

0:00:04.1 Katie Berlin: Hi, welcome back to Central Line. I'm your host, Katie Berlin, and our guest today is an author, speaker, researcher and PhD, Zach Mercurio. Welcome to Central Line. It's so great to have you.

0:00:17.8 Zach Mercurio: Thanks, Katie. I'm excited to be here.

0:00:19.4 Katie Berlin: You and I actually met through Josh Weissman, who a lot of our watchers and listeners will be acquainted with in some fashion. Josh is definitely one of the most prolific speakers who's now in Vet Med, and I can tell from following you on social media and reading your book that the two of probably have some really fun conversations on leadership. That be accurate to say?

0:00:42.4 Zach Mercurio: That's more than accurate to say. Yeah, we have a great time. And I think that more importantly is we both believe and have seen in the research how powerful a leader's actions can be on another human being's well-being.

0:01:01.2 Katie Berlin: Absolutely. And I feel so strongly about that, too. So I'm really excited to get into this conversation. Been looking forward to it for a long time. But first, would you mind just introducing yourself and letting us know a little bit about you and what, besides leadership, you're passionate about?

0:01:15.6 Zach Mercurio: Yeah, there's two parts of my life. One part of my life is I do research and I teach in a place called the Center for Meaning and Purpose at Colorado State University. There is such a thing.

0:01:23.8 Katie Berlin: That's a good name.

0:01:25.0 Zach Mercurio: Yeah. And we study what makes life and work meaningful and what constitutes human flourishing. And the rest of my time is I'm out in organizations with leaders helping to turn really these common sense ideas of being a good human into common repeatable practices and habits. My whole job right now is to turn what's been known as soft skills into hard repeatable skills that everybody must learn if you're going to be responsible for where a human being spends a third of their life. And then in my personal life, I'm really into reading. Reading is my escape. And I love reading books, whether it's fiction or nonfiction, that helps me better understand the human condition. I like to do road biking and I have two little boys ages eight and six and a very quirky dog named Lily.

0:02:26.9 Katie Berlin: Excellent. What is a podcast guest on this podcast without a quirky dog? We all have them.

[laughter]

0:02:32.0 Zach Mercurio: You're right. And my brother is a veterinarian. He's a veterinary surgeon as well.

0:02:36.6 Katie Berlin: Excellent.

0:02:36.7 Zach Mercurio: So I've sort of been like along with his journey through his experiences.

And he's part of a big practice in Virginia. And I get to hear what he's going through. So I'm connected to the field.

0:02:50.3 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Well, that's wonderful. And I love that there's even such a thing as the Center for Meaning and Purpose. I did not know that. And I want to know more about that, for sure. I'm like, I need to go visit this place. To me, in my head suddenly became like a monastery where everyone is like, walking around in like these beautiful gardens talking about the meaning and purpose of life. And it's probably not quite like that. But I mean, Fort Collins is nice it's probably not quite like that.

0:03:14.7 Zach Mercurio: I'll let you hold on to that image.

[laughter]

0:03:19.1 Katie Berlin: Okay. And so road biking, is that what you would consider your third space where you can kind of just be Zach and you don't have to be an expert in anything, you just kind of like let stuff go?

0:03:31.1 Zach Mercurio: Oh, totally my third space. Yeah, it's so awesome about road biking and any endurance sport or anything that simplifies your mind to only be able to focus on exactly what you're trying to do is really powerful. I mean, research shows that that's really powerful, but I experience it too. And it helps me to realize that what's purposeful isn't always pleasurable, which is an important truth in life. That you're doing something for your body and it's not pleasurable, but it is purposeful. I mean, I can be here to play with my kids and feel more fit. And it aligns with a lot of what we do around helping people to understand the difference between purpose and pleasure.

0:04:14.3 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that's true. Like the saying that like, work should be fun, there should be fun at work, but work isn't always going to be fun. But if you have if you know why you're doing it it makes it more...

0:04:26.5 Zach Mercurio: I guess we can like, just start.

0:04:29.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah, let's do it.

0:04:30.7 Zach Mercurio: Because one of the biggest problems with how we've thought about work, but I think over the past decade of the self care self love movement has been that we think everything should be pleasurable for us. And if we expect everything to be pleasurable and we go searching for pleasure only, A, that's fleeting. So those moments come and go. So it's not really a good viable plan for fulfillment. But the second thing is that we miss out on purpose, moments of purpose, because contributing is often inconvenient. Purpose is often not always pleasurable, but we can learn ways to see the purpose in what we're doing. And that's why Josh and I get along so well, because leaders can learn ways to reveal people's purpose and make it easier for them to see it and clear the way between them and what they're doing and the bigger impact, which is I think so important for long term fulfillment and well being.

0:05:27.0 Katie Berlin: What about, so say a person is doing work that doesn't necessarily align directly with a purpose they thought they had, but they're working for somebody very inspiring, can the right leader also help give you purpose?

