

**Well at Work: A Leader's Positive Psychology Guide to  
Managing Stress and Manifesting Well-Being**

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### **Abstract**

Through this paper, I explore the current U.S. landscape of stress and work-related stress, including when it can be bad for us (i.e., distress and burnout) and good for us (i.e., eustress). Then, I draw on positive psychology - the science of well-being - and affiliated disciplines (e.g., positive organizational scholarship and positive organizational behavior) to offer science-based strategies for leaders to rethink and help manage stress and manifest well-being in the workplace. Specifically, I discuss meaning, mattering, and belonging as three interconnected and important principles for leaders to know and to put into practice through zones of control, low-cost, high-impact positive psychology interventions, such as job crafting, building self-efficacy and resilience, and creating high-quality connections. While this paper is certainly not the solution to work-related stress, it is a step and a tool for leaders towards more managed stress and manifested well-being in our workplaces.

*Keywords:* stress, positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship, positive organizational behavior, leadership, meaning, mattering, belonging

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## Preface

*Coddiwomple (v): to travel purposefully towards a vague destination.* I learned this goofy word from one of my fellow classmates on our very first day of class and little did I know how much relevance it would have and permission it would bring me along my master's journey, from day one of class to writing this paper today. I applied to this master's program (MAPP) at Penn because I feel called to learn about the science of well-being and to apply it personally and professionally in ways that better myself and help others. A pretty vague destination, traveled purposefully through MAPP - the research, relationships, content, and community - and beyond.

This paper is a purposeful path towards this vague destination. It is a reflection of what I have learned through MAPP and how I aspire to apply these lessons professionally and inspire others to apply them too. Specifically, this paper is for anyone who has experienced stress at work, who is a leader in their work, and who cares about improving the well-being of themselves and those around them at work. It is for the first-line supervisor who is managing tired employees across multiple shifts. It is for the newly promoted manager who is building a brand-new team from the ground up. It is for the established senior leader who is integrating opposing cultures through an acquisition. My goal through this paper is to understand the U.S. landscape of work-related stress and draw on positive psychology research to offer leaders low-cost, high-impact strategies to manage the stress and manifest the well-being of themselves and their employees.

Beyond this paper, my vision is for people to experience more joy, meaning, and fulfillment through their work. In this vision, the understanding and pursuit of well-being among leaders at work is shared, supported, and sustained. By enabling human flourishing at work, we

may seek to better manage work-related stress and manifest more workplace well-being. Let's  
coddiwomple together.



## **Introduction**

What stresses you out? Is it paying bills? Interacting with your boss? Presenting in front of a group? An upcoming move or life change? Maybe a conflict with a loved one? Is it the state of our economy or world right now (e.g., Covid-19, war, climate change, mass shootings, social injustice, inflation, etc.)? Maybe it is all of the above. For at least three-fourths of us in the United States, something stresses us out (American Psychological Association, 2019). And most likely, that something is related to our work (Fink, 2016).

In the first section of this paper, I will explore stress and work-related stress (WRS) in the U.S. landscape and try to answer, what it is, when it can lead to and how it is different from burnout, and what causes and contributes to it (i.e., stressors). Then, we will explore when stress can actually be a good thing, why managing (not necessarily reducing or eliminating) WRS and manifesting well-being matters for organizations, and why leaders should care. After we explore these questions, I will introduce positive psychology and what leaders can both learn and apply from positive psychology when it comes to managing WRS of their employees and manifesting well-being. Specifically, I will propose that if leaders keep the following overlapping and interconnected three principles - meaning, mattering, and belonging - salient in their everyday mindset and behaviors, then their teams will better manage work-related stress and experience greater well-being.

### **Defining Stress**

From a mild inconvenience at home to a seriously challenging situation at work, we have many different definitions of stress despite it being such a universally shared experience. According to a 2017 Gallup survey, eight in ten Americans say they frequently or sometimes

encounter stress in their daily lives (Saad, 2021). Going back to its origins, stress was first studied and introduced to the public over 50 years ago by Hans Selye, also known as the father of stress theory. At that time, he provided this simple yet very vague definition of stress: a nonspecific response of the body to a demand (Selye, 1956). Since then, stress has been a topic of interest to medical professionals, business professionals, social scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, and even zoologists. Definitions of it have gotten slightly more specific than Selye's, such as a natural mind-body response to a demanding situation (Quick et al., 1987) and an unpleasant emotional and physiological arousal that we experience in situations that we perceive as threatening to our well-being (Joseph, 2013). Though there is still not one singular, shared definition that encompasses all the things we refer to as stress, consistent in at least these definitions is that stress involves our body's *response* to something. We typically refer to feeling "stressed out" when our perceived demands are greater than our perceived resources (Cory Muscara, 2022). This particular definition sets the stage for the role that perception plays in stress, which we will explore briefly later. Another popular conception of stress, defined by Kelly McGonigal (a health psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University and whose TED Talk on how to make stress your friend has received almost 30 million views and counting) is *stress is what arises when something you care about is at stake* (McGonigal, 2016). This list is not exhaustive, but it summarizes the definitions of stress that are most often used and cited in this paper.

<b>Definitions of Stress</b>
a nonspecific response of the body to a demand <i>Source: Selye, 1956</i>
a natural mind-body response to a demanding situation <i>Source: Quick et al., 1987</i>
an unpleasant emotional and physiological arousal that we experience in situations that we perceive as threatening to our well-being

<i>Source: Joseph, 2013</i>
when our perceived demands are greater than our perceived resources to meet those demands
<i>Source: Cory Muscara, 2022</i>
what arises when something you care about is at stake
<i>Source: McGonigal, 2016</i>

For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to McGonigal’s conception of stress in the context of work, also known as work-related stress (WRS). In a 2021 Wrike survey of 1,600 U.S. employees, almost everyone (94%) reported feeling stress at work, and almost one-third reported their stress level is high to unsustainably high (Hansen, 2021). Before we learn more about stress, specifically common stressors and when and why stress can be both good and bad for us, let’s first distinguish work-related stress from burnout: two terms that are often used interchangeably in our vernacular yet have important distinctions. While burnout is generally beyond the scope of this paper’s application, it is still important to understand its signs and symptoms so that we may better manage work-related stress before it becomes unmanageable.

### **Burnout**

Simply stated, burnout is the result of *chronic* work-related stress (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022). Though the concept of burnout first originated in the 1970s, in 2019 the World Health Organization officially defined burnout as a “syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” (World Health Organization, n.d.). It is a medical syndrome, unlike stress. Furthermore, burnout is characterized by three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and the diminishment of professional accomplishment or efficacy (Maslach, 1998).

Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. It is regarded as a lack of energy and feeling that one's emotional resources are used up. Individuals who are emotionally exhausted often report that they are filled with dread at the prospect of returning to work for another day. Depersonalization involves the development of negative attitudes and feelings towards persons for whom work is done. It may be expressed as unprofessional comments towards coworkers and generally reflects a distant attitude towards work. Diminishment of professional accomplishment is the tendency to negatively evaluate the worth of one's work, feeling insufficient to perform their job, and a generalized poor professional self-esteem (Maslach, 1998).

Burnout is not something that happens overnight, and it tends to start with exhaustion from the day-to-day laborious stuff that turns into the never-ending last straw. In late 2020 and into early 2021, Moss and colleagues surveyed more than 1,5000 employees in various sectors, roles, and seniority levels across 46 countries to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on burnout and well-being. The survey combined several evidence-based scales, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986), which is one of the most reliable psychological measures of occupational burnout, and the Areas of Worklife survey (Leiter & Maslach, 2003), which assesses employees' perceptions of work-setting qualities that affect whether they experience engagement or burnout. Here are four alarming stats from the survey:

- 56% of respondents said their job demands increased.
- 62% of the people who were struggling to manage their workloads had experienced burnout "often" or "extremely often" in the previous three months.
- 89% of respondents said their work life was getting worse.
- 85% of respondents said their well-being had declined.

This study highlights what the MBI and decades of research suggest are the six main causes of burnout: workload, perceived lack of control, lack of reward or recognition, poor relationships, lack of fairness, and values mismatch (Maslach, 1998). We'll explore each of these causes briefly.

According to a Gallup report (Clifton, 2017), employees who strongly agree that they always have too much to do are 2.2 times more likely to say they experience burnout; even high-performing employees can quickly shift from optimistic to hopeless when they are struggling with unmanageable performance expectations. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic did not help an already-overworked society. Specifically, according to data from the NordVPN, which tracks when users connect and disconnect from its service, the U.S. added three times more hours to its workday (Davis & Green, 2020).

Monotony and a lack of autonomy both predict burnout; this perceived lack of control can be exhausting and costly for an employee's well-being (Maslach, 1998). Those who both micromanage and feel micromanaged are at great risk of burnout. Giving employees more autonomy and encouraging job crafting - two topics and strategies that will be discussed later in this paper - are research-based ways to decrease distress and increase job satisfaction.

Additionally, when there is a gap between effort and reward, that space is ripe for burnout. In one study of 204 nurses, when there was a gap between high job demands and low promotion prospects, there was a significant depletion of the nurses' emotional resources and increase in burnout symptoms (Bakker et al., 2000). Frequent gratitude gathering and sharing is one way to create a network and culture of recognition, in addition to fair compensation practices.

Connection with others is not only good for engagement and happiness at work, but it's likely been instrumental for our strength and safety over the evolution of our species. Strong

relationships, including friendship, is equally important in our work lives as it is in our personal lives. Employees who have best friends at work experience higher levels of healthy stress management and may even live longer (Shirom et al., 2011). Creating spaces - physical and psychological - for coworkers to connect with one another is critical for organizational performance and employee well-being.

The last two common causes of burnout are lack of fairness and values mismatch. Favoritism, mistreatment, bias, and unfair compensation and/or policies are all examples of conditions that can lead to lack of fairness and consequently, burnout. Lastly, when an employee's values and goals do not align with the values and goals of the organization, consequences include lower job satisfaction, lower productivity, higher turnover, and decreased mental health (Moss, 2021).

In summary, while workload, autonomy, reward/recognition, relationships, fairness, and values alignment can lead to burnout when handled poorly, when handled well, these same factors can be a recipe for the healthiest and highest-performing organizations (Moss, 2021). (For more information on and strategies to prevent burnout, I recommend *The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It* by Jennifer Moss - also included in the appendix)

## **Stressors**

One common thread through the stress literature is that stress involves an individual's response to a stimulus. That stimulus to which an individual responds, whether physical or psychological, is what we refer to as a stressor or a demand; in other words, what *causes* stress. Think back to what stresses you out. Whatever your answer(s), those are your stressors.

Common stressors can include physical threats, threats to our self-image, an important life event (e.g., a move, a marriage, a career change), a conflict with a significant other, a tight deadline, or the loss of something or someone we care for (Selye, 1956).

Today, according to the American Psychological Association's 2022 *Stress in America* survey, top stressors also include the rise in prices of everyday items due to inflation, supply chain issues, global uncertainty, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and concerns regarding child(ren)'s development. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on American stress levels in terms of disrupted work, education, health care, economy, social connections, and, importantly, loss of life (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Specifically, almost eight in ten Americans are stressed out by the pandemic, and almost seven in ten have experienced more stress over the course of the pandemic (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Most likely, at least one of your stressors stems from work as work is one of the most reported sources of stress for American adults (Brulé, & Morgan, 2018). Work-related stressors might include demands related to one's role, relationships at work, workplace policies, or one's job conditions. Others may include role ambiguity, work conflict, workload, unemployment, lack of health insurance or other benefits, shift work, length of working hours, job insecurity, low job control, high job demands, low social support at work, and low organizational justice (Goh et al., 2015). According to the 2021 Wrike survey, the top work-related stressors were related to breakdowns in teamwork and collaboration (e.g., communication, team members not pulling their own weight, and bottlenecks) (Hansen, 2021).

