The Neuroscience of Helping Your People Love What They Do

ALIVE AT WORK

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INTRODUCTION

OUR ORGANIZATIONS ARE LETTING US DOWN

"I wonder what my soul does all day when I'm at work."

—Graffiti seen in London

Let's start with a couple of questions. Are you excited about your work? Or does work make you feel like you need to "shut off" in order to get through it?

If you answered "yes" to the first question, you're in the fortunate minority. But, if you're in a position to lead and motivate others, there's still a good chance that those who fall under your leadership would answer no.

According to both US and global Gallup polls, about 80 percent of workers don't feel that they can be their best at work, and

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70 percent are not engaged at work. What this means is that an overwhelming majority of the workforce is not "involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work." And 17 percent of that group are "actively" disengaged: they are repelled by what they do all day.[1] Another recent study shows that over 87 percent of America's workforce is not able to contribute to their full potential because they don't have passion for their work.[2]

These numbers are alarming but, sadly, they're probably not surprising to you. I think all leaders know in their guts that engagement is an issue. Why? For one, we've all struggled with it ourselves. As a friend told me recently, "Sure, work sucks . . . that's why they call it work." At one point or other, we've all felt dulled by what we do at work—bored and creatively bankrupt. We've sometimes lost our zest for our jobs and accepted working as a sort of long commute to the weekend.

Yet even though we've all been there, it can be frustrating when our people aren't living up to their potential. It's exasperating when employees are disengaged and don't seem to view their work as meaningful.

It can be hard to remember that employees don't usually succumb to these negative responses for a lack of trying. They *want* to feel motivated. They *seek* meaning from their jobs. But some realities of organizational life are preventing them from feeling alive at work.

Here's a real-life example. When Tom started his gig after college designing and maintaining the website of a Big 4 accounting firm, he was excited. The pay was great, much better than the

other two offers he had received, and he was told that there were lots of opportunities for personal growth.

The honeymoon didn't last long. As Tom recalled: "I soon found out my supervisor had no time or patience for experimenting. He was more concerned with protocol than personal development. It's like he's afraid of me trying new things because it might not go exactly as planned. It doesn't exactly leave much room for learning."

At first, Tom wasn't deterred. He tried to keep an open mind and optimistic attitude. He worked to improve some processes and inject some personality into his work, which gave him boosts of confidence. Unfortunately, Tom's boss was under pressure to meet website performance metrics, so she didn't have the flexibility to implement Tom's ideas.

Tom began to shut off. He did his work and completed his tasks, but he was becoming disengaged and unmotivated. He felt he was performing a series of scripted actions. Worse, he felt as if his boss wasn't responding to his creative impulses. After a year, Tom's tasks began to feel routine, small, and disconnected from a bigger picture.

Which is a shame. It's not as though Tom was a subpar performer who was only working for a paycheck. He was smart and talented, and he wanted to learn new things and expand his horizons. But his boss, he thought, was holding him back. So instead of contributing more to his employer, Tom looked elsewhere for fulfilment. While at work, he started bidding on website management projects via a freelancing app, and took on new projects that he was excited about. The irony was that his freelance work

wasn't much different from his day job. But since it allowed him more ownership and freedom, it felt more meaningful to him.

Unfortunately, Tom isn't an outlier: he's like most employees in big organizations. As the Gallup studies suggest, a majority of employees don't feel they can be their best selves at work. They don't feel they can leverage their unique skills or find a sense of purpose in what they do. Most organizations aren't tapping into their employees' full potential, resulting in workplace malaise and dull performance.

Organizations are letting down their employees. We can do a much better job at maintaining their engagement with their work. But first, we need to understand that employees' lack of engagement isn't really a motivational problem. It's a biological one.

