How to Make a Difference at Work

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO MORE MEANINGFUL AND PURPOSEFUL WORKPLACES
INTRODUCTION

The workplace provides a wealth of opportunities and possibilities through which anyone can make a difference every day. Whether it’s one person, one team, or one organization, everyone has the capacity to create positive and meaningful change in their workplace in both small and large ways.

It only takes one person to make a difference in the workplace – to create a positive ripple effect at the workplace, in business, and in the community. Positive ripple effects can create lasting change. There are countless examples of individuals, teams, and organizations making a difference in the workplace, but also countless more opportunities to make an impact.

The following white paper explores this concept of making a difference at work and in the community, the benefits of making a difference on your business, and practical ways that both employers and employees can positively impact others at work. Our conclusions and observations are supported by research conducted as part of the NorthCoast 99 program as well as the most up-to-date published research on the topic.
WHY MAKE A DIFFERENCE AT WORK & IN THE COMMUNITY

Published research shows that doing good at work and in the community is good for business, happiness, engagement, and well-being. Adam Grant’s research on this topic, in particular, has gained significant attention lately, as it finds that giving, prosocial behavior, and service to others at work can be a significant source of engagement, motivation, and even personal success. In addition, his studies have found that helping someone at work creates a feeling of progress, achievement, and contributing to someone else’s well-being, which in turn creates more positive emotions and improves happiness.¹⁴

In addition to ERC’s research which confirms the positive business benefits of making a difference at work on employee engagement, retention, and other organizational results, numerous other published research studies have also found the business value of doing good at work. The following is a sampling of highlights from fairly recent research.

• Anik, Aknin, Norton, & Dunn found that when employees share their bonuses with coworkers and charities, they are more satisfied and perform at a higher level than those who don’t. The research showed that when organizations provide employees with the opportunity to spend money on others, it results in increased happiness, job satisfaction, and team performance.¹

• Sonnentag & Grant found that daily acts of kindness such as acknowledging someone’s contribution or helping someone at work leads to positive emotions, which leads to greater workplace happiness and a more positive work environment.¹⁴

• Grant & Gino conducted three different lab studies and a field study which uncovered that expressions of gratitude increase helping behaviors at work and also increase employees’ sense of worth and value, which makes them feel more competent.⁹

• Muse & Pichler found that social support from supervisors is linked to more positive work/life balance, higher performance, and less stress between work and family obligations. Social support was notably positively linked to these results for lower skilled workers.¹²

• Chun, Sosik, & Yun found that individuals who receive mentoring and career support show higher levels of organizational commitment, leadership behavior, and better well-being.⁴

• Whitman, Caleo, Carpenter, Horner, & Bernerth found that perceptions of fairness were linked to team performance and attitudes. When there were perceptions of greater fairness, there was also less absenteeism and turnover. In addition, teams were more likely to go above and beyond when they perceived leaders to be fair.¹⁶

• Seibert, Wang, and Courtright found that when employees felt empowered, their performance was higher, they were more innovative, and they reported greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment. They also felt less job strain and were less likely to leave their organizations.¹³

• Huang, Liu, and Gong found that the more leaders involve employees, such as by inviting their ideas and opinions and including them in decision making, the more employees feel empowered, trust their leaders, and perform at higher levels.¹⁰
Also, a great deal of recent professional research points to the business benefits of making a difference at work in the ways we identified previously:

- Globoforce found that appreciation and recognition in the workplace can be linked to higher engagement and motivation, and lower turnover. Frequent recognition also directly correlates to employee satisfaction.  

- WorldatWork’s most recent survey on flexibility found that the degree of workplace flexibility culture in place at an organization correlates to retention and voluntary turnover.

- When Work Works, a joint initiative of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and the Families and Work Institute, finds that when employees have more work/life balance and flexibility on the job, their productivity and well-being is higher.

- The Corporate Voices for Working Families found that flexibility drives financial performance and productivity, and also found that flexibility correlates to increased revenue generation and positively affects customer service.

- Bersin by Deloitte found that organizations that invest more in learning and development outperform other organizations and have higher engagement and profit margins, as well as lower turnover.

