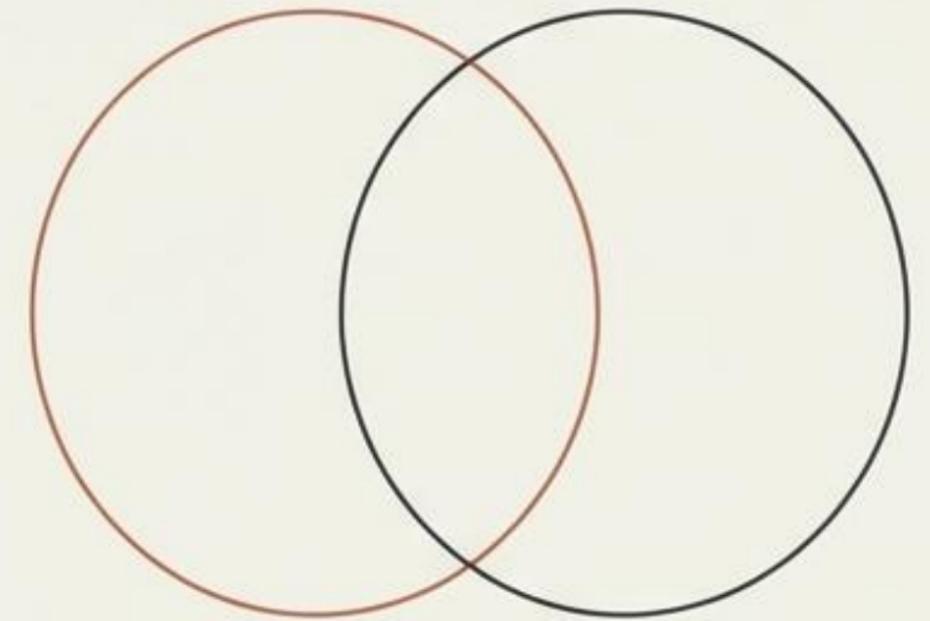


# Chapter 9: The Power of Mattering at Work

Inter: Everyday interactions can make employees feel more significant



**Author:** Zach Mercurio

**Source:** HBR's 10 Must Reads on New Managers (2026 Updated Edition)

**Session Context:** 90-Minute Professional Leadership Training

# The Crisis of Significance

30%

report feeling **invisible**.

65%

feel **underappreciated**.

82%

report feeling **lonely**.

## The “Mattering Deficit”:

Despite investments in DEI, wages, and wellness apps, the workforce is experiencing a **crisis of isolation**.

## The Consequence:

These deficits are the root cause of “**quiet quitting**,” high attrition, and declining mental health.

