PITCH: To help employees find meaning in drudgery, help them connect the dots

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People want purposeful work, and managers know it. That's why companies try to inspire employees with mission statements about the impact their work can have. Ikea tells employees they're "creating a better everyday life"; Microsoft says they're "empowering every person and organization on the planet to achieve more in the world." Managers constantly encourage employees to think about why they do the work they do, to give them a sense of purpose and fight against demotivation.

But our latest research--with nearly 4,000 working adults in the U.S.--suggests that this hyperfocus on purpose can backfire. Workplaces today promise sweeping impact. Yet, most employees' daily tasks are mundane and disconnected from these lofty goals. In one of our surveys, assessing 700 employees across 22 industries, all but one employee could quickly name an unimportant and meaningless task they regularly do at work. Some experts even argue that we live in a world of "Bullshit Jobs."

Constantly hearing messages about making an impact actually risks leading employees to ruminate about their work's lack of impact. When we asked employees in our research to reflect on the "purpose" of their unimportant and meaningless tasks, they reported lower levels of enjoyment, meaning, and motivation than when we simply asked employees to rate these tasks without any mention of purpose. If reflecting on purpose backfires, how should managers help employees derive satisfaction from mundane work?

Our research offers a solution. According to classic Gestalt principles in psychology, people perceive the same objects as more valuable when they belong to a set. Most work tasks--even the most menial--belong to a broader set of tasks that achieve a singular purpose. Responding to client emails might feel like a waste of time, but combined with data analysis and report writing, it plays an important role in solving clients' most pressing concerns. Thus, thinking about how seemingly unimportant work belongs to a set of tasks contributing to a broader goal could help employees see their true value.

To test this idea, we asked employees to list two other tasks that built on their unimportant and meaningless tasks "like puzzle pieces" "to achieve a broader purpose." (We call this intervention "Superordinate Framing"). We found that applying this framing to menial tasks imbued these tasks with a greater sense of purpose. For example, one participant wrote that their dreaded "weekly meeting," when combined with "open chat rooms" and "reporting issues to the management," enabled a larger goal: to "forge communication between individuals who would not otherwise be able to solve a problem by themselves." Another participant recognized "answering client calls" as an important step in "making sure they are happy with

the product," when combined with "solving client issues" and "documenting the call". Afterward, they reported greater enjoyment and meaning.

These findings suggest that superordinate framing can be a useful tool for employees to motivate themselves. They just have to think about how their unimportant tasks fit in with other tasks like puzzle pieces to achieve a common purpose. For example, a hospital administrator whose job is to organize patient records might not feel like this work actually carries out the mission of "helping people live healthier lives." But thinking about how their task helps people live healthier lives along with nurse's medication and doctor's surgery would help them feel more connected to this mission.

Superordinate framing can also be an effective tool for managers. In another study, we hired nearly 900 online workers in the U.S. to complete the same widget-building task. Some were told that they were creating widgets for an art project (purpose framing). Others were told that their widgets would be "woven together" with widgets made by either themselves or other workers to create this artwork (superordinate framing). Workers reported more joy, meaning, and motivation while completing the same task when they were under the impression that their current work belonged to a larger set. Moreover, superordinate framing was effective whether the larger context was collaborative or not: simply informing participants that their own current widgets would be combined with their own widgets to be made later had a positive effect. Thus, if managers are looking to motivate employees while assigning seemingly menial yet necessary tasks, they should highlight how it connects with other tasks carried out in the firm.

However, we did find that superordinate framing involved a trade-off between meaning and money. In this study, superordinate framing made people think their work was more meaningful and important, but it also made them demand more compensation than the other group. Managers should remember that a big-picture investment promises a big payoff for all parties, with employees enjoying their work and thus feeling committed for the long run.

World-wide, fewer than one-sixth of employees feel engaged at work, undermining their performance, their happiness, and their health. Our latest research provides one explanation for the disengagement: the gap between employees' everyday tasks and the broader purpose of their roles. While every job will have its mundane tasks, helping employees see how they contribute to a broader purpose is a simple strategy for keeping them motivated. Rather than ham-fist the importance of purpose, show employees how small actions contribute to a larger whole.