- DDI found that employees who considered their best bosses to be more likely to help them be more productive, give them sufficient performance feedback, effectively handle workplace conflict, empathize when sharing concerns or frustrations, and help them solve problems, felt more motivated to give their best to their manager.

- Dale Carnegie Training found that employees who perceived that their managers cared about their personal lives, who had more positive feelings about interaction with one’s supervisor, and who were empowered by their supervisor, and felt that they leaned a lot from them, were more engaged.

- Aon Hewitt found that providing career growth opportunities and enabling higher performance through tools and resources are the top drivers that correlate to employee engagement.

- The majority of organizational research published to date has found that showing others respect and valuing them enables employees to be more engaged and achieve better results through greater efficiency and productivity.

In addition, research suggests that volunteerism and corporate philanthropy in the community and an emphasis on social responsibility is beneficial for the workplace and business in terms of:

- Higher performance than competitors over the long term
- Return on investment and sales growth
- Enhanced company reputation and willingness to buy a product or service
- Increased career and job satisfaction
- Development of workplace skills
- A better work experience and organizational culture
- Employee engagement and retention
HOW EMPLOYERS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE AT WORK

When making a difference in the workplace, we often first consider community involvement, being better stewards of our company resources and the environment, and making more ethical decisions. These are certainly all incredibly valuable components of making a difference at work and in the community.

But here’s a challenge for your business. It seems that we may be missing the daily opportunities to make a difference with our own employees and serving the needs of those in our own businesses – whether those are our customers, clients, or those sitting next to you. Perhaps those opportunities are some of the most meaningful ones we have.

Maybe making a difference in the workplace can be much more than this. Maybe we can help change the world at work by the small measures we take each and every day. Perhaps our “problems” at work can become opportunities for real, positive solutions that benefit others and our organizations. Maybe as leaders we are missing our important responsibility to nurture and make a difference in the lives of those we lead through our simple day-to-day workplace actions.

This thinking has been inspired by the employers of choice we research and serve. They not only lead the way in making a difference in their communities, but also in the workplace. They’ve taught us that doing good, both inside and outside of the workplace, is both beneficial for business and employees.

Making a difference at work means taking action and initiative – whether large or small – to do something good for one individual or many in the workplace. Managers, leaders, and HR play a crucial role in making a difference at work. HR can make a difference in establishing policies, systems, and workplace practices. Managers can make a difference in how they treat, communicate, and interact with employees on a daily basis. Likewise, leaders can make a difference in these same ways, and by supporting a culture and workplace practices that make a positive impact at work.

Based on our research of how employers make a difference at work, here are ten (10) pillars of how employers and leaders can make a difference at work.

Pillar 1: Value and respect others

Everyone wants to feel valued and respected for who they are in the workplace. When we help foster those feelings, we can make a difference in the lives of others.

We cannot make a positive difference in the workplace if we only value employees for their results and not for whom they are; fail to believe and show that all employees are important; do not treat them as we would like to be treated; nor create a welcoming, respectful, and friendly atmosphere. All of these are essential to making employees feel valued and respected.

• Be respectful, consistent, and fair in all of your dealings.
• Respect diversity (of individuals, perspectives, backgrounds, etc.) in the workplace.
• Encourage employees and build their self-esteem.
• Emphasize strengths. Tell employees what they can do that no one else can.
• Make time. Interact with, listen, and talk to them. Understand who employees are as people.
• Communicate how an employee’s work helps the organization succeed.
• Reinforce and emphasize an employee’s value to the organization and their team.
• Communicate the importance of an employee’s role.
• Send a signed card and flowers or a gift basket to a new employee.
• Sincerely welcome a new employee to your organization.
• Invite a new employee to a staff event to welcome them.
• Give an employee a card and gift on their employment anniversary.
• Take pride in creating a nice work environment for employees.
• Allow employees to individualize their workspace.

Pillar 2: Acknowledge and thank others

Thanking and congratulating others is a meaningful way to make a difference and creates a spirit of acknowledgement and appreciation in the workplace – which all around makes it a better place to work every day. Everyone wants to feel appreciated for the work they do. People can be individually thanked and recognized in-person, in meetings, in newsletters, via email, through personal notes, and a flurry of other ways.

