

Trust & Purpose: How Oxytocin Can Make Your Job More Meaningful

Written by Paul J. Zak

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

But for others, work is an adventure. The difference doesn't always lie in the nature of the work.

Two different people can have two very different responses to the same job—but my research has also shown that organizational culture makes a huge difference in how we feel about, and perform, at work.



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

I discovered that teams needed two key components to perform their best: trust among team members and an understanding of the purpose of their work. We found that both of these have a shared neurologic foundation, providing a framework to identify best practices when creating or modifying work cultures.

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

Oxytocin at Work

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

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

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

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Trust Makes Work Easier

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

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

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

Making Work Meaningful

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

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

This is a distinct notion from the essential quotidian doing of business that is a company's transactional purpose. Studies from my lab and others have shown that working with Purpose is

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a potent oxytocin stimulus. When colleagues understand a company's Purpose and, importantly, act on it while at work, a second oxytocin stimulus arises, because most of us value helping others. My experiments showed that teams that had both high trust and high Purpose blew away the competition.

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

Finding Leverage

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

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

Ovation: *recognize high performers*

eXpectation: *design difficult but achievable challenges*

Yield: *train extensively and delegate generously*

Transfer: *facilitate job crafting*

Openness: *share information broadly*

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Caring: *intentionally build relationships*

Invest: *promote personal and professional growth*

Natural: *be authentic and vulnerable*

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

The Impact of Trust and Purpose

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

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

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

My team found that those working in companies in the highest quartile of trust, compared to those in the lowest quartile, had 106 percent more energy at work, were 76 percent more engaged on the job, and said they were 50 percent more productive.

High-trust companies had one-half the employee turnover of low-trust companies, with employees at these companies telling us that they were 56 percent more satisfied with their

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jobs.

Trust improved alignment with their organization's Purpose by 70 percent and reduced sick days by 13 percent; those fortunate enough to work in high-trust organizations were 29 percent more satisfied with their lives outside of work. Trust not only improves work, it improves life.

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

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

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

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