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How to Do Truly Great Work in Your Organization

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David Sturt, author of *Great Work* and Executive Vice President at O.C. Tanner, joins Dr. Jack Zenger and Dr. Joe Folkman in this edition of the Zenger Folkman podcast series to discuss his research into how people can make a difference—what they think about, what they do, and how their leaders help them achieve extraordinary results.

Sturt regularly consults with industry leaders and speaks at conferences in the US, Canada, and the UK. He has studied and analyzed the effects of people being recognized for great work, and has distilled that information in his new book, *Great Work: How To Make A Difference People Love* (McGraw-Hill).

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Let's begin by talking about the book *Great Work* and what separates it from lots of other books on leadership and management that are out there. Tell us a bit about how you see it being differentiated from all the rest?

We took an interesting approach on the research that went into this book because we have access to literally millions and millions of records of data on people who have been nominated and received awards for the work that they've done in their respective organizations. Because we have access to that data, we were able to analyze that data to determine, in these nominations, what observed behaviors people were doing that lead to these extraordinary outcomes. It was more of a behavior-oriented view on those unique things people do that make the difference. These are regular people in regular jobs all over the world doing extraordinary things. We identified some of those key actions and activities, and that became the foundation or core of the book, and it's a pretty interesting set of observations.

Were most of the people from the dataset individual contributors, managers, or executives?

All of the above, from janitors all the way up to VPs of large organizations. It was a real cross-section of workers around the world.

What were the behaviors that lead to great work on the part of individual contributors? Were they the same as great work on the part of managers, or did you see some different patterns?

We saw very similar patterns. The basic building blocks of accomplishing great things were very, very much the same. Now, you can have new ones for managers that might have an additional level of leadership involved in a project or in an initiative. But in terms of those building blocks, when you break it down to what people are doing differently to get better than expected results, those tend to be very, very similar.

If I want to be recognized, what should I do?

Do great work.

Give me some specifics on what your research tells us about five sort of ways or processes.

Let me pick one of them, and it's one that we ended up calling "talk to your outer circle." This is one that we found counterintuitive and yet very profound in its ability to help uncover new ways of doing things or new types of value, new innovation.

Let me give you a backdrop to that and start with discussing the inner circle first. Every one of us has an inner circle, and statistically that's between two and five people. Now there's personal inner circles, but we also have an inner circle in our work lives. What we found in the data was that people who are having more creative ideas, better ideas, more innovative ideas that lead to better outcomes tended to have conversations with people outside their inner circle. Most people just talk to the same very small group of peers or team members when they try to solve a problem. I think most people that do that are like, "Hey, we got this difficult problem let me go to my go-to people," and they sort of circle around to see if they can solve that problem together. The challenge with that is that the reason they're in your inner circle is they tend to think like you—that's why you get along so well.

But what we saw was that the further away from the core group that you're usually talking to, the better the chances of innovative, fresh thinking. The observable behavior was that people would say, "Oh, they went and talked to a customer," and nobody had really got the customer perspective before or they had a conversation with somebody in the finance team and then this idea hit them about another way to do something. We saw references to these conversations that seem to be highly correlated with great work outcomes. A specific thing that each of us can do in our own work is rather than getting trapped into talking to the same people, be more intentional and deliberate about reaching out to people who are not in our same discipline, not in our same team or department, and getting a variety of thought before trying to solve the problem. That ideation step of having those conversations makes a huge difference.

Was the further out the person existed from your normal inner circle more of an advantage? Should I go out and look for people who think differently than I do?

Generally, we saw the pattern that the further away you went, the better the chances you had for disruptive thinking. We heard this in some of the one-on-one interviews where the person described even going and just having a conversation. Let's say they're in HR and they're having a

conversation with somebody in finance. They have to describe the problem differently because the other person didn't have the same discipline or background, or even the same context, so it's counterintuitive. You think it would take a long time to describe the problem to somebody who knows nothing about that domain, but in sharing the conversation it prompted having to describe it in fresh terms. The other person coming at it from a different perspective would often have insights that weren't directly solving the problem, but in the person's mind—the one asking the questions—new insights and new associations would trigger better than expected outcomes.

In our original research, when we looked at behaviors of the best leaders, one of the competencies that emerged was dealing with the outside world or having an external focus. We agree that it's a very important behavior.

Were there any big surprises that you encountered as you were doing this research, or anything that caught you off guard?

There were a few that I learned a lot from. The concept of talking to your outer circle caused me to manage differently. When I'm faced with an approval type decision, where a team comes to me and says, "This is what we're proposing. We need to get final authorization on those to move forward," I'll often, instead of shouldering that burden myself, ask who have you talked to about this, who haven't you talked to about this, who could shed some light on this decision. That always ends well, that always seems to introduce a better perspective, a more grounded perspective, so it actually affected how I lead.