• Recognize an employee’s birthday and other personal or meaningful life milestones.
• Visit an employee to give an in-person thank you for their hard work and contributions.
• Write a personal note or card to an employee to thank them for something.
• Give an employee a gift card, cash, or other meaningful reward for a success.
• Take an employee out to lunch for a job well done.
• Let an employee leave early or have an extra day off for a special achievement.
• Share and celebrate success stories as a team and staff.
• Praise an employee publically.
• Reward an employee for their performance and accomplishments with a raise or bonus.
• Host an employee appreciation event, such as an outing, picnic, or party.
• Create a mechanism whereby employees can thank and show appreciation to their peers.
• Encourage employees to thank one another.

Pillar 3: Help others succeed and be the best they can be

One of the best ways to make a difference in the workplace is to help others succeed – to help them not only find their true gifts and craft, but also reach a new level of quality, mastery, progress, and
excellence in their work. Everyone wants to succeed, and we all need help from those around us to get there.

We can help employees by guiding them and developing systems and practices that help them be more effective on the job and do the best work in which they are capable. Managers, in particular, are especially suited to offer this “gift” to those who work for them.

Sincerely helping others be more effective at what they do, especially those who work among us and directly for us, is a way that we can show them we care and are invested in them. By making a difference in this way, we not only help that person succeed, become more satisfied with the work they produce, and assist them in reaching their potential as professionals, but we also help our organization succeed.

• Help employees find their craft (best skills and talents).
• Assess and provide feedback on employees’ skills and talents.
• Set and communicate realistic but high expectations for work quality.
• Create an opportunity for employees to self-reflect on their work quality and performance.
• Encourage and provide opportunities for employees to suggest ways to improve their work.
• Clear roadblocks and promote employees’ work.
• Suggest resources (i.e. articles, people, etc.) to help employees excel at what they do.
• Assign an employee to a mentor with whom they can learn a new skill.
• Give employees tasks aligned with their strengths and best skills and abilities.
• Give useful, constructive, and specific feedback.
• Provide an honest and open assessment of employees’ work at least once per year.
• Meet with an employee regularly to coach, advise them, and help them improve.
• Provide working conditions that help employees do their best work (to the extent possible).
• Set up an internal community of practice or knowledge sharing group in which employees can learn from one another and help one another succeed.

Pillar 4: Grow and develop others

Similarly, employees cannot do their best work if they are not keeping up to date with their professional development and the latest thinking and skills in their field. We can help make a impact, by better enabling our employees to make a difference, do their best work, and develop their capabilities when we support their learning, growth, and development.

As employers, we can support employees by encouraging them to pursue personal growth, investing in new educational and professional developmental opportunities, and making sure that they are sufficiently trained to do the work. In addition, we can continually provide new challenges, projects, and on-the-job opportunities to help employees stretch their capabilities. Any help we can provide employees in becoming better people and professionals can be considered making a difference at work.
• Assign a new challenge, project, and interesting assignment to an employee.
• Offer an opportunity to work cross-functionally on a specific project or initiative.
• Allow an employee to pursue a job shadowing or cross-training opportunity.
• Provide an employee with career tools and coaching to help them develop their career.
• Before hiring externally, ask to see if any employee internally has an interest.
• Offer an internal career opportunity to advance and develop an employee’s capabilities.
• Promote from within and provide managerial and leadership training.
• Create a leadership development initiative or program inside your organization.
• Create an individual development plan for an employee.
• Have a conversation with an employee about their career development.
• Clarify career paths and tracks so employees can create a career plan.
• Offer to send or pay for an employee to attend a training program or conference.
• Suggest training and development opportunities you think would be beneficial.
• Pay for an employees to attain a professional certification.

**Pillar 5: Support others with their personal needs**

Everyone carries some of their personal needs to work – perhaps caring for children, a medical condition, a divorce, or an aging and sick parent. Offering appropriate measures of support for others in the workplace is another way to make a positive difference.

These opportunities to make a difference are rampant in the workplace on a daily basis. They include how we deal with others who are experiencing illness, a personal dilemma, or a family issue; how we respond to others’ personal needs when they are communicated to us; how flexible with time off we are to an employee who experienced a death in their family; how we set and enforce policies that either support or prohibit employees from meeting their personal needs; how we assist employees in the work/life balancing act; and how we help foster good physical and mental well-being that enables employees to live healthy, productive lives.

