

How Oxytocin Can Make Your Job More Meaningful

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Does your job suck? Neuroscience research suggests it might be missing two key ingredients.

By [Paul J. Zak](#) | June 6, 2018

Let's be honest: For many people, work sucks.

But for others, work is an adventure. The difference doesn't always lie in the nature of the work. Two different people can have two very different responses to the same job—but my research has also shown that organizational culture makes a huge difference in how we feel about, and perform, at work.



I spent eight years measuring brain activity while people worked in order to identify the components of workplace culture that make work an adventure. This was preceded by a decade of doing laboratory studies to understand the brain basis for effective teamwork.

I discovered that teams needed two key components to perform their best: trust among team members and an understanding of the purpose of their

work. We found that both of these have a shared neurologic foundation, providing a framework to identify best practices when creating or modifying work cultures.

Trust and purpose do not magically arise in companies. Rather, they are strategic assets that can be measured and managed for high performance. My analysis showed that trust and purpose improve the triple bottom line: They are good for employees, improve organizational performance, and strengthen communities.

Oxytocin at work

Of course, I did not start a [long research program](#) without some hypotheses. My experiments in the early 2000s on human cooperation were the first to identify the key role played by the neurochemical oxytocin. This molecule had not been associated with human social behaviors until my group developed a technique to stimulate and measure the brain's acute production of

oxytocin through rapid blood draws.

Using this protocol, we showed that when one is intentionally trusted, even by a stranger, the brain produces oxytocin. This reduces the typical wariness we have of interacting with those we do not know and increases our ability to understand others' emotions. The enhanced empathy enabled by oxytocin allows humans to quickly form teams and work together effectively.

In fact, this response is graded: The more trust one is shown by others, the more oxytocin is released in the brain. High levels of oxytocin cause people to work harder to help the group achieve its goals. We know it is oxytocin causing cooperation because my colleagues and I developed a way to safely infuse synthetic oxytocin into living human brains. When we do this, self-sacrifice to help others, even those different from us, flourishes.

Trust makes work easier

These laboratory studies showed that when trust between team members is high, oxytocin flows and work feels less like, well, work, and more like doing interesting things with friends. But would these findings hold outside the lab? I put on my boots and looked for field sites to test these effects.

A number of businesses, including retailer Zappos.com and office designer Herman Miller, agreed to let me draw blood and measure brain activity from their employees as they worked. These tests confirmed our lab findings: Teams that caused oxytocin release in each other were more productive and innovative, and enjoyed the tasks they were doing more, than those whose brains did not connect to their teammates'.

I also went as far from the developed world as I could to test the role of oxytocin on teamwork to convince myself that the neural signatures of cooperation were universal. This led me deep into the rainforest of the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea where, with the help of an anthropologist, I joined an isolated tribe of one thousand subsistence farmers. The Malke people live without electricity or plumbing and have never been to a doctor. I set up generators and a medical hut to take blood samples and measure oxytocin before and after a traditional dance that preceded group work. I proved that the brains of indigenous people produce oxytocin and this makes heavy work light.

Making work meaningful

In addition to trust, I had hypothesized that teams needed a second component to perform at the highest levels: knowing that their work matters.

Management thinkers from W. Edwards Deming to my late colleague Peter Drucker asserted that the only reason an organization exists is because it improves people's lives. Why else would you pay for a company's or nonprofit's product or service? I call this an organization's transcendent purpose—or just "Purpose" for short.

“Teams that had both high trust and high purpose blew away the competition”

—Dr. Paul Zak

This is a distinct notion from the essential quotidian doing of business that is a company's transactional purpose. Studies from my lab and others have shown that working with Purpose is a potent oxytocin stimulus. When colleagues understand a company's Purpose and, importantly, act on it while at work, a second oxytocin stimulus arises because most of us value helping others. My experiments showed that teams that had both high trust and high Purpose blew away the competition.

But would this be true across a large group of organizations? That is what I had to prove next.

Finding leverage

Blood draws are just not a scalable way to measure trust. Initially, when business leaders asked for my help in boosting trust in their companies, I offered to draw blood from their employees and watched these executives' faces turn pale.