Here's the thing: many organizations are deactivating the part of employees' brains called the *seeking system*.[3] Our seeking systems create the natural impulse to explore our worlds, learn about our environments, and extract meaning from our circumstances.[4] When we follow the urges of our seeking system, it releases dopamine—a neurotransmitter linked to motivation and pleasure—that makes us want to explore more.[5]

The seeking system is the part of the brain that encouraged our ancestors to explore beyond Africa. And that pushes us to pursue hobbies until the crack of dawn and seek out new skills and ideas just because they interest us. The seeking system is why animals in captivity prefer to search for their food rather than have it delivered to them.[6] When our seeking system is

activated, we feel more motivated, purposeful, and zestful. We feel more *alive*.[7]

Exploring, experimenting, learning: this is the way we're designed to live. And work, too. The problem is that our organizations weren't designed to take advantage of people's seeking systems. Thanks to the Industrial Revolution—when modern management was conceived—organizations were purposely designed to *suppress* our natural impulses to learn and explore.

Think about it: in order to scale up organizations in the late 1800s, our species invented bureaucracy and management practices so that thousands of people could be "controlled" through measurement and monitoring. Because managers needed employees to focus on narrow tasks, they created policies that stifled employees' desires to explore and try new things. These rules increased production and reliability, but reduced employees' self-expression, ability to experiment and learn, and connection with the final product.

Unfortunately, many remnants of Industrial Revolution management still remain. In an overzealous quest to be competitive, ensure quality, and comply with regulations, most large organizations have designed work environments that make it difficult for employees to experiment, stretch beyond their specialized roles, leverage their unique skills, or see the ultimate impact of their work. Most leaders today don't *personally* believe that people work best under these conditions. But each generation of managers walks into organizations where there are deeply entrenched assumptions and policies about control through standardized performance metrics, incentives and punishments, promotion

tournaments, and so on. As a result, organizations deactivate their employees' seeking systems and activate their fear systems, which narrows their perception and encourages their submission.[8]

When people work under these conditions, they become cautious, anxious, and wary. They wish they could feel "lit up" and creative, but everything starts to feel like a hassle. They start to experience depressive symptoms: for example, a lot of headaches or trouble waking up and getting going in the morning.[9] Over time, they begin to believe that their current state is unchangeable, and they disengage from work.

But get this: our evolutionary tendency to disengage from tedious activities isn't a bug in our mental makeup—it's a *feature*. It's our body's way of telling us that we were designed do better things. To keep exploring and learning. This is our biology—it is part of our adaptive unconscious to know that our human potential is being wasted, that we are wasting away.[10] Jaak Panksepp, the late pioneer of affective neuroscience, said it best: "When the seeking systems are not active, human aspirations remain frozen in an endless winter of discontent."[11]

During the Industrial Revolution, limiting workers' seeking systems was intentional. Scientific management was considered rational and efficient because it helped ensure employees did only what they were told to do.

Things are different now. Organizations are facing the highest levels of change and competition ever, and the pace of change is increasing each year. Now more than ever, organizations need

employees to innovate. They need employees' insights about what customers want. They need new ways of working based on technology that employees understand better than leaders. They need employees' creativity and enthusiasm in order to survive, adapt, and grow. They need to activate their employees' seeking systems.

I know this is possible. I've studied organizations as a professor and a consultant, and I have seen firsthand how they can work better. Throughout this book, we'll look at leaders across the world who have improved business outcomes while also improving the lives of employees by activating their seeking systems. We'll look at call centers in India, manufacturing plants in Russia, assembly facilities in Italy, nonprofits in the United States, delivery companies in the United Kingdom, airlines in the Netherlands, and banks in China. We will see again and again there are ways to activate the potential that lies dormant within all of us.

And it doesn't take a massive overhaul of a company's structure to make it happen. With small but consequential nudges and interventions from leaders, it's possible to activate employees' seeking systems by encouraging them to play to their strengths, experiment, and feel a sense of purpose.

Here's the plan for the book.

First, we'll take a closer look at the ins and outs of the seeking system: how it works and why it is needed to improve performance and help people live lives that are more worth living. The more you know about the mechanisms driving employee zest, motivation,

and creativity, the better you'll be at increasing engagement and innovation.

Next, we'll look at why and how organizations are activating employees' fear systems and deactivating their seeking systems, and we'll examine ways to change this and help employees find "freedom" within the "frames" of their jobs.

From there, we'll tackle each trigger that activates the seeking system—self-expression, experimentation, and personalized purpose—and learn how leaders at all levels can increase employee zest and engagement through these triggers. You'll gain a more substantial understanding of why people love what they do—or more often, *don't* love what they do.