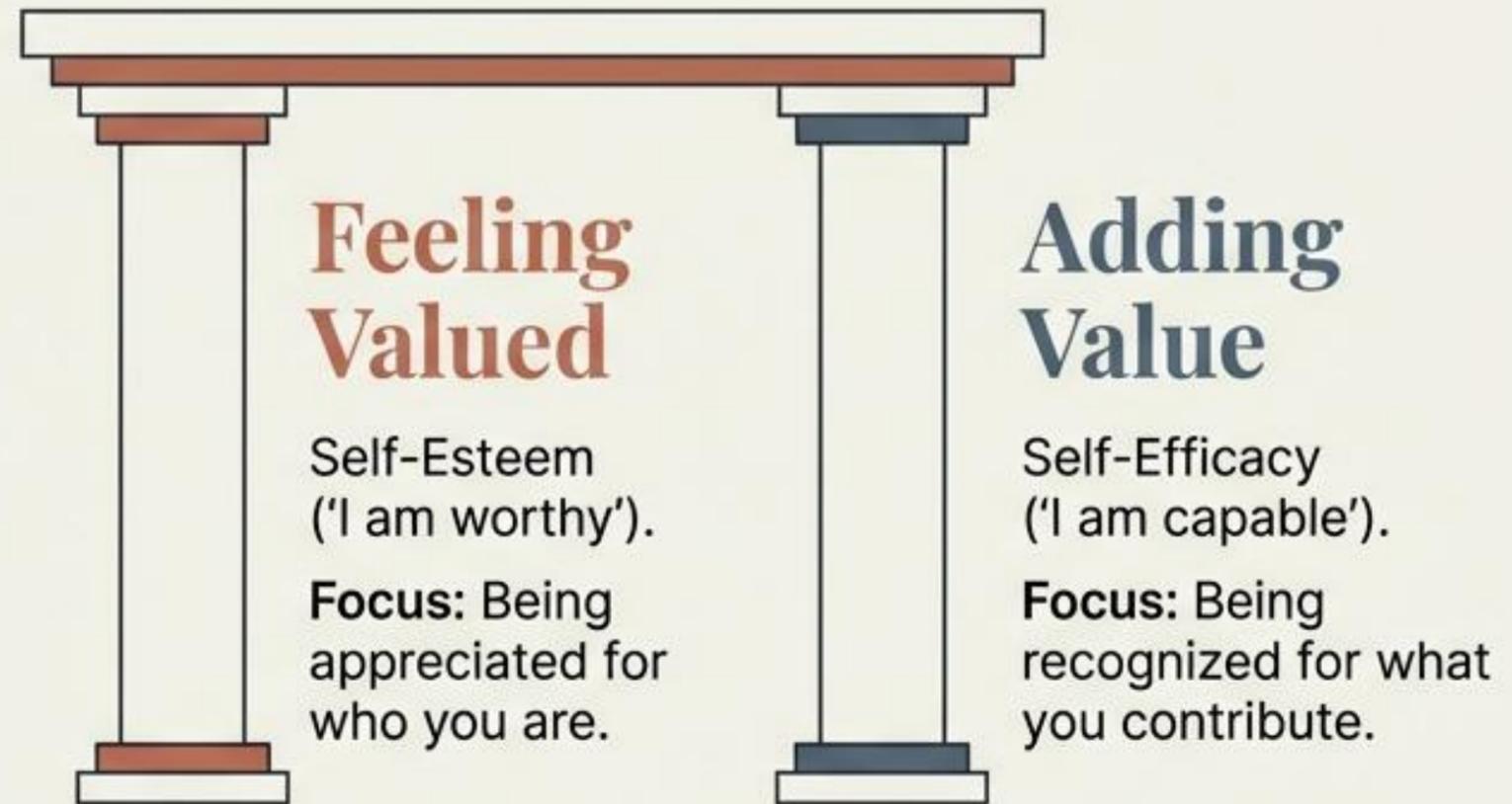
## Core Argument:

Mattering is not a result of policy; it is a **primal human need that perks cannot satisfy**.



# Defining the Construct: Two Pillars

Mattering =



*When both pillars exist, employees are more satisfied, more likely to be promoted, and less likely to leave.*

# Distinction: Belonging vs. Mattering

## Belonging (Inclusion)

### Definition:

Feeling welcomed and accepted by a group.

### The Limit:

One can be “included” but still feel their specific presence is optional.

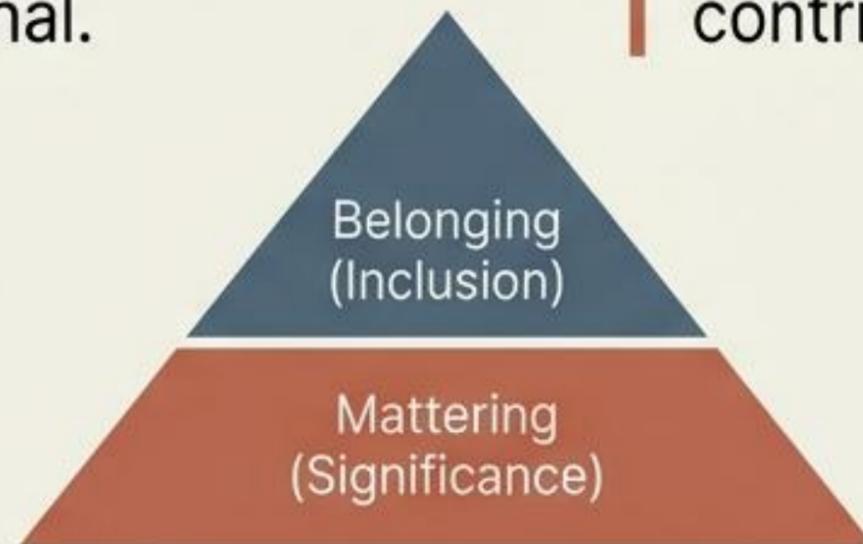
## Mattering (Significance)

### Definition:

Feeling significant to the group’s individual members.

### The Requirement:

Indispensability and unique contribution.



Mattering is a more fundamental survival need than belonging.

# The Mechanism: Micro-Interactions



**The Premise:** Matterings are created in daily interpersonal exchanges, not in HR policies.

## **Case Narrative:** Jane's Story

- **Context:** A university cleaner felt purposeless and invisible.
- **The Shift:** A single interaction where a person noticed her specific struggle.
- **Result:** "The mental chatter brightened." She remained in the role for 18 years.