My earliest research on trust explained why it varied across countries and how it improved living standards (done with World Bank economist Stephen Knack). I decided to follow this tack with organizations: I ran experiments to figure out what types of behaviors between colleagues would stimulate oxytocin release. These studies showed that there are eight building blocks for organizational trust. I created a handy acronym so they are easily remembered, OXYTOCIN:

- Ovation: recognize high performers
- eXpectation: design difficult but achievable challenges
- Yield: train extensively and delegate generously
- Transfer: facilitate job crafting
- Openness: share information broadly
- Caring: intentionally build relationships
- Invest: promote personal and professional growth
- Natural: be authentic and vulnerable.

Each of these factors explains between 45 percent and 72 percent of the variation in organizational trust. This means that when leaders change any one of the OXYTOCIN factors, it creates substantial leverage to raise trust and improve performance.

OXYTOCIN and Purpose exemplars

In order to make this scalable, I created a survey (that you can try for yourself) that measures the OXYTOCIN factors so companies can manage trust and foster Purpose.

Ovation. The Container Store does Ovation in brass. And straw. And chocolate. Ovation is embedded in their culture, from daily huddles before the stores open to end-of-day “gratitudes” celebrating the hard work of colleagues. An Ovation that I helped The Container Store strengthen is called “We Love Our Employees Day.” The Container Store re-purposed

Valentine's Day by sending every employee a gift basket that includes a "love note" from the founders, T-shirts, chocolates, and other fun gifts. In 2012, the company put a ten-foot-high "love note" to its employees on the roof of its headquarters. They have also purchased full-page ads stating, "We Love Our Employees!" in the *New York Times* and the *Dallas Morning News*. As love songs play in stores, customers are encouraged to go to the company's website and leave "love notes" to show appreciation for their favorite employees.

eXpectation. The Royal Bank of Canada put a focus on eXpectations during their 2005 turnaround. In 2004, Canada's largest bank was lagging, both structurally and financially. Decisions took eons to make and collaboration between business units was rare. CEO Gordon Nixon engineered a series of culture changes to align RBC's execution with its goals. One of the first things he did was to set concrete eXpectations for all business units. Across RBC's departments, joint goals were established so that each unit would work together to meet organization-wide objectives. To put teeth into eXpectations, each unit wrote a "charter" so that eXpectations and accountability were transparent. A key charter component was welcoming challenges rather than avoiding them. These changes worked. By 2007, RBC colleagues were focused on meeting eXpectations and its financial performance was best in class.

Yield. Whole Foods Market has embraced Yield from the executive suite to the store aisles. Each department in their stores is run as a nearly autonomous unit, deciding what it will sell, who to hire, and how to display their products. Departments have their own profit and loss statements and are responsible for staying in the black. Teams are arranged in a lattice so they can learn from others' successes and mistakes. Bonuses are team-based and compensation is shared broadly. Walter Robb, co-CEO of Whole Foods, has said, "When leaders give their power away to others, they create space for those people to flourish."

Transfer. One of the fastest-growing and most profitable agricultural companies in the U.S., Morning Star Tomato, has no job titles. At all. Everyone is a colleague; even owner and founder Chris Rufer's business card just has his name on it. Each colleague chooses which work group she or he will join based on a commitment to create value for the group. Morning Star Tomato produces more than half of the U.S. output of processed tomato products (sauce, paste, and stewed tomatoes) and has nearly single-handedly driven down the price of these products by 80 percent over the last 30 years. Rufer attributes their success to their culture of inclusion and excellence. Processing tomatoes is a highly regulated industry. Each plant has an on-site FDA lab randomly testing for quality and cleanliness so everyone must perform well. Excellence at every stage of the production process is achieved with Transfer.

Openness. Openness is part of the core business model at Buffer, a software company that optimizes social media impact. Salaries are posted online, as are revenue and the number of customers. All company emails are accessible by everyone. "Transparency breeds trust, and trust is the foundation of great teamwork," according to Buffer founder and CEO Joel Gascoigne. Within three years of its 2010 founding, Buffer was serving one million customers a day. Clarity about Buffer's goals and practices using Openness reduces the stress that inhibits trust, so Buffer's colleagues can focus on wowing their customers.