0:05:40.9 Zach Mercurio: Well, there's difference between your purpose and the purpose. You may have a purpose in your life that is completely unrelated to work, which is good, I would say.

0:05:52.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah, it's probably good. Yeah.

0:05:54.6 Zach Mercurio: But then there's the purpose in whatever it is that you're doing. I focus more on helping people see the purpose in what they're doing. There's also the difference between the meaning of work and the meaning in work. So I think this is important for listeners to understand. The meaning of work is what work means in someone's life. Like it could mean like getting a paycheck or I'm doing it because I like it. But that's different than the meaning in work. The meaning in work is what people experience when they're there. And that has a huge impact on retention, well being, performance, motivation much more so than why someone works. What they experience when they're there, the meaning in work is something that has much more of an effect on experiencing meaningful work or experiencing purpose in work or well being. And what's really powerful about this is that's the space that leaders have architecture over.

0:06:49.8 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that's really, that's a fascinating distinction I haven't really heard before. And in veterinary medicine, it seems very clear what the purpose, what the meaning of the work is. Is that like, we all got into this to come to a place where we could have the tools and the skills to help animals and their families. And it seems when you talk to people outside the profession, they're like, oh, that must be so fulfilling because you get to go to work and you get to fulfill that meaning of the work every single day. And that's true. Like we get to come to work and we get to do what we train to do every single day. And at the same time, so many of us are unhappy and it sounds like from what you're talking about, it's because they're not finding the meaning in the work every day.

0:07:42.2 Zach Mercurio: Yes. This is absolutely critical to understand. And you've articulated it really well. You can have a job that matters, but not experience mattering in your job.

0:07:53.5 Katie Berlin: Mattering.

0:07:54.8 Zach Mercurio: I work with trauma surgeons who have a job that matters. They literally save people's lives every day. And that's what they do when they clock in. Yet many of them are burnt out. They want to leave the profession because they don't feel like they matter to the people around them in their job. And for someone who doesn't believe that they matter, it's almost impossible for anything to matter. And so it's a big difference. You can't rely, especially on a profession like veterinary medicine, you can't rely on a big purpose, rest on the laurels of just people who want to help animals or you have to make sure people experience mattering in the job so that they can focus and believe in that bigger purpose. Because again, nothing matters to someone who doesn't believe that they matter.

0:08:45.5 Katie Berlin: Right. I'm thinking of all these questions that I didn't even... Like I wrote down questions and sent them to you, and none of these are on that list. There's something that is a little switch that's being flipped in my head now thinking, listening to you talk, because I've talked to a lot of people pretty recently in various organizations and in various levels of managerial seniority in those organizations who say, well, I would love to be a better leader but I just don't have time. Or I only can dedicate 30% of my time to managing my team and the rest of the time I have to

do my own work. And this always like grates on me because I feel like in my role as a manager, what I really would love to do is spend as much time as possible managing, and I hate that word too, but being as good a leader as I can be and not have to do so much actual work, because to me, the work is the support first. And people look at me like I'm very naive when I say that, and partly that is because I work in nonprofit, and I feel like maybe that is a little naive in a nonprofit. But would you say that a leader's primary job, even if they're running a company, that their primary job is to make sure that their team feels that mattering?

0:10:09.4 Zach Mercurio: Yeah. And this is where leaders get very confused because a leader's job is to take care of the people doing the job.

0:10:18.3 Katie Berlin: This is why I love your social media.

0:10:21.5 Zach Mercurio: You know what? It really is. That's a leader's job, is to do that. And it has to be, because there is no work without human well-being. A lot of times we think, oh, it's an afterthought, but a lot of leaders obsess over the lagging indicators, whether it's service efficiency or client satisfaction in a veterinary hospital. And they try to pursue those lagging indicators like how do we get the patients in and out faster? How do we get these indicators up, these numbers up? How do we improve our margin? Practice leaders, all of those things. Those are effects. People are always the cause. And if you don't invest in the leading indicator of something, you can't expect the lagging indicator to be stable. Turnover is going to go up and down. Margin is going to go up and down, satisfaction is going to go up and down. You'll have good times, bad times. It's a roller coaster way of managing an organization where if you focus on the people first, and you trust that the lagging indicators will follow and you take the long view, you create a stable, sustainable path of long-term performance.

0:11:33.8 Katie Berlin: This is related to one of the things I was going to ask you about, which is a recent post that I saw on your social media. I am seriously the Zach Mercurio top fan because I'm constantly like, that's exactly it. That's exactly what I want to say. And part of it is having spent so much time with Josh, which I'm very fortunate to have done. I've completely absorbed the positive leadership, purpose and path, psychological safety. I have absorbed it into my bones. But you had one recently that talked about the difference between recognition and appreciation and affirmation. And that's another thing that I had never seen put quite that way because we use those words interchangeably. It's like we empower our team. What does that mean exactly? Can you talk about the difference between those three things, what that means to you?

