

# HOW THE HEART MAKES CONNECTIONS

A White Paper Adapted from

## **Shift the Work**

*The Revolutionary Science of Moving From  
Apathetic to All In Using Your Head, Heart and Gut*

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## The Heart Brain and Engagement

In this white paper, based on my book *Shift the Work*, I look at the importance of using our heart to be truly present and to make connections with others – at work and at home.

We don't handle change well. We suck at making commitments, so we exchange our iPhones for new ones every year. We fail at the promises we make ourselves, which is why most people won't follow through on their New Year's resolutions. Instead of working on relationships, we choose to start over. We lack grit and determination. We aren't tenacious at those moments when we are struggling to reach the finish line.



The brains in our heads can help put our thoughts and words into actions.

Our head brain can notice patterns, so we can design innovative game plans at work. The question is: What happens when we face adversity and the game plan looks like it's failing? How do we maintain a steady level of excitement, enthusiasm, and energy during these difficult periods? How do we have the courage to follow through when everyone is telling us it can't be done? How do we stand firm when people dismiss our dreams as childishly romantic?

Most of us begin new jobs with a sense of deep commitment. We want to make an impression on our bosses and new coworkers. We set out wanting to do an A+ job. If the boss asks for volunteers, our hands are the first to go up. Showing up early and staying a little late is fine because we're ALL IN.

Somewhere along the way, this commitment and enthusiasm disappear for 70 percent of us. Soon, we are keeping our heads down at work and waiting for the clock to hit six. Returning home doesn't bring a sense of relief or elation. Instead, we feel as if we went through a battle. All we want to do is vegetate in front of the television. Maybe we'll decide to get a new job, but we won't have any sense of why the previous job failed, and the same pattern will follow us to our new position.

We now understand how to free ourselves from this mindset of rinse, replace, and repeat.

Recent advances in neuroscience tell us that when the going gets tough, it's the brain in the heart that gets us going. It's why we pound our chests when making a guarantee to

deliver on a promise. We never point to our heads to demonstrate the commitment is true.

The brain in the head has us checking off boxes, keeping us on a path, and sticking to a process. How you do it, however, is as important as what you do.

The brain in the heart allows us to experience the moment and connect to our actions in a visceral manner. When we face adversity and aren't feeling great about our direction, it's the heart that steers us and decides whether the commitment is worth it.

We've been taught that the brain sends orders to the heart. This is true.

What we haven't been taught is that the heart sends orders back to the brain.

Research shows how signals sent from the heart impact our attention, perception, memory, and problem-solving. Think about moments when stress takes over your body. Your thinking is impaired. It's not the time we make our best decisions. It's why we tell people to take a deep breath before they decide on the next step to take.

It reminds me of a scene in the movie *Rudy*. The coach of the football team lays into one of his star players and says, "If you had a tenth of the heart of Ruettiger, you'd have made All-American by now!" Do you lead with your head, heart or gut brain? [Find out.](#)

## The Seed School and One Thing I Almost Forgot

When the SEED School of Maryland asked me to deliver a speech to 308 middle-school children, I felt flattered. Then, the nerves kicked in.

In the past, I'd spoken to high-school students about my journey from Baltimore City kid to entrepreneur, but a gymnasium full of boisterous adolescents felt like a completely different challenge. Turns out, I was right.

Having always believed that giving back to the community is a privilege, I said yes. Plus, it's hard to think of a cause better than the SEED School of Maryland, a public, college-preparatory boarding school that provides tuition-free education to some of the state's most disadvantaged children. Admission is based on a lottery system, and for many of the students, it's a winning ticket that's the difference between life and death.



I pulled up to the 52-acre campus on Baltimore City's west side. The grounds were as deserted as a dust-bowl town. I was a few minutes early and I went over in my head the themes my speech would cover: values, perseverance, leadership. Not

exactly subjects that would strike a chord with a group of hyperactive, hormonal adolescents stuck in an assembly.

The anxiety intensified the moment I entered and saw bleachers on both sides of the enormous gym. It's hard enough to engage children when one is facing them. Now, I'd have to figure out how to position my body in a way that would allow me to make maximum eye contact with everyone in the audience. In addition, the room was empty. I spent a couple of minutes wondering whether I messed up the time. I guess it's safe to say that I was looking for doubt anywhere I could find it.

Finally, the students started trickling into the room. Eventually, every seat was taken.

When the head of school quieted everyone down, he delivered a brief introduction and handed me the microphone. Any nerves I'd been experiencing immediately went away the second I started speaking. I felt relaxed, and the students were engaged as I opened with a humorous story from my youth.

