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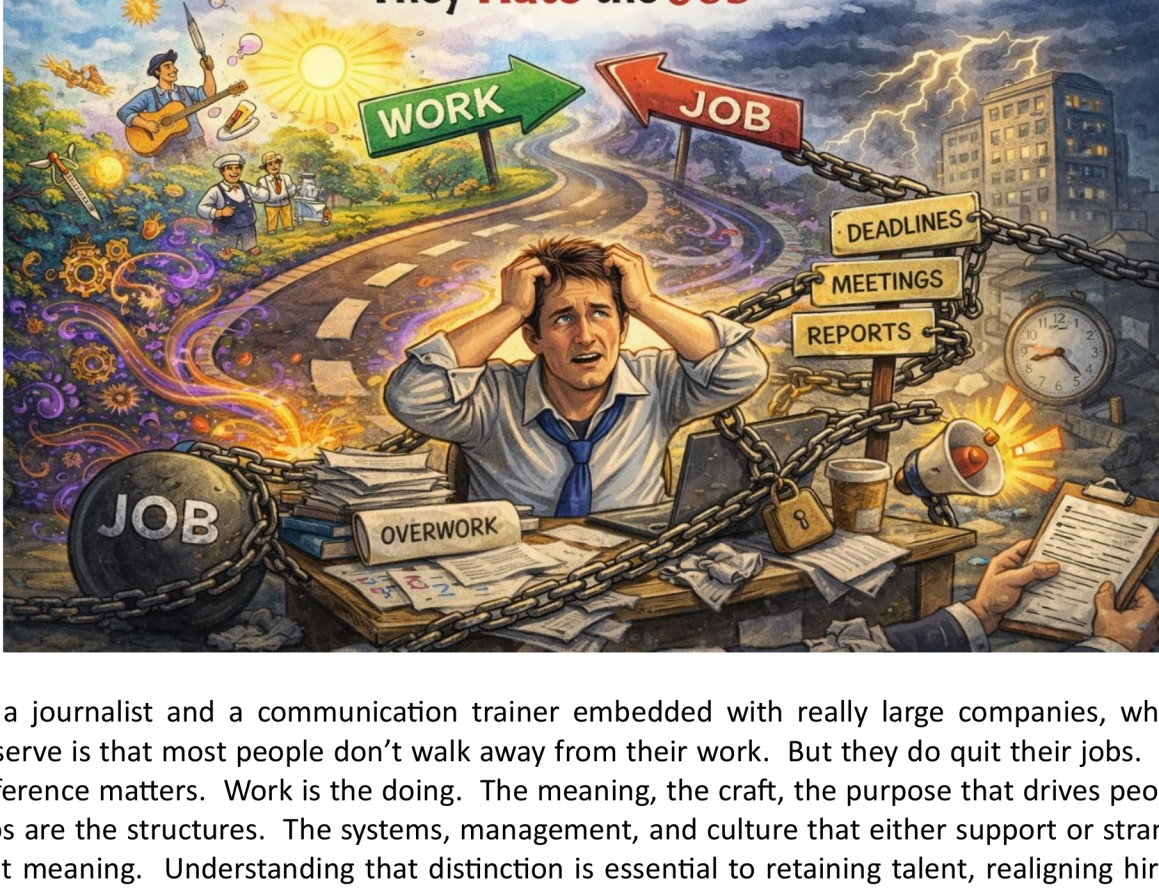
JOB vs WORK, not understanding the difference can be costing you valuable productivity

When Your People Don't Hate Their Work—They Hate the Job

Why the communication gap between “job” and “work” costs you people.

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As a journalist and a communication trainer embedded with really large companies, what I observe is that most people don't walk away from their work. But they do quit their jobs. The difference matters. Work is the doing. The meaning, the craft, the purpose that drives people. Jobs are the structures. The systems, management, and culture that either support or strangle that meaning. Understanding that distinction is essential to retaining talent, realigning hiring,

and diagnosing turnover before a promising candidate becomes another casualty of a broken job design.

As organizations chase engagement metrics and redesign jobs for flexibility, this distinction has never mattered more.

