

What Makes Us Come Alive At Work?

Last year, I participated in one of Eugene Eric Kim's [collaborative literacy experiments](#) called Changemaker bootcamp. In this series of monthly meetings, a half-dozen professionals gathered to learn from each other about best practices and “muscle building” for building our own collaborative literacy and facilitation skills. After the series ended, we met up occasionally for gatherings hosted by participants. One of these meetings, run by Marie Haller of [Impact Hub San Francisco](#) and Eugene Chan of [PolicyLink](#), taught me one of the most important things I've ever learned about engagement in the workplace. And beyond.

Eugene and Marie designed our meeting to explore one simple question: *What makes us come alive at work?* Before you begin reading about our group's take on this question, I recommend taking a moment and pondering for yourself: what makes *you* come alive at work? Jot down a few thoughts if you can before you read on.

Our group that day consisted of about eight professionals in the San Francisco Area – consultants, managers, technologists, community builders. After various warm up and brainstorming activities on the topic, we came up with a collective list that looked something like this:

What makes us come **ALIVE** at work?



Staring at the walls where we'd captured these ideas, we were then able to distill them into one phrase that pleased us all:

"I am a fully engaged, trusted contributor to work that matters...with good people!"

It's a compelling sentence – I want this person's job, don't you? The phrase captures many important themes – caring about your work, feeling your work has impact, feeling a sense of autonomy, trust, and camaraderie with colleagues.

But what really stuck with me was what came out in our closing reflections. Here we were able to distill our sentence down even further to something more elegant, and more elemental. The short phrase that captures an essence of everything we had explored together that day was this most simple of sentences:

I matter.

We all want to feel that our contributions matter. That our work is purposeful, that it is contributing to something good in the world, that our peers recognize the value of our

contribution, and that we can go home at night feeling the world is impacted by our participation in it. We may express this in all sorts of different ways, but fundamentally, this is what it's all about. I matter. You matter. *We matter.*

On my way home, this message was bouncing around in my head like a song I couldn't stop singing. It still does. And things got really interesting when I realized this: it's actually *not* about the work. It's about how we *relate* to it. And what's more, this "we matter" orientation is something we can *choose* – both for ourselves and in how we regard others.

It suddenly seemed so simple: the more I treat others as though they matter and remind them *how* they matter, the more we can enjoy each other and our work together. And there's a huge win-win here as well: regarding others this way feels good for me, and contributes to my own sense of meaning in my work as well.

Of course, ultimately, this insight applies far beyond the workplace walls – the same could be said of how we regard our family members or the clerk at the grocery store. So what I really realized that day was even deeper: my sense of aliveness in all aspects of my life is not about how great or horrible my external conditions are, but about how I regard myself and others.

Not a bad take-away from a two hour meeting.

But don't take my word for it – test it out for yourself:

- How does it feel when you treat your colleagues as if they matters in the work you are doing together?
- How does it feel if you regard yourself and your own work this way?
- Where do you catch yourself not doing this? Not trusting, not believing in what you are doing, not valuing and appreciating yourself or your colleagues?
- What shifts do you notice in your orientation and sense

of aliveness in your work when you choose to try on this “we matter” frame?

- How do these insights apply to other areas of your life?

I discovered this nugget in a collaborative setting, and I’d love to continue the conversation here. Please share in the comments below what you discover in your own exploration of aliveness in the workplace. *You matter*, and I’d love to hear your thoughts!