Then, the microphone cut out. Suddenly, it was like I was whispering into a hurricane. People were yelling that they couldn't hear me. In a flash, I lost the audience. The children started talking and laughing with one another. Three students scrambled around me in an effort to solve the technical difficulty. It soon became clear that they didn't possess the expertise to deal with the issue.

For a second, I thought about bailing. Then, I considered the message it would send the children. I didn't want them thinking that quitting was the right response to dealing with setbacks. So, I proceeded to yell the speech at the top of my lungs. All eloquence and grace went right out the window, but the kids at both ends of the gym could hear me perfectly – or they had quieted down because I was yelling like a madman.

I proceeded to explain the importance of perseverance. I told them about growing up in Baltimore City, losing my mother at a young age, and going to the tough schools that they had narrowly escaped thanks to the SEED School. It's tough to sound inspiring when you're screaming at the top of your lungs, but I tried. I told them about attending Johns Hopkins, being an entrepreneur, and the constant effort to make my mark in my community and the world. Although relieved that I'd reached the end of my remarks, I felt discouraged by the thought that the students hadn't heard one word I said.

Ready to walk away, a teacher approached. She said some of the students had questions, a request that lifted my spirits. Perhaps they had heard my remarks.

The first child stepped to the microphone. He asked, "How much money do you make?"

After providing a diplomatic answer, I took a second question. "What's it like being in business?"

In one minute—still yelling at the top of my lungs—I tried relaying to the group a sense of our company's day-to-day work.

Next, a young girl stepped up to the front and asked, “Do you think your mother is proud of you?”

I waited to answer, sensing she had something else to say.

She did.

“See, I lost my mother, too, at a young age, and I want to know if she’s proud of me.”

At that moment, I almost started bawling. Without a microphone, I’d managed to reach this girl. I’d shared something of value with her, and she responded with something of value. Mission accomplished, even if she were the only one in that entire gym who had heard my speech.

I learned a valuable lesson that day: what we say matters.

Sometimes we feel that nobody is listening. We haven’t found the right words to express an idea, the microphone is broken, or the crowd is too busy on their phones to listen. If we’re willing to put ourselves out there, we’ll find people who’re ready to find value in the message we want to share.

The head can devise all sorts of strategies for putting you in front of an audience, but it depends on the heart brain to make the connection. [Learn more](#) about your head, heart, and gut brain qualities.

“You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” – R. Buckminster Fuller

## Tony Robbins's Six Needs

Six needs drive human behavior, according to Tony Robbins:

1. Certainty / Comfort
2. Uncertainty / Variety
3. Significance
4. Love and Connection
5. Growth
6. Contribution



What do the first four have in common? They're what we'd call matters of the heart. Number 4, "Love and Connection," is particularly crucial. It brings to mind a celebrated Harvard happiness study that followed people over the course of decades and identified connection as the number-one factor in determining a person's overall satisfaction with life.

Our thirst for connectivity is undeniable. It's why we check our phones every five minutes and feel a need to share every like and interest on Facebook. It's the reason we prefer to stay in a job that is familiar even if it brings us no satisfaction. An insufficient connection, we mistakenly believe, is better than no connection at all. Some people turn to drugs and alcohol in trying to fill this need. Someone taking drugs doesn't know if he will live or die. What he does know is that he will feel something.

It will make him feel important, and it's a lifestyle that connects the user to a group of people with the same limited interests.

The challenge for all of us is to fill the need of connection in a constructive, rather than destructive, manner. Unfortunately, the destructive path, as one might imagine, is far easier to pursue. Fixing your marriage, pursuing an education, and finding engaging work is much more difficult than doing drugs, joining a gang, or even staying in the same dead-end job.

But this challenge is much easier when you [know your work superpower](#).

## What the Neuroscience of the Heart Tells Us About Engagement

The heart has energy. We all know someone with infectious energy. What we don't all know is the biological explanation for how people can change the mood in a room.

The heart acts like a magnetic field, radiating its moods to anyone in proximity. When we engage someone, whether through touch or proximity, our hearts transfer an energy forward. While our bodies absorb the mood, our heart brain — working with our head brain — releases an energy back at the person.

Think of the brain in the heart as the body's power plant. Power plants, as we know, don't just use energy; they generate it.