In all of these situations, we have the opportunity to show understanding, support, care, and generosity.

• Provide a flexible or alternative work schedule to an employee who needs one.
• Implement a flexible attendance policy.
• Allow an employee to attend an appointment without making up time or using PTO.
• Provide flexibility in time off to an employee who experienced a death in their family.
• Support and accommodate an employee with a unique or special personal need.
• Help an employee with workload: reassign tasks, provide additional staffing support, etc.
• Offer sufficient time off and encourage employees to use it, if needed.
• Provide resources, tools, and programs to help employees manage/improve their health.
• Educate employees on issues affecting their well-being.
• Provide on-site convenience services to help make employees’ lives easier.
• Help employees manage stress.
• Offer access to employee assistance services, such as an employee assistance program.
• Provide financial and retirement planning assistance.
• Provide important benefits: retirement, disability, and health insurance.
• Provide at least partially paid maternity leave.

Pillar 6: Create a community

In many organizations, walls of competitiveness, power and control, jealousy, bullying, gossip, backbiting, and other negative interpersonal behaviors are prevalent. When we attempt to build community in the workplace, by trying to break down these walls and forge positive connections, we are making a difference.

Community is not merely teambuilding or good coworker relations. Community is about creating an inclusive atmosphere where employees can build positive relationships with one another, where authentic interdependence exists, and where employees can communicate with one another in a compassionate way that helps them grow.

Community is not about just getting people to work together more effectively. It’s about a heightened, uncommon level of honesty, connection, and collaboration between individuals and work units, and a sense of fellowship and mutual support that brings out the best in others and the organization. It’s about employees moving from valuing those they work with not just for their results, job title, functional value, or personal agenda, but for who they are.

The more we know about and value others at work, the more we will support their success. The more we support each other’s success, the more of a difference we make, and the better the organization gets.

• Make everyone feel included and as part of a team.
• Encourage a fun, light-hearted, and joyful workplace.
• Organize a staff event or outing that is just for fun.
• Encourage staff to socially interact with one another.
• Develop a team ritual or set of rituals designed to help employees value and acknowledge others for more than just work results or contributions.
• Promote deeper levels of communication beyond tasks, goals, and objectives such as:
  • what they love about their work
  • what their dreams and aspirations are
  • what fulfills them inside and outside work
• Encourage forgiveness of imperfections and positive communication.
• Make sure no one feels threatened, alone, or isolated from others.
• Be loyal to employees, and encourage loyalty from employees.
• Make it a goal to do one random act of kindness for one employee each day.
• Help employees practice the good towards one another.
• Emphasize positivity in the workplace; take steps to reduce gossip, negativity, and rumors.

Pillar 7: Be fair and just

One of the most important and necessary ways in which we can make a difference is by acting justly in the workplace – that is the fairness with which we treat employees, make decisions, set policies and procedures, and interact and communicate with them. The workplace presents daily opportunities to act with justice on behalf of our employees.

But justice also goes beyond fairness. It’s about using our leadership authority and influence to serve those in a less influential or powerful position – including those that work for us.

• Treat all employees as you would like to be treated.
• Make management decisions about rewards, promotions, and other issues fairly.
• Provide safe, comfortable, and clean working conditions for all employees.
• Do not discriminate against or harass any employee.
• Pay employees fairly.
• Ensure that policies and procedures are set and executed in a fair, consistent manner.
• Provide equal opportunities to everyone.
• Evaluate others justly and accurately.
• Communicate honestly and transparently.
• Keep promises and commitments that you make to employees.
• Regularly identify issues of injustice in the organization and put into motion efforts to stop them.

Pillar 8: Empower and involve others

As managers, leaders, and HR professionals, making a difference at work can also entail empowering others to make an impact. The degree to which we involve and empower employees in contributing to our mission and organization leads employees to more meaning and fulfillment into their work lives, thereby enriching them and positively affecting their work experience.

• Provide employees with the opportunity to submit ideas and make suggestions.
• Ask employees for their feedback on important decisions that affect their job.
• Conduct an employee survey at least once a year.
• Delegate and empower an employee to lead an organizational and team improvement effort.
• Task an employee or group of employees to lead a strategic priority.
• Have employees participate in creating or implementing a new program or product/service.
• Invite an employee to attend a senior leadership meeting.
• Involve employees in shaping the organization’s direction and/or specific initiatives.