While these lists demonstrate that there are common life and work-related stressors, stressors are highly individualized, meaning what one individual perceives to be a stressor may

not be perceived to be by another. In defining stress, I mentioned the role that perception plays, and often (not always) what we perceive to be demanding and what we perceive to be a resource are different than what is actually demanding and what is actually a resource. This leads into another important characteristic of stressors. They are inherently neutral (Simmons & Nelson, 2007). In other words, it is an individual's *response* to a stressor, not the stressor itself, that produces either a positive and/or negative experience.

To illustrate these two characteristics, Google CEO, Sundar Pichai, tells this now-popular story about a cockroach in a restaurant (Sharma, 2018). Pichai observed a cockroach in a restaurant suddenly land on a lady who started jumping and screaming out of fear, causing everyone at the tables around her to also become panicky. A concerned waiter quickly comes to the tables, and the cockroach now lands on him, to which he responds with composure and confidence. He proceeds to grab the cockroach and throw it out of the restaurant. As Pichai observed the lady and the waiter during this encounter with the cockroach, he wondered if it was the cockroach that caused the lady's stress. Victor Frankl taught in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1985) that "between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom" (2017, p. vi). Pichai concluded that it was not the cockroach itself, or the stimulus in this case, that caused the stressful experience for the lady, but rather it was her *response* to the stimulus. And that same stimulus was not perceived to be a stressor by the waiter, leading to a much different, more positive outcome. While not all of us experience a cockroach landing on us in a restaurant every day, we are all perceiving and experiencing stimuli every day, and it is up to us to interpret and respond to those stimuli as stressful or not.



## Good Stress and Bad Stress

Another important characteristic of stress is that not all stress is bad for you. To illustrate this, consider the following two stress mindsets (McGonigal, 2016). Which do you subscribe to?

<i>Mindset 1: Stress is harmful.</i>	<i>Mindset 2: Stress is enhancing.</i>
Stress depletes my health and vitality.	Stress improves my health and vitality.
Stress debilitates my performance and productivity.	Stress enhances my performance and productivity.
Stress inhibits my learning and growth.	Stress facilitates my learning and growth.
The effects of stress are negative and should be avoided.	The effects of stress can be positive and should be utilized.

I would venture to guess that many of us subscribe to *Mindset 1: Stress is harmful*. In fact, the overwhelming majority of scientific and lay definitions for "stress" define it as a negative (McGonigal, 2016). Furthermore, a 2014 survey conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard School of Public Health found that 85% of Americans agreed that stress has a negative impact on health, family life, and work. So why is it that so many of us when we think of stress, we see it as a “bad” thing?

How stress got its bad reputation goes back to the early 1900s and the father of stress theory, Hans Selye. The experiments Selye conducted (on rats) to inform the hypotheses he made (on humans), resulting in tours and speeches he gave all over the world (including a testimony to the U.S. Congress that smoking was a good way to prevent the harmful effects of stress), all contributed to the world’s belief that stress is harmful. Without going into further detail on the history and legacy of Selye, he did eventually recognize that not all stress is bad for you, and so he distinguished between pleasant stress, which he labeled eustress, and unpleasant stress, or distress.

When something is perceived to preserve or enhance well-being, that is considered eustress (Selye, 1976). When stressors are perceived as challenges, rather than hindrances, for example, eustress is positively associated with worker engagement (Simmons & Nelson, 2007). In a 2013 survey of CEOs, vice presidents, and general managers, McGonigal found that 51% of participants said they did their best work while under stress (McGonigal, 2016). Going back to McGonigal's conception of stress - *what arises when something you care about is at stake* - there is an underlying link between stress and meaning. In other words, we don't stress about things we don't care about, and we can't create a meaningful life without experiencing some stress (McGonigal, 2016). When we see stress as not a psychological flaw or a weakness to be corrected but as a natural response to help us do something when something important to us is at stake, stress can actually become something to follow, not fear.

It is because of this distinction between eustress and distress, exemplified by the two mindsets we can hold towards stress (i.e., stress is harmful, or stress is enhancing), that the purpose of this paper is not to *reduce* or *eliminate* all work-related stress. Rather, it is to *manage* it in ways that also manifest well-being - to help leaders understand how to cultivate mindsets and contexts at work that both minimize distress and burnout and promote eustress and well-being.

### **The Business Case**

It goes without saying that work-related distress and burnout are costly for organizations. Emotional exhaustion, a characteristic of burnout, has been shown to decrease work performance (Wright & Bonnet, 1997). Specifically, in one longitudinal field study, researchers collected data at two time periods (T1 and T2) from a sample of 44 professional staff employees to examine the

contribution of burnout to work performance. They used Maslach's Burnout Inventory (MBI) to measure burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) at T1, and they used a validated performance evaluation procedure consisting of the same four dimensions (support, goal emphasis, team building, and work facilitation) to measure work performance of the personnel sampled (Wright & Bonnet, 1993) at T2, three years later. Work performance data were obtained at both time periods (T1 and T2) and burnout data were collected at T1. As Wright & Bonnet (1997) hypothesized, a negative relationship between emotional exhaustion, a characteristic of burnout, collected at T1, and subsequent work performance at T2 was established ( $p = 0.0194$ ), suggesting emotional exhaustion predicted subsequent work performance, even while controlling for age, gender, and prior performance. Interestingly, there was not a statistically significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and work performance at T1, thus the need for longitudinal designs, such as this, in burnout research.

Furthermore, burnout has been closely linked to rates of error, turnover, absenteeism, decreased productivity, and patient/client satisfaction (Brulé, & Morgan, 2018). In another study, Goh and colleagues (2015) estimated U.S. health care expenditures and mortality based on the following work-related stressors: unemployment, lack of health insurance, shift work, length of working hours, job insecurity, work-family conflict, low job control, high job demands, low social support at work, and low organizational justice. These ten stressors were selected because there is broad support for their health consequences from the epidemiological literature and because there are data sources that allow us to produce sound estimates of their prevalence and the sizes of their health effects. Their model estimated the excess mortality and incremental health expenditures associated with exposure to each of the ten work-related stressors. Their

analysis found that more than 120,000 deaths per year and approximately 5-8% of annual healthcare costs are associated with these ten stressors and may be attributable to how U.S. companies manage their workforce. This study, among others, highlights a dire need for leaders and organizations to pay more attention to management practices as important contributors to health outcomes and costs in the U.S (Goh et al., 2015).

With those negative consequences of distress and burnout in mind, should a leader's goal then be to strive for a stressless work-life, minimizing stress at every opportunity? Before I answer this question, I'll share a brief study. From 2005 to 2006, researchers from the Gallup World Poll asked 125,000+ people from 121 countries one question: Did you feel a great deal of stress yesterday? Then the researchers computed an index of national stress. Worldwide, an average of 33% of people said, yes, they felt stressed out yesterday. In the U.S., 43%. (The Philippines took the top spot at 67%, and Mauritania ranked last at 5%.) Since country-by-country percentages varied, the researchers wondered if a nation's stress index corresponded with indexes of well-being, life expectancy, and national GDP, for example. To the researcher's surprise, it did - the higher a nation's stress index, the higher the nation's well-being, life expectancy, *and* GDP. When it came to overall well-being, the happiest people in the poll weren't the ones without stress; rather, they were the ones who were highly stressed but not depressed (Ng et al., 2009).

Now, going back to the question, should a leader's goal be to strive for a stressless work-life? I would argue no if we are also interested in striving for a meaningful work-life. As the previous study underscores, high levels of stress are associated with both distress and well-being (Ng et al., 2009). Happy lives are not stress-free, nor does a stress-free life guarantee happiness. In fact, although most people predict they would be happier if they were less busy, research

shows that people are happier when they are busier, even when forced to take on more than they would choose (Hsee et al., 2010). In short, a meaningful life is also a stressful life (McGonigal, 2016). Here are a few reasons why leaders should strive not to *eliminate* stress but rather to *rethink* stress so that it may be managed in ways that also manifest well-being.

Stress seems to be an inevitable consequence of engaging in roles and pursuing goals that feed our sense of purpose (McGonigal, 2016). Work, parenting, personal relationships, caregiving, and health are all incredibly meaningful aspects of life, and yet they are our biggest sources of stress. When the most commonly reported sources of stress overlap with the greatest sources of meaning, it becomes clear that stress can contribute to well-being. (We will learn later in this paper about the relationship between meaning and well-being.) Furthermore, we have an instinctual and innate capacity to make sense out of our suffering, and stressful situations awaken this process in us. Because of this, stress challenges us to find meaning in our lives. Even when the stress we're under doesn't seem inherently meaningful, it can trigger a desire to *find* and make meaning, which can help us to stay motivated in the face of adversities.

Biologically, stress gives us the energy to rise to a challenge (Seery, 2013), motivates us to connect with and care for others (Moghimian et al., 2013), and helps us learn and grow (Het et al., 2012). When we feel stress, our sympathetic nervous system directs our bodies to mobilize energy (e.g., breathing deepens to deliver oxygen to the heart, heart rate speeds up to deliver oxygen, fat, and sugar to the muscles and brain); additionally, when we feel stress, we release oxytocin (yes, the "love hormone"), which makes us want to connect with and care for others (Moghimian et al., 2013). The last stage of a stress response is recovery, where stress hormones increase activity in the brain regions that support learning and memory. Studies show that people who view stressful situations as opportunities to improve skills, knowledge, or strengths are less

likely to have a fight-or-flight response and are more likely to have a challenge response, leading to greater learning (Stout & Dasgupta, 2013) and engagement (Simmons & Nelson, 2007).

Finally, there are costs to our physical and psychological health when we try to live a life *without* stress. Specifically, psychologists have found that trying to avoid stress leads to a significantly reduced sense of well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness (Elliot et al., 2012), and it can be incredibly isolating (Oertig et al., 2013). When we avoid stress altogether, while we may have spared ourselves some discomfort, we will also have robbed ourselves of some meaning. As psychologists Richard Ryan, Veronika Huta, and Edward Deci (2001) write: “The more directly one aims to maximize pleasure and avoid pain, the more likely one is to produce instead a life bereft of depth, meaning, and community” (p. 119).

In summary, when it comes to stress, a leader’s goal should not be to strive for a stress-free work-life. Rather, a leader’s goal *and role* should be to rethink and help their employees better manage stress and manifest well-being. While we certainly cannot always control the stress in our lives, we can choose our relationship to it. We can choose not to avoid it but to play an active role in how it can transform us. Holding now a deeper understanding of stress, I will next introduce positive psychology - the science of well-being - and its research-backed frameworks and interventions for leaders and organizations to reap the benefits of stress and well-being rather than simply avoid the costs of burnout and ill-being.

### **Positive Psychology**

In the late 1990s, then-president of the American Psychological Association (APA), Martin Seligman, made a deeply transformative observation and a bold call to action. First, he observed that the field of psychology was largely consumed with treating and alleviating disease,

illness, and suffering (Seligman, 1999). When we think of *health*, we tend to think, *absence of disease*. However, this deficit theory, Seligman argued, is an insufficient measure of health. When we think of *health*, we ought to think not just what is *absent* but also what is *present* (Keyes, 2007). In other words, psychological and physical health and well-being must extend beyond the mere absence of disease. It was this observation that would lead Seligman to facilitate a global paradigm shift within the field of psychology and that bold call to action.