### **The heart brain manufactures energy through its connection to the head brain.**

Consider that the brain in the heart has 40,000 neurons, a fraction of the 86 billion neurons located in the brain in the head. Still, the small cluster of neurons acts as a key portal of the neural network, pulling thoughts and ideas from the brain in the head, and releasing the subsequent energy into the world. The head brain will notice if the person standing across from you is happy, but it's only once the heart brain receives the message that it releases the oxytocin and pumps the blood at a faster rate. It will change the way the muscles in our face move. Our voices will sound different. The person standing across from you will observe and absorb these changes.

**The heart communicates.** We've all seen our share of Oscar-worthy performances. The actor can use the head brain to make the choice to use a certain accent or move his or her body in a way that properly reflects the character. Intellectualizing the role will only carry the actor so far. The magic happens when the actor can put himself or herself in the emotional space of the character he or she is playing. The heart has to be pumping at the right rate that will allow the voice to crack just perfectly right before breaking down in tears, or it won't be believable.

**The heart remembers.** The heart sends as many, if not more, messages to the head brain than it receives. Researchers in the field of energy cardiology have found that nearly all heart-transplant recipients report experiencing memories and emotional responses that appear to have come from the donor's personality. What this means is that the heart creates thinking hormones similar to the type created in the head brain.

In her book, *A Change of Heart: A Memoir*, Claire Sylvia shares her experience after receiving the heart and lungs of her donor—a teenaged boy who died in a motorcycle accident—describing a change in her cravings, behaviors, and emotions. She reportedly acquired her donor's love for beer and chicken nuggets. Sylvia also found

she became more aggressive and impulsive. After she sought out the family of her donor, these physical and psychological changes were confirmed. Sylvia's story is only one of a number of documented case studies that supports that the heart maintains our memories.

**The heart tastes.** The human genome has twenty-five bitter taste receptors, twelve of which, according to The School of Biomedical Sciences team at the University of Queensland, are located in the heart. As part of this team's ongoing research into the growth of human hearts during disease, they found that when the taste receptors are activated with a chemical—that we taste as bitter—the contractile function of the heart was almost completely inhibited.



**The heart breaks.** Even the healthiest of individuals can experience a broken heart. Broken heart syndrome, also called stress-induced cardiomyopathy, is the body's reaction to stressful moments most often linked to our relationships. The death of a loved one, a breakup, physical separation, betrayal—many of us have, or will, experience some kind of heartbreak in our lifetime. The brain in the heart detects the surge of stress hormones and responds to these heart-wrenching moments with ache—physical and emotional—but in most cases promises to heal with time. The heart craves connection and engagement, and when that connection is diminished or broken, our body responds.

**The heart hears.** A great song plays on the radio, and we feel it in our hearts. A musical theorist can explain why certain notes played together can sound particularly pleasing, but we feel the greatness in our hearts, not in our heads. It's our hearts that beat faster when the song is recognized by our ears.

Do you lead with your head, heart or gut brain? [Find out.](#)

## It's Not What You Say, But How You Say It

In the 1950s, Dr. Albert Mehrabian studied the elements that form the basis of communication. He determined that only 7 percent of communication is about the actual words spoken. In fact, 38 percent is about voice quality—pitch, tone, volume, rhythm, and frequency. The most significant element of communication is body language. It

accounts for 55 percent of communication. Overall, 93 percent of communication isn't about what you say, but how you say it.

Try this exercise. Repeat the following sentences, while emphasizing the italicized words. You will notice that although the words are the same, each sentence has a completely different meaning.

*I* didn't steal her money. (It wasn't me.)

I didn't *steal* her money. (I took money from her, but I don't consider it stolen.)

I didn't steal *her* money. (I stole money, but not from her.)

I didn't steal her *money*. (I took something from her, but it wasn't money.)

In the workplace, we believe email is the fastest, most efficient system to communicate. The reality is that it's often difficult to interpret the sender's intention. Was the person genuinely angry, or speaking sarcastically? It's symbolic of the workplace environments we've created. We leave no room for feelings and connecting with our coworkers and the work at hand. It's difficult to work with purpose when feelings are suppressed throughout the day.

[“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”](#) –  
George Bernard Shaw

## Generation Xers Are All About Heart

The baby boomer generation was all about compliance, control, and compensation. People were content with being part of a hierarchical system. They devoted themselves to the company and the job. They were a generation in tune with the brain in the head, which is about planning, innovation, and following a path.

The members of Generation X took a different path. They believed in following their passion. It's the generation that grew up on Rocky and Rambo. Generation Xers believe that where there is a will there's a way, and nobody should ever accept that no is the end of the road—a sense of determination that perfectly aligns with the brain in the heart.