For forty-two years, I worked as a professional broadcast journalist. To date, I've won seven Emmys, two team Murrow Awards, and was inducted into the Michigan Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 2024, the same year I took a lucrative buyout from my television station and got paid out to pasture.

I've worked at four television stations in four U.S. cities and covered everything from murder and mayhem to flower shows. I've met Presidents, princesses, and paupers alike. I've held arrogant politicians to account, and wept quietly at home after covering a parent who lost a child in a school shooting. I've felt the hand of God upon my life while skydiving from a plane on live television. I've flown an F-16 when the pilot handed me the controls during a media flight and for 22-minutes flew an engineering wonder through the clouds. I've pulled 7-Gs and didn't pass out, or lose my lunch (the trick was, I didn't eat lunch). I've performed in an opera and a circus and watched the great polar bear migration in the Canadian sub-arctic.

When asked about my career, I have consistently had the exact same answer: *I have always, always, always loved my work, but have not always loved my job.*

That pattern isn't confined to newsrooms. I see the same split across boardrooms, factory floors, and hospitals — people who love their work but are crushed by the job.

Since 1990, I've also taught communication modules to Fortune 500 companies, OEMs, organizations, and individuals. Each focused on harnessing the power of communication to increase workplace productivity. Across every client, especially those with large employment populations, I've observed a common thread: a conflation between the words “jobs” and “work.”

In my experience as a trainer who uses the tool of communication to improve workplace productivity, my observation is: that confusion of terminology is costing many employers many valuable employees.

When senior leaders ask how to fix engagement or burnout, they rarely examine the language those systems run on. Yet the way organizations talk about “jobs” versus “work” is the hidden code behind performance, retention, and trust.

I offer a field-tested framework for translating abstract work design into concrete communication architecture that leaders can practice, measure, and sustain. I build communication scaffolding that, when practiced with intention, can improve not only work productivity but the experience of a job itself.

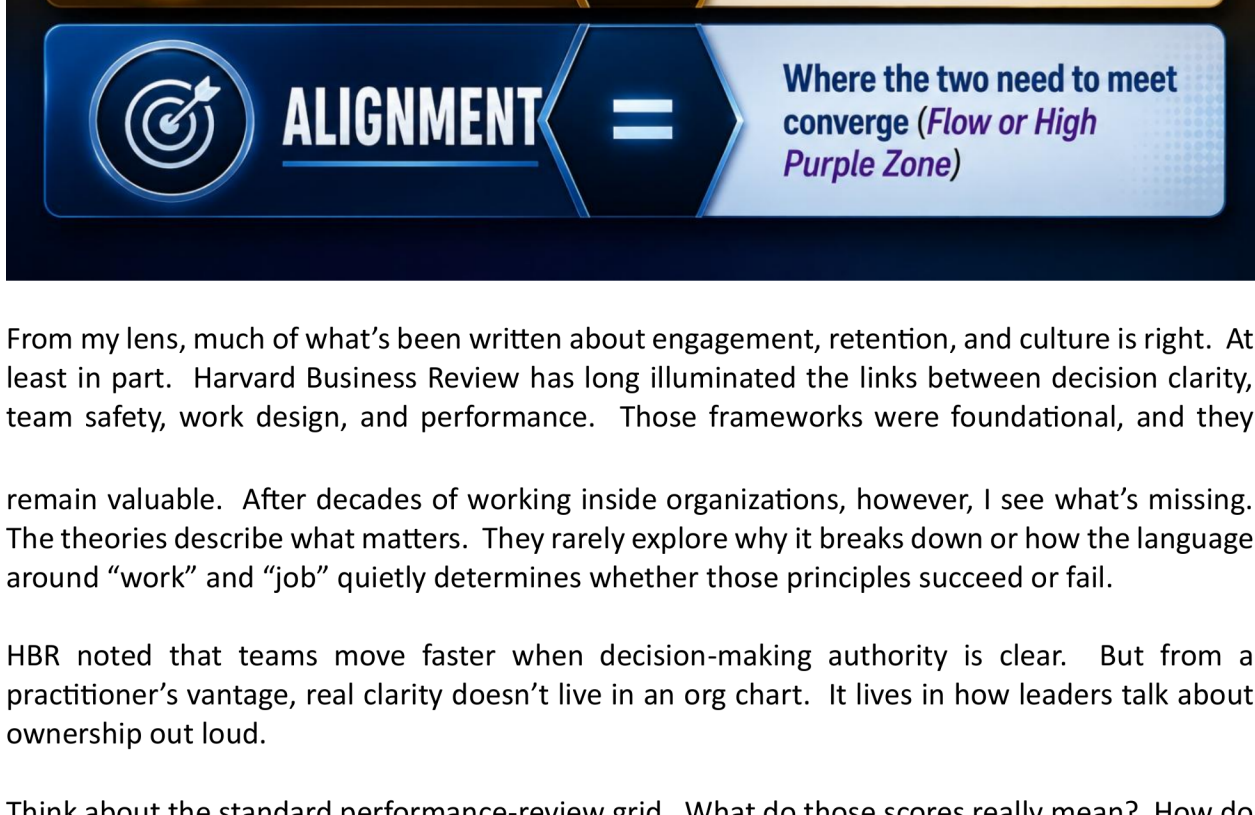
To put a finer point on it: a job is the infrastructure, the description of a task or series of tasks. It's the label. It's the administrative framework that surrounds the doing. Work, however, is the doing. It's the embodiment of the description. Work is experiential. It's what fulfills humans in the act of earning their paycheck.