One lady we interviewed, we went back and met with her because I had to go see for myself, was at a Subaru of America plant in Indiana where they

had eliminated all landfill waste produced by a building that was millions of square feet. A new Subaru rolls off the line every 120 seconds, all day and into the night, and they produce zero landfill waste. I just thought, "How in the world did you do that?" When you sit down and talk to people like that you think, "Oh, well they probably had all of this organizational support and all of this budget money and all of these resources and maybe a super supportive boss for all of that to align. But I was really intrigued by how many people described how lacking in resources they were, and how it was really a validation of that age-old adage that we all grew up hearing about: necessity being the mother of invention. I saw that play out again and again and again. Even in the context of very little support, people seemed to be able to find a way to work with what they have, and that was really inspiring to me because it takes away all of my excuses for innovating. People find wonderful ways of coming up with solutions.

What else should I do to get recognized?

A couple of other thoughts that we know will make a real difference: What is around asking the right question? When we're young we ask a lot of questions. If you've been around five- and six-year-olds, sometimes they can drive you nuts with all the questions they ask to try to understand the world around them. That curiosity is really a key to them learning fast.

I think sometimes in our work worlds, we get a little calcified in our processes and in what we think we know. Often that becomes an impediment to great work. We settle into good work, which is doing what's expected and accomplishing close to what we did yesterday. When you trace the genesis, where did it begin for them? How did they get the idea originally? Often it began with them asking a really good question. A question that others weren't asking that maybe lived in the back of somebody's mind but never got pulled forward into their consciousness to wrestle with.

One of the things you can do is really ask yourself some good questions before you launch into execution. We see so many people—and I think this is a product and an outcome of the hectic world that we all live in—who are doing a lot more work than perhaps before. There's a lot coming across our desk. There's a lot of emails coming at us every minute. There's this temptation and gravitational pull toward execution—to think, "Okay, I've got to just go get this done." What I think people miss

is that little window you need to do something that's really going to make a difference, which is not the case for a lot of what comes across your desk. Most of what comes across your desk is "get it done, bang it out." Go right into execution and get it done.

There are certain opportunities, projects, problems that present themselves to you as real opportunities to do great work. For those, it's important to give yourself a little window. Give yourself some time to really push yourself to ask questions that other people are not asking: what would people really love, what would delight the customer or the intended beneficiary of your work? Begin to navigate into those kinds of questions that start provoking some fresh, original thinking. If you do that, it tends to significantly increase the quality of the ideation process that leads to the execution, which leads to the outcome. Be mindful of the kinds of questions you're asking yourself on the front end of those great work initiatives. You'll find you get better at asking better questions and better at accomplishing great work—and ultimately, being recognized for it.

Is the competency their curiosity? Is it a natural curiosity that people have?

I think that's super helpful to have that sense of curiosity, and some seem to have more than others. But from my perspective, if you aren't that curious, what do you do? Our data would suggest simply by pushing yourself to ask those questions, it will help provoke possible target regions or solutions. I think it's something that we can actually do and apply, respective of the depth of curiosity.

You mentioned that asking the right question is one of the things we can do to be better recognized. What was the second?

Another one is to go see it for yourself. Going out and getting a fresh perspective and looking at it differently. So much of the time people tend to think that their home—in their work life—is their desk. Their

home is their laptop. Their home is their chair and that's where they work—that's where they think they need to do their work. They keep looking from the same perspective and wonder why they're not seeing something different. If you want to come up with different ideas you've got to look at things from multiple perspectives. That was another aha moment in the research.

It was very clear to us that when people leave their desk and go see how their work is being used and consumed—whether by a colleague or all the way out to the customer—it sheds new light and breaks down some assumptions that they might have had. That's another key behavior or action that you can take that dramatically affects your ideation of new ways to do things better or doing great work.

Years ago, I was teaching at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and one of my colleagues, Harold Leavitt, would frequently say that the most valuable time that managers spend in their day is not behind their desk but invariably when they get out and go see a customer, go talk to a supplier, or go observe the application of their company's product. So, I certainly would concur with what you've observed.

That's definitely true for managers. Even going way back to what's been said about "management by walking around," that idea has been out there. I've been surprised to see whether managers use it or not. I think few leverage this action. Individual contributors especially, often feel like they don't have permission, that somehow they're playing hooky. They're cheating their employer if they're not sitting at their desk working. Getting people to get outside of that, with either an artificially imposed or self-imposed constraint, can really help expose them to a whole range of new thoughts and new thinking simply by

going and seeing and looking and observing.

