TWO CASE STUDIES

# The Jackets & Eleven Seconds

*Root cause analysis and discussion questions for your leadership team*

**An Every Piece Matters resource**

Yours to use with your own leadership team.

**Melissa Montgomery, M.S., SHRM-CP, BPC, EQAC**

Founder, People by Design

About these cases. Both are composites, assembled from documented patterns in published research and from situations that recur across organizations. They are not accounts of specific People by Design clients and no real organization is described. They are built to be accurate about the pattern, not about any one company. Use them with your own leadership team.

CASE ONE · NOTICING

# The Jackets

*A noticing deficit treated as an affirming problem*

---

### THE ORGANIZATION

A regional hospital system, roughly 1,400 employees across four campuses. Nursing turnover running at 31 percent annually, well above what the system's own leadership considered sustainable. Replacement cost per departing nurse was estimated internally in the tens of thousands, which put the annual cost of the turnover in the millions.

### WHAT THEY DID

They commissioned an engagement survey. It cost about twelve thousand dollars and it was well built. The lowest-scoring item in the entire instrument was *"someone at work seems to care about me as a person."* It came in at 2.1 out of 5. The write-in comments were consistent and specific. Nurses described being seen as a schedule rather than as people. One comment circulated widely internally: *"My manager knows my badge number and my PTO balance. That is the complete list."*

### HOW LEADERSHIP RESPONDED

Within eight weeks the system launched an appreciation initiative. Branded fleece jackets for every clinical employee. An appreciation week with catered lunches. A peer nomination program with a quarterly award. Total spend, including the survey, around ninety thousand dollars.

### WHAT HAPPENED

Twelve months later the same item scored 2.0. Turnover was 30 percent. The peer nomination program had 31 nominations in its first year across 1,400 people, and 19 of those came from the same two units.

---

## Root cause

> They measured a noticing deficit and purchased an affirming gesture.

The survey item was about attention. *Someone at work seems to care about me as a person*. That is a question about whether anybody is paying attention to a specific individual. The response was recognition, delivered generically, to everyone at once.

A jacket given to 1,400 people is definitionally not about any one of them. It cannot be, and everyone receiving one understands that instantly. The intervention did not fail because it was cheap or insincere. It failed because it answered a question nobody asked.

## A second, quieter failure

The peer nomination program required a form, and forms are a tax on the exact behavior you are trying to increase. Nineteen of thirty-one nominations came from two units, which almost certainly means two managers were personally driving it. That is not a program. That is two people, and when they leave, it goes with them.

## What actually moves it

The intervention that changes item scores like this one is unglamorous. Charge nurses hold one five-minute conversation per shift with one team member, about anything that is not clinical. It is scheduled, it is expected, and it is tracked as completed or not completed only.

> The content is never reported upward. That constraint is the entire design. The moment a manager has to summarize what someone told them, it stops being a conversation and becomes surveillance, and the staff figure that out in about two weeks.

## The research this pattern rests on

The composite is invented. The pattern is not.

Gallup's *State of the Global Workplace 2026* puts global engagement at 20 percent, down from a 23 percent peak in 2022, with manager engagement at 22 percent and falling faster than any other group. The barrier is not that organizations are unaware. It is that the response almost never matches the diagnosis.

Dr. Zach Mercurio makes the underlying distinction directly in *The Power of Mattering* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2025): recognition programs address what people produce, and mattering addresses whether people are seen. An organization can run an excellent recognition program and produce no change at all in whether anyone feels noticed, because the two are answering different questions.

---

## Take this to your leadership team

1. Look at your most recent engagement survey. For your three lowest-scoring items, is each one asking about noticing, affirming, or being needed? Now look at what you did in response. Did it match?
2. Where in your organization is a good behavior being sustained by one or two individuals rather than by anything structural? What happens the month after they leave?
3. What is the most recent thing you spent money on that was intended to make people feel valued? Who specifically was it about?

CASE TWO · AFFIRMING

# Eleven Seconds a Day

*An affirming practice with no program attached*

---

## THE ORGANIZATION

A community nonprofit, 40 staff, direct service, chronically underfunded in the way that most of them are. Voluntary turnover at 22 percent. No recognition budget of any kind. No HR department. No ability to compete on salary with anyone.

## THE SITUATION

A new executive director inherited a staff that was, by every visible measure, committed and exhausted. Exit interviews from the prior two years said almost the same thing every time, in different words: *I do not think anyone would notice if I stopped*. Recognition did exist. There was a quarterly all-staff meeting with a shout-out segment, and there was an annual awards lunch.

## WHAT SHE DID

Nothing programmatic. She started no initiative, formed no committee, and spent no money.