0:12:24.0 Zach Mercurio: Yeah. Appreciation is... Well, I'll start with recognition, because a lot of us have employee recognition programs. Recognition is showing gratitude for what someone does. Appreciation is showing gratitude for who someone is, so that they showed up, showing gratitude that they are doing what they're doing, that they have these skills, that they have this personality. But affirmation is showing people the specific evidence of their significance. So for example recognizing someone may be elevating their achievements or their work so other people can see them. Appreciation may be giving somebody maybe a day off because you see them they've been struggling, and you can see that they're struggling and you're grateful for them. But affirmation is saying, hey, I noticed that you have these unique gifts and they make this unique impact, and doing that regularly. It's easy to say you appreciate somebody. It's easy to tell someone, to recognize somebody. You have to get up close to affirm somebody. You have to be a noticer to affirm somebody. And affirm comes from the Latin root, which means to firm up or to make stronger. And

I love that because when you affirm somebody you're strengthening their self-belief that they matter because you're giving them evidence that they matter. And what's in our environment, the evidence in our environment determines what we believe.

0:13:57.8 Zach Mercurio: And so that's the difference. And I want to go back, if you don't mind, Katie, to what you said about someone who says, I don't have time to do this. There are two things I want to highlight here. One is that at the organizational systemic level it is true that many organizations take people's attention away from people. Some organizational environments don't even make it possible for people to care. For example, if you have such an obsession with efficiency metrics when it comes to clients, and you're trying to get people from one room to the next and one patient to the next, and that's what someone's rewarded on or incentivized on, then the environment is not making it possible for that person to care. So there are environmental design components that either make it possible or make it impossible for someone to care. So that's one level. But on the individual level great leadership is really about optimizing interactions. All of what we know about what actually creates experiences of mattering or experiences of feeling heard or experiences of feeling valued or motivation actually happen in daily interactions. So there are ways we can optimize the daily interactions we already have without adding more time to our plate to make sure people feel valued and know how they add value. I just wanted to go back to that because I think it was such a great point.

0:15:27.7 Katie Berlin: Yeah, I love that too, is like rather than saying, okay, I have to schedule more meetings or more calls with my team, like, how can you best maximize and optimize the time that you already have.

0:15:40.7 Zach Mercurio: Right. And that ties into your last question because some people say like, well, affirmation, well, that'll take a lot of time. It's much easier to do an awards banquet at the end of the quarter. Affirmation takes time. But what you can do is anytime you say thank you to someone, instead of just saying thank you, show them exactly the difference that they made, tell them the story of the difference they made and name their strengths. That's one thing. Give a better thank you. Or if you're asking somebody in a one on one you're passing them in the hall, you're saying, hey, how are you doing? Instead of asking how are you doing? Ask, hey, what is your attention right now? What have you been struggling with the most? What am I not doing today to support you? What can I start doing? Those little questions, you get data that you can use as a leader to actually notice people? But if we just ask, hey, how are you? Or start a meeting with or a huddle with how's everybody doing, good?

0:16:35.5 Katie Berlin: No one's like...

0:16:36.0 Zach Mercurio: Nobody's going to be like, not me.

0:16:39.4 Katie Berlin: Yep. Actually, I haven't felt any support from you in two weeks.

0:16:43.2 Zach Mercurio: Right, right.

0:16:44.0 Katie Berlin: They're just gonna quietly realize that that's not...

0:16:45.5 Zach Mercurio: Or I just wanted to check in on how everybody's doing. Nobody's going to say, "Me? Not so good. Glad you're checking in." It's the everyday noticing people, affirming

them, showing them how they're needed through interactions that create great leadership.

0:17:01.0 Katie Berlin: So let's say, I'm thinking about a vet practice model, and we have a practice manager or medical director, for instance, or a practice owner, who says, Okay, I want to make sure that I'm doing this to affirm my team, but at the same time, I still have KPIs that are put in front of me that I have to do, how can a lead, this is a million dollar question. How can a leader in a sort of a micro environment that answers to a macro system of KPIs, how can they change the culture and KPIs that they're looking at in their clinic to develop a new system of reward and affirmation?

0:17:44.8 Zach Mercurio: Yeah, there's a great quote by Simon Sinek and he says, be the leader you wish you had. Like we can all the time, we can all often fall to the level of the system that we're beholden to unintentionally, like we just sink to it. But I would say, have the KPIs in mind, but know that your way of getting to the KPIs can be different. And that's where really knowing and believing that the leading indicators of every KPI are human beings. And trying that and seeing what happens to the KPIs. I would also argue to that practice that employee well-being should be the KPI. And that's the problem. Employee well-being has to be the KPI. And the top one because nothing else happens, satisfaction, margin, whatever happens without that. And because you become what you pursue. When you live by results, you die by results. And so that's what I would like to see. But if you don't have control over what those KPIs are, you do have control over how you meet them.