Most of all, you'll get an in-depth look at how employees think and feel about their work, and you'll discover ways to tap into their full potential. Activating the seeking system is like putting a plug into a live socket. The potential is already flowing right under the surface—you just need to access it to get employees lit up.

Here's the best part: it may sound crazy, but finding ways to trigger employees' seeking systems will do more than increase the enthusiasm, motivation, and innovation capabilities of your team. By improving people's lives, your *own* work as a leader will become more meaningful, activating your own seeking system. Things will work better for *you*. As Terri Funk Graham said, "The more passion people have for the work that they do, the more likely they are to demonstrate positive energy and success in life."[12]

Let's get started.

CHAPTER 3

ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO BRING THEIR BEST SELVES TO WORK

When Adesh woke up in his Delhi flat after a restless sleep, his mind was consumed with his first day at work at Wipro, an Indian information technology company.

Even though this was his fourth job since he left university two years ago, he was anxious about joining a new company. Making first impressions on coworkers, meeting everyone for the first time, struggling to fit in, making sure he is as good as everyone else: it was stressful.

He was worried about his new role, too. As a call-center rep, he'd be talking with people around the world and trying to solve their problems with their printers or booking their flights. This was all

new to him. Sure, he'd done some chat support, but he'd never assisted anyone live, halfway around the world, on the phone before.

Even though this was a great job, Adesh knew it was going to be a grind. Since he'd be assisting customers in the United States, he'd need to be available during their business hours. His shifts would begin at 9:00 p.m. and go through the night. He'd need to deal calmly and professionally with frustrated customers, who could be rude and disrespectful. He'd also have to adopt a Western accent and attitude. No wonder new reps tended to quit after just a few months.

After an hour-long shuttle ride through Delhi traffic, Adesh arrived at the sprawling landscaped campus, where he was shown into a room along with eighteen other new hires. Having been onboarded a few times over the last two years, Adesh knew the drill. Soon, the admin types would show up, and Adesh and his classmates would have to fill out paperwork and sit through an hours-long orientation about their job responsibilities.

After a few minutes, a man walked through the door and introduced himself as a senior Wipro leader. Adesh was surprised: the man wasn't from HR. Instead of talking about procedures and responsibilities, the senior leader spent fifteen minutes discussing why Wipro was an outstanding organization. "Working at Wipro gives you the opportunity to express yourself," he told the group. Unlike most new-hire trainers, he didn't seem to be reading from a script.

After sharing personal stories about his Wipro experience, the man asked all the new hires to take a few minutes and write an answer to a question: "What is unique about you that leads to your

happiest times and best performance at work? Reflect on a specific time—perhaps on a job, perhaps at home—when you were acting the way you were 'born to act.'"

Taken aback, Adesh stared at the blank piece of paper. He knew Wipro was different, but he hadn't expected to delve into his personal life at orientation. But, after a few moments, he was able to focus on the task at hand, and he thought about helping his twelve-year-old nephew Anil with his math homework.

As Adesh remembered, Anil couldn't understand how to use the rules of geometry to figure out the degrees of an angle. Frustrated and angry, Anil furiously erased his work and crumpled the paper. With a little effort, Adesh was able to calm Anil down. Then he walked him through the rules. "Look, Anil, a flat line is always 180 degrees," he said. "Let's write that here. And if you know this angle is 50 of those degrees, then how much does the other need to be?"

Adesh continued helping Anil in this fashion for thirty minutes, slowly and calmly helping him. It worked. Before long, Anil was really getting it, racing ahead without even asking questions, gathering confidence. When Adesh was leaving, Anil whispered, "Thank you for helping me." But Adesh didn't need to be told. He already saw the gratitude on Anil's face.

Now, at his job orientation, Adesh happily wrote down this memory.

"You haven't met each other yet," the Wipro staffer said after everyone was done writing, "but you'll be doing a lot of training together. So get together and introduce yourselves. But I want each of you to introduce your *best* self. Perhaps read the story you wrote and tell the group what it says about you at your best."

When it was his turn, Adesh told the group about helping Anil: "I'm good at empathizing with my nephew, seeing the block in his thinking. I like helping him get around that block."