Research consistently shows that what drives attrition isn't the work, it's the structure, leadership, and language surrounding the job.

The Data and Why I See It Differently

Most analyses of engagement describe what matters: clarity, safety, meaning, and culture.

Engagement D.N.A. explains how communication makes them matter. Engagement DNA is a system I devised in my communication training practice to gauge the tipping point in which communication can still reach a dissatisfied employee and how to message around that person or those persons to improve the ‘air’ in the work ecosphere.



From my lens, much of what's been written about engagement, retention, and culture is right. At least in part. Harvard Business Review has long illuminated the links between decision clarity, team safety, work design, and performance. Those frameworks were foundational, and they

remain valuable. After decades of working inside organizations, however, I see what's missing. The theories describe what matters. They rarely explore why it breaks down or how the language around “work” and “job” quietly determines whether those principles succeed or fail.

HBR noted that teams move faster when decision-making authority is clear. But from a practitioner's vantage, real clarity doesn't live in an org chart. It lives in how leaders talk about ownership out loud.

Think about the standard performance-review grid. What do those scores really mean? How do they add up to a fulfilled employee in their work? Yes, they might indicate work is getting done properly or improperly, but what do they tell you about the person behind the work and their feelings towards that work? And more importantly, how are those reviews communicated? The problem isn't the chart. It's the conversation.

Let's borrow imagery from Star Wars. Imagine the difference of how a work review plays out with a Jedi-conversation. Think communication exchange mastery. Calm, clear, precise, emotionally intelligent, and powerfully disarming without aggression. It models linguistic control under stress. The kind of interaction that converts cortisol-flooded confrontation into oxytocin-driven alignment.

Amy Edmondson's work on psychological safety rightfully reframed how teams learn. Yet psychological safety is not a policy. It's a language state. I've heard leaders say, “My door is always open,” and others say, “I need your eyes on this. I might be missing something.” Both statements intend openness. Only one sounds like safety.

When MIT Sloan Management Review reported that toxic culture was ten times more predictive of attrition than pay, the finding was both startling and affirming. But I would argue that what we call “culture” is not a set of behaviors or perks. It's a vocabulary. Culture lives in the words leaders use, the tone they choose, and the acknowledgments they withhold.

You don't change culture with a review. You don't nurture a love of work with a survey. You don't preserve jobs with edicts. You change those things one conversation at a time by recognizing which side of the equation you're really addressing: the work thing or the job thing.

The research has told us what matters: clarity, safety, meaning, and culture. What I've learned from the field is that all four are communication-dependent systems. They thrive or collapse through the way we talk about jobs and work.