Want to know more about your strengths and weaknesses in the workplace. [Take our work superpowers quiz.](#)

## What the Statistics Say About Our Hearts in the Workplace

Level of passion speaks to the question of whether you own what you do in your heart.

Does your belief in the company make you want to do a great job at work, or are you completely indifferent to the company's success?

We surveyed a group of employees to learn whether, if knowing what they now know, they would accept the job again if offered it today—72 percent answered in the affirmative. This sounds high, but is it really? Over a quarter of the company would choose not to take the job again.

Would you go to a restaurant if a quarter of the diners said they'd never come back?

It's no wonder we have such tremendous divisions in this country. People aren't finding an outlet for their passion at work, so at home they turn to politics to fill the need. It's negative passion that results in blaming others and pointing fingers for the great frustrations in our lives. When a kid isn't being paid attention to, he or she acts out, essentially what the adult workforce is doing right now.

Willingness to suffer is the question of whether you're prepared to push through when confronted with the harder, less appealing aspects of the job. Not every task we are asked to do at work is glamorous or fulfilling, but if we believe in the overall mission, we are willing to tolerate these elements as part of the job.

It's when we don't agree with the mission that they become onerous.

Level of resiliency is about whether we'll break before we see something through to the end. We all hold up commitment as a virtue, and none of us wants to live with regret, but it's easier said than done, especially when we are trapped in a negative situation. Say you decide to do a triathlon but only spend one-month training. Midway through the race, you're forced to drop out. You won't walk away feeling satisfied that you gave it your all. Further, the fact that you wasted little time training will not provide comfort. All you'll feel is regret over not having made a greater commitment to succeeding and having wasted time on a half-assed effort.

Failing should only feel okay when we know we've exhausted all options. When we're indifferent to it, it means it's time for serious reflection. [Take my work superpower quiz.](#)

## A Strategy for You: Motion Creates Emotion

Annie O'Dell (nicknamed, AOD) exuded passion. A gentle soul with an animated spirit, Annie finished college in her home state of Minnesota and drove to Washington, D.C., to take a job at a company she knew nothing about. Three months later, she left that job to work with our company. We gave her the position of project specialist, meaning she did a little of everything. In twenty-five years of working in various businesses, I've yet to encounter anyone who's matched the level of enthusiasm Annie brought to her job at SHIFT THE WORK.

Right away, she stood out for having a unique point of view, one that was shaped by her connection with the brain in her heart. We asked her to put together a thank-you gift for our clients. In years past, we took a pretty standard approach to this gesture—fruit baskets, gift cards to restaurants, holiday cards. That year we settled on the idea of bringing a catered lunch into the offices of our clients. Lunch in the middle of the week, Annie thought, was a nice gesture, but it too was ordinary. Ice cream sundaes for dessert on a Wednesday afternoon, on the other hand, would prove that we put serious thought into the gift. Suffice it to say, the clients were blown away. They commented on the utter joy as, like children, they topped their sundaes with fudge and sprinkles in the middle of a workday.

At one point, Annie noticed that in company meetings, everyone was dividing their attention between the proceedings and the phones in their hands. She took a trash can, covered it with green felt, decorated the lid like a frog face, and called it Kevin. As a new rule moving forward, everyone would deposit his or her phone into Kevin at the start of meetings. She could have suggested we all put our phones into a nondescript, cardboard box, or leave them in our office, but like with the ice cream sundaes, she had a way of electrifying people's hearts and getting them excited about ideas.

Soon after convincing several members of the team to jump out of an airplane for the first time, she felt a pain in her stomach. Doctors discovered that she had a rare form of sarcoma. For two years, she met the cancer with the grace of an angel.

Her sickness came right in the middle of 2009, as our company struggled during the recession. Annie wasn't physically present at work during this time, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't channeling her spirit and style as I tried to dig our company out of the ditch.



She came out from Minnesota to visit us one last time. To this day, I'm haunted by the memory of her telling us that she could feel the cancer inside her body. Three weeks later, she asked us to visit her in order to say goodbye. There she was in her hometown, surrounded by loved ones. Meeting her family and the people from her hometown, it was clear that this was someone who touched

everyone deeply, as we suspected. Even though it was tragically early, she said she had no regrets.

My wife, Erica, was pregnant at the time, and we were having a debate over what to name the child. For a reason that wouldn't become clear to me until much later, I decided to ask this woman who was close to death what we should name this new life. Annie picked Eliana (and we would call her Ellie for short); the name sounded right coming out of her mouth. Then, she told me to remember that love always prevails, and goodness never dies.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of interviewing Jack Welch about his new book *The Real-Life MBA*. I was overcome as he began to tell me about a career assessment process mentioned in the book that he called Area of Destiny. AOD. On one axis is a person's passion. The other axis is the person's skills.