## **The Leadership Imperative:**

We must relearn "soft skills" atrophied by brief digital communication.

## **Three Core Behaviors:**

1. Notice (See/Hear) → 2. Affirm → 3. Need.

# Core Competency I: Seeing and Hearing

## Knowing (Data):

Understanding a role, stats, or tenure.

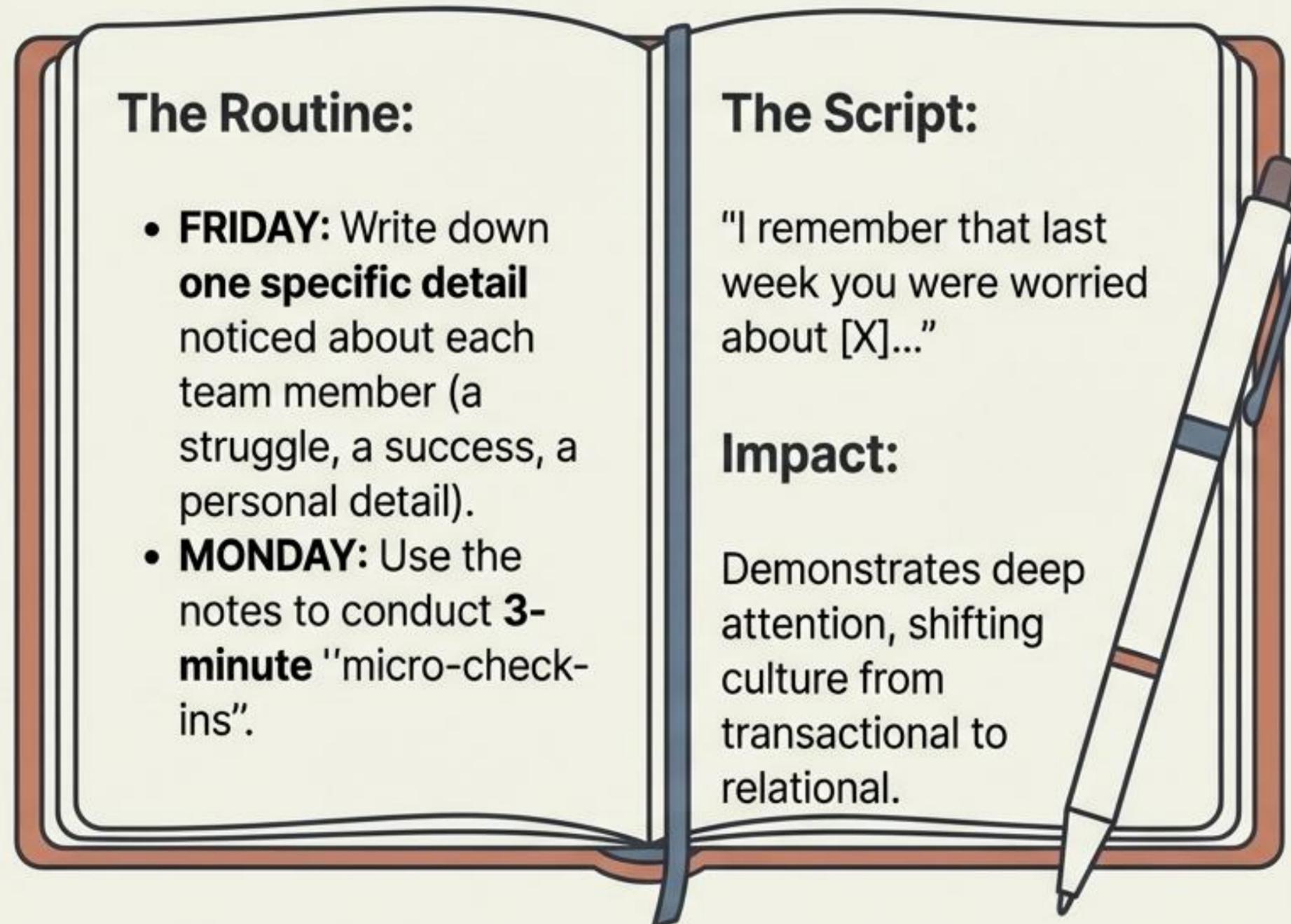
## Noticing (Humanity):

Paying deep attention to details, ebbs, and flows of life.

### Technique: Meaningful Inquiries

1. **Standard Greeting:** “How are you?” (Yields generic answers).
2. **Clear Questions:** “What has your attention right now?” (Focuses on object + time frame).
3. **Exploratory Questions:** “What are you learning right now?” (Invites the employee to teach the leader).