Pillar 9: Give back to those in need

Making a difference at work also extends out into the local community to others in need outside of our organizations. Beyond the workplace, we can use our organizations as platforms for making a bigger impact when we give back by connecting our employees with volunteer opportunities, donating to and sponsoring charitable causes, encouraging and enabling volunteer work, and supporting initiatives in our community.

• Donate products and/or profits to charitable organizations.
• Sponsor or financially support a community charitable event or fundraiser.
• Raise money and/or collect resources for community organizations.
• Coordinate a team community service day or event.
• Allow employees to participate in non-compensated professional services.
• Encourage employees to participate on non-profit boards and in community professional orgs.
• Communicate volunteer opportunities.
• Support local community leadership development initiatives.

Pillar 10: Act socially responsible

Finally, acting socially responsible, particularly in terms of ethical conduct and reducing our organization’s adverse impact on the environment, are also key ways in which we can make a difference at work.

• Have a zero-tolerance policy for unethical behavior.
• Create standards of ethical conduct for your business and train employees on them.
• Establish a way in which employees can confidentially report unethical conduct.
• Purchase products and services from socially responsible, ethical organizations.
• Create a recycling program and encourage employees to participate in it.
• Re-use resources such as paper, plastic, technology, and supplies.
• Exemplify practices which conserve energy and minimize waste (turn off lights, etc.).
• Assess and continually reduce your business’ adverse impact on the environment.

There are so many other and more specific ways employers and leaders can make a difference and enrich the work lives of their employees on a daily basis, including simply acting kindly, compassionately, and in service toward others when the opportunity arises, but these ten (10) pillars encompass much of what it means to make a difference at work.
HOW TO EMPOWER EMPLOYEES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE AT WORK

Leaders and workplace professionals can make an important difference in their organizations – but so can their employees, if they are empowered to do so. At its best, making a difference is a partnership between leaders and their employees.

Whether employers realize it or not, most organizations want their employees to make a positive difference every day. Consider if the following is true of your organization.

We want employees to...
• Deliver exceptional service to our customers.
• Deliver excellent quality work.
• Drive our business forward with their ideas, suggestions, and input
• Put their whole hearts and minds into their jobs and use all of their talents
• Be engaged and satisfied with their work
• Get along with, appreciate, and go above and beyond to help coworkers
• Take initiative to improve something at work to benefit someone else or the organization
• Make good, ethical decisions that help our organization achieve its objectives
• Develop themselves both personally and professionally
• Take personal responsibility for improving their performance and success

If these are true of your organization, you want employees to make a difference. Likewise, employees want to know that their work makes a difference to others. Time and time again, our research shows that meaningful work is precisely what most employees are looking for in a job, ranked consistently first in importance above all other attributes. What this suggests is that a sense of purpose and meaning in one’s work is fundamentally more important to every age group, gender, job type, and tenure than all other aspects of work.

In addition, when we analyze what makes an employee stay at an organization, consistently making a difference is one of the most common reasons, often disguised as...
• Believing in the organization’s mission and purpose
• Enjoying and believing in one’s work and its impact
• Believing in the organization’s products and services
• Positively impacting customers
• Enjoying helping coworkers

As employers, we have an opportunity to empower our employees to make a difference. But oftentimes, we aren’t framing what we want as such, and are missing an opportunity to tap our employees in a way that will speak to them according to what they really desire – to touch and help
others and make a positive impact.

In fact, the best gift we might give employees is the ability to see their work lives as fertile ground to make a difference. In doing so, we can foster more positive behavior in the workplace help them lead more fulfilling work lives, and positively impact our bottom line in the process. The following three elements are crucial to helping and empowering employees to make a difference.

**AWARENESS**

The first and most critical way to empower employees to make a difference is by helping them shift their attitude towards greater self-awareness. Some employees naturally have a “difference making” attitude and regularly see opportunities to make a positive difference on the job, with their coworkers, and with customers. Others need help viewing their jobs and work through a different lens.