The idea is to identify where passions and skills meet. Annie, our AOD, was definitely in the top right quadrant. Her passion perfectly aligned with her skills because her skill was her passion. She had this natural ability to light people up, whether it was her colleagues, clients, friends, or complete strangers. A more appropriate job title for her would have been "director of inspiration." What are your natural work strengths? Discover them [here](#).



## Take Time Out of Your Day to Connect with Your Heart

I'm a big proponent of journaling in the morning. The company that created The Productivity Planner also has a product called The Five-Minute Journal: A Happier You in Five Minutes a Day. Again, it's the idea of: Shift the Work your language, Shift the Work your mindset. Through using specific language to write down our goals, we can better connect to the heart brain. Approach the coming day with a mindset of gratitude. Instead of what we "have to" do, we write down what we "get to" do.

Normally, commitment to exercise is a product of the head brain. We know it's healthy, and we devise a plan to achieve certain goals. The popular exercise program CrossFit, on the other hand, is about connecting people to fitness and health through the brain in the heart. Participants see themselves as members of a community. The commitment one makes to oneself comes through the bonds formed with the other members. People visit one of the "boxes," or affiliated gyms, unsure of what exercises they'll be doing that day. The hour starts with an instructional period and is followed by group stretching. Finally, everyone goes through the WOD (workout of the day) together, and each individual's results are put up on a board. It's no coincidence that if you look at the

people in your life who do CrossFit, they're probably the people you find most passionate about living.

## Strategies: Workplace

What if your organization established an environment where workers felt connected to each other and the work? It starts with putting the values and vision of the company into words, so there is a clear picture of how a worker will experience those values on a daily basis. This manifesto should be thoughtful about the full life cycle of an employee, from the time the worker comes in for the interview through the person's departure.

Think of how nice it would be to work for a company that acknowledges that there will be an end of the road. After all, not everyone will become an executive. People will top out at a certain point and will want to pursue a different challenge. Most companies act angry when a worker decides to depart, even though they've been doing the same job for ten years without any promotion. A company that acknowledges the end at the beginning is more likely not only to help workers achieve their goals but also to have workers who are more engaged during their time with the organization.

Take the example of the consulting firm McKinsey. Upward of 75 percent of senior partners leave to become corporate executives. McKinsey accepts these departures as a badge of honor, a sign that the company's culture produces some of the best in the field. McKinsey accepts that employees view the company as a stepping stone, and because of this reputation they're able to recruit top-level talent who will work their tails off to get that next great job. [Discover your natural work talents.](#)

Too often, companies see falling profits and blame them on product or distribution issues. They never think to look at the issue of engagement, even though we know a disengaged worker is a less productive worker.

Glassdoor has emerged as the Yelp for businesses. It's a site workers can visit to see whether potential employers understand what employees of the company are thinking



and feeling at work. Read through enough reviews of a company, and you'll be able to quickly tell whether the workers are engaged or not. It's unfortunate that a majority of company leaders aren't constantly assessing whether workers feel connected to the energy of the company. Want to see how we dealt with a tough Glassdoor review? Watch the video at [www.shifthework.com/tools](http://www.shifthework.com/tools).

At SHIFT THE WORK, we care deeply about maintaining the passion of our workers, which is why we grant employees month-long, sponsored sabbaticals after ten years at the company.

## Strategies: Community Mission

When you can see it, you can feel it. That's empathy.

Growing up in Baltimore City, "on the wrong side of the tracks," it was easy for me to be anything but a fan of the police. That limited point of view changed when I arrived at Hopkins and a criminal-justice professor required everyone in the class to participate in a police ride-along.

They paired me up with officers attached to the northern district of Baltimore City, an area that included the dangerous North Avenue. This was in the late '90s, a particularly violent period in our city. It was a scary adventure, even for someone like me who'd grown up in a similarly rough neighborhood.

We spent the first half of the night tracking down carjackers, sending loitering children home, and arresting vagrants for disorderly conduct. It brought back a lot of memories

and feelings, although I'd have to keep reminding myself that I was now playing for the other side. Slowly, as the night wore on, I began to appreciate the difficulty of the officers' jobs. They were forced to make split-second decisions and defuse potentially violent situations. Present in all their interactions was the constant struggle to maintain the difficult balance between firmness and civility.