In his APA presidential address in 1998, Seligman called on his colleagues in psychology to seek a more balanced and scientifically sound approach to and study of psychology and the human experience from one of illness, suffering, and weakness to one of well-being, flourishing, and strengths (Seligman, 1999). As a result of his address and APA presidential tenure, along with collaboration with other leaders within psychology such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Christopher Peterson, Ed Diener, and Albert Bandura, Seligman founded a new field called positive psychology.

This new field would expand psychology to explore, legitimize, and value aspects of life that increase well-being and enable individual, organizational, and community flourishing. It would seek to shift the emphasis away from not just what is wrong with people (weaknesses) but also what is right with people (strengths), to be interested in resilience (not just vulnerability), and to develop wellness, prosperity, and the good life (as opposed to the remediation of pathology). It would be grounded in the notion that health is more than the absence of ill-being but the presence of well-being. Specifically, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) stated:

Psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is

best. Psychology is not just a branch of medicine concerned with illness or health; it is much larger. It is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. (p. 7)

In short, positive psychology is the study and application of what makes life worth living (Gable & Haidt, 2005).

Before I continue introducing positive psychology, its reach and impact, I feel compelled to comment on the use of the word “positive.” Positive psychology is not about replacing negative with positive. It is not about forcing or focusing solely on being happy or being positive all the time (i.e., “positive vibes only.”) And it is certainly not about ignoring reality or problems. Rather, positive psychology is about intentionally focusing on the good as much as we naturally do the bad. It is about helping people to think more deeply and complexly about the good in life, just like we do the bad. Positive psychology is a science and a research-based application of seeing what is real *and yet* what is possible, what is problematic *and yet* what is positive. I italicize “and yet” because if I were asked to summarize in a matter of a few words, positive psychology, my pick would be these two.

Since that speech and its inception in 1998, positive psychology has exploded in size, reach, impact, and breadth, with thousands of researchers and practitioners globally studying the principles and practices of human flourishing (Rusk & Waters, 2013). I was first introduced to positive psychology during my undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan’s Center for Positive Organizations (CPO). Growing up, I never knew my dad to like his job, and my mom did not work outside the house. When my dad would come home from work, we would not talk about his day because “work was work” and now he was home. For eighteen years, my parents’ experience of work shaped my belief that work was just a means to an end, a means to provide for yourself and/or family, and that was it. It was not until I found positive psychology and the



CPO that my beliefs around work transformed. For the first time, I heard words like “purpose,” “strengths,” “thriving,” and “flourishing” used in the same sentences as words like “work” and “job.” For the first time, I started to believe work could be a means to *meaning*, a means to connect our lives to something greater than ourselves. At that time, shy of twenty-one years old, I discovered a passion for and purpose to help others experience more joy, meaning, and fulfillment through work. Today, five or so years later, I remain passionate about helping leaders and organizations bring out better versions of their people and the communities they serve. Though I realize now that how I perceived my dad’s work growing up may not have accurately reflected his experience, I remain eager and curious to challenge the perception and change the minds of people like me (prior to joining CPO) to create a world where people care about and experience well-being at work. And that is why I decided to go back to school at the University of Pennsylvania, the birthplace of the science of well-being.

In addition to scoping the field of positive psychology, Seligman also created a model for well-being, called PERMA. PERMA stands for: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Though the PERMA model is not central to this paper’s thesis, there are certain elements of it that we will explore later in our application plan (e.g., meaning, relationships, and achievement), and it has been one of my biggest learnings from MAPP in terms of how I think about practical ways to manage and increase well-being. For these reasons, I will briefly explain the five elements of PERMA; however, it is important to know that each element in and of itself contains decades of qualified research, theory, and practice to suggest that these truly are the greatest contributors to our well-being, and that is beyond the scope of this paper.

P: Of all the emotions we experience in a given day, the negative ones tend to outweigh the positive given a well-proven bias that most of us have towards negativity (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). While some degree of negative emotion is crucial to our well-being because negative emotions can make us more rational and alert us to risk or danger, positive emotions are powerful mechanisms in the pursuit of well-being, and, as I will further explain below, they can unleash upward spirals of flourishing with the power to change the course of our lives (Fredrickson, 2009)

E: Think about when you last felt “in the zone,” when time stopped for you, and when you felt completely absorbed in whatever it was you were doing. Maybe you were performing on stage, or playing in a sports game, or giving a presentation at work. Engagement is categorized by exactly that - feelings of when time stopped, when we lost self-consciousness, and when we were completely absorbed, in other words, when we were in *flow*. Flow is an experience during which one is completely immersed in the activity at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is different from pleasure or positive emotions in that flow involves a marrying of one’s skill/effort with the task/situation’s challenge. If one’s skills or effort are too advanced for the task or situation, they become bored; if one’s skills or efforts are insufficient for the task or situation, they become stressed. When one’s skill/effort match the task/situation’s challenge, particularly when there is opportunity to discover and leverage one’s strengths, there is potential for the deep enjoyment and personal development that come from flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

R: *Other people matter*. When he was asked to summarize positive psychology in a matter of a few words, Chris Peterson, one of the fathers of the field, famously responded

with those three (Peterson, 2006). (Recall mine were “and yet.”) Especially through the Covid-19 pandemic, we can all likely appreciate, now more than ever, the impact and importance of connecting with others on our well-being. The relationships we build with others, both in the day-to-day interactions with the check-out person and in the lifelong connections with friends and colleagues, they matter for our well-being. I will describe this impact in depth further below.

M: Meaning refers to “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self” (Seligman, 2011, p. 17). In addition to belonging, purpose (i.e., the goal(s) we work towards that contributes to the world), storytelling (i.e., the way(s) we make sense of and communicate the events in our lives), and transcendence (i.e., rising above the everyday experience as part of a higher reality) each also contributes to meaning in our lives (Smith, 2017). This particular pathway has always felt ambiguous to me. “What is the meaning of (your) life?” has felt like a daunting and highly abstract question. That said, thanks to MAPP, I have come to find it more relevant and practical to think of and talk about meaning through moments, specifically sacred moments. These are moments defined by feelings of connectedness, boundlessness, and transcendence (Pargament, 2022). They can occur with other people, in nature, at work, at big life transitions, and in little ordinary times. By noticing and experiencing more sacred moments in the day-to-day stressors *and* celebrations, we may find more meaning.

A: Accomplishment (or achievement) refers to the pursuit of success, winning, and mastery (Seligman, 2011). Skill, grit, and persistence are all factors that contribute to accomplishment (Duckworth et al., 2007). Self-efficacy is another important factor, which we will discuss later. From a work standpoint, making progress in and

accomplishing meaningful work has been indicated as the most important factor in career well-being (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Personally, I have found this to be relevant in my own career, as accomplishment plays a significant role in my occupational well-being.

Since positive psychology was founded, positive trends have emerged in organizational and management studies. These fields incorporate positive psychology principles and focus on understanding the conditions, phenomena, and processes that lead to flourishing in organizations. Just as humans are hard-wired towards the negative, organizations, too, often focus on what is wrong. Given my professional interest and scope of this paper, I will briefly introduce two similar yet distinct fields that seek to shed light into why and how organizations can reach their bottom-line goals through focusing on and enhancing an employee's experience, strengths, and well-being at work.

### **Positive Organizational Scholarship & Positive Organizational Behavior**

Positive organizational scholarship (POS) and positive organizational behavior (POB) complement the common and traditional organizational focus on problem-solving, dysfunction, and burnout by focusing on strength-spotting, performance, and well-being in organizations (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Let's explore them both briefly.

Positive organizational scholarship (POS) is the study of the generative factors and dynamics that positively influence workplace culture (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), such as thriving, flourishing, and growth. POS provides a lens through which to study organizations by its strengths and successes, rather than merely its flaws and failures. POS researchers suggest that there exist natural, generative (i.e., life-giving or resource-building) resources within each of

us that, when unlocked, have positive individual and organizational potential. Examples of these resources include positive emotions, connections, and meaning (which we will, in the next section, define as the flourishing triangle). When these resources are unlocked - in other words, developed and deployed - through organizational roles, structures, routines, and/or habits, organizations experience better outcomes, such as increased employee engagement and greater feelings of inspiration, pride, and meaning in our work (Cameron et al., 2003).

While POS focuses on creating organizational conditions and cultures for employees to thrive, positive organizational behavior (POB) focuses more on the individual, stake-like capacities of employee performance (Luthans, 2002). Specifically, POB is the study of human strengths and psychological capacities that improve work performance. POB researchers have identified four psychological capacities that most positively impact work performance: hope (Synder, 2000), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), optimism (Seligman, 1990), and resilience (Masten, 2001). Taken together, these four capacities are referred to as psychological capital, or PsyCap (Luthans et al., 2007) or the acronym, HERO. When developed and deployed in the workplace, individually and collectively, PsyCap (i.e., HERO) can lead to highly desirable organizational outcomes (Avey et al., 2011).

Both POS and POB offer valuable topics and frameworks through which to explore positive psychology in organizational and workplace contexts. Like positive psychology whereby a focus on the positive does not deny or negate the negative, adopting a positive lens in an organization does not ignore the presence and realities of its challenges and weaknesses. Rather, both POS and POB examine alongside and compliment the pursuit of understanding what makes an organization and its people thrive. We will revisit some of these topics from POS

and POB in the proceeding sections when we link and apply positive psychology and well-being with work-related stress.

### **Linking Positive Psychology with Work-Related Stress**

Now that we have looked at them independently, how might we apply positive psychology to help us manage work-related stress and manifest well-being in our workplaces? To investigate this question, there are several positive psychology theories and models on which to draw and to help build a bridge into application, which we will discuss next.

#### **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a framework through which to understand the internal factors that motivate us (Ryan, & Deci, 2017). It is one of the most cited contemporary theories of human motivation and wellness (Martela & Riekkii, 2018). SDT suggests that we all have three basic human needs - autonomy, competence, and relatedness - and when these needs are satisfied, they lead to greater motivation and well-being. *Autonomy* refers to the need to exercise choice in our daily lives. *Competence* refers to the need to grow, learn, and master new skills. *Relatedness* refers to the need to belong and connect with others (Ryan, & Deci, 2017). Leaders play an important role in establishing a culture where employees are free and able to pursue experiences that satisfy these three needs (Slemp et al., 2018). Therefore, if leaders can find a way(s) to leverage SDT at work - by providing genuine and plentiful opportunities for autonomous working, competence building, and connecting with others - then their employees may experience greater motivation and well-being at work.

## **Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory (SCT) is a learning theory and provides a framework for understanding how individuals actively shape and are shaped by their environments (Bandura, 2011). Prior to SCT, it was thought that learning could only be achieved through taking individual action (Skinner, 1950). However, SCT suggests that learning can also occur through individuals observing and modeling others in their environments. In other words, people do not learn new behavior solely by trying it for themselves; rather, they may also learn through observing and modeling the behaviors of those around them. SCT further suggests that learning is most likely to occur when an individual has strong self-efficacy, defined as “one’s perceived capability to produce a given level of attainment” (Bandura, 1997, p. 802). In other words, people are more likely to engage in learning behavior when they are more confident in their abilities. Self-efficacy has been argued to be the most important factor of success and a crucial determinant of perseverance (Maddux, 2009), which is a key driver of grit (Duckworth et al., 2007). Therefore, if leaders can find ways to build the self-efficacy of their employees, then their employees may experience greater growth and grit at work.

## **POS: The Flourishing Triangle**

Previously in this paper, we introduced positive organizational scholarship (POS) and its basic premise that there exists innate human resources within leaders and within organizations, such as positive emotions, connections, and meaning, that lead to positive human and organizational outcomes (Dutton et al., 2008). Taken together, these conditions - positive emotions, connections, and meaning - create what POS researchers call *the flourishing triangle*. The flourishing triangle represents a research-based model for how to cultivate human

flourishing at work, or more simply put, how to create a great place to work (YouTube, 2016, 1:17:00). Let's discuss each of the three conditions and how they, independently and collectively, build human capacity for flourishing at work.