After everybody finished, the leader gave each person a badge and a fleece sweatshirt customized with his or her name. Adesh felt good telling his story and listening to everyone else's. He felt that his new colleagues already knew a lot about him, and vice versa.

In this moment, he felt like his best self.

The Power of Best Impressions

We've all been in Adesh's shoes. When we join a new organization, the first few weeks are a blur: the confusing acronyms people throw at us, what topics are acceptable and unacceptable to discuss in meetings and over lunch, whether or not you should prioritize quality or speed. It's like visiting a foreign country—everything's unfamiliar, and we can't rely on our previous relationships, routines, and assumptions.

With all this ambiguity going on, this also is the time we experience the basic human need to fit in and be accepted by our new managers and coworkers.[1] It is a time of anxiety because it's a vulnerable situation to be in. Organizations know this, of course, which is why they traditionally have used this initial period to get us to absorb their values, their way of doing things.[2] Since new employees are a rapt, needy audience, it's easier for organizations to indoctrinate us to their norms, values, and expectations.

There's nothing wrong with this, per se. It's important for workers in organizations, especially big ones, to share a common purpose. But when my colleagues and I studied 605 new Wipro employees across three different operations centers in India, we discovered that there was a better way of conducting onboarding sessions.[3] As we confirmed in subsequent studies, an *individualized* approach to onboarding, where newcomers like Adesh write about and share stories about their best selves with others, leads to greater performance and retention. And perhaps more importantly, it connects employees more closely to their organizations.

In our experiment, we randomly assigned groups of new hires to one of three conditions. In the first condition, described above, employees were asked to write about times they used their best characteristics and then share them with the group. At the end of the session, participants were given a personalized badge and fleece sweatshirt.

In the second condition, after listening to a senior leader and a star performer talk about Wipro's values, and why Wipro is an outstanding organization, a different group of newcomers was asked to spend fifteen minutes reflecting on what they had just heard (e.g., "What did you hear about Wipro that makes you proud to be part of the organization?"). After discussing their answers with the group, people in this condition received a generic Wipro badge and fleece sweatshirt.

The participants in the third condition, the control group, went through Wipro's regular onboarding, which focused on skills training.

After tracking the participants for six months, we found that Adesh and his colleagues who were placed in the "best self" condition were outperforming their peers who had participated in Wipro's typical onboarding sessions. Their customers, for example, reported 11 percent higher satisfaction—72 percent compared with 61 percent. And, we found that the "best selves" cohort were more likely to remain in their jobs—retention improved by a whopping 32 percent! Compared with the control condition, results also showed that it helped to talk about Wipro's values (the second condition)—this reduced quitting by 14 percent but did not lead to significantly better customer satisfaction.

So in the end, asking people about their best selves and letting them share their ideas with their new peers worked the best—but in all my years of working with companies, I have not seen a company use this approach to onboarding.

Our Best Selves

At Wipro, we tried to perform what psychologists call a *wise intervention*.[4] A wise intervention is when you do something new and small that has disproportionately large effects because it fixes something that's making people feel emotionally vulnerable. Our experiment likely had a disproportionately large effect on Adesh and his fellow new hires because they were anxious about meeting

new people and fitting in. In such situations, we tend to highlight the parts of ourselves that conform to the group and fit the expectations of others. This can be both exhausting and stressful.

The "best selves" intervention, however, alleviated this problem. By sharing their personal stories at the very start of their relationship, the new hires at Wipro were able to express themselves more fully by showing their colleagues their most valued behaviors and traits. As a consequence, they were viewed by their coworkers in the way they wanted to be seen. To put it another way, they felt like their best selves.

Does everybody have a best self? Remember, a self is just a story that we tell ourselves. It is not objective—you can't see it or touch it. But it is very real in the sense that the story affects how we act and how others respond to us. If we change the story we tell about ourselves, we change our behaviors.

As Laura Roberts and her colleagues at the University of Michigan have defined it, a best self is "the cognitive representation of the qualities and characteristics the individual displays when at his or her best."[5] Our concepts of our best selves are not projections of what we think we *could* become someday. Rather, they're based on our real-life experiences and actions. They comprise the skills and traits that we've developed and discovered over time, and the actions we have taken to affect others in a positive way.