At around midnight, as we took a short coffee break in a convenience store lot, the dispatcher interrupted with a call that there'd been a shooting on the Hopkins campus. I'd always thought of my campus as a bubble, impervious to the violence that surrounded it. It even had its own security force, but there we were flipping on the siren and racing to the scene. When we arrived at the campus entrance, the officers grew agitated, as they struggled to find a clear route to the library, where the shooting had taken place. This part of the city wasn't a normal route on their beat. I leaned forward from the back seat and, through the glass divider, began directing them to the scene.

Moments later, we arrived, driving onto the grass. Blood was everywhere. The ambulance hadn't even arrived yet. The victim was on the ground, a bullet wound to the head. Bystanders cared for him, but he was dead. I'd seen violence up close before, but I thought I'd left it all behind when I left my old neighborhood for life at Hopkins.

The officers asked if anyone saw the shooter. A witness pointed in the direction of a dormitory. The officer took off, and I followed close behind. By the time we arrived, Hopkins had already detained the man. They handed him to the officer, and the three of us began walking back to the car, shoulder to shoulder.

"Hey," the shooter said to me, looking me dead in the eye. "Do you have the time?"

My officers were tasked with accompanying the corpse to the emergency room. As the doctors worked on the man, the officers went through his wallet, trying to look for identification. I'm the one who had to tell them that all of the IDs were fake. Meanwhile, the whole time I'm thinking that once they figured out the name, they'd be the ones who'd have to drive to the person's house and inform the next of kin. Wow.

## **When's the last time you walked in someone else's shoes?**

It's not enough to read about experiences in a book or listen to a description of what a person goes through. Classrooms only take you so far. You won't know it, until you live it. It's like when my wife goes away for the weekend and leaves me in charge of the kids. Only then do I truly appreciate the difficulty of the work she does every single day.

The heart brain is literally an energy field. If we want to connect with people, we need to stand where they are standing, to see the world through their hearts. Engagement

doesn't mean dropping a check to a food bank into a mailbox. It requires taking the time to volunteer at the food bank, seeing the look on the recipients' faces as they pick up the food. It means taking the opportunity to sleep at a homeless shelter.

When was the last time you spoke to the person who cleans your office at night? This doesn't mean you need to scrub toilets alongside the person, but try to get a sense of what their life is like. If people had a sense of what it's like to work at a DMV, they'd be less quick to harshly judge its workers. Maybe you'd discover that they think we are lazy, impatient, and ignorant. Use your lunch break to spend time with workers from a different department. If you're an executive, then spend time with a lower-level employee. Lower-level employees should try to get a sense of what life is like for the people in charge. If you drive to work every day, try taking the bus or subway. What's important is that you embrace these opportunities without an agenda besides deepening the connection with the other person and the world around you.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of visiting Detroit's Superhero Training Academy, a not-for-profit that empowers children to tap into their inner superheroes and unleash their potential. As part of the curriculum, the children dress up as superheroes, wearing masks and capes, and go through the neighborhood executing various challenges. The students even choose superhero names. The purpose of this dress-up is to place them in the emotional space of the person, or superhero, that they want to become.

Do you know your work super power? Discover them [here](#)

## Tap into the Worlds of Other People

It's easy to criticize other people's words and actions. When we take the time to stand in their world, we can appreciate that they face their own struggles and challenges. Everything becomes relative. Suddenly, our empathy, patience, and tolerance are increased.

In college, I was playing football and struggling through my classes, all while taking care of my mother. I was also running several businesses, one of them a house-painting



company. One day, I had to be at two places at one time. A lot of money was on the line, and I needed someone to run an errand for me, so I could meet a potential client. I made some calls to friends and partners, but nobody was available. Finally, I turned to my roommate and football teammate, a kid who was busy smoking and drinking his way through school.

I explained to him that I was in a bind, and I'd truly appreciate it if he could pick up an order from the paint store for a project that was scheduled to start later that day. I told him I'd pay him for his time and would even throw in dinner and a six-pack.

This roommate, who woke up at two in the afternoon every day, looked up at me and said, "No, I'm really busy today."

At the time, I was quite pissed at him and ended up not talking to him for weeks. Years later, a different perspective leads me to a different, more charitable response. The stress my roommate felt was real to him. There must've been something going on in his head and life, some type of pressure or anxiety, that made him want to drink and smoke all day. He was genuinely stressed out, and the task I was throwing at him probably did feel like more than he could handle.