*Positive emotions*, as we learned earlier in this paper from Seligman's PERMA model of well-being, are pleasant feelings that are attached with an action tendency (Fredrickson, 2009). For example, feeling hope may encourage planning for the future, and feeling interested may encourage exploring. (For a complete list of the ten positive emotions and their associated thought-action tendency and resources accrued, please see figure A in the appendix.) By experiencing positive emotions at home and/or at work, they *broaden* our cognitive scope and attentional capacity which then *builds* our development of new resources, both for immediate survival and for long-term flourishing (Fredrickson, 2009). This research, summarized by the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, enables us to entertain new ideas or see a perspective differently (i.e., broadens our capacity), which in turn leads to more creativity and innovation (i.e., builds our resources) (Fredrickson, 2009) - both of which are beneficial for the workplace. Therefore, leaders should consider ways for their employees to experience positive emotions at work to realize the legitimate and desirable benefits of such emotions.

*Positive connections*, in this model, are characterized as short-term connections with other people that are mutually engaging and energy-giving (Dutton & Heaphy, 2006). These positive connections can also be referred to as high-quality connections (HQCs). Think of the last time you had an interaction with someone at work - maybe a familiar colleague, maybe a new customer, or a complete stranger - where you felt energized and seen, clarity and competence, and/or you felt uplifted or maybe you helped uplift the other. This is what Dutton and colleagues (2006) call a high-quality connection: a brief, mutually positive, energizing, and



dynamic dyadic interaction between two people. They do not require deep, intimate, or prior knowledge of the other person. Conversely, think of the last time you had an interaction with someone at work where you felt blamed or belittled, or maybe depleted or demeaned. Compared to HQCs, these low-quality or corrosive connections can be costly for organizations in terms of engagement, productivity, quality, and employee health (Ragins & Dutton, 2007). On the other hand, studies by Dutton and Heaphy (2006) highlight several short and long-term benefits of HQCs, including decreased stress and anxiety, attenuated blood pressure and heart response, increased energy, and even longer lifespan. Therefore, leaders of organizations would benefit from prioritizing and fostering more HQCs - the everyday interactions with others - as a competitive advantage to increase productivity, performance, learning, engagement, and employee well-being. We will explore HQCs further and how to actually build them in the next section.

The third condition to cultivate flourishing at work is *positive meaning*. This occurs when an employee is able to view their work with value, worth, or significance (YouTube, 2016, 1:33:00). Do we see our work as just a job, or is it something that is inherently important to us and/or the world? As researchers have attempted to address and measure what makes work meaningful, they have identified several constructs that contribute to meaningful work: work centrality (how relatively important work is in comparison to other domains of life), work commitment (the relative importance work has to people's sense of self), intrinsic motivators (such as opportunities for advancement, recognition, achievement), extrinsic motivators (such as pay, working conditions, job security), and work values (Wrzesniewski, 2003). These constructs suggest that both the individual attributes (internal) and the job/environment (external), not one or the other, act together and are *both* important for experiencing meaning at work.

Complementing this research, POS researchers tackle this question of meaningful work by offering a tripartite model of how people frame their orientation, in other words their *relationship*, to their work. The three dominant orientations towards work that shape the experience of it include a job, a career, and a calling (Bellah et al., 1985). People that orient their work as a “job” tend to focus on the material benefits, such as the pay. Work is typically seen as a means to a financial end that allows them to enjoy their time away from work. People with “career” orientations tend to work for advancement through the organization and the pay, prestige, and increased self-esteem associated with the advancement. Lastly, people that orient their work as a “calling” tend to work not for the financial reward or advancement, but rather for the fulfillment that doing the work brings. Importantly, through this model, it is the individual doing the work who defines the orientation, not the design or type of work itself. For example, a teacher working solely for income may view their work as a job, whereas a garbage collector who sees their work as making the world a cleaner place could have a calling orientation. While one orientation is not inherently good or bad, those with a calling orientation have a stronger and more rewarding relationship with their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), and thus experience greater meaning.

Though seemingly abstract concepts, finding ways at work through roles (e.g., leaders, mentors), routines (e.g., staff meetings, orientations, one-on-ones), and processes (e.g., performance management, recognitions, onboarding) to experience and savor more positive emotions, to connect more with others, and to view our work as worthy is already a more concrete goal towards increasing workplace well-being. In summary, positive emotions, connections, and meaning, especially taken together, can be resource-producing, capacity-building, and can cultivate human flourishing in the workplace.

### **POB: The Holistic Stress Model**

Previously in this paper, we also introduced positive organizational behavior (POB) and the four psychological capacities that most positively impact work performance: PsyCap. There is growing evidence that PsyCap may buffer against work-related distress. In other words, people who have more available psychological resources (e.g., hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism (HERO)) are better able to manage and cope with stressors and demands across various life domains, including work (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). For example, one study found that PsyCap moderated the relationship between emotional stress, burnout, and job satisfaction (Cheung et al., 2011). Specifically, the researchers hypothesized that PsyCap would be negatively associated with burnout and positively associated with job satisfaction, and through their moderated regression analyses found that the correlations between PsyCap and burnout as well as job satisfaction were all in predicted direction (i.e., PsyCap was negatively related to emotional exhaustion ( $r = -0.50$ ), depersonalization ( $r = -0.56$ ), and personal accomplishment ( $r = -0.50$ ) and positively related to job satisfaction ( $r = 0.28$ ), each with a  $p$  value of 0.01 (Cheung et al., 2011)).

Drawing on POB, the holistic stress model - depicted in figure B in the appendix and proposed by Simmons and Nelson (2007) - provides a way to illustrate how demands or stressors at work manifest themselves in both positive and negative responses, and how these responses ultimately affect work outcomes and well-being. The model suggests that when an employee encounters a stressor, they evaluate (or cognitively appraise) that encounter with respect to its significance for or impact on well-being in two types of appraisal and associated response patterns: positive and/or stressful. Positive appraisals occur when the outcome of an encounter with a stressor/demand is perceived to preserve or enhance well-being (Lazarus & Folkman,

1984). Stressful, or negative, appraisals occur when the outcome of an encounter with a stressor/demand involves harm/loss, threat, or challenge. Specifically challenge appraisals hold the potential for gain or growth and as such, can be perceived as either a positive and/or stressful appraisal. Remember the cockroach story? When the lady encountered the cockroach (i.e., the stressor), she appraised it as stressful, therefore creating an overall stressful, or negative, experience. The waiter, however, had a much more positive response to the same stressor.

Furthermore, this model contends that any given stressor could hold the potential for both challenge and constraint, the appraisal of which would be manifest in both positive and negative emotions, attitudes, and behaviors (Simmons & Nelson, 2007). The leverage lies in understanding how individual differences, such as differences in PsyCap (hope, efficacy, optimism, and resilience), affect the relationship between stressors and responses. High levels of hope, for example, have been found to be the most effective indicator of eustress, and satisfaction with work and with supervision are significant predictors of hope at work (Simmons & Nelson, 2007). We would expect most work situations and stressors to elicit a mixed bag of both positive and negative responses. For example, a newly promoted person might experience joy with the recognition of achievement and yet disappointment with the need to subsequently relocate their family. In summary, a leader's focus on building PsyCap in employees can help facilitate both the coping of distress and the generation of eustress at work.

### **Applying Positive Psychology to Work-Related Stress**

Building on the theoretical foundation on which we just laid, what can leaders actually *do* to manage their team's work-related stress and manifest more well-being? Based on the research on work-related stress, coupled with the science of positive psychology, POS, and POB, I

propose that if leaders keep the following three overlapping and interconnected principles - meaning, mattering, and belonging - salient in their everyday mindset and behaviors, then their teams will better manage work-related stress and experience greater well-being. Next, I will share the what, why, and how for each principle: what it is, why it matters for work-related stress and well-being, and how leaders can put these principles into practice through zones of control, low-cost, high-impact positive psychology interventions. Importantly however, I feel compelled to highlight that work-related stress and especially burnout are often much bigger issues than an individual leader or even positive psychology alone can tackle - limitations to this application plan I will share later. *And yet*, we may still focus on where it is positive psychology *can* support a leader's role and influence in helping employees to manage work-related stress and manifest well-being.

### **Meaning: What, Why, and How**

For most American adults, we spend nearly half of our waking life at work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). For such a common and shared reality, our experiences of work vary from a distasteful necessity to a source of meaning. As we previously learned in the PERMA model and the flourishing triangle, meaning is a pathway to well-being (Seligman, 2011) and a thriving work culture (YouTube, 2016, 1:17:00). Applied in the context of work, meaningful work is defined as work that is personally significant, provides opportunities for growth, and is connected to something larger than ourselves (Steger et al., 2012). In other words, work is meaningful when we believe that it serves an important purpose. Therefore, we assume that it is not so much the *kind* of work that matters as much as the *relationship* we have to the work (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Recall this question from earlier: do we view our work as just a job,

or is it something that is inherently important to me and/or the world? We learned that those with a calling orientation (i.e., those who work not for the financial reward or advancement but for the fulfillment that the work brings), compared to those with a job or career orientation, tend to have stronger and more rewarding relationships with their work, and thus experience greater meaning (Wrzesniewski, 2003).

Why does experiencing meaning at work matter for work-related stress and well-being? From an individual standpoint, people with callings tend to put more time in at work and report higher job and life satisfaction than those with job or career orientations (Wrzesniewski, 2003). From a team standpoint, groups of individuals with calling orientations report stronger identification with their team, less conflict, more trust in management, and healthier group processes (e.g., communication, conflict). From an organizational standpoint, an argument could be made that if calling orientations are linked to high job satisfaction, and job satisfaction is linked to work performance, then it is likely that the best performers in organizations tend to see their work as a calling (Wrzesniewski, 2003). As research out of Harvard Business School has found (cited in Smith, 2017, p. 201), “Of all the events that can deeply engage people in their jobs, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work.” Therefore, as a leader of people, how can you help your employees experience greater meaning at work, and thus help them manage stress and manifest well-being?

***Encourage job crafting.*** Job crafting is the process of reimagining and redefining our work in a more personally meaningful way, and it can be done in three ways: task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). We know from research that the design of one’s job can significantly shape how they experience the meaning of their work (Hackman, 1980), and job crafting provides a framework and process to help

employees rethink and redesign elements of their work to allow them to experience greater meaning. Leaders play an important role in this process by allowing and encouraging their employees to job craft where appropriate - whether task, relational, or cognitive - to help them better manage stress and manifest well-being. Let's next explore the three ways of job crafting and how it can look in practice.

*Task crafting:* Our jobs consist of tasks, and those tasks can be altered or crafted in ways to make our work more meaningful. Traditional job design theory states that tasks are meaningful when they: involve a variety of skills (task variety), are seen as part of an identifiable whole (task identity), and impact others and that impact can be seen (task significance) (Hackman, 1980). To help cultivate greater task variety, task identity, and task significance, leaders can encourage employees to add tasks to their job that they find personally meaningful, emphasize tasks that they already see as personally meaningful, and redesign tasks to make them more personally meaningful (Berg et al., 2013). Any of these pathways may help an employee to perhaps develop a new skill(s) (task variety), see the bigger picture of a particular task and how it fits in (task identity), and/or see the end result or impact of their task on others (task significance.) For example, a recruiter with a personal interest in technology might add the task of leveraging social media to attract and communicate with candidates, thereby developing a new and desirable skill. Understandably however, encouraging an already stressed-out employee to *add* a task(s) to their job may not be the most appropriate pathway to help them experience more meaning; however, encouraging them to reflect on and lean into existing tasks that they most enjoy about their job (emphasize) or could enjoy more if [x] (redesign) could help them to experience more meaning. For example, that same recruiter may also have a personal interest in developing and coaching others, so they might think about training a less-experienced recruiter at

tasks they already do and are quite skilled at. In summary, leaders can encourage task crafting where appropriate to help employees reimagine and redefine the *tasks* of their work to help them experience more meaning.