Each evening she wrote one index card. On it went one person's name and one sentence with three parts: the specific thing they did that day, the specific effect it had, and why it had to be them. The next morning she found that person and said it out loud. It took about eleven seconds.

She kept the used cards in a shoebox so she could see who she had not gotten to yet. At 40 staff, one a day meant every person heard something specific roughly every two months, which is dramatically more often than any quarterly program delivers.

## WHAT HAPPENED

Over eighteen months voluntary turnover moved from 22 percent to 9. The change she did not anticipate was that the practice spread sideways. Staff began doing it to each other, unprompted and without a form, because they had watched it happen five times a week for a year and it had stopped being weird.

## Root cause of the original problem

The recognition that already existed was output-based and event-driven. Quarterly shout-outs recognize completed work in front of a group. That is a fine thing and it is not the same thing.

> Output recognition says *the work was good*. Affirmation says *you are the reason it was good, and here is how I know*. A person can receive output recognition for years and still conclude, accurately, that they are interchangeable with anyone who would have produced the same output.

The exit interview line is the diagnostic. *I do not think anyone would notice if I stopped*. That is not a complaint about recognition. It is a report of a mattering deficit, and it should be read as one.

## Why it worked, in three parts

Frequency beat production value. Eleven seconds daily outperformed a catered annual event, and it is not close. Mattering is built in accumulation, not in moments.

Specificity made it non-transferable. "Great job" can be said to anyone. "The way you slowed that conversation down" can only be said to one person, and the person receiving it knows that.

It was modeled, not mandated. Nobody was told to do this. Forty people watched it happen every day for a few months and then started doing it. A mandated version, with a form and a monthly count, produces compliance and dies in a year.

## The research this pattern rests on

Workhuman and Gallup's 2024 research found that recognition, done well, could prevent approximately 45 percent of voluntary turnover. Gallup has separately published replacement cost estimates in the range of one half to two times an employee's annual salary. Put those two figures together and the arithmetic on eleven seconds a day becomes difficult to argue with.

The mattering construct itself has a forty-year research base. Rosenberg and McCullough introduced it in 1981, Elliott, Kao and Grant validated it empirically in 2004, and Flett's 2022 review in the *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* consolidates the field. Across that literature the two dimensions are consistent: feeling noticed, and feeling needed.

---

## Take this to your leadership team

1. Pull your last four exit interviews. How many contain a version of *I do not think anyone would notice if I stopped?* Read them again for that specifically, because it hides in different words.

2. Is every recognition mechanism you run event-driven? If your appreciation happens on a calendar, it is being scheduled rather than felt.

3. Who in your leadership team could keep a shoebox for ninety days? Not as a program. Just as a thing they do. What would it cost to find out?

---

**Frequency beats production value.**
**Specificity beats sincerity. Modeling beats mandating.**
**None of those three cost anything.**

---

SHOW YOUR WORK

# Sources


- Mercurio, Z. *The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance*. Harvard Business Review Press, 2025.
- Mercurio, Z. "The Power of Mattering at Work." *Harvard Business Review*, May 2025.
- Gallup. *State of the Global Workplace 2026*. Global employee engagement 20 percent in 2025, down from a 23 percent peak in 2022. Manager engagement 22 percent, down nine points since 2022. United States engagement 36 percent. Employee thriving 34 percent.
- Workhuman and Gallup, 2024. Recognition, done well, could prevent approximately 45 percent of voluntary turnover.
- Gallup. Employee replacement cost estimated at approximately one half to two times an employee's annual salary.
- Flett, G. L. (2022). "An Introduction, Review, and Conceptual Analysis of Mattering as an Essential Construct and an Essential Way of Life." *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*.
- Elliott, G., Kao, S., and Grant, A. M. (2004). "Mattering: Empirical Validation of a Social-Psychological Concept." *Self and Identity*.
- Rosenberg, M., and McCullough, B. C. (1981). "Mattering: Inferred Significance and Mental Health among Adolescents." *Research in Community and Mental Health*, 2, 163–182.


*The three-practice framework is Dr. Zach Mercurio's, from The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance (Harvard Business Review Press, 2025). The Puzzle Philosophy, the Mattering Deficit Diagnostic, and the exercises are People by Design originals.*

## Everything from Every Piece Matters is free and online.

The Mattering Deficit Diagnostic, the full workbook, both case studies, complete facilitation guides for all three exercises, and every research citation. No email required for any of it.

**pplbydesign.com/every-piece-matters**

Scan the code, or type the address. Both work.


Melissa Montgomery, M.S., SHRM-CP, BPC, EQAC
melissa@pplbydesign.com | pplbydesign.com


*Inspire People. Ignite Culture. Transform Lives.*