That's where my work begins. Designing the language architecture that aligns work and job. When leaders master that translation, they don't just retain talent; they rebuild the connective tissue between purpose and performance.

We know that feelings about work and jobs fluctuate with daily realities. Drawing on engagement research and field observation, I developed Engagement DNA to show how work satisfaction and job satisfaction interact and where communication can tip the balance.

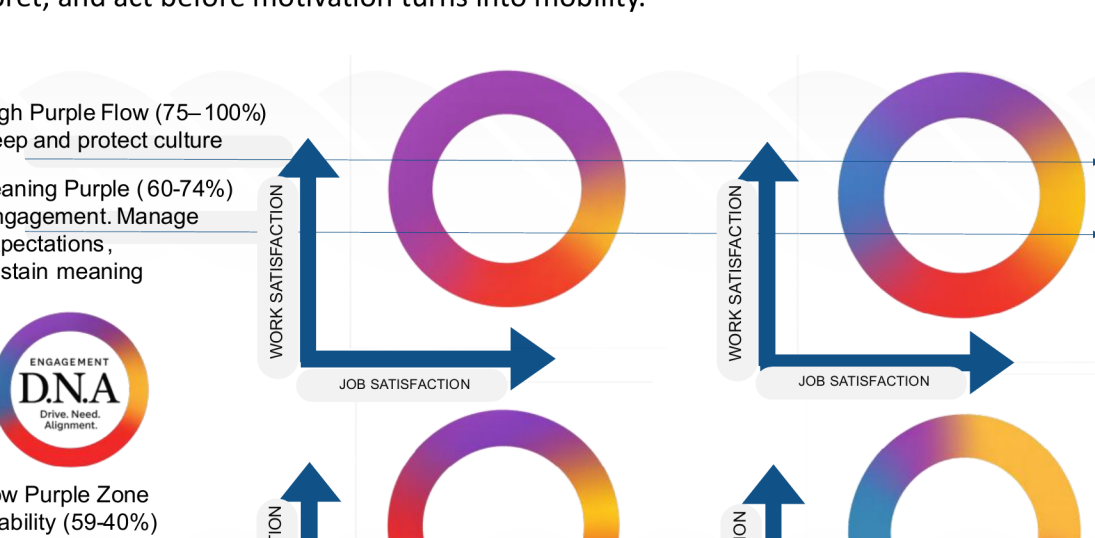
Across multiple studies, the flashpoint for disengagement tends to emerge once work satisfaction falls below roughly forty percent, even if job conditions remain stable. I call the upper alignment range the Purple Zone. High Purple employees are those whose work satisfaction runs between seventy-five and one hundred percent and are driven by purpose. The work feeds them, even when the job structure doesn't.

Between the extremes lies an intervention zone. Instead of asking employees whether they like their job, ask whether they like their work. That single question often reveals whether communication around expectations, recognition, or autonomy is raising or lowering the Purple quotient. Adjust the language of management, and you can lift an average performer into engagement.

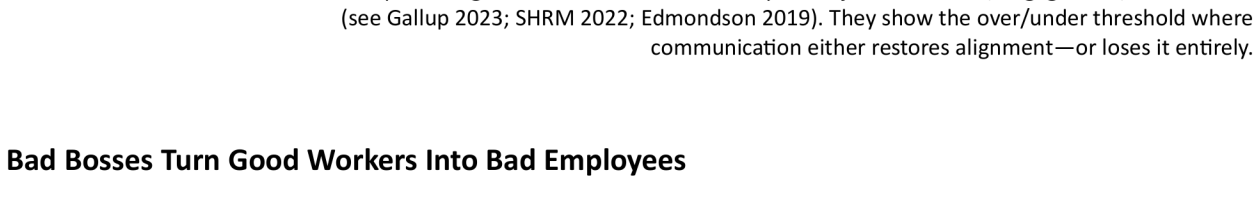
When satisfaction drops below forty percent, the employee enters the Low Purple or disengagement zone. They may remain competent and reliable, but their emotional contract is already broken and they will leave when opportunity appears.