*Relational crafting:* In addition to tasks, for most of us, our jobs also consist of relationships, and those relationships, too, can be altered or crafted in ways to make our work more meaningful (Berg et al., 2013). To cultivate greater meaning through our interactions and relationships at work, leaders can encourage employees to build new relationships, reimagine or redesign existing relationships, and help others. A leader might encourage an employee to build a relationship with someone who enables them to feel a sense of pride, dignity, or worth in their work. For example, one study found that hospital cleaners who increased the amount of interaction they had with patients and their families and built relationships with them experienced more appreciation and enacted a role of caregiver that elevated the sense of meaningfulness that they derived from their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). A leader might also encourage an employee to think about their existing relationships at work and how they can be crafted in new or more meaningful ways. For example, a school principal might reframe what it means to have relationships with teachers to be about getting to know their individual work preferences and interests (and helping them understand the principal's), rather than just about supervising or evaluating their work (Berg et al., 2013). Lastly, a leader might encourage an employee to help and support another employee(s) in their work. While this might seem counterintuitive to an already stressed-out employee, research shows that when we help others and feel helpful at work, we experience a heightened sense of personal worth and meaning (Dutton, 2003). Personally, I have found relational crafting most meaningful in my own work by taking stock of the interactions and relationships I have at work that most energize *and de-*



*energize* me and spending more time with those who energize and less time with those who de-energize, to the extent possible. That last part is important because there will always be people and interactions at work that might be both de-energizing *and* unavoidable; in these cases, I have found most helpful to accept and focus on those interactions I can control and perhaps turn to the next way in which we may craft our jobs: cognitive crafting.

*Cognitive crafting:* Unlike task and relational crafting, cognitive crafting does not involve changing anything physical or objective about our work. Rather, it involves tapping into the power of our own mindset to change how we subjectively experience our work (Berg et al., 2013). To do this, leaders can encourage employees to either expand their perceptions or narrow their perceptions of the purpose of their work. For example, a leader might encourage an employee to expand their perception of the purpose of their job to think about it more as a whole rather than as a set of separate parts or tasks, and this can help them to better connect with the impact of their work and experience their work as more meaningful (Hackman, 1980). By contrast, a leader might encourage an employee to narrow their perception of the purpose of their job to something of specific and personal significance and value to them. For example, a leader of a software engineer who finds meaning in creating new ideas, but not the actual coding involved in implementation, might encourage them to focus on and lean into that part of their job - of creating new ideas more so than of the coding and implementation (Berg et al., 2013). In summary, leaders can encourage cognitive crafting where appropriate to help employees reimagine and redefine their *subjective experience* of their work to help them experience more meaning.

***Give autonomy.*** We learned earlier that a lack of autonomy is one of the six main causes of burnout (Maslach, 1998). We also learned from self-determination theory (SDT) that

satisfying our human need for autonomy, particularly in a work context, has great potential to decrease distress and increase job satisfaction (Martela & Riekk, 2018) and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, research on SDT has shown that autonomy, along with competence and relatedness, are key predictors of meaning in life (Weinstein et al., 2012) and meaningful work (Martela et al., 2017). Therefore, a leader would benefit to think of job autonomy as a resource that, when given to an employee, can help reduce work-related stress, enhance capacity to achieve work goals (Clausen et al., 2022), and experience meaningful work (Martela et al., 2017).

Job autonomy is defined as how much freedom an employee has to do their job (Wooll, n.d.), and when it is conceptualized and treated as a resource, it becomes instrumental for employees to help manage work-related stress and manifest well-being by tapping into and nurturing the inner motivational resources of employees (Slemp et al., 2018). This particular leadership style can be referred to as *leader autonomy support* (LAS). Before I explain LAS, let's first contrast it with a controlling leadership style.

A controlling leadership style involves leaders imposing external constraints on behavior with the intention of compelling individuals to produce specific outcomes (Ryan et al., 1983). It is often interpreted as prescriptive, inflexible, and rigid and pressures an employee to think, feel, or behave in particular ways (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Generally, a controlling leadership style signals to an employee that the leader is the initiator of action, which shifts the employee's perceived cause of one's behavior to an external source, rather than them feeling internally motivated (Deci et al., 2017).

By contrast, leader autonomy support refers to leadership behaviors that promote a climate of support and understanding within leader-employee relationships (Reeve, 2015). LAS

is characterized by leaders who take interest in the perspectives of their employees, provide opportunities for choice and input, encourage self-initiation, and avoid the use of external rewards or sanctions to motivate behavior, and it has generally been found to increase employee performance, engagement, and well-being (Baard et al., 2004). Furthermore, examples of leaders giving autonomy to an employee include freedom and flexibility in setting their own work schedule and deadlines, asking for their input on organizational goals, and designing their own work processes in pursuit of an established goal/task (Wooll, n.d.). These behaviors signal to an employee that *they* are the initiator and regulators of their own actions (Deci, 2017). Furthermore, when we are able to autonomously choose our activities and tasks at work, they are prone to be experienced as more meaningful (Ryff, 1989).

A recent meta-analysis on leader autonomy support in the workplace conducted by Slemp and colleagues (2018) demonstrated that LAS is an important predictor of positive employee and organizational outcomes, with correlations that are generally consistent with SDT propositions in organizations. For example, LAS was positively associated with employee well-being and negatively associated with distress and burnout. In summary, when employees perceive that they are free to perform their work in their own way within the context of LAS, they are more likely to experience improved work performance and well-being (Clausen et al., 2022; Slemp et al., 2018), less distress and burnout (Slemp et al., 2018), and more meaningful work (Martela et al., 2017; Ryff, 1989).

***Practice real-time resilience.*** The reality is that there will always be stressors in our lives, especially at work. There will always be a deadline that feels unreasonable, a workload that feels too heavy, or a colleague that frustrates us. These stressors are likely to send us into a *stress is harmful* mindset. We may start to tell ourselves that we can't perform or be productive, or that

we can't get through whatever challenge. *It's just too much!* These internal dialogues are examples of what psychologists call thinking traps (Beck, 1979), and they can lead to self-destructive behaviors like avoiding challenges, hiding problems, ignoring feedback, and not forming supportive relationships (McGonigal, 2016). Thinking traps are overly rigid patterns in our thinking that cause us to miss critical information. They tend to be most often triggered by situations of ambiguity, time pressure, and depletion - or what we might refer to as "stressful situations." (See Figure C in the appendix for a list of common thinking traps.)

Drawing on POB, we learned that resilience is one of four psychological capacities that most positively impact work performance (recall PsyCap) (Masten, 2001; Luthans et al., 2007). So, what can leaders do to help their employees shut down counterproductive thinking when it happens, and therefore build focus and confidence as well as make meaning out of the situation? Real-time resilience strategies can help. The next time you, a leader, or one of your employees encounters a stressful situation at work and you notice a harmful thinking pattern, try one of the following tactics:

1. **Evidence:** I know that is not true because... (use evidence to counteract the thought)
2. **Plan:** If that happens, I'm going to... (plan a helpful response)
3. **Reframe:** A better or more productive way to see this is... (consider a different, more productive perspective)
4. **Control:** One thing I can influence or control is... (notice what is within our zone of control or sphere of influence)
5. **Strengths:** One of my strengths I can use in this situation is... (leverage a strength)

The key is to make your responses believable, specific, and vivid (Reivich & Salzberg, 2022). For example, if I am stressed out about giving an upcoming presentation to my newly merged team, it would not be believable to respond with, *I know that is not true because I don't really care about this presentation* (when, in fact, I do deeply care.) A more helpful response might be, *one thing I can control is my preparedness and how I show up for this presentation, or*

*a more productive way to see this is as an opportunity to, for the first time, introduce and integrate a diverse group of skilled professionals to learn from each other and grow our capability.* Drawing on our PERMA model discussion around meaning through moments, one strategy I have found personally helpful when I'm in a stressful situation and a harmful thinking pattern is to ask myself, *what is this experience trying to teach me? What can I learn from it? In other words, what meaning can I make from this [moment/situation/experience]?*

In summary, there will always be stressors at work, and many will be beyond our control. As a leader, it is important to help your employees hold a more balanced and productive view of stress - to fear it less and to use it more as a resource for deriving meaning and well-being. To, again, reference Victor Frankl: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom" (2017, p. vi).

#### Leader Quick Tips to Cultivate Meaning

- Encourage job crafting
  - Encourage task crafting by allowing your people to craft their tasks to experience a variety of skills/tasks (task variety), to see tasks as part of an identifiable whole (task identity), and to see the end-result and impact of their work (task significance). Encourage them to add tasks to their job that they find personally meaningful, emphasize tasks that they already see as meaningful, and redesign tasks to make them more meaningful, where beneficial and appropriate.
  - Encourage relational crafting by allowing your people to build new relationships with others and/or lean into existing relationships in new or more meaningful ways. Help and encourage them to help others in carrying out their jobs.
  - Encourage cognitive crafting by helping your people change how they subjectively experience their work through either expanding and/or narrowing their perceptions on the aspects of their work they find most meaningful.
- Give autonomy
  - Treat job autonomy as a resource by giving your people the possibility and freedom to exercise discretion where beneficial and appropriate, such as allowing them to set their own work schedule and deadlines, ask for their input on organizational goals, and design their own work processes in pursuit of an established goal/task.
  - Embrace leader autonomy support (LAS) by taking interest in the perspectives of your people, providing them opportunities for choice and input, encouraging self-initiation, and avoiding the use of external rewards or sanctions to motivate behavior.

- Practice real-time resilience
  - Help you and your people respond to a counterproductive thought in real-time, triggered by a stressful event or situation, using the following strategies:
    - Evidence: I know that is not true because...
    - Plan: If that happens, I'm going to...
    - Reframe: A better or more productive way to see this is...
    - Control: One thing I can influence or control is...
    - Strengths: One of my strengths I can use in this situation is...
  - When in a stressful situation, encourage the following question: *What is this experience trying to teach me?*
  - Get to know you and your people's stress mindsets by noticing how you/they think and talk about stress and how you/they react to other people's stress. Help them to see stress not as something to fear but as something to follow.

### **Mattering: What, Why, and How**

Similar to the basic human needs suggested by SDT to experience well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017), we, too, have a need to feel like we matter (Prilleltensky, 2021). When we matter, we both feel valued and add value, in our families, communities, and in our work. In the context of work, since feeling devalued is a primary stressor of work (i.e., feeling ignored, excluded, or actively disrespected), it is especially important for leaders to know the critical role they play in creating climates where employees feel like they matter (i.e., feeling valued and adding value) (Prilleltensky, 2021).

Why does feeling valued and adding value at work matter for work-related stress and well-being? Employees who feel valued by their organizations are more likely to be engaged in their work and have higher performance and well-being (Ballard & Grawitch, 2016). Furthermore, feeling valued at work is highly associated with job performance and satisfaction, intrinsic motivation to do well, and commitment to the workplace (Pierce et al., 1989). The more that employees feel like they matter, the less likely they think about quitting. Additionally, feeling valued by others at work has been correlated with less work-related stress (Rayle, 2006).