Engagement is about connecting through the heart brain and absorbing the energy that is emitted from the people around us. We live in a society that tells people it's okay to be self-centered and constantly worried about our own feelings. This doesn't make people happier. If anything, it closes us off and prevents us from trying to engage other people. Nobody stops to consider that we'd all be happier if we took the initiative to rise above our current situation and tap into the worlds of other people. If we can become the coach, the person who manages the flow of the surrounding energy, we can learn things about ourselves from others. These are the connections that would truly make a difference in making us more engaged with family, our community, and ourselves.

## Being Blind for an Afternoon



NATIONAL FEDERATION  
OF THE BLIND

Live the life you want.

With our corporate clients, experience has taught us that a change of perspective can lead to a change in perception. The National Federation of the Blind, which is located in Baltimore, has an exercise where they blindfold visitors for three hours and challenge them to handle everyday tasks. After about thirty minutes of suffering through this sensory deprivation, the other senses kick in and become amplified. Suddenly, you can hear everything. Objects feel differently when you

touch them. You can sense when people pass in front of you or are approaching from behind.

The experience allows one to appreciate not only how blind people manage to get through life, but also how a musician like Beethoven used his handicap of becoming deaf to become one of the greatest composers of all time. It's no coincidence that some of the great entrepreneurs are learning-disabled. The process of overcoming the obstacle and finding a workaround has allowed them to discover fresh ways of looking at how we live. [Get a fresh perspective](#) on your own skills

## Being Blind for an Evening

In 2016, for our company holiday party, we put on an evening called “Dining in the Dark.”

Executives and entrepreneurs from Baltimore and Boston were invited to an elegant dinner. They were broken into groups of six, then blindfolded before taking their seats. Unbeknownst to them, at select tables sat people who recently reentered society after serving time in prison. One was a woman who had her first child at 13 years of age. Another was a man who had spent twenty years in prison on a wrongful conviction. A second woman was trying to get her GED at the age of 32. As dinner was served, the participants went around the table answering three questions we had prepared in advance. What has been their greatest life struggle? What are the greatest issues facing Baltimore? What are their hopes for Baltimore?

The answers provided by the recently freed guests didn't surprise me. These were my neighbors growing up. (The woman who had the baby at thirteen attended the same high school as me.) Their stories of finding themselves stuck on a destructive, desolate path were standard for that community, which I knew well.

The entrepreneurs and executives were part of the world I now inhabited.

Hearing these stories could inspire empathy, but would our business leaders be called to do something about it?

We performed a mini social experiment. We asked our guests to raise a hand if they met someone whose story amazed them. Hands went up in the air. We then shared with them the struggle these people face when looking for work. Would the people in the room, we asked, hire this amazing person they met? If so, raise a hand. Every single person raised a hand, and we instructed them to remove their blindfolds. Watch the video at [www.shiftthework.com/tools](http://www.shiftthework.com/tools).

The executives and entrepreneurs in that room connected to these less-fortunate people through a shared humanity. Empathy is a drug. It releases dopamine in the brain, oxytocin in the heart, and serotonin in the gut. This biochemical reaction is the

body's way of connecting us to the greater good and prompting us to act on that feeling. It's the body's way of asking, "What are you going to do about this situation?" Letting the opportunity slip away creates a void. Don't think your body won't take note if you ignore the call.

After 9/11, New York City came up with the mantra, "If you see something, say something." If your body is telling you something is off, the proper response is not to sit back and stay quiet. The obligation is to do everything you can to improve the situation. Likewise, if a coworker is taking an action that is inconsistent with the company's stated values, even if the person is senior and you are low man on the totem pole, it is incumbent on you to take a stand.

## Solutions: Tools, Technology and Training

In the backs of our minds, we know we get only one go-around, and we don't know when it will end. What if we could more often operate based on this reality? If we were continually aware of our fragile state, we'd be our best selves every day, our hearts to lead us. Life begins with our relationships. Life isn't celebrated by consumption, but through connections. It's about the energy we give and take. [Start here.](#)

## Celebrate the Wins

One of the major reasons people leave their jobs is because they don't feel as if they're making progress and growing. What if your organization celebrated even the small victories of its workers? This could mean ringing a bell when a deal is closed, or banging a gong when a major project is completed. Some companies will use a weekly newsletter to highlight the achievements of employees.

## CEO Riff

In business, people are told not to discuss their deepest feelings and insecurities. What ends up happening is that workers carry around their resentments, disappointments, and frustrations. With no outlet for them, the feelings build up over time, and the workers grow more and more bitter by the day.