0:19:01.0 Katie Berlin: Would you say that the workplaces that you've seen... You've seen probably quite a few different models and teams in various stages of this sort of recognition, appreciation, affirmation continuum. Where would you say that most people fall? In general?

0:19:18.0 Zach Mercurio: Yeah. Most people have the motivation to want to do it, but they don't have the skills to do it, and the environment doesn't enable them to do it because any human behavior requires three things. We have to want to do it, motivation. We have to know how to do it, ability. And our environment has to remind us to do it. I see a lot of like training initiatives. They just focus on cultivating motivation.

0:19:40.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Which can't last forever.

0:19:40.7 Zach Mercurio: It can't last. Right? So one of the things that is important is to really identify the hard skills that are needed to do this and to really start evaluating leaders on those skills, for example. Showing purposeful affirmation through like how you show gratitude and say thank you is a skill. I mean, it's a skill that can be learned and should be evaluated like any other skill. But then you have to look at, okay, now does our environment that this leader's in make it possible for them to do what we're asking them to do? And which parts of our environment or the system or structure do we need to adjust to make it possible for them to do this? For example, if I have a dentist appointment coming up and I wanna floss my teeth, I have the motivation. I watched a video on how to do it, but then I don't have any floss.

0:20:30.4 Zach Mercurio: How frustrating is that? That's the situation a lot of leaders are in. They want to care. The environment doesn't enable them to care. So I think when those things are present, you can start gaining traction. But most organizations, I find they're motivated to do this. They kind of have the skills and abilities to do this. Some don't, they haven't invested in that, but a lot of them

just don't have an environment that triggers people to do it and enables them to do it. But that's a good framework. If you're gonna go off and have a discussion after this podcast, that is a helpful framework from which you can actually really dig into this stuff. Like why is this not happening through motivation, ability and environment.

0:21:11.1 Katie Berlin: And that's something, it sounds like something the whole team can kind of be part of is saying like how can we create this culture together versus... So I actually, so I have your book here.

0:21:20.1 Zach Mercurio: Oh, cool.

0:21:20.1 Katie Berlin: So I'll put a link to Zach's book in the show notes called "The Invisible Leader". And it's great. And it's a good read in terms of you can take chunks, manageable chunks from it. You don't have to sit down in a quiet environment and read through enormous sections at one time. It's very digestible. And there was something that I highlighted that you had said invisible leadership asserts that the best leaders aren't people at all. It removes people, positions in power from the mix and rests on the importance of cultivating a compelling common purpose as the most powerful leader. And that sounds like a group effort to create that.

0:21:58.8 Zach Mercurio: That is a group effort. Yeah. And it's not... And leaders themselves are conduits of that bigger contribution once they let the contribution take over. And I'll give you an example in this discussion. Like say you have someone who has these KPIs and they're all like metric focused. Being able to ask yourself, if our purpose was our boss, what would it say about our KPIs?

0:22:28.9 Katie Berlin: I love that.

0:22:31.4 Zach Mercurio: Like if our purpose, if the contribution we want to make that mission statement that you had someone come in and help your brand. If that was the boss, the true boss of your decision making, what would you do? What would you do differently? I would argue that many people would probably operate differently. And I think that that's what I mean when I saw the invisible leader. It's that common purpose has to be above all else. Everything that we do in terms of wellbeing, creating mattering, making sure people connect to that purpose is in service of that. And it harmonizes energy. Sometimes I find that people argue a lot about what they're doing or how they're doing it, but it's really that they've lost the shared belief on why it matters.

0:23:15.5 Katie Berlin: Okay. So I'm gonna segue from that. And I love that. And there's a little bit of like sort of magic realism in my head there too of the purpose is like sort of this being that is looking over everything that you're doing. And I just love that but...

0:23:38.3 Zach Mercurio: I like that too. Now that I'm thinking about it. They can join our center for meeting and purpose monastery that's who walks around the purpose.

0:23:40.4 Katie Berlin: Right? It's like, let's ask... Yes, we're all worshipping at the feet of the purpose. So there was something else, I think when I reached out to you about doing a podcast. It was because you had posted something that really resonated with me on a personal level which will surprise no one who's actually worked with me. And it was, you said difficult employees are the most common creation of deficient cultures. And I was like that's the thing, right? Because I have

been difficult multiple places that I've worked and admittedly, I don't always know how to put things. I'm trying as I get older and more experienced at life and work to see what lands well with people. But also I do think that there's a certain way that we are trained to see people who speak up when they feel like the situation isn't going in the direction of that purpose. Because there's usually a reason. It's not like everybody wanted to go in that direction and they just like saw something shiny and wandered off. It's like somebody might be seeing the purpose differently and they're gonna take that hand raised as an objection to what they're doing versus saying, "Hey, is this really what's best for the team?" Or, "I feel like the team isn't understanding where we're headed and why." And I have definitely been difficult there and I don't know if I was right or not, but can we talk about that word difficult?