Caring. SAS Institute is the world's largest privately held software company with over \$2 billion in revenue. Employee turnover at SAS is two percent, the lowest in the industry. They have sustained high profitability and colleague retention by building a Caring culture. SAS emphasizes work-life integration by having colleagues work 35 hours per week. They also offer on-site daycare for 850 children of their employees at one-third the market cost, offer basic medical services at no cost, and provide healthy snacks and meals at campus cafes. "We'll take care of you if you'll take care of us" is the approach taken by SAS Institute co-founder and CEO Jim Goodnight. SAS Institute is consistently ranked among the best companies to work for in the U.S.

Invest. In the early 2000s, British-Dutch consumer goods company Unilever created a health and well-being program called "Lamplighter" to help executives manage their energy and performance by reducing chronic stress. Its success led to a rapid rollout of Lamplighter to Unilever's 172,000 employees around the world. The program assesses physical and mental health and creates individual scorecards that team members use to develop work-life integration plans. These plans include exercise and nutrition goals and even psychological counseling, if needed. Unilever's analysis showed that for every £1 spent on the program, £3.73 was returned in higher productivity. Lamplighter is good for its colleagues and profitable for the company.

Natural. In 1999, personal computer maker Lenovo Group was going global. But this Chinese company had a very Chinese culture. People would only speak in hierarchical order. Tea was served at every meeting. And titles were paramount. CEO Yang Yuanqing was called "Chief Executive Officer Yang" by everyone. Mr. Yang sought to change Lenovo's culture to one focused on being Natural. One of the first things he did was to post himself in the lobby of Lenovo's Beijing headquarters for more than a week wearing a "Hello, my name is Yuanqing" sticker and shaking hands with everyone who walked through the door. He asked employees to address him by his first name. He also changed the official language at Lenovo to English. The changes worked. Lenovo grew from an Asian-only brand to a global behemoth shipping more PCs than any other company in the world. Lenovo generates over \$46 billion in annual revenue and *Barron's* magazine consistently names Yang one of the "World's Best CEOs."

What about Purpose? In addition to OXYTOCIN, there is one more ingredient my research shows companies need to improve that triple bottom line: a sense of transcendent purpose. "Through commerce, we create value that helps each of us pursue a better life and forge human connections that enrich our shared experience." This is eBay's Purpose statement. The use of "we" and "us" clearly signals that their goal is not to maximize profits or stock price, but to serve all of humanity. Service is essential in Purpose narratives. Colleagues at organizations that have a clear and well-communicated Purpose use "we" much more than "me." Aaron Hurst, founder of nonprofit Taproot, advocates thinking of Purpose as a verb: the organization has to live its Purpose or it will have little impact.

The impact of trust and purpose

The science relating trust to team performance is convincing, but how much does trust really improve outcomes in actual businesses? If it is only a little, then there is not much to get excited about.

The data I have collected from the organizations that have asked me to help them reboot their cultures showed that trust substantially improved multiple outcome measures. But these are a self-selected set of businesses and nonprofits that already thought culture was important.

To confirm that these findings apply broadly, in late 2016 I collected a nationally representative sample of 1,105 working adults in the U.S. and queried them about their organizations.

- My team found that those working in companies in the highest quartile of trust, compared to those in the lowest quartile, had 106 percent more energy at work, were 76 percent more engaged on the job, and said they were 50 percent more productive.
- High-trust companies had one-half the employee turnover of low-trust companies, with employees at these companies telling us that they were 56 percent more satisfied with their jobs.
- Trust improved alignment with their organization's Purpose by 70 percent and reduced sick days by 13 percent; those fortunate enough to work in high-trust organizations were 29 percent more satisfied with their lives outside of work. Trust not only improves work, it improves life.

Trust matters. A lot. Our analysis of showed that if a company moved up one quartile in organizational trust, the average employee would produce an additional \$10,185 in revenue. Every year. Many of the ways to increase trust that I discuss in *Trust Factor* do not cost very much, so the return on an investment in trust is often hundreds of dollars for each dollar spent. Don't tell economists this, but working at high-trust companies with Purpose is fun: Colleagues are doing important work for the world with people who support them.

It all starts by identifying your organization's Purpose—how you connect to, and serve, others. Then, empower colleagues with trust and challenge them to reach audacious goals that improve the world, one customer at a time.

There are no human resources at work, just human beings. It's time to start treating those at work as the fallible, emotional, surprising, and intrinsically wonderful human beings that they are.



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