We saw this pattern when I went and did a little day trip down to IDEO. I wanted to see any correlations between the research we were doing and IDEO's process. It was amazing to watch how they have perfected this specific action when they tackle any new project. They showed several different products that had ultimately become category-defining products in established industries, which is hard to do. They did it largely because of one step in their process, which is going out and literally videotaping and taking pictures of people in their natural habitat interacting with products, like the ones they were trying to redesign. That action alone shed enough light on the problem sets—it gave them all they needed to come up with groundbreaking products. It was fascinating to see some companies like them really leverage this skill in a profound way.

Talk a little bit about what you've concluded as you've looked at all this research. What percentage of the population do you see truly being able to deliver great work?

That's a great question. I don't have any specific percentages, but I'll tell you the takeaway from having spent so much time in the middle of this data caused me to believe that just about anybody can engage in great work, either at a small level or at a significant level. It really comes down what you choose to do. I think so much of what has been ingrained in people is, "Oh, if I'm not creative then I can't do these kinds of innovative things," or "I'd never thought of myself as an innovator. I'm basically going to be good at doing what I do and innovation is not part of my skill set." I'd like to disrupt that thinking. I think that's terribly limiting for them, because when we compare action with other types of demographics like IQ, action wins. I think what you choose to do with whatever skills you have makes an extraordinary difference. I really do believe just about anybody is capable of doing great work by leveraging some of those actions that increase the odds of finding better ways to do things.

What's your sense about the triggers that cause people to decide they are going to do great work? What happens inside their thinking?

I'm always wrestling with that, trying to understand what it is that brings that person in. We talk a lot about engagement and I think a lot of people have thought, "Man, we've got to get people engaged so that they do great work." We ran some interesting studies the end of last year to try to shed some light on this, and we found that if you can get somebody engaged in a difference-making project it makes a difference. Let's say you're a manager of a team and you're wondering, "How can I engage the members of this team to do great work?" My suggestion would be to tackle a project, take on a problem as a team where there's a real opportunity to make a difference. What I found is that when people are involved—maybe not voluntarily at first—in a difference-making endeavor, when they have a shot at actually making a difference that other people are going to love, it raises their level of engagement dramatically.

I use to think of it as "I got to run around figuring out how I get people the engagement-shot so that they can then jump into all of these great work initiatives and really do great work." Now, I'm of the mind to find the difference-making endeavor and get people involved in that. What begins to naturally happen to anybody who is feeling like they're part of making a difference is their engagement rises and their intensity and interest levels in doing great work continues to rise. Then, once they've had the taste of that, they want more and they'll tend to return to that because of how good it feels having made a difference.

Yesterday, I was with a client from a pharmaceutical company who was talking to another research scientist, and he was describing the job: he knows ten thousand drug interactions

that don't work. He is combining everything and he says, "Well, there's twenty thousand more I don't know about." But one of the things that he kept an eye on were the people that just push through. He's not going to get the recognition until the eureka moment when he comes to the thirty-thousandth combination and finds one that does work—or maybe he won't. But he keeps his eye on the fact that they do have a drug that keeps people alive for five more years, and that was some of the work he did. It's really hard. Not everybody gets recognized and not everybody is able to come through and do that. Do you have some encouragement for those folks who are working away but not able to find that eureka moment?

I think one of the key things is looking for the smaller victories along the way, especially in the job that he has where it may take years to get the big breakthrough. There are ways to get those little victories along the way, to feel some degree of your ability to make a difference. We've seen it come up again and again that when you feel like you're making a difference, it fuels you during those drought times when you're not seeing a lot of specific highs, or maybe you're not being recognized. I think it's being mindful of where you're making a difference and how most people have those opportunities—even in jobs that one might look at and say that's pretty monotonous, where they do the same

kinds of things every day. We're seeing more manufacturing organizations, for example, do a great job finding ways to give people on assembly lines permission to make small differences in small ways. Small gains along the way end up leading to big gains.

What's your sense about the next step for this research you've been working on? Where do we go from here?

We just completed a big project on appreciation. We have a book on appreciation called *Appreciate* that's coming out in August. That's a compilation of a ton of research we did around the effects of appreciation on individual's engagement and great work.

One of the next projects we're deep into right now is this *Great Work* book and the resulting data that came from examining individual contributors, irrespective of where they land on the organizational chart. So, what do people do individually.

The other question that has been rattling around in our heads is rather than saying, "What makes a great leader?" asking who has delivered better than expected results on a particular project and then taking a look at what specific observable things did that leader do that seem to really make a difference on the outcome of that team endeavor. That's an area that we're drilling into right now to determine some common things that leaders do that lead to better than expected outcomes.

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