0:25:13.1 Zach Mercurio: Yeah.

0:25:14.5 Katie Berlin: And like first of all, I wanna know, have you been the difficult one?

0:25:17.4 Zach Mercurio: Of course, of course I have. We've all been in environments where we feel like we don't matter. And the result of feeling like you don't matter are two things. It either results in acts of withdrawal or acts of desperation. And most difficult employees are acting out in desperation. They're grasping for the significance. They don't get, it's basic childhood psychology. We know that conduct issues in schools, for example, are the results of students not getting the attention they need at home. That continues on through adulthood. We don't like to talk about this 'cause we think it's work. You should be hardened. You should know to go along with everything.

0:26:02.3 Zach Mercurio: But we're human beings. And when a human being feels like the instinct, and it's a survival instinct to matter, we searched for mattering when we were little babies. We reached out and grasped for someone to care for us for our survival. We grasped to matter to someone else before we searched for food. It's an instinct. When that instinct is not met, we scratch and claw for it. And that's what happens. And you are not a difficult person. And this is the other thing about the word difficult. You are a person who is exhibiting behaviors perceived as difficult. That's why I can't stand when people say to me, or leaders say, oh, what do I do with difficult employees or my disengaged employees? These are not disengaged employees. These are employees who are behaving in ways you are perceiving as disengaged. And when we start thinking about the behavior, well, no rational person can say, oh, well behaviors are independent from the environment, a human's behaviors. So then we start saying, okay, how is the environment that I'm creating complicit in manifesting the behaviors I say I don't want.

0:27:17.6 Katie Berlin: Basically, how am I and the culture I'm contributing to, contributing to this problem.

0:27:19.8 Zach Mercurio: And it's like the basic like biological, ecological principle of toxicity. If you put a healthy organism into a toxic environment, it will eventually become a toxic organism.

0:27:30.6 Katie Berlin: Because sometimes I wonder if the difficult people are sort of the canary in the coal mine to use kind of a gross analogy where like the people who are sort of either checking out first or who are raising their hands first and maybe like making something... Making meetings uncomfortable. This is a superpower of mine is making meetings super uncomfortable. I'm really good at that. And I feel sometimes like then it's just a matter of time before other team members start to feel that way too, if they're not already or start to display behaviors of that attitude. But it's

often the people who get there first that are branded as toxic because they might be the only one that leadership can see.

0:28:21.1 Zach Mercurio: And toxic in that case is misapplied, right? It's again, that's a toxic person. Instead of they're exhibiting these behaviors. What could potentially be manifesting these behaviors? Potentially there's an idea that's not being heard. Potentially there's something that everybody's thinking, but no one's saying. One of my favorite things I did with a client is I had this meeting where I had each person write down... They were having a lot of conflict and I had each person write down what everybody was thinking, but nobody was saying. So I had them independently write it down.

0:28:54.4 Katie Berlin: Oh, I love that.

0:28:54.5 Zach Mercurio: And then I had them posted on the wall and I had everybody go and read it independently, and then they sat down and all of a sudden what happened is that the space opened up. But leaders have to be willing to create that space. And when that space is not there, then the one person has to take it all on themselves to speak up like about what everybody's thinking and no one's saying, and then that person becomes wrong. And then other people see the reaction to that person and then they're like forget it, I'm not gonna speak up. And then they go sink back into acts of withdrawal. And then if they can't speak up, they speak out to each other and they start gossiping. And then the managers start complaining that everybody's gossiping and not giving us direct feedback. And then they hire consultants like us. But in reality we're not.

0:29:43.7 Katie Berlin: We're not.

0:29:45.1 Zach Mercurio: But when in reality, if you can just open up that space, to really create the space where it's safe for people to share what they're afraid to share, for people to talk about and come to an agreement on what we're all thinking, but not saying. And to really dig into those things openly. The difficult person will... It'll be a norm to have these difficult conversations. And I would argue people will feel better, leaders would feel better about that in the long term. But again, go back to the motivation, ability and environment thing. The reason why a lot of leaders don't create these spaces is 'cause they don't know how it's uncomfortable. And they take things personally.

0:30:32.7 Katie Berlin: Yeah. And so much of what people like you and Josh and the other amazing people that are starting to bring these ideas to veterinary medicine, it seems like their entire goal, like your entire goal is to give people the tools they need to create that environment if they don't know how to do it for themselves. And I wish that we saw this right now as a hard skill. My cat is probably making like super loud purring noises and like...

0:31:04.0 Zach Mercurio: This sounds like actually like one of those headspace meditations while you're going to sleep, you can do like a cat one.