# Applied Tool: The Friday Notebook



# Core Competency II: Affirmation

Moving beyond 'Appreciation' (Output) to 'Affirmation' (Intrinsic Value)

## The Four Elements of Affirmation

### Strengths

The overlap of what they love and what they are good at.

### Purpose

The specific contribution they want to make.

### Perspective

Their unique way of seeing the world.

### Wisdom

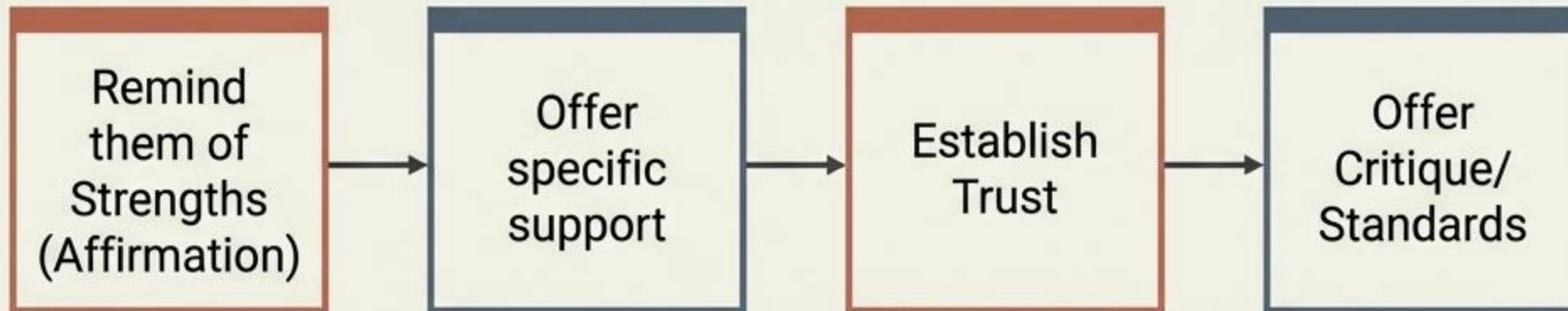
What they have learned from their specific life experiences.

**Goal:** Show employees why they are unique, not just that they are productive.



# Framework: Wise Feedback

Source Research: David Yeager



**High Standards + Assurance of Capability  
= Maximum Performance**



Feedback is ignored if the recipient does not believe they matter to the giver.

# Core Competency III: Showing Indispensability

Connecting individual work to significant human impact.



## The Core Need:

Employees must feel that if they were not there, they would be missed.

## Technique:

Stories of Significance.

## Result (Adam Grant Research):

Motivation increases by upwards of 400% when labor is linked to human benefit.

## The Problem:

Employees rarely see the downstream impact of their work.

