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THREAT OR PROTECTOR?

REEVALUATING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The Employee Engagement Puzzle

For decades, leaders have puzzled over how to help their employees become more engaged; how to retain them instead of losing them to competitors; and how to motivate them to achieve expected results. Some have provided incentive programs, better benefits, higher pay, flexible work time, the option to work from home, improved culture, opportunities for growth, etc. with limited success. In fact, employee engagement scores have been flat for nearly two decades. Gallup's 2018 Employee Engagement survey¹ showed only 34 percent of employees are actively engaged. That is an increase of only 4 percentage points over the last 17 years. The failure to increase employee engagement is disconcerting when one considers that, according to Gallup, disengaged employees cost United States companies \$500 billion annually in lost productivity.

Why are employee engagement initiatives not working? Why do companies see such little return on their engagement investments? Why are the efforts of supervisors, who earnestly want to create an engaging environment for their employees, falling short? With all that employers are doing to foster engagement, why do employees remain disengaged?

¹ Harter, J. (2020, April 17). Employee Engagement on the Rise in the U.S. Retrieved May 19, 2020, from https://news.gallup.com/poll/241649/employee-engagement-rise.aspx?utm_source=link_wwwv9&utm_campaign=item_245786&utm_medium=copy

Threatening Environments Negate Engagement Efforts

Though there are many factors to consider, one significant factor is that employers' noble efforts to create an engaging environment are neutralized by threats they dole out to employees from the onset of employment. As a result of those threats, too many employees feel exposed, unprotected, and expendable and, perhaps at a subconscious level, they become wary of their employer and fear their leaders. Thereafter, all the engagement initiatives must overcome the perception that the company is like a pacified lion. It may lie peacefully in the grass, but at any moment, could charge and devour them as they work warily at their assigned tasks.

EMPLOYEES FEEL EXPOSED,
UNPROTECTED, AND
EXPENDABLE

The threats begin the moment new employees accept a new job with the seemingly innocent invitation, "Please sign these forms and return them back to us." Most employers require new employees to sign a confidentiality agreement threatening that their employment could be terminated, and they could face legal action should they share trade secrets. They are also required to sign a non-compete agreement that states they cannot work for a competitor after they leave the company and threatens legal action if they do. Then they also sign a statement verifying they have read the employee handbook which lists all the rules and threatens disciplinary action "up to and including termination" should they violate the rules. Some employers require new

employees to sign a statement acknowledging they will not pursue legal action against the employer and that the employer can terminate their employment at any time for any cause. Employers bombard new employees with threats and leave them to feel powerless from the moment they accept the job offer.

Undaunted, new employees optimistically look forward to their first day of employment, convincing themselves those forms conveyed boilerplate, lawyerly legal language intended for less scrupulous employees. Though they may not state it implicitly, it is understood the employees must achieve minimum standards or their supervisors will dole out ever increasing levels of disciplinary action "up to and including termination" to hold the employees accountable until they achieve the expected results. Employees are also introduced to additional policies and procedures and told there is "zero tolerance" should they not comply. Over the years, they see friends and coworkers unjustifiably terminated. Threats, threats, and more threats!

Over time, the motivation employees demonstrated in the first weeks of employment wanes. Their productivity declines. Their interactions with their supervisor, other leaders, and coworkers becomes increasingly strained.

Leaders then scratch their heads and wonder, "Why aren't our employees more engaged, motivated, and committed to the success of the organization? Why aren't they part of the team? Don't we pay them fairly and generously reward them? Haven't

we been benevolent and caring? What more must we do to motivate them?”

HUMANS ARE ANIMALS
WITH AN INSTINCT FOR
SELF-PRESERVATION

Instinct for Self-preservation

Employees are humans and humans are animals with an instinct for self-preservation. And, like most animals, when they feel threatened, they default to fight, flight, or freeze. When they feel threatened in the workplace, their energy, creativity, and effort are channeled to self-preservation. They may become combative, hide their mistakes, waste time gathering proof against criticism, increase absenteeism, withdraw from the team, and quit but stay—all symptoms of disengagement.