In one study, for example, interpersonal mattering was negatively correlated with burnout (Haizlip et al., 2020). Specifically, this study included 324 nurses who are in a profession known for high stress rates. The researchers utilized Jung and Heppner's (2017) Work Mattering Scale (WMS) to measure interpersonal mattering and the Compassion Fatigue subscale in the Professional Quality of Life Scale (Stamm, 2005) to measure burnout. Overall, nurses in the sample tended to experience high levels of mattering (mean [SD], 4.93 [0.74], out of a 6-point Likert scale) and relatively low levels of burnout (mean [SD], 2.18 [0.61], out of a 5-point Likert scale). Correlational analyses indicated a strong negative correlation between mattering and burnout ( $r = -0.47, p < 0.01$ ) (Haizlip et al., 2020).

Every interaction at work is an opportunity to make someone feel valued or devalued. Through these interactions, both our verbal and nonverbal behaviors can convey a message of inclusion or exclusion (Prilleltensky, 2021). For example, words can be either supportive or sarcastic. Jokes can be either uplifting or demeaning. Gazes can be compassionate or critical. The verbal and nonverbal behaviors of leaders can be especially helpful or harmful in making employees feel valued and like they add value. Mattering is signaled through our behaviors at work. Underscoring the importance of a leader's role in creating climates where employees feel like they matter through respectful behaviors, in one study of over 20,000 employees, 54% of participants said they do not feel respected by their leader, yet respect from their leader was reported as the most important predictor of positive work-related outcomes (Porath & Gerbasi, 2015).

While feeling valued by your leader and at work is an important component of mattering, so is adding value. To fully matter, we need skills and opportunities to make contribution, to ourselves and to others (Baumeister, 1991). Drawing again on self-determination theory (Ryan &

Deci, 2017), to matter is to experience autonomy over our decisions and actions, to feel competent and to make contribution in some area of life, and to have meaningful and supportive social connections (Prilleltensky, 2021). Therefore, as a leader of people, how can you help your employees both feel valued and add value at work, and thus help them manage stress and manifest well-being?

***Promote a “We Culture.”*** To understand what exactly a “We Culture” means and why it matters for mattering, let’s first contrast it with a “Me Culture.” In a “Me Culture,” we can think of the following mantra: *I have the right to feel valued and happy* (Prilleltensky, 2021). Feeling valued and happy is typically what American culture promotes when it comes to mattering: “I Matter.” Rather, the true way to matter is to embrace an attitude that “We Matter.” In other words, to pursue both feeling valued and adding value. In a “We Culture,” we can think of the following mantra: *We all have the right and responsibility to feel valued and add value.*

As a leader, how can we practically create more “We Cultures” through our everyday behaviors and interactions? We can characterize this type of culture into three pillars and adopt behaviors within each pillar that promote an employee’s ability to both feel and add value. The three pillars of a “We Culture” are supportive, effective, and reflective (Baney, 2012). (Think of the acronym, SER.) Let’s briefly explore each pillar and their associated leadership behaviors to cultivate mattering.

A supportive culture encourages behaviors that affirm, value, and appreciate people (Brown, 2015). This pillar of a SER culture is all about making employees feel valued. For example, when an employee succeeds, they are celebrated. When they struggle, they are supported. When they experiment, they are not scolded for trying, even when they fail. However, since true mattering is not only about feeling valued but also about adding value, we turn to the



second pillar of a SER culture: effective. An effective culture allows us to add value through accomplishing goals, which encourages behaviors around setting clear objectives, taking initiative, communicating clearly, offering feedback, engaging in corrective action, and monitoring progress. Importantly, in a SER culture, employees' strengths are known, leveraged, and recognized by their leaders. Employees can add more value when their strengths are known to them and their leaders, leveraged through work assignments and teams, and recognized in personally meaningful ways. (To learn more about strengths-spotting at work, please see the appendix for links to the VIA Strengths Assessment and the Reflected Best-Self Exercise.) As Peter Drucker famously said, "The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths making a system's weaknesses irrelevant" (Whitney, 2010). Lastly, the third pillar of a SER culture builds on our need for learning, innovation, and growth (Canevello & Crocker, 2010). A reflective culture encourages behaviors that provide career growth and development, feel a sense of progress, and reward the desire to learn, be curious, and question old ways of doing things (Prilleltensky, 2021).

In summary, leaders can promote a "We Culture" through supportive, effective, and reflective behaviors, such as strength-spotting, signaling to an employee that they both feel valued and add value. In doing so and feeling like they matter, employees may experience less emotional exhaustion (a characterization of burnout) and improved well-being (Prilleltensky, 2021).

***Build self-efficacy.*** We learned earlier from social cognitive theory that people are more likely to engage in learning behavior when they have high self-efficacy - in other words, when they believe in their abilities to achieve certain outcomes (Bandura, 2001). When we are confident in our ability to achieve goals, we are better able to manage stress and are more

resilient in the face of adversity (Prilleltensky, 2021). We also learned from self-determination theory that competence is critical to motivation, vitality, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Without competence, we cannot make a difference (Prilleltensky, 2021). In other words, feeling both capable and competent is hugely important in adding value, a key component of mattering.

As a leader, how can we help build the self-efficacy of an employee? Maddux and Kleiman (2021) suggest there are five primary sources of self-efficacy: performance experiences, vicarious experiences, imagined experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological/emotional states. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the first two sources as techniques for leaders to build self-efficacy: performance (or mastery) experiences and vicarious experiences.

To understand mastery experiences, we can think of the phrase, “seeing is believing.” When employees have tangible evidence of their success and can see themselves coping effectively with stressful or difficult situations, their sense of mastery is likely to be heightened (Maddux & Kleiman, 2021). Mastery experiences involve leaders allowing the developing employee to personally experience mastery and success first-hand through hands-on training and/or on-the-job settings, rather than doing it for them or providing step-by-step instruction. These experiences are most likely to be successful when goals and strategies to achieve are specific and proximal, providing greater motivation and evidence of achievement and efficacy than goals that are abstract, vague, or in the distant future (Maddux & Kleiman, 2021). Furthermore, mastery experiences structured through gradual attainments, rather than quick results and easy successes, are most effective at instilling strong efficacy (Bandura, 2000).

In cases when performance or mastery experiences may be either too difficult, risky, or costly, vicarious experiences can also build self-efficacy and teach new skills. These experiences involve leaders modeling for the developing employee what mastery and success look like,

allowing the employee to visualize themselves in the task (Luthens et al., 2007) and believing that they can do the same thing (Conger & Keane, 1981). When leaders convey knowledge, skills, and strategies for managing demands, their example in pursuing challenges fosters aspirations and interest in certain activities (Bandura, 2000). Furthermore, seeing people like ourselves succeed by perseverant effort raises our beliefs in our own abilities (Bandura, 2000). To illustrate the use of vicarious experiences to enhance self-efficacy through a non-professional example, think of advertisements for weight loss or smoking cessation programs that feature testimonials from successful people, allowing the viewer to see themselves as accomplishing this difficult task too. An example of a vicarious experience in a work setting might be for a developing employee to observe their leader or colleague succeed at running a big meeting or giving an important presentation, allowing the employee to visualize themselves in that role and learn from their leader or colleague's success.

In summary and taken together, by providing both mastery and vicarious experiences, leaders may build their employees' self-efficacy, helping them to add value and contributing to their sense of mattering.

#### Leader Quick Tips to Cultivate Mattering

- Promote a “We Culture”
  - Encourage the following mantra and reward behaviors accordingly: We all have the right and responsibility to feel valued and add value.
  - Affirm, value, and appreciate your people. (Supportive)
  - Set clear objectives, take initiative, communicate clearly, offer feedback, engage in corrective action, and monitor progress. Focus not just on your employee's development opportunities but also on their strengths. Ask your people for and observe what their top strengths are, leverage them through work assignments, build teams and tasks around them, and recognize them in personally meaningful ways. (Effective)
  - Offer your people growth opportunities (e.g., stretch assignments, mentorships, development courses). Allow them to feel a sense of progress towards goals, and reward their desire to learn, be curious, and question old ways of doing things. (Reflective)

- Build self-efficacy
  - Create experiences for your people to experience mastery and success first-hand through hands-on training and/or on-the-job settings. Make goals and strategies specific and proximal. (Mastery experience)
  - Model what mastery and success look like for your people, allowing them to visualize themselves in the situation and believing that they can do the same thing. (Vicarious experience)

### **Belonging: What, Why, and How**

Similar to our need to feel value and add value, we also have a need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Maslow, 1968). While there are many definitions of belonging depending on the context, a common thread through the literature and for the purposes of this paper in the context of work, we will refer to belonging as our need for connection and for meaningful relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

We are naturally social creatures. As Lieberman (2013) says, our need for interaction and connection with others is just as important to our survival as are food and water and it is possible that we need social connection more than anything. Supporting this argument is Harlow's famous cloth and wire monkey experiments back in the early 1930s. In his experiments, Harlow separated infant monkeys from their mothers and provided the infant monkeys with two surrogate mothers: one made out of wire that provided food and the other made of cloth and did not provide food. In a counterintuitive finding, the infant monkeys overwhelmingly chose to spend their time with the cloth surrogate mother and only visited the wire mother to feed. In a series of experiments, Harlow concluded that the mother-infant relationship and the psychological health and development of the infant monkey depended not only on nursing and food but also on love and contact (Harlow, 1959). While the experiments Harlow conducted then are nowadays in many ways considered deeply disturbing and unethical, his findings led to later

work and theories, such as those of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, who found that the quality of bonds we form with caregivers in our early life is highly influential in the quality of relationships we form later in life (Bowlby, 1969), with friends, family members, romantic partners, and even colleagues.

Why does belonging at work matter for work-related stress and well-being? We learned earlier that poor relationships are one of the six main causes of burnout (Maslach, 1998). In a 2022 study of the factors associated with work-related stress and burnout among corporate employees amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, Lam and colleagues found that a work environment that values strong relationships among colleagues and between supervisors and supervisees helps create a stronger sense of belonging (Lam et al., 2022). Drawing now on the third component of self-determination theory, relatedness - or the need to belong and connect with others - we learned is also critical for motivation and well-being (Ryan, & Deci, 2017).

Furthermore, turning to positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship, we learned that strong relationships are a pathway to well-being according to the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) and that positive connections at work is one way to create a thriving culture (recall the flourishing triangle), therefore contributing to a sense of belonging. Just as belonging is a powerful tonic for our well-being, exclusion is toxic for our health (Prilleltensky, 2021). In brief contrast to belonging, feeling rejected, excluded, or ignored in the workplace leads to an increase in stress, anxiety, and a myriad of other negative feelings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, as a leader of people, how can you help your employees feel like they belong at work, and thus help them manage stress and manifest well-being?

***Build high-quality connections (HQCs).*** We learned in the previous section about the benefits of high-quality connections and, conversely, the costs of corrosive connections at work.

According to Dutton (2003), the quality of our connections with others is one of the most powerful variables that influences the well-being of individuals and organizations. Now, let's discuss how to actually build them. There are four behavioral pathways to build HQCs: respectful engagement, task enabling, play (Stephens et al., 2012), and trust (Dutton, 2003).

*Respectful engagement* refers to how we show esteem, dignity, and care for another person (Ramarajan et al., 2008). Like mattering and the verbal and non-verbal behaviors that can convey messages of inclusion or exclusion, respectful engagement is also expressed through everyday behavior and small moves, such as gestures, words, and body language. It involves being present with others, affirming them, and communicating and listening in a way that manifests regard and appreciation of the other's worth (Dutton, 2003). When leaders respectfully engage, they demonstrate the basic human entitlements of respect and dignity, and they foster peoples' chances of experiencing a HQC (Stephens et al., 2012). For leaders, there are five pathways to respectful engagement (Dutton, 2003). Let's explore each briefly.