0:31:07.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah. It's one of the most soothing noises in the world.

0:31:11.8 Zach Mercurio: It is very soothing.

0:31:12.9 Katie Berlin: We got John here who's like the biggest bother.

0:31:17.7 Zach Mercurio: I'm fine with it. John knows what's up.

0:31:18.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah. But I apologize for anyone who doesn't like the purring noise. I know not everybody loved the chihuahua snoring. And so I'm sure there's somebody that wishes the cat wasn't purring in the microphone, but it's too bad 'cause I can't get her off. It's too cute. But I wonder like if there's ever gonna be a time where our industry and other industries who focus so much on skills, like how to save a person's life as a trauma surgeon, very important. That is a very important skill. I wouldn't want a trauma surgeon who does not know those skills, but also that's useless if your team is walking out the door everyday feeling like they don't matter because they're gonna turn over and you're constantly gonna be dealing with burned out staff. So do you think that's possible? Have you seen that?

0:32:03.5 Zach Mercurio: I do. I think it's possible and I think it's gonna be imperative and I think it's gonna be inescapable at some point. It's gonna be like in 10 years, if you're not doing it, it's gonna be like being a practice without a website.

0:32:14.9 Katie Berlin: God, I hope you're right.

0:32:16.5 Zach Mercurio: I do think I'm going to be right because the US surgeon General America's top medical doctor weighed in for the first time on what needs to happen in the workplaces in October 2022. This is the first time America's top medical doctor, a physician weighed in on what needed to happen. And at the core of this, to improve the nation's mental health, he said that people need to experience mattering at work. Dignity and meaning. Dignity being worthy apart from what you do or don't do for someone else. And meaning experiencing what you're doing as positive, purposeful, and significant.

0:32:51.2 Zach Mercurio: I wouldn't be surprised actually in 10, 15 years if there's not an OSHA, like there's an OSHA for physical safety if there's not going to be an OSHA for psychological safety and emotional safety in the workplace. So I think one, it's gonna be inescapable at some point. Two, the choices of where, when, and how people work and earn a living are going to exponentially increase. Again. And this is where a institution like veterinary medicine, relying on the big purpose is not gonna be a sustainable practice because people more than ever now can earn income in many different ways that are much less stressful. Worldwide literacy rates are going up, educational attainment's going up. All of that screams to me more choice of where, when and how people can do it, do the work. I wouldn't be surprised if at some point there's gig work for veterinary medicine that people can do, where, when and how they wanna do it.

0:33:48.5 Katie Berlin: The possibility is even for relief Vets right now are incredible. Relief Vets and techs could literally go anywhere and work.

0:34:00.1 Zach Mercurio: And so choices of where, when, and how people work are going to increase exponentially. So if you do not create places where people feel like they matter and like they want to work as a priority, you'll inevitably be left with chronic staffing shortages and chronic people issues, which as we talked about, result in all of the lagging issues. Customer satisfaction, client retention, all of the things that we say we care about. I really don't think there's an option anymore.

0:34:29.1 Katie Berlin: This AAHA podcast is brought to you by CareCredit. CareCredit

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0:35:08.1 Katie Berlin: I know personally for me, that's the most important thing. A pay cut would happily suit me if I could feel like I matter everyday. And I know a lot of people are starting to realize that too when they are going from clinic to clinic and just aren't feeling like they've found their place a lot of people will come and say I don't understand how I'm supposed to compete with corporate practices because they can offer so much better benefits or more money and it's not to say that corporate practices can't create cultures like this in their individual hospitals and as a general rule. And I think they should, they have the resources to dedicate to making sure they can do that in the best way. But a private practice who offers this culture of mattering and purpose has a huge leg up on most of the practices out there because that's a very rare thing.

0:36:00.9 Zach Mercurio: Yeah And a study of over 34 million people on why they left their jobs during the pandemic, toxic corporate culture was 10 times more likely to predict someone leaving, making the decision to leave than was payer benefits. We've known that for years, right? Pay compensation, this is important. There's a difference between compensation and valuing somebody. Compensation is compensating someone for their time and skill that has to be at an appropriate livable level. So that's another podcast, but it's compensation. Money is an inanimate object. So it cannot value Katie, it cannot value somebody, it can't appreciate someone, it can't recognize someone, it can't affirm somebody. It can be a symbol of those things, but only people appreciate people. Only people affirm people. Only people value people. So a lot of times we rely on money, like to pay a physician really well. But even in those spaces, people who are getting paid well, they're leaving. Look at what's happening in education with our teacher shortage. Look at what's happening in healthcare with physician shortages. Obviously something needs to be done.

0:37:10.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Okay. So that leads into the last thing I was gonna ask you about, which is the phrase you are not your job. I think you had said something in a post not too long ago where you talked about why that isn't always helpful to say to somebody. Because I see a lot of advice that says you know what, if you're not happy at work, like if you can just put your head down, do your job as best as you can, don't worry about what isn't yours to worry about. Go home and try to live a full and active life outside of work. And I am fundamentally incapable of doing that especially now.