The more our colleagues know who we are when we're at our best, the more likely we can feel like ourselves at work. We suspected that this is the reason why the people who experienced our wise intervention stayed so much longer and made clients happier: because they could express themselves more authentically. That

would bond them to Wipro in a different way. As Amit Rastogi, one of the onboarding managers who helped with the study, told me: "People were proud to be recognized as individuals. This gave them a distinctive identity within the organization and helped them identify with the organizations much faster. They felt very connected to the organization at that time."

It's important to keep in mind that a best self is just one of a host of other identities that each of us inhabit depending on the circumstances. Sometimes our prominent identity might be as a father or a daughter, other times our identity as an academic, or manager, or writer might be prominent. The best self, like our other identities, needs to be activated. But as we saw at Wipro, it doesn't take much to do that. Because of our intervention, the new hires felt as if they were being encouraged to seek what was best and unique about themselves, and share this with colleagues as they were first meeting them, which gave additional meaning to their work.[6] This likely led them to exhibit their best character traits more often. And, since their coworkers and managers appreciated their unique skills and traits, they acted more freely and authentically in subsequent interactions.

The best thing about best-self activation is it creates long-term cascading effects. For example, after his best-self activation, Adesh experienced positive emotions such as enthusiasm, which in turn prompted more creative information processing.[7] And this resulted in more productive responses to stress.[8] Better creativity and more productive interactions with colleagues and customers further affirmed his best self, which lead to yet more positive emotions and performance, further affirming the self, and so on.

I've seen similar results in other studies, as well. For example, we recruited people to come into the lab and perform data entry tasks, and socialized them using the best-self approach. We found that, compared to a control condition, people in the best-self condition made fewer errors inputting the data, and they also were significantly more likely to come back and code more data on another day.[9] Their passion wasn't dampened after the session: once ignited, it continued to burn.

Why is this? As Janine Dutcher, a psychology professor at University of California, Los Angeles, has found via fMRI studies, when people are prompted to think about their best traits, their seeking systems are activated.[10] Dutcher and her team found no effects in control samples who made preference judgments that were not connected to their selves (they made judgments about toasters. Not that there's anything wrong with toasters). It turns us on to think about what we are capable of, and this is how our seeking systems help us bring more energy and engage more of ourselves at work.

You Are Bigger Than Your Job

As powerful as self-affirmation and self-expression are in improving our stories about ourselves and changing our behaviors, there's a way to increase their effects. Following the lead of the pioneering ideas published by Laura Roberts and her colleagues, we solicited best-self stories from people's social networks. That is, we asked an individual's friends, family, mentors, and coworkers

to write narratives about times that individual made a distinct contribution.[11] For example, one person's friend wrote:

> You are unafraid to be intelligent. So many people, particularly women, are afraid to be the smartest person in the room. You are a wonderful role model for all bright, quick, and articulate women in the world, showing that it is more than ok to be clever and to allow people to see that you are smart. I can think of a time when you won the argument with the class, and I found it inspirational.

And here is an example narrative from a coworker:

> Laura has good forethought for business and does anything and everything she can to help keep us employed. In 2012, when Hurricane Sandy hit the East Coast, here in Florida we did not really think much of it. But Laura was obviously worried that it would impact her business, because a lot of our accounts receivables are in the NYC/New Jersey areas. She ended up borrowing from her retirement savings to keep the business going. I even suggested that maybe she could let the couple of part-timers go, but she responded that the people there always gave their best, so she wouldn't want to do anything less for them. It took about six months to get things back on track, but we all managed to keep our jobs thanks to Laura.

These stories from friends and colleagues were powerful for a couple reasons. First, they expanded people's views of themselves. Just as a fish doesn't know that it's wet, we don't always

know our strengths because they seem so natural and normal to us. Our signature strengths don't seem like a big deal to us, but they mean so much to other people. As Peter Drucker wrote, "Most people think they know what they are good at. They are usually wrong. More often, people know what they are not good at—and even then more people are wrong than right."[12] And since the storytellers were trusted sources, their words were even more meaningful and impactful than self-reflection.

