

22 KEYS TO CREATING A MEANINGFUL WORKPLACE

BY TOM TEREZ

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Reviewed by Claude Whitmyer

What makes a space sacred? Is it the artifacts? The rituals performed there? Charismatic leaders? Followers with deep faith? Perhaps it can be summed up as “meaning.” The “sacred,” after all, is deeply meaningful to those who see it as sacred. Most people equate sacred space with religious or spiritual practices, especially the practices surrounding human lifecycle transitions, such as birth, adolescence, marriage, and death. Few think of their workplaces as sacred spaces or of even having the potential of becoming sacred spaces.

But as *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Pat McHenry Sullivan explained in a recent column about workplace altars,

“Like altars everywhere, workplace altars are a natural response to the need for respectful reflection wherever we are. ‘Stop here long enough to consider what matters,’ altars invite. ‘Reconnect here to the wonder of life. Gain strength and guidance.’ . . . Because of business practice and labor laws, workplace altars need to be discreet . . . During a hard time, legal secretary Brenda Fuller placed a prayer she loved by her telephone. Later she added a photo that makes her laugh and a quote by Goethe to go boldly toward her dreams. Tiny frames filled with prayers graced her computer monitor stand . . . People on the go also have altars. Inside his locker, a firefighter posts meaningful words and pictures. A meter maid keeps devotional materials in her truck. So does a carpenter, who also blesses his tools and each task. Most employees agree that their right to practice spirituality at work is balanced by other employees’ rights to practice different values.”

In the twelve years since I first began guiding people on their individual paths to meaningful work, I’ve often thought that surely there must be more ways to create sacred space at work, to carry that sense of the sacred beyond the cubicle or the dashboard and into the way we communicate and behave with one another at work. I am pleased to say that I think I’ve found a book that provides powerful guidance for doing just that.

If we redefine “space” to include our mental and behavioral “spaces” as well as the physical, then I think you’ll find some impressive guidance in Tom Terez’s *22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace*.

For several years now, workforce consultant Tom Terez has been conducting the “Meaning At Work” project to find out what people think about a meaningful work place. What Terez uncovered were the “22 Keys.” These keys grew out of fifteen focus groups and an extensive series of individual interviews with people who together had about 3,000 years of work experience. For periodic research updates, see his surveys and “Awful and Awesome Boss Hall of Fame” at www.meaningfulworkplace.com/boss/.

Research by Terez and others points to a shift taking place—subtle in its visibility, yet profound in its impact. This shift is from a “buyer’s market” to a “seller’s market” in the world of work—away from “worker as machine,” toward “worker as artist, writer, performer—talent.”

Companies can no longer afford to treat workers as interchangeable cogs in the industrial machine. There is too much “intellectual capital” tied up in the new “knowledge worker” to allow that. Take for example the eight questions IBM asks of prospective employees:

- Does the company have global reach?
- Does the technology count?
- Do the people matter?
- What about work/life balance?
- Is the company’s mission important?
- Does the company give back?
- Will the impact of my work endure?
- Will I make a difference?

The last six of these eight questions are about the meaning of work. IBM knows what others are finding out: to keep the talented worker you must provide meaningful work and a meaningful workplace.

We have a lot of evidence that a meaningful workplace leads to better performance, higher quality, and a bigger bottom line. But meaning does not come from foosball, catered lunches, video games, and company-sponsored playtime.

Tom divides the keys into five major groupings:

- Mission (purpose, direction, relevance, validation)
- People (respect, equality, informality, flexibility, ownership)
- Development (challenge, invention, support, personal development)
- Community (dialogue, relationship building, service, acknowledgment, oneness)
- The “Me” keys (self-identity, fit, balance, worth).

The opening chapter defines the keys. Each subsequent chapter covers one key, providing detailed descriptions of what it is and how to cultivate it in your work place. Each chapter also contains action ideas and assessment tools to help apply the information directly to your own work situation. All 22 keys come to life with real stories about people and organizations.

A good way to put these keys to work is to invite your co-workers to a lunch-time book group. Participants read a chapter or two of the book each week and then talk about it over lunch. Terez includes plenty of discussion questions in the Assignments section at the end of each chapter. Even a half-hearted effort to read and apply the 22 Keys will result in a definite change in attitude, if not actual subtle changes in workplace conditions. (Caveat to employers: don’t make this a top-down event. Let employees organize themselves.)

Terez takes a refreshing, jargon-free approach to workplace values. What Tom’s research uncovered was that in a meaningful workplace, we feel as if we’re making a difference. We’re valued for our knowledge, skills, and interests. We are encouraged to see how our personal visions and the organization’s mission overlap and how our own personal growth and development can be of benefit both to ourselves and to our company. A meaningful workplace is one in which the organization has achieved that critical balance between company culture and individual expression so that folks feel like a part of a working community. www.meaningfulworkplace.com includes descriptions and examples and tips on how to bring the keys alive. There are online, check-the-box assessments for both your workplace and your self. You can even order a 16-page evaluation kit that combines the organizational and personal assessment tools for uncovering improvement opportunities in your workplace. I especially liked the “Laugh and Learn” section on humorous happenings in the workplace and the “Awful and Awesome Boss Halls of Fame.”

It is especially tough in economic hard times to keep from retrenching into old repressive models of workplace organization and behavior. Fear drives us to rely on the familiar, rather than try something new. But we desperately need to keep looking at the long-term picture and realize that the America we all long for is a society of tolerance, mutual appreciation, and deeply meaningful personal, communal, and workplace lives.

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