In this state, pay, incentives, benefits, work-life balance, etc. do little to reengage them because, at the core of their disengagement, is the persistent threat that their livelihood is in the hands of a cold, indifferent, powerful corporation that has clearly conveyed, “You are expendable. Resistance is futile. Comply or you will be terminated without recourse.”

How much more engaged would employees be if employers conveyed, “You are safe here. We will protect you. We will make your interests paramount to liberate you from self-preservation so you can devote your time, talent, energy, and resources to the success of the team”?

Create a Non-threatening Environment

Is the solution for an engaged workforce to eliminate obligatory legal documents, minimum performance standards, and disciplinary processes? Probably not. Eliminating these things is impractical; but leaders can tone down the threatening language and potentially get better results.

Additionally, you can simply look in the mirror and ask yourself, “Do the people I lead see me as a threat or a protector? Do they see me as self-serving or serving, selfish or selfless?”

IF THEY SEE YOU AS A THREAT, THERE
IS LITTLE YOU CAN DO TO MOTIVATE,
INSPIRE, AND ENGAGE THEM.

If they see you as a threat and feel your motives are self-serving, there is little you can do to motivate, inspire, and engage them. They will see you as the lion in the grass and will watch you warily as they nervously perform their duties. Their attention, energy, and effort will be divided between their work and self-preservation. Simon Sinek, author of *Leaders Eat Last*, explained in his 2014 Ted Talk, “It’s the leader that sets the tone...If the conditions are wrong, we are forced to expend our own time and energy to protect ourselves from each other, and that inherently weakens the organization.”

One employee admitted he did not trust his leaders and felt unsafe in his work environment. He also expressed sympathy for his leaders because he knew they were pressured to perform and expected to respond to employee issues with a firm hand. He then said, “What they don’t

understand is that, if they'll look out for us, we'll look out for them." He was essentially saying, "If they protect us, we will protect them."

Stephen M. R. Covey, author of *The Speed of Trust*, said that people need to know two things about you to know they can trust you. 1) They need to know you are not a threat to them. 2) They need to know your only motive is to help them succeed. If your behaviors seem threatening, reframe them into non-threatening behaviors intended to help those you lead succeed. For example, instead of holding employees accountable for expected results, define the expected results as the goal and dedicate yourself to empowering them to achieve those results. Instead of disciplining employees with the intent to fire them, discipline with the intent to help them succeed so you can retain them. Instead of paralyzing employees with policies and procedures, empower them with values that define expectations, but also give them freedom to operate independently within those parameters.

One might ask, "What if an employee is underperforming? If we create a non-threatening environment for that employee, what motive would they have to improve their performance?" If an employee with high integrity is underperforming, you must first ask yourself, "Do I want the employee to improve for their success or mine?" If it is for your success, you are a threat and will have limited influence until you change your mindset. If it is for their success, next determine if the problem is skill or will. If they do not have the skill, provide training. If they do not have the will, find out why and attempt to influence them. If they still do not have the skill or will after your reasonable

efforts to help them succeed, let them go. They will not be successful on your team and keeping them is enabling their failure. Protect them by moving them where they are most likely to succeed. Move them to a position in the organization that will benefit from their strengths or remove them from the organization so they can find success elsewhere. If the employee perceives you are a protector and not a threat, the employee will more likely value what you do to help them succeed and, if their employment is terminated, they will more likely understand that it is in their best interest.

WE SHOULD CHOSE TO SACRIFICE SO
THAT OUR PEOPLE MAY BE SAFE AND
PROTECTED AND SO THAT OUR
PEOPLE MAY GAIN.

Sinek encourages leaders to create, what he calls, a Circle of Safety. He said, "When a leader makes the choice to put the safety and the lives of the people inside the organization first, to sacrifice their comforts, to sacrifice the tangible, the result is the people feel safe, feel like they belong and remarkable things happen...When we feel safe inside the organization, we will naturally combine our talents and our strengths and work tirelessly to face the [threats to the organization] and seize the opportunities." He continued, "[As leaders, we should] choose to sacrifice so that our people may be safe and protected and so that our people may gain. And when we do, the natural response is that our people will sacrifice for us. They will give us their blood, sweat, and tears to see that their leader's vision comes to life. And when asked, 'Why

would you do that? Why would you give your blood, sweat, and tears for that person?' They all say the same thing, 'Because they would have done it for me'."