0:37:53.1 Zach Mercurio: Yeah. As is every normal human being. And I say normal, psychologically, like stable human being.

0:38:01.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah. If you do that, you're fundamentally, it seems like you'd have to be really disengaged from what you're doing because caring about growth and improvement and the culture around you and your teammates is such a huge part of work life. And you spend so much time there. How is it possible for that not to become part of who you are? So what do you think is a better thing to say to people who are feeling kind of like, oh, there's all these things going on I can't control, but I can't leave. What do I do?

0:38:30.6 Zach Mercurio: Yeah. So there's no separation between work and life. It's something that was made up in the industrial revolution to get us to accept less from our workplace and make it easier for people to dehumanize us in our workplaces. It's just work. It's just a paycheck, it's just a job. When we say those things up to ourselves, we're diluting ourselves into actually accepting less from where we are 'cause we're compartmentalizing it. And it's much easier for a leader to be like, "Oh, they're just here for a payday. It's just a job for Katie." It makes it easier to dehumanize Katie in the job. That's an old tactic that's left over from the industrial revolution to separate work and life.

0:39:09.6 Zach Mercurio: Life occurs wherever a human being is living and breathing. That includes in work. So life occurs at work and work is a part of life. And we have to believe that. And once we can believe that, we can expect more, which I think is important. Expect more for yourself and how you're treated in work. And at the same time, if we start expecting that, leaders have to expect more of themselves in what they create in work. But for an individual, I would also say this, you are not your job. Your job is not your identity of who you are, but your job is an inevitable way you express who you are.

0:39:53.2 Zach Mercurio: And you have values, you have unique strengths. You have principles and beliefs, and no one can take those things away from you. So if you think about going into work and thinking about the everyday interactions that you have that aren't controlled by a leader or a culture that may be abusive and you can focus on delivering your values and living by your values and delivering your strengths and living by your beliefs in those interactions that you have control over, that can make a profound difference. So the you are not your job thing is like, oh yeah. And then you go in and you just sort of suffer through one third of your life to enjoy the rest of your life. That's not really a great tactic either 'cause that's not gonna promote wellbeing. But if you can say, Hey, in these interactions, what I have control over, I will commit to living by these values, commit to using my strengths, commit to trying to see the purpose in what I'm doing, and to be the leader I wish I had. At the end of the day, that's going to be a more fulfilling way to go forward. And you'll learn a lot about... You'll learn the skill of how even in a difficult circumstances, you can see the meaning in it. And if you can see the meaning where you are, you'll be able to see it wherever you go.

0:41:17.8 Katie Berlin: That brings a whole new perspective to all of this, because at a certain point, I guess we are what we do, what we repeatedly do. And so if you're a leader and you keep making choices that maybe if they don't actively harm your team, don't lead to creating the environment where they're gonna feel supported and like they matter. And those decisions keep happening and those missed opportunities keep coming by. At some point, that's just the kind of leader you are. That's the kind of person you are. Even if that's not your intent at all, and that's something that I think a lot of people, I don't know, they get stuck on like, well, I don't know how to manage people or I don't know how to lead people and I got this title, or I got this raise and I'm in this position now and I don't know what I'm doing. But that's a north star for them is if nothing else, you can think are the decisions I'm making and the priorities that I'm putting into place, are those gonna take me closer to the goal of the environment that I want to help create or farther?

0:42:27.1 Zach Mercurio: Yeah. I think you raise a great point. Instead of being a passive recipient of culture, be an active constructor of it, of creating the culture you say you want. And I think that that is a really important way to take control over your work because at the end of the day, if nothing else, you can say I did my best. And sometimes that's all we have.

0:42:54.8 Katie Berlin: Yeah. I feel like this is a therapy session for me. Thanks Zach.

0:43:00.5 Zach Mercurio: You brought out the points. So it's...

0:43:07.3 Katie Berlin: Well, and I think everybody listening has been in an environment...

0:43:09.4 Zach Mercurio: Yes, of course.

0:43:10.3 Katie Berlin: Where they have not felt like they matter. I see these...

0:43:12.5 Zach Mercurio: I have too.

0:43:14.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah, not everybody listening has been in an environment where they do feel like they have mattered.

0:43:17.4 Zach Mercurio: I know.

0:43:19.2 Katie Berlin: And that's really sad. Did you have a job where you felt affirmed, not just appreciated?