It’s all too common for employees to view themselves as victims of their workplace problems – their boss, inadequate resources, and lack of opportunities. Unfortunately this view often prohibits them seeing the opportunity inside each problem.

A greater awareness of making a difference at work usually requires a new way of looking at and doing things in the workplace, assisting employees in taking responsibility for their behavior and actions, and encouraging everyone to look inside themselves, get rid of their bad habits, and make daily choices to make a difference.

For example, if we can get our employees to start viewing problems as opportunities for positive change, we can get one step closer to helping them make a difference.

**OPPORTUNITY**

Second, there must be an opportunity to make a difference with coworkers, customers, the community and any other individuals who are recipients of a positive action. For the employer, this involves providing meaningful work and opportunities to impact others positively.

But it also involves empowering employees to seek and take advantage of opportunities, projects, and other tasks already in their midst. Sometimes it entails training and/or guiding employees to take notice of the challenges, opportunities, and good work needing to be done to serve others right in their midst.

Many opportunities are likely already present in the workplace for employees to make a difference. Yet, it’s very common for employees to overlook these. Many times, they aren’t moments of big, sweeping impact… it may be the coworker who is feeling discouraged or undervalued or the customer who needs a bit of extra attention. Employees may need to be reminded of the ways that they can make a difference with others, and encouraged to pay attention to and notice ways they can impact others for the better.
UNDERSTANDING

Finally, employees need to understand how others are impacted by their actions. Organizations can show and communicate to employees who benefited from their work or how others could benefit. Sometimes this connection is very clear and obvious, while other times, it is not.

Helping employees answer questions such as who benefits from what they are doing, how a situation is better because of what they do, and what positive outcomes their actions enable others to achieve can help facilitate this understanding. Another beneficial way of improving understanding is to get employees closer to their customers – whether internal or external. When employees are closer to the recipients and end-users of their work, they are more likely to see its effect and meaning.

In addition, a sense of value is especially crucial for understanding. Feeling that one’s efforts are appreciated, valued, and perhaps even recognized as helpful and beneficial is important in making a difference. This can be achieved through means of feedback, recognition, and communication from the recipients of whatever service or action employees provided.

PRACTICAL WAYS EMPLOYEES CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In addition to the ways to make a difference alluded to earlier in the paper (many of which are also relevant to employees), here are some practical ways that employees can and do make a difference in the workplace every day:

• Changing their attitude. Sometimes making a difference is just merely changing your attitude about work and viewing it as a mission or means to impact others positively.
• Respecting and valuing others. Showing respect towards others, including coworkers and managers, and seeing the value of others’ contributions.
• Supporting their company. Supporting the organization in directly or indirectly impacting others with exceptional work and contributions.
• Initiating new contributions. Initiating ideas, solutions, and suggestions to help move the organization forward and better meet the needs of its customers.
• Improving their performance. Self-reflecting on and coming up with new ideas and ways in which you can improve the quality of your work.
• Perfecting their craft. Continually striving to perfect and master your craft can improve the quality of your work and make a difference in the organization.
• Actively participating. Actively speaking up and contributing to whatever cause your team or organization is working on.
• Going above and beyond. Going above and beyond to help a coworker, your team, or organization achieve something.
• Mentoring or training others. Mentoring, coaching, training, or sharing knowledge to help someone else on the job.
• Showing appreciation. Showing appreciation and praising coworkers for their efforts; recognizing and acknowledging others.

• Helping to build community. Taking a “we are all in this together” mindset. Recognizing that we are all interconnected and interdependent.

• Contributing to a positive work atmosphere. Fostering optimism and positivity; instigating opportunities to positively connect with coworkers and others in the organization.

• Connecting to the big picture. Connecting your role to the overall mission and/or objectives of the organization.

In these ways and so many more, employees can make a positive impact every day in their organizations. Oftentimes, all it takes is a little nudge, conversation, and guidance to help employees start thinking about how they make a difference.

CONCLUSION

We all want change in our workplaces and to work in more engaging, happier, and better organizations that positively impact our customers and communities. We can be part of that difference by viewing our businesses as platforms for a greater good and taking responsibility to be of service to others that we work with every day.

And, by doing so, we will change our cultures and organizations to more meaningful and purposeful ones that truly make a difference in the world.
Sources


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