*Conveying presence.* This means being psychologically and/or physically available and receptive to help and turning one's attention to another (Dutton, 2003) by focusing on the here and now, and not the past or future. Though it sounds simple, conveying presence can be exceptionally difficult, especially with constant pressures to look ahead to future goals and anticipated challenges. I'm sure we can all recall an experience in conversation with a boss or a colleague who was very clearly distracted by maybe a text message or email. Conversely, recall an experience when you felt completely attuned and listened to by your leader. That's respectful engagement.

*Being genuine.* Another strategy that sounds simple however, putting on a front or acting on external pressures, rather than on internal desires and motivations, for example, are all too

common in our workplaces, and they block our capacity to respectfully engage another person (Harter, 2002). In short, respectful engagement requires being real.

*Communicating affirmation.* This can be accomplished in a few different ways: affirming someone's situation, looking for the value in the other and what they have to offer, expressing recognition, expressing genuine interest in others' thoughts, feelings, or actions, and treatment of time, including showing up on, granting, and apologizing for wasting time (Dutton, 2003). As an example, and especially when an employee is feeling particularly stressed and going through a rough time, affirming their situation by noticing it and communicating your acknowledgement and appreciation can be a powerful way to engage: "*I want you to know that I see what you are going through, and no one could do this job better than how you are doing it.*"

*Effective listening.* In other words, we listen to learn and not to respond. Effective listening involves acknowledging the feelings conveyed either explicitly or implicitly by the other person, and it involves trying to more fully understand the context of the other person.

*Supportive communication.* One way to do this is to make more requests than demands. Though demands may get something done in the short term and demonstrate a manager's power in that moment, they dilute the connective potential in the relationship (Dutton, 2003). Conversely, making genuine requests with clear objectives, positive action language, and specific terms not only also gets work done but also yields greater trust and connection.

Now that we've explored respectful engagement as one pathway to building HQCs, let's next explore task enabling, the second pathway. *Task enabling* comprises the various strategies people use to facilitate the successful performance of others (Dutton, 2003). It involves interpersonal actions that help someone complete or perform a task (Stephens et al., 2012). In

other words, help someone do something. Like respectful engagement, there are also five strategies for leaders to create task enabling, and thus potential for high-quality connection:

- A. **Teaching:** This involves providing information that allows an employee to do their job more effectively.
- B. **Designing:** Like job crafting, this involves selecting and arranging elements of an employee's job to make it more interesting and appealing.
- C. **Advocating:** This involves helping an employee perform by easing the navigation of the political context of the organization.
- D. **Accommodating:** This involves altering the substance, timing, or process of what an employee is doing to help them succeed.
- E. **Nurturing:** This involves focusing on an employee's developmental needs.

The third pathway to building HQCs is through *play*. By creating space in team meetings, for example, for people to be social and playful (e.g., improvisation activities, playing a game, telling a joke, sharing a talent), we not only reduce stress, but we also learn more about and bond with each other in ways that are not possible or less likely in work or non-play mode.

The fourth and final pathway to building HQCs is *trust*. This means acting towards others in a way that conveys belief in their integrity, dependability, and benevolence (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). In other words, assuming and acting on positive expectations about another's behaviors and intentions. There are many ways to both build (and break) trust, including by sharing accurate and timely information that is valuable to others, appropriately disclosing information about ourselves, using inclusive language, sharing credit for work, delegating decisions and tasks, granting access to valuable resources, and soliciting and acting on input. Not only do we build trust through what we say and do but also through what we do not say and do, such as not jumping to conclusions about someone's poor intentions, not demeaning others, avoiding check-up behaviors and surveillance, and not publicly chastising people for poor performance.



In summary and in revisiting our definition of belonging as a need for connection and for meaningful relationships with others, the building and presence of high-quality connections with others play an important role in an employee's sense of belonging at work.

#### Leader Quick Tips to Cultivate Belonging

- **Build high-quality connections**
  - Respectfully engage with your people through everyday interactions and behaviors. Convey presence, be genuine and real, communicate affirmation, listen effectively, and communicate supportively. For example, ask more generative questions (e.g., instead of asking, "How was your weekend?" try, "What was the highlight of your weekend?") Give them your undivided attention, express your gratitude to affirm their value, and ensure equal turn-taking in meetings or conversations.
  - Task enable your people and encourage them to also help facilitate the successful performance of others.
    - **Teach:** Provide information that allows them to do their job more effectively.
    - **Design:** Select and arrange elements of their job to make it more interesting and appealing. (Think job crafting.)
    - **Advocate:** Ease the navigation of the political context of the organization.
    - **Accommodate:** Alter the substance, timing, or process of what they are doing to help them succeed.
    - **Nurture:** Focus on their development.
  - Create time and space for your people to be social and playful with each other.
  - Build and maintain trust by assuming and acting on positive assumptions and exceptions about your people's behavior and intentions. Be mindful of what you are saying and doing, and what you are not saying and not doing, to build or break trust.

### **Summary**

Let's briefly reflect on the purposeful journey we've just traveled before we conclude with some limitations and key takeaways. We started by analyzing the current U.S. landscape of stress and work-related stress (WRS). We did this through exploring the various definitions of stress, ultimately referring to WRS to what arises when something we care about is at stake in

the context of our work. We quickly differentiated stress from burnout and the common causes of burnout: workload, perceived lack of control, lack of reward or recognition, poor relationships, lack of fairness, and values mismatch. We then explored common stressors, which we learned are highly individualized and inherently neutral. This led us into a discussion around differentiating between good (eustress) versus bad (distress) stress and the business case for why a leader's goal should not be to strive for a stress-free work-life for their employees; rather, they should strive to help their employees rethink and better manage stress and manifest well-being.

From there, we introduced positive psychology, founded by Martin Seligman and colleagues, along with his PERMA model of well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. We also introduced positive organizational scholarship (POS) and positive organizational behavior (POB). These introductions helped set the stage for a theoretical exploration of some of the theories and frameworks within these fields, such as self-determination theory, social cognitive theory, POS's flourishing triangle, and POB's holistic stress model, as they relate to an employee's experience with stress and well-being at work.

Finally, we dove into application: what can leaders actually *do* within their zones of control to manage their employees' work-related stress and manifest more well-being? I proposed that if leaders keep the following three overlapping and interconnected principles - meaning, mattering, and belonging - and the various low-cost, high-impact interventions discussed and associated with each - salient in their everyday mindset and behaviors, then their teams will better manage work-related stress and experience greater well-being. Intervention ideas included encouraging job crafting, giving autonomy, and practicing real-time resilience to cultivate meaning, promoting a "We Culture" and building self-efficacy to cultivate mattering,

and building high-quality connections to cultivate belonging. The reason I say meaning, mattering, and belonging are overlapping and interconnected principles is because while high-quality connections, for example, are sure to cultivate belonging, they are also likely to cultivate meaning and mattering as well. Similarly, relational job crafting, for example, is also likely to cultivate belonging, along with meaning, at work. That is why I suggest that it might be helpful to think of this application plan - meaning, mattering, and belonging and the associated interventions - as more of a Venn diagram with various overlaps rather than as three distinct and separate circles, as depicted in the appendix.

### **Limitations**

While I firmly believe a leader's focus on meaning, mattering, and belonging will help reduce work-related stress and increase well-being, there are several limitations to which I want to call attention. First, and one already stated, work-related stress and especially burnout are often much bigger issues than an individual or employee alone can tackle. Often, organizational-level interventions, such as restructuring work or improving performance management, can be effective and have longer-lasting positive impacts on work-related stress and burnout (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022). Though there are certainly effective individual-level interventions that can help manage stress and manifest well-being, such as those discussed in this paper, it is important to recognize that individual-targeted methods alone cannot overcome institutional problems.

To that end, a second limitation of this paper is positive psychology's inability to fully and comprehensively address work-related stress and burnout. The scope of this paper, and as such, the recommendations provided within, is within the realm of what positive psychology can offer these topics. For example, workload is the single greatest contributor of employee burnout

(Harshana, 2018), and yet, positive psychology alone cannot address managing workload. Additionally, a positive psychology intervention may not necessarily nor always be the most appropriate response in every case of an employee's work-related stress and burnout especially. In other words, positive psychology can, in many (not all) cases, offer empirically based and relevant recommendations to help reduce work-related stress, but it does not fully and comprehensively solve all causes of it. Rather, more holistic approaches in the field of management studies are needed to help address the whole problem from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Furthermore, it is important to underscore that not all stress can or should be eustress, hence one of the reasons we explored the signs and symptoms of burnout early on in this paper. For some people, chronic, uncontrollable stress inhibits their ability to choose their mindset about it and to see the benefits it may produce in our lives.

Lastly, while this paper's application attempts to offer interventions that are within a leader's zone of control (i.e., not involving significant cost or other person or resource investment), the importance of senior leadership support in driving any organizational change initiative, including this one, is critical for success and sustainment.

### **Conclusion**

Work and well-being might seem like a paradox, and undoubtedly, some may have even snickered at the very title of this paper. There is an implicit undertone in American society that work is not supposed to be fun or fulfilling. That's why it's called "work," right? And words like "positive" and "flourishing" are so fluffy, not for serious businesspeople to be concerned with, right? I know this because I once believed it. Today, I could not disagree more, and it is my hope that after reading this paper, I have at least piqued your curiosity into learning more about stress

and well-being at work and the desirable effects both can have on performance, productivity, and health. That is not to say that work will not always have some challenges, frustrations, and stressors. As we've learned, sometimes these very stressors, when managed properly, can be the catalysts for work well-being. (And when managed poorly, they can lead to burnout.) Recall earlier, I suggested a leader's goal should not be to strive for a stress-free work-life. Rather, a leader's goal and role should be to rethink and help their employees better manage stress and manifest well-being. (Think *Mindset 2: Stress is enhancing!*)

*Coddiwomple (v): to travel purposefully towards a vague destination.* Through the research and interventions offered in this paper, each informed by sound theory and practical application, may all of us leaders be more equipped to coddiwomple towards a world of workplaces with more managed stress and manifested well-being.

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## Appendix

### Supporting Tools:

- Job Crafting Exercise
- VIA Strengths Assessment
- Reflected Best Self Exercise
- Questions to Build HQCs

### Supporting Popular Press Books:

Brown, B. (2015). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Avery.

Dutton, J. E., & Spreitzer, G. M. (2014). *How to be a positive leader: Small actions, big impact*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

McGonigal, K. (2016). *The upside of stress: Why stress is good for you, and how to get good at it*. Penguin.

Moss, J. (2021). *The burnout epidemic: The rise of chronic stress and how we can fix it*. Harvard Business Press.

Prilleltensky, I., & Prilleltensky, O. (2021). *How people matter: Why it affects health, happiness, love, work, and society*. Cambridge University Press.

Seligman, M. E. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Simon and Schuster.

Smith, E. E. (2017). *The power of meaning: Finding fulfillment in a world obsessed with happiness*. Crown.

Figure A

Ten positive emotions and the broaden and build theory

**Table 1.1** Ten representative positive emotions

<b>Emotion label</b>	<b>Appraisal theme</b>	<b>Thought-action tendency</b>	<b>Resources accrued</b>	<b>Core trio in mDES item</b>
Joy	Safe, familiar unexpectedly good	Play, get involved	Skills gained via experiential learning	Joyful, glad, or happy
Gratitude	Receive a gift or benefit	Creative urge to be prosocial	Skills for showing care, loyalty, social bonds	Grateful, appreciative, or thankful
Serenity (a.k.a., contentment)	Safe, familiar, low effort	Savor and integrate	New priorities, new views of self	Serene, content, or peaceful
Interest	Safe, novel	Explore, learn	Knowledge	Interested, alert, or curious
Hope	Fearing the worst, yearning for better	Plan for a better future	Resilience, optimism	Hopeful, optimistic, or encouraged
Pride	Socially valued achievement	Dream big	Achievement motivation	Proud, confident, or self-assured
Amusement	Nonserious social incongruity	Share joviality, laugh	Social bonds	Amused, fun-loving, or silly
Inspiration	Witness human excellence	Strive toward own higher ground	Motivation for personal growth	Inspired, uplifted, or elevated
Awe	Encounter beauty or goodness on a grand scale	Absorb and accommodate	New worldviews	Awe, wonder, amazement
Love	Any/all of the above in an interpersonal connection	Any/all of the above, with mutual care	Any/all of the above, especially social bonds	Love, closeness, or trust

*Note:* Reprinted from Fredrickson (2013, p. 5).