Recently, I decided I wanted to address this problem by connecting with our team in a uniquely different way. Also, a majority of my work is done outside the office, and I feared that this contributed to the team's feeling disconnected from me emotionally. To deepen the level of engagement, I set up a channel on Slack called #CEOriff. Every day, I send the team a message. Sometimes I riff about what is happening in the company.

I include both good and bad news. What are the patterns we want to continue and reinforce? What are the patterns we want to Shift the Work? It could be me singing the praises of a team member who responded to a client problem

in a particularly clever manner. I'm quite interested in highlighting models of behavior. Other times, I'll introduce a general business lesson or thoughts on an interesting article I came across. I've even riffed about my own life. I'll tell them about how my family spent the weekend, or a time I disappointed a loved one. I once riffed on my daughter calling me out for not being present and spending too much time on my phone.

Sometimes the riff will take one minute to watch. Other times, it will take ten minutes. In the nine months since launching this initiative, I've missed only one day.

Most importantly, the riff gives everyone at the company an indication of how I experience certain events. It proves to them that the big boss can respond emotionally, and not just intellectually. It's a glimpse into my heart brain. If I can get my team to know me on a level that is separate from the head brain, then it frees them up to share their authentic selves, too. Watch a sample CEO riff at [www.shiftthework.com/tools](http://www.shiftthework.com/tools).

## Feedback Software

15Five is software designed to facilitate constructive conversations between employees and management. Employees take fifteen minutes at the beginning of the day to draft their thoughts on everything from the status of current projects and feelings about the work culture to priorities and challenges moving forward. Companies can customize the fields and questions, so the questionnaire is relevant to specific departments and workers. It should take a manager no longer than five minutes to review the feedback.



The point of the software is to create a culture of feedback.

It creates set points, so managers and employees can see if progress has been made on various fronts. In any organization, workers need to feel connected to the organization's broader mission, and this is partially accomplished when they feel as if their concerns and feelings are being heard and addressed.

## Gratitude Letters

At SHIFT THE WORK we enacted an exercise called “The Gratitude Box of Letters.” Employees are challenged to send out a letter of gratitude, every week, for an entire year. The recipient can be either a professional or personal contact. A letter may thank a business client for opening the letter writer’s eyes to something amazing in the world, or it may thank a former teacher who taught the person a valuable lesson many years ago.

And here's a final assignment for you: articulating appreciation. Write down twenty-five reasons why you go to work every morning. It could be that you want to pay off your mortgage, you want a job that makes even a small, positive difference in the world, or you’re seeking a professional challenge. Go through the list and ask yourself whether your current job satisfies these reasons.

## About Joe Mechlinski

Joe Mechlinski is a *New York Times* bestselling author, speaker, and social entrepreneur who believes that an engaged workforce is the key to unlocking human potential. Driven by his deep-rooted passion for building mission-driven cultures, Joe founded SHIFT, a collective of businesses spanning consulting, executive membership, and venture capitalism united by their common mission to revolutionize workforce engagement and transform the world.



His latest book, [\*Shift the Work\*](#), focuses on this very idea. Filled with actionable strategies and inspiring true stories, *Shift the Work* reveals the revolutionary science behind employee engagement and how readers can use the brains in their head, heart, and gut to transform their workplaces and lives, for the better.

Always embarking on new adventures, Joe launched his podcast, [\*Shift Happens\*](#), which features inspiring icons and influencers such as *New York Times* bestselling author Dan Pink, and three-time *New York Times* bestselling author Tucker Max.

## About the Book

With every tick of the clock, millions of people inch closer to their breaking points—a growing epidemic of apathy and anxiety in the workplace that is affecting life outside of the office. But meaningful work-life integration is possible.

In *Shift the Work*, Joe Mechliniski, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Grow Regardless*, shares his personal journey to find purpose, and how it influenced him to take a deeper dive into the science of human behavior. Inspired by neuroscience research about the connections between the brains in the head, heart, and gut that drive human perspectives and conduct, Joe shares how everyone can re-engage with their work and impact the world.

Filled with actionable strategies and inspiring true stories, this indispensable guide motivates readers to seek fulfilling opportunities, reconnect with their passions, and recognize their power to make a difference.



## Discover Your Work Superpower Today!

### You are Minutes Away from Discovering Your Work Superpower

Answer these 20 questions honestly and openly, don't overthink them. If both choices seem true for you, select the answers that is true most often, or the one that you would rather be true. When you are finished you will get your results immediately. Have fun!

### [Discover Your Work Superpower - Take the Quiz](#)