In his book *Leaders Eat Last*, Sinek tells the story of Charlie Kim, founder of the tech company, Next Jump. Kim wanted to build a company that would make his parents proud of him. That meant being a good person and doing the right thing. Kim considered his own children and acknowledged he was committed to them for life. He would do all he could to help them become better people and would never get rid of them in tough times. He felt his company should treat its employees the same way.

So, he implemented a policy of Lifetime Employment. The policy declared employees would not be terminated to balance the books or because of mistakes or poor performance. Instead, the employees would be coached to ensure their success. This created a Circle of Safety for Next Jump's employees.

As a result, Next Jump's performance skyrocketed. The years prior to implementing the Lifetime Employment policy, Next Jump's average revenue growth was 25 percent per year. After implementing the policy, average yearly revenue growth jumped to 60 percent per year. Prior to the policy, turnover of computer engineers was at 40 percent, equivalent to the national average. After implementing the policy, turnover dropped to 1 percent. Many engineers declined job offers from companies like Google and Facebook, promotions, and salary increases because they were committed to Next Jump.

That is engagement! And that is the result of creating a Circle of Safety, becoming the protector instead of a threat.

Tips for Creating a Circle of Safety

Here are some additional tips for creating a non-threatening work environment to increase employee engagement. Each conveys you are not a threat and your only motive is to help those you lead succeed.

- *Selfless Mindset* – Remember, it's not about you. Your role as a leader is to shine the spotlight on those you lead. Develop a selfless mindset and put your employees' success ahead of your own.
- *Sacrifice* – Sacrifice for your team. Show them that you will do all you can to support them and help them succeed.
- *Reframe Feedback* – Make feedback about their success and not yours.
 - Less effective: "I need you to finish this project on time."
 - More effective: "I know you want to finish this project, because you want the team to know they can count on you."
- *Take the Bullet* – If your team fails, take the blame for the failure.
- *Give Credit* – If the team succeeds, give them the credit as if you had little to do with it.
- *Give Autonomy* – Stephen R. Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, said, "If you dictate the methods, you can't hold people

accountable for the results.” Give those you lead freedom to choose how they will achieve the expected results. If you require them to do it your way and they fail, that is your fault, not theirs.

- *Extend Trust* – Show you trust those you lead. Delegate opportunities to them and eliminate symbols of distrust (e.g. locked up office supplies).
- *Talk Straight* – Employees feel uncomfortable when they do not know what their supervisor thinks of their performance. Tell those you lead what they are doing well and what they need to improve in clear terms.
- *Safety First* – If the work has inherent risks, put the safety of those you lead above all else. If the risk cannot be mitigated, do not let them perform the task.
- *Frequent Conversations* – Have frequent, casual conversations with those you lead. Conversations create connections and foster trust. One can measure the depth of a relationship by the depth of the conversations.
- *Care* – Truly care about those you lead. John Harbaugh, head coach for the Baltimore Ravens, said, “If you really want people to feel that you care about them, the best way to do that is to actually care about them.”

Love those you lead. Be genuinely concerned about them and invested in their personal lives.

- *Describe the Outcome* – If someone you lead is failing, explain where their performance leads instead of how you will discipline them.
 - Less Effective: If your performance does not improve, I’ll have to “write you up”.
 - More Effective: If your performance does not improve, you won’t be successful here.

Conclusion

Employees are disengaged because employers and supervisors too often convey they are a threat instead of a protector. When employees feel threatened in the work environment, they expend effort and energy protecting themselves from their leaders. When they feel safe and protected, they no longer need to “watch their backs”, but can devote all their effort, energy, and talent to the success of the organization. Therefore, to foster true employee engagement, leaders should overtly protect those they lead so they are perceived to be a protector and not a threat.



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