Figure B

Holistic stress model

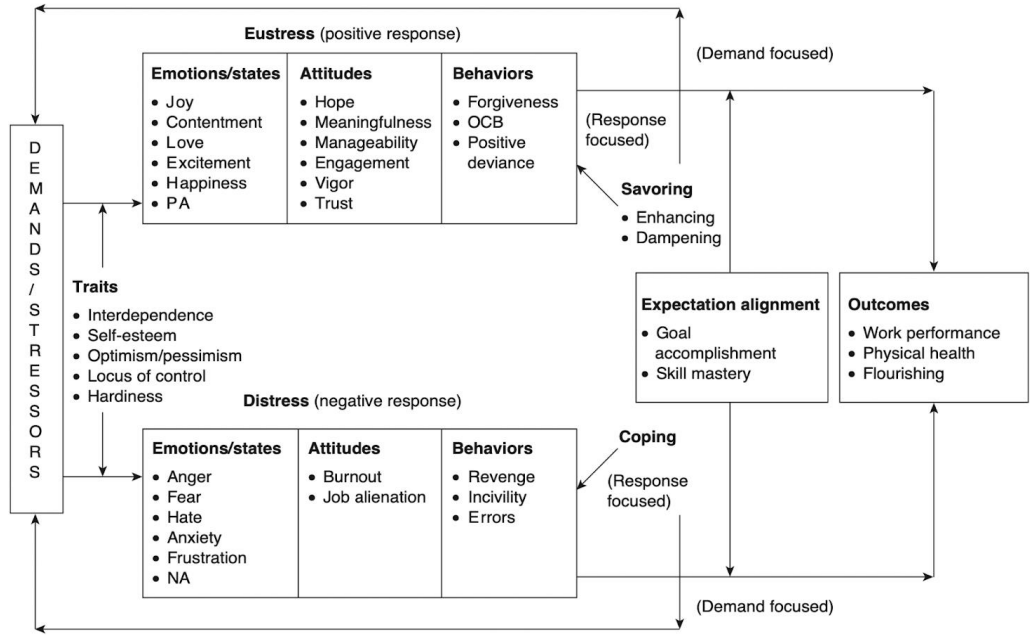
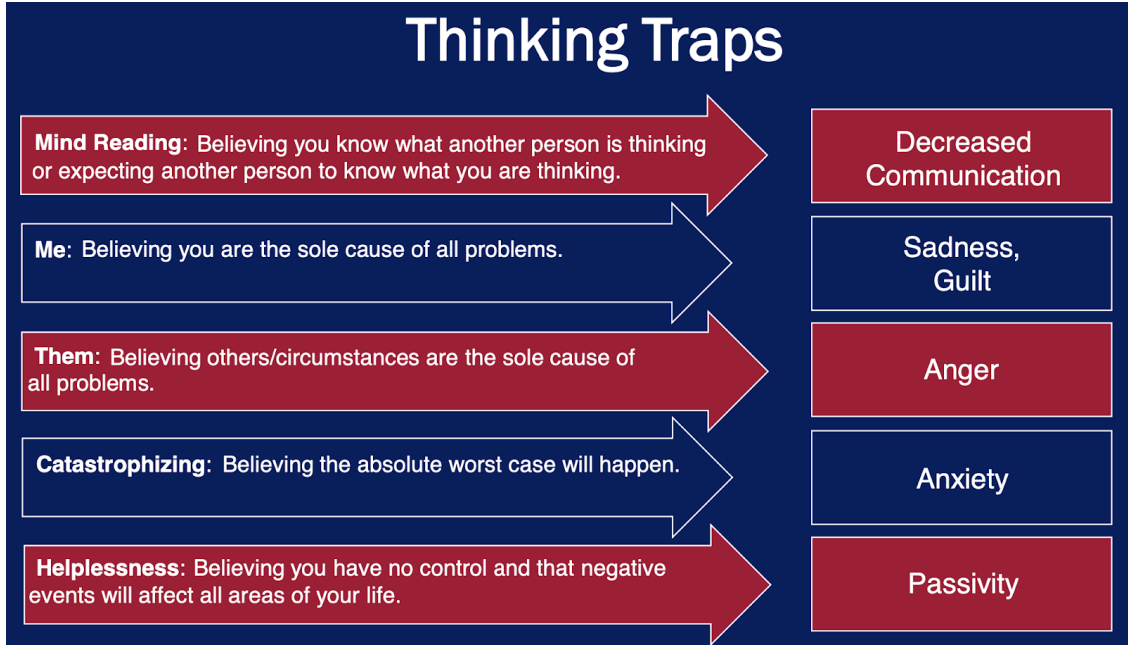


Figure 4.1 Holistic stress model

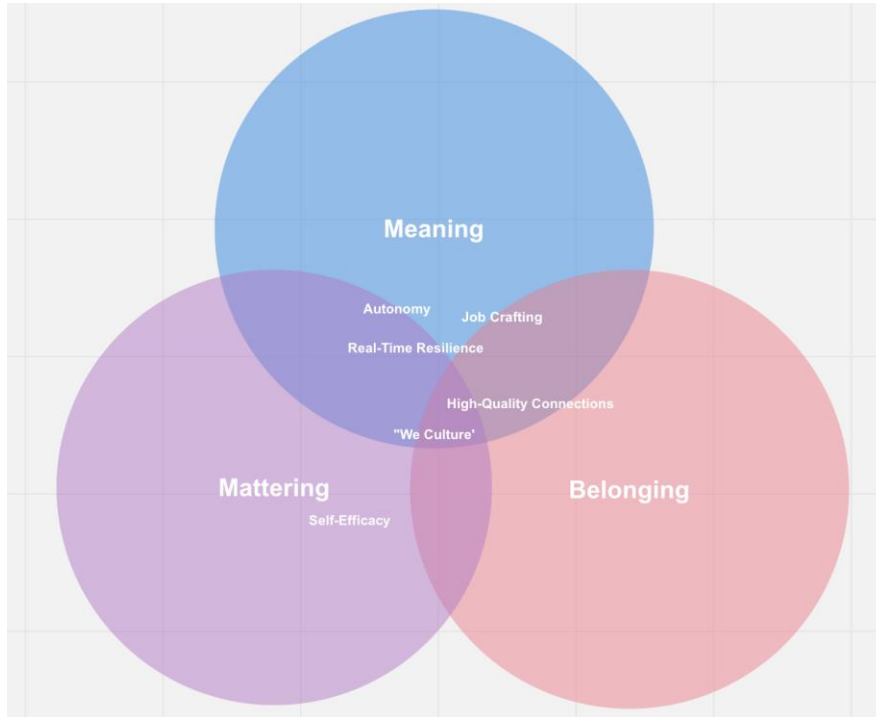
Note: Reprinted from Simmons & Nelson (2007, p. 41).

Figure C



Note: Reprinted from Reivich & Salzberg (2022, MAPP 708 Onsite 3)

## Application Plan



## Summary of Leader Quick Tips

### **Leader Quick Tips to Cultivate Meaning**

- Encourage job crafting
  - Encourage task crafting by allowing your people to craft their tasks to experience a variety of skills/tasks (task variety), to see tasks as part of an identifiable whole (task identity), and to see the end-result and impact of their work (task significance). Encourage them to add tasks to their job that they find personally meaningful, emphasize tasks that they already see as meaningful, and redesign tasks to make them more meaningful, where beneficial and appropriate.
  - Encourage relational crafting by allowing your people to build new relationships with others and/or lean into existing relationships in new or more meaningful ways. Help and encourage them to help others in carrying out their jobs.
  - Encourage cognitive crafting by helping your people change how they subjectively experience their work through either expanding and/or narrowing their perceptions on the aspects of their work they find most meaningful.
- Give autonomy
  - Treat job autonomy as a resource by giving your people the possibility and freedom to exercise discretion where beneficial and appropriate, such as allowing them to set their own work schedule and deadlines, ask for their input on



- organizational goals, and design their own work processes in pursuit of an established goal/task.
  - Embrace leader autonomy support (LAS) by taking interest in the perspectives of your people, providing them opportunities for choice and input, encouraging self-initiation, and avoiding the use of external rewards or sanctions to motivate behavior.
- Practice real-time resilience
  - Help you and your people respond to a counterproductive thought in real-time, triggered by a stressful event or situation, using the following strategies:
    - Evidence: I know that is not true because...
    - Plan: If that happens, I'm going to...
    - Reframe: A better or more productive way to see this is...
    - Control: One thing I can influence or control is...
    - Strengths: One of my strengths I can use in this situation is...
  - When in a stressful situation, encourage the following question: *What is this experience trying to teach me?*
  - Get to know you and your people's stress mindsets by noticing how you/they think and talk about stress and how you/they react to other people's stress. Help them to see stress not as something to fear but as something to follow.

### **Leader Quick Tips to Cultivate Mattering**

- Promote a "We Culture"
  - Encourage the following mantra and reward behaviors accordingly: *We all have the right and responsibility to feel valued and add value.*
  - Affirm, value, and appreciate your people. (Supportive)
  - Set clear objectives, take initiative, communicate clearly, offer feedback, engage in corrective action, and monitor progress. Focus not just on your employee's development opportunities but also on their strengths. Ask your people for and observe what their top strengths are, leverage them through work assignments, build teams and tasks around them, and recognize them in personally meaningful ways. (Effective)
  - Offer your people growth opportunities (e.g., stretch assignments, mentorships, development courses). Allow them to feel a sense of progress towards goals, and reward their desire to learn, be curious, and question old ways of doing things. (Reflective)
- Build self-efficacy
  - Create experiences for your people to experience mastery and success first-hand through hands-on training and/or on-the-job settings. Make goals and strategies specific and proximal. (Mastery experience)
  - Model what mastery and success look like for your people, allowing them to visualize themselves in the situation and believing that they can do the same thing. (Vicarious experience)

## Leader Quick Tips to Cultivate Belonging

- Build high-quality connections
  - Respectfully engage with your people through everyday interactions and behaviors. Convey presence, be genuine and real, communicate affirmation, listen effectively, and communicate supportively. For example, ask more generative questions (e.g., instead of asking, “How was your weekend?” try, “What was the highlight of your weekend?”) Give them your undivided attention, express your gratitude to affirm their value, and ensure equal turn-taking in meetings or conversations.
  - Task enable your people and encourage them to also help facilitate the successful performance of others.
    - Teach: Provide information that allows them to do their job more effectively.
    - Design: Select and arrange elements of their job to make it more interesting and appealing. (Think job crafting.)
    - Advocate: Ease the navigation of the political context of the organization.
    - Accommodate: Alter the substance, timing, or process of what they are doing to help them succeed.
    - Nurture: Focus on their development.
  - Create time and space for your people to be social and playful with each other.
  - Build and maintain trust by assuming and acting on positive assumptions and exceptions about your people's behavior and intentions. Be mindful of what you are saying and doing, *and* what you are not saying and not doing, to build or break trust.