## The Example:

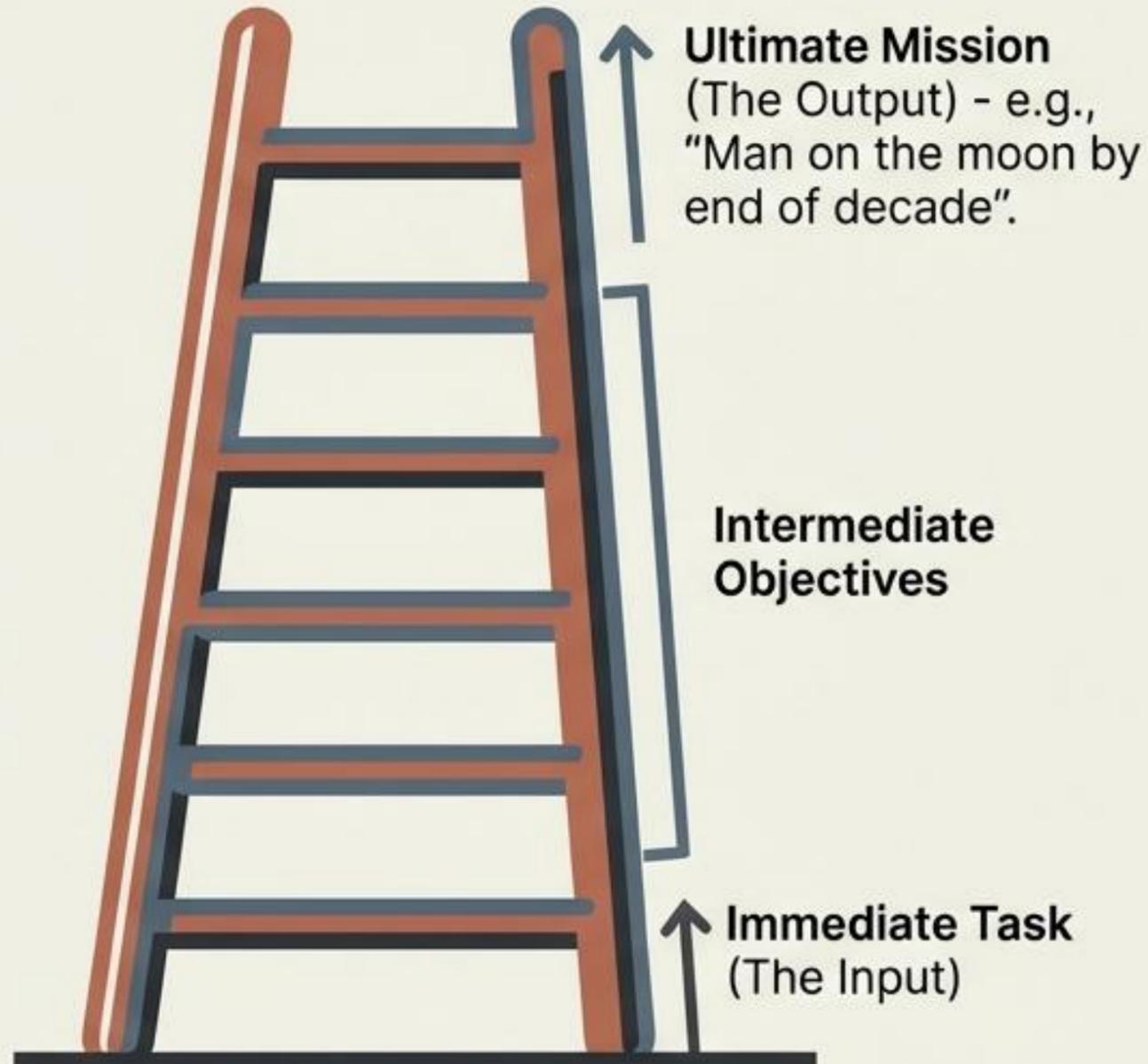
Plumbing contractors shown a photo of a child eating a doughnut in a shop they serviced. "You fixed the heater that allowed this shop to open."

## Result

Motivation increases by upwards of 400% when labor is linked to human benefit.



# Structural Tool: The 'Laddering' Technique



- **Origin:** Owen Maynard, NASA Chief of Mission Operations.
- **Application:** Explicitly link the daily work to the organizational purpose.
- **Why:** To validate why the specific person is needed for the specific task.



# Scaling: Measuring the Intangible

## Tool 1: The Mattering Audit

Create a three-column review for every direct report:

| Column 1: See/Hear<br>(What specifically have I noticed?) | Column 2: Affirm<br>(How have I shown significance?) | Column 3: Need<br>(How have I shown they are indispensable?) |
|---|--|--|
|   |  |  |



## Tool 2: Self-Assessment

Rate on 1-5 Scale:

- "I ask about and remember details of others' lives." 1 2 3 4 5
- "I tell people how it's better when they're around." 1 2 3 4 5

**Challenge:** Leaders tend to overestimate their own caring behaviors.



# Case Study: AmEx Global Business Travel

## Problem

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**Context:** Post-Covid burnout, high attrition, low morale among frontline agents.



## Intervention

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**Emotional Anchor:** Leaders shared personal stories of mattering.

**Codification:** Created "How People Matter Here" blueprint.

**Behaviors:** Defined specific actions (e.g., "Describe the Why before the What").



## Result

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- 50% reduction in attrition (sustained for 1.5 years).
- Significant increase in engagement scores.

# Critical Success Factors

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## Intention Check

Do not use mattering as a tactic for profit. It must be human-centric: Fulfilling the desire for dignity.



## Common Myths Debunked

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**Myth:** It's just recognition.

**Reality:** It is daily micro-interactions.

**Myth:** I don't have time.

**Reality:** Transactional leadership causes turnover, wasting more time.

**Myth:** It's the same as Belonging.

**Reality:** Belonging is being welcomed; Mattering is being needed.

# Summary: Reigniting Interdependence

## Recap of the 3 Pillars

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1. **Notice:** Replace transactional 'knowing' with relational 'seeing'.
2. **Affirm:** Use 'Wise Feedback' to connect unique strengths to performance.
3. **Need:** Use 'Laddering' to prove indispensability.



## Final Thoughts

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**Shift:** Stop rewarding only output; start rewarding leaders for how they make people feel.

“To be of importance to others is to be alive.” — T.S. Eliot.

**Call to Action:**

Conduct your first 'Mattering Audit' this week.