0:43:26.0 Zach Mercurio: There are some people... Right now I get to talk to large groups of people and it's that person who remembers that you were there and takes a picture of the end slide with your email address and takes the time to send you a message and let you know like that they used a skill you provided them and it made this difference. Those are few and far between maybe like one one every like couple of months, even though we do tons of engagements. But it's those people that give me a lot of hope because that's the practice, right? They don't know that they're doing it, but they're affirming me. So in my current job right now, that's where I get it. In some other aspects of my work at a large research institution, I have to rely on the fact that I'm doing the best I can where I am because there's essentially no validation.

[laughter]

0:44:24.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:44:24.4 Zach Mercurio: No one's coming.

0:44:25.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah, it could be right. It's kind of like doing a podcast. It's like, well, no one sent me an email.

0:44:30.9 Zach Mercurio: No one's coming. No one's rushing to me to tell me how great my work is.

0:44:37.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Well, I think you're doing great work.

0:44:38.8 Zach Mercurio: Thank you.

0:44:38.9 Katie Berlin: I can't see what you're doing at the university, but this is so important. And

honestly, I keep going back to your social media because between you and Simon Sinek and Josh and Flourish, that's my social media feed a lot of days is like, the things that I'm stopping on are those because I need to hear those things. And because they resonate so deeply with me as a new leader and somebody who wants to do a lot more leading of teams, that's my favorite part of the job. And I told Josh the other day that my goal as a manager is always to try to make decisions that would make Josh proud of me as if he's the one making them.

0:45:17.6 Zach Mercurio: Oh, I love that. I think we need far fewer thought leaders and many more practice leaders. It's embarrassing that I have a job actually, because the things that I say or that I think about, to me, it's just like, I was in my kindergarten's like open house. Like I got to go into the classroom and look around. I was looking at these values on the wall, like respect. And it had a behavior of listening to others. It had inclusion, it had appreciation, all of these things. And I'm like, what happens from kindergarten until when people have to lead people? I feel like all I'm doing in my job is teaching kindergarten to adults.

0:46:03.8 Katie Berlin: That's really it.

0:46:06.2 Zach Mercurio: Really, it really is. If you go in this kindergarten classroom...

0:46:06.4 Katie Berlin: It's got a staggering image.

0:46:08.1 Zach Mercurio: You will look at these values on the wall, you'll look at how they're learning to recognize each other, listen to each other, share, share their voice. And I'm not exaggerating. Literally, that's what I do in my job for adults.

0:46:30.3 Katie Berlin: It's a great gig and I hope one day you're out of it. There's no place for it anymore.

0:46:34.5 Zach Mercurio: I do. I hope one day I'm just maintaining it not trying to instigate it. And people are like, oh, Zach, all you talk about is mattering and purpose. I will keep saying it until you start doing it.

0:46:46.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah. And I hope that's true. I know that's true. I see all of you like out there doing...

0:46:52.7 Zach Mercurio: Yeah. Like I'll keep saying it until you start doing it. So when the data starts changing and 65% of people don't feel undervalued in work, and almost 70% of people don't feel forgotten in work, and toxic corporate cultures is not predicting people to leave 10 times more than pay, then I'll stop talking about it.

0:47:09.4 Katie Berlin: I love that. That's a mic drop. So it's a goal for everybody listening or watching to go out and make it a just a little fraction of a percent closer to Zach being out of a job.

0:47:21.9 Zach Mercurio: Yes, that's great. That's a good move there.

0:47:24.1 Katie Berlin: Let's all work together to put Zach out of a job. Alright. Well, Zach Mercurio, thank you so much for coming on. Where can people find you, find out more about you and what you do?

0:47:34.3 Zach Mercurio: I have a website, so you can go to my website, zachmercurio.com. And then connect with me on LinkedIn. I like LinkedIn. It's been great for me. I know other people have different opinions, but it's been great to find people who are really trying to take action to improve. I found a lot of "practice leaders" there that I can... A lot of the people that comment on the comment stream of some of myself, if you look at their titles, they're actually people out leading, which I love that. That's like the best.

0:48:04.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah. And then you too, if you follow Zach on LinkedIn, you too can get these nuggets of wisdom delivered to you every single day or almost every day. And also don't forget the book. I'll put a link to that in the show notes, and it's an excellent companion to Josh's book.

0:48:20.5 Zach Mercurio: Oh yeah.

0:48:23.0 Katie Berlin: Which takes a lot of the same types of principles you're talking about and...

0:48:27.7 Zach Mercurio: The P of purpose. This is a good deep dive into that area.

0:48:30.7 Katie Berlin: The P of purpose. Yes, exactly. And and puts it in a veterinary context specifically too. So I just, I really appreciate your time. I know you're busy and you talk about this stuff all the time, but your passion is contagious, even through a phone screen.

0:48:47.2 Zach Mercurio: Thank you.

0:48:47.9 Katie Berlin: Thank you so much for the work you do and coming on here.

0:48:51.1 Zach Mercurio: Thanks.

0:48:52.2 Katie Berlin: And thanks to all of you for watching and listening. We'll catch you next time on Central Line.