfulness is limited, though what they can do to introduce meaninglessness is unfortunately of far greater capacity.

The study was carried out by Professor Katie Bailey, an employee engagement expert at Sussex's School of Business, Management and Economics, and Dr Adrian Madden of Greenwich's business school.

They interviewed 135 people working in 10 very different occupations, from priests to garbage collectors, to ask about incidents or times when the workers found their work to be meaningful and, conversely, times when they asked themselves, "What's the point of doing this job?"

Professor Bailey says: "In experiencing work as meaningful, we cease to be workers or employees and relate as human beings, reaching out in a bond of common humanity to others.

"For organizations seeking to manage meaningfulness, the ethical and moral responsibility is great, since they are bridging the gap between work and personal life."

The authors identified five qualities of meaningful work:

- **Self-Transcendent.** Individuals tend to experience their work as meaningful when it matters to others more than just to themselves. In this way, meaningful work is self-transcendent.
- **Poignant.** People often find their work to be full of meaning at moments associated with mixed, uncomfortable, or even painful thoughts and feelings, not just a sense of unalloyed joy and happiness.
- **Episodic.** A sense of meaningfulness arises in an episodic rather than a sustained way. It seems that no one can find their work consistently meaningful, but rather that an awareness that work is meaningful arises at peak times that are generative of strong experiences.
- **Reflective.** Meaningfulness is rarely experienced in the moment, but rather in retrospect and on reflection when people are able to see their completed work and make connections between their achievements and a wider sense of life meaning.
- **Personal.** Work that is meaningful is often understood by people not just in the context of their work but also in the wider context of their [personal life](#) experiences.

The researchers also identified the 'seven deadly sins' of meaninglessness: disconnecting people from their values; taking them for granted; handing out pointless work; treating staff unfairly; overriding peoples' better judgment; disconnecting people from supporting relationships; and putting them at risk.

While the challenges of helping employees find meaningful [work](#) are great, "the benefits for individuals and organizations that accrue from meaningful workplaces can be even greater," the authors write.

Dr Madden adds: "Organizations that succeed in this are more likely to attract, retain, and motivate the employees they need to build sustainably for the future, and to create the kind of workplaces where human beings

can thrive."

More information: What Makes Work Meaningful—Or Meaningless:
http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/what-makes-work-meaningful-or-meaningless/?utm_medium=pr&utm_source=release&utm_campaign=featjune16

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