The benefits of these relational best-self activations from people's social networks are substantial. When our seeking systems are activated, our performance increases just as it did for the karaoke singers who interpreted their stress as excitement instead of anxiety. In a series of studies, Julia Lee, a professor at the University of Michigan, found that those who undergo relational best-self activation experience stronger immune responses, enhanced creative problem solving (over 200 percent improvement), and significantly less anxiety and negative physiological arousal. In another study, Lee randomly assigned half of the participants to read best-self stories from friends before giving a three-minute speech. These individuals were scored significantly more positively by a pair of independent judges than participants who wrote their own narratives.[13]

Self-Expression in Teams

Taken together, these studies present strong evidence that best-self activation is a trigger of the seeking system, resulting in better physical and mental functioning, and driving higher performance.

And the results suggest that it is more powerful to learn about your best self from others, compared to just thinking about it yourself.

Next, we wanted to examine whether relational best-self activation also can improve how teams function and perform. Effective communication and information sharing is needed for teams to reach peak performance. Unfortunately, when new teams are forming or when existing teams take on new members, newcomers can feel anxious about being accepted by the group. This anxiety can make new members withhold unique information that might make them stand out.[14] It's safer, after all, to just discuss information that everyone agrees on if we want others in the team to see us as competent.[15] We wondered if we could help new teams avoid this trap by using their social networks to activate their seeking systems.

We focused on team performance in a sample of 246 senior leaders who participated in a four-week leadership development program at Harvard's Kennedy School. There were a total of forty-two teams, which we randomly split into two experimental conditions. All participants completed a self-reflection, where they wrote their own stories about their best impact on others. In one condition, senior leaders received the relational self-affirmation reports, produced by Essentic, before participating in a crisis simulation related to public health.[16] The teams in the control group condition didn't receive their reports until the study concluded.

Each diverse team played the role of an emergency watch squad in a seven-day simulation. Following the report of a dangerous coronavirus detected in their state, the teams had to work as part of the state government to monitor developments and propose a solution.

Participants in both conditions received identical information (drip-fed from tweets, news stories, etc.) leading up to the briefing day. They had to react to and make decisions about the information, and then propose a way forward. The team members had never met or communicated with each other before the simulation began, so our relational best-self affirmation was the only difference between treatment and control teams. On the day of the briefing, each team made a twenty-minute presentation to a panel of experts consisting of individuals from the US government and Harvard faculty members. The expert panels (a total of sixteen judges) assessed the quality and creativity of the solutions, and did not know that different teams received different treatments. So we had a good measure of the teams' performance. The results revealed that the teams assigned to the best-self expression condition outperformed those in the control condition, even after controlling for cohort, team size, mean age, and gender composition.

In his book *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, David Whyte says: "Companies need the contributing vitality of all the individuals who work for them in order to stay alive in the sea of changeability in which they find themselves. They must find a real way of asking people to bring these hidden heartfelt qualities to the workplace. A way that doesn't make them feel manipulated or the subject of some 5 year plan."[17]

It's up to leaders in organizations to address this problem, and activating people's best selves and triggering their seeking systems is a great way to do it for two reasons.

First, this is good for us as human beings because we are more likely to feel alive at work. Research shows that when people identify and use their unique strengths, they report feeling "more alive" or "intensely alive."[18] In one study, psychologist Martin Seligman randomly assigned one set of participants to learn about their "signature strengths" by taking an inventory of character strengths (you can take it too: www.authentichappiness.org), and were asked to use one of these top strengths in a new way every day for one week. Compared with a control group, people in the signature strengths condition had fewer depressive symptoms (including headaches, trouble sleeping, and trouble waking up).[19] That's because when people seek, find, and fulfill what is best and unique about themselves, it gives meaning and direction to their lives.[20]

Second, if we feel like work is more like "real life," complete with intrinsic motivation and positive emotions, we're more apt to help our organizations adapt, innovate, and stay relevant. This can pay huge dividends to organizations, including, as David Whyte writes, "more adaptability, vitality, imagination, and the enthusiastic willingness to go the extra mile—qualities which are ancient and which humans have wanted for themselves since the beginning of recorded history."[21]

This is the new war for talent—not wooing employees away from competitors, but unleashing the enthusiasm that is already there within employees, but dormant.

In chapter 4, we look at ways other organizations have experimented with employee self-expression.