Color me productive

Behavior isn't just color. It's language. High Purple represents optimal alignment between meaning and structure. Gold and Amber reflect stability with potential fragility. Blue signals risk, when the conversation about the work has grown quiet. Red is the danger zone: emotional withdrawal that precedes physical exit. These zones aren't fixed personality types; they're snapshots of communication health. The more fluently leaders speak the language of work and job, the more often they are likely to keep their people in the Purple



Let's be clear. Ambition doesn't negate engagement. It often fuels it. An employee who is seeking higher pay, more advantages and advancement can be high purple and a workplace rockstar while being open to other opportunities. When work satisfaction remains high but job satisfaction begins to slip, those color bands become early indicators for leadership to observe, interpret, and act before motivation turns into mobility.



These percentages are drawn from meta-analyses on job satisfaction, engagement, and attrition (see Gallup 2023; SHRM 2022; Edmondson 2019). They show the over/under threshold where communication either restores alignment—or loses it entirely.

Bad Bosses Turn Good Workers Into Bad Employees

Let me give you an example of how this plays out. I'll use myself and an actual incident that happened when I was a working journalist.

I can think of three employment cycles in which I had substandard, unqualified, unempathetic poor leadership. I survived them all.

While working in Detroit, I had a producer who brought an attitude to work that screamed, “I hate my life, therefore, I hate everyone else”.

One morning I was scheduled to deliver the findings of an investigative report. I had been working on it for months, had lots of *show-n-tell* paperwork and was ready to go live with my important findings inside the studio.

That particular producer, however, was seemingly hellbent on me being outside for no particular reason, other than it was raining cats and dogs and she had the power to make me get soaked on live television.

I explained to her that if I delivered my findings standing in the rain, no one would be paying attention to my report, they'd be focused on a news reporter, seemingly stupidly standing in a torrential downpour for no particular reason that served the subject matter.

She didn't care.

And so that's where I stood. Holding an umbrella in the driving, windy rain, with water running down my face and my clothing, looking absolutely ridiculous. I was furious.

On the way home I was driving north on I-75, when I saw a mammoth plume of black smoke to the East of the City. Black smoke means active fire. White smoke means steam and the fire is being brought under control. Something in the distance was burning big and out of control.

Still soaked and livid, I made the conscious decision not to call the fire into our assignment desk. For all I cared, the competing stations could beat us on that one. I had a ‘screw you’ attitude as I drove home at the end of my morning shift still cold and wet and furious.

I had that attitude for all of three miles. Five minutes later, I called in the fire and the station was able to send a crew. We won the story from the competition by getting there first.

My work satisfaction: my “Drive” overrode my job dissatisfaction that day.

The story aired, and we beat the competition. But my loyalty wasn't to the station, or its management. Ultimately, it was to the work.

That's the danger zone leaders often overlook: when people love their work but not their job, they will still deliver... until the next opportunity lets them leave.

One bad manager, gave me a window of opportunity to check-out and not care. But because I operate in the High Purple Flow Zone and have always loved my work, it won out over the job and the poor administration.

It begs the question: If you have an employee who loves their work, why wouldn't you do everything possible to keep from opening a window for them to leave?

My communication prescription is common sense when it comes to bridging the Work-Job Gap.

1. **Name the Language Divide.** Start conversations by distinguishing “job” (structure) from “work” (purpose).
2. **Audit the Vocabulary of Leadership.** Count how often leaders talk about tasks vs. meaning. Communication shows culture.
3. **Engineer Clarity Loops.** Replace “My door is open” with direct language that signals safety (“I might be missing something. Can you look with me?”).
4. **Protect High-Purple Talent.** When you identify people who love their work, shield them from managerial dysfunction and bureaucratic noise. They are your irreplaceable retention core.

Engagement isn't an HR program. It's a communication architecture. When leaders learn to speak the language of Drive, Need, and Alignment, they don't just retain employees, they restore purpose to the job itself.

To build the solid foundation of work and job alignment, the most valuable tool in your box is communication.

Citations:

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