**The Thrill Is Gone —
When Employees Disengage**

When I'm out and about in the business arena discussing "things employee", one of the issues that is fast becoming a hot topic of conversation, concern and coaching is that of employee disengagement the increased numbers of employees who seem to be underperforming and the resulting cost underperforming has on the bottom line.

Underperforming, or disengaged, employees impact, infect and influence the team, the department, the unit and/or the organization in varied ways, all of them negative. For one thing, underperformers are usually nay-sayers, bad-mouthing the company whenever they can. These underperformers usually serve as the core of the gossiping group, the bullying group or the critical group, affecting morale just as an insidious cancer which, cell by cell, can destroy the body, i.e., individuals, the team, the department, the organization.

In addition, the disengaged adversely affect productivity simply because it takes them longer to produce. Simply, time is money.

Finally, underperforming or disengaged employees can adversely affect the organization in the manner in which they speak to clients and customers. More often than not, disengaged folks are the first to bad-mouth their own organization to others, inside and out talk that can, and does, have serious consequences that most often results in decreased client satisfaction and decreasing returning-client numbers.

Curiously enough, it appears that there is a six-month honeymoon period where the vast majority of employees are actively involved, engaged and proactive in their relationship to their team, their department, their unit and their organization. Then the thrill begins to evaporate.

Why is the Thrill Gone?

For one thing, reality sets in. The picture that was painted during the interviewing and hiring process turns out to be just one corner of a larger painting, unfortunately, a rosy corner of an otherwise blurry painting.

Why the Blur? What's the Truth?

What is the blurring all about? What causes the once-clear painting to become a bit more obscure? Here are some factors:
Leaders, managers and supervisors seem to be too busy to take an active and involved role in learning about and supporting their direct reports on a personal as well as a professional basis, viewing employees more as functions than people. The emotional distance that ensues fosters disengagement and underperforming.
The opportunities for growth, development, and involvement in the creative process seem to be minimal. When employees are regarded as drones whose tasks and responsibilities are laid out neatly in their job descriptions without any opportunity to branch out, learns new skills, or contribute in new ways, they tend to back off and become less engaged.
Information sharing is kept to a minimum where employees with a want to know and a need to know are often kept in the dark and refused access to knowledge and information that would support them to be more productive and engaged. These employees begin to feel they are less-than-trustworthy and irrelevant and thus become confused, leading to resentment and disengagement.

Leaders, managers and supervisors are reluctant to coach and mentor their direct reports when it comes to career advancement and professional development. Not devoting time to support folks to move to a next level, leaders, managers and supervisors communicate they see no value in supporting their direct reports growth and development, thus tilling fertile ground for disengagement.

A playing favorites culture paints a murky picture as employees are unclear on what gets rewarded friendship or productivity. When folks advance on the basis of who they know, others will tend to withdraw and contribute less, leading to disengagement.

Lack of accountability leads those who are consciously engaged, focused, and productive to become less so when they see their counterparts being absolved from being held accountable. These once-enthused employees become reactive, resentful, less enthusiastic and disengaged. A culture of resentment and mediocrity ensues.

The inability or unwillingness of leaders, managers and supervisors to appropriately provide timely and effective feedback. Employees feel stranded and abandoned when they don't know where they stand. Employees who aren't clear on what's working and what's not working vis-à-vis their performance tend to disengage and go on cruise control to get by. When employees lack clear goal statements, or are not stretched by challenging goals, they become discouraged and disengage.

Disconnects between employee expectations and organizational expectations cause employees to become confused. When an employee performs and produces and the organization fails to do so, employees become disillusioned and tend to settle for a less-is-more mindset when it comes to work and working. Disengagement results.

What's the Solution?

The panacea for disengagement is, well, engagement. So, here are some ways leaders, mangers and supervisors can move in the direction of, contribute to, and ensure a more engaged workforce.

Showing mutual respect helps to drive the thrill process. When leaders, managers and supervisors honestly and openly respect one another as human beings, and not as functions, the team, unit, department and organization becomes wrapped in a layer of passion and positivity. Positive and passionate folks are engaged folks.

Holding one another accountable lets no one off the hook, holds everyone's feet to the fire, and fosters mutual respect and trust. Mutual-accountability leads to pride in ones self and the team, increased enthusiasm and a willingness to contribute, as a team, and go the extra mile, especially when the going gets tough.

Mining the employee ranks for hidden talents. When leaders, managers and supervisors explore ways in which their direct reports can strut their stuff i.e., discover, nurture and implement employees hidden talents, strengths, and aptitudes, everyone wins. Morale soars and a can-do mindset permeates the workplace culture. When leaders, managers and supervisors invest time, interest and energy in their direct reports, their direct reports will invest in, and become engaged in, their work and the well-being of their organization.

When leaders, managers and supervisors walk the values talk, they send a clear message that values are more than nice words on a plaque on a wall. Lived, demonstrated values communicate honesty sincerity and self-responsibility; shared values are infective, and lead folks to move in a common direction on the moral compass when it comes to how one is and who one is in life at work. Shared values that are lived communicate commitment and foster engagement.

Ask folks to contribute and participate. Empower your direct reports. Ask everyone to be involved in decision-making as it involves their immediate work and their team. Ask folks to share with others what they do best. Empowering results in commitment, which results in engagement.

Recognize and reward folks efforts, early and often. Provide timely and constructive feedback. Mentor and coach proactively and consistently. Help folks help themselves by giving them the tools, skills and support they need to do their best work. Provide opportunities for personal and professional growth and development. Personal and professional growth point to engagement.

Finally, leaders, managers and supervisors need to relate to their direct reports from their heart as well as their head. Focus on a people-orientation as well as a task-orientation when dealing with employees and youll discover a cadre of engaged folks.

So, want to keep the honeymoon aura alive? Want to keep employees engaged? Take a conscious and consistent interest in your employees, your direct reports, and they'll take an interest in you. Translation: engaged. Show people they are valued, and have a sense of worth over and above the functions and tasks they perform. And, listen.

If leaders, managers and supervisors want to find and keep employees who are engaged, long after the initial six-month honeymoon period, then create a culture and climate where folks consciously want to come to work and do their best, where doing good work and being fully engaged just makes good sense to everyone. Then, the thrill will seldom be gone.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- What keeps the thrill alive for you? It is alive, isn't it? If not, why not?
- Are you proactive in providing feedback, coaching, and mentoring on a consistent basis, not just when HR says "it's time" or just when it's convenient for you?
- How do you feel/react/respond when it comes to taking a "heart-felt" approach to people?
- Does everyone hold everyone else accountable for their piece of the work as an open policy? If not, why not? Fear? Politics? Confusion?
- Do you actually live your organization's values on a daily basis? What would others say about you?
- Do you ask folks to contribute, engage and participate on a consistent basis? Do you empower folks as a practice of your management style?
- Do you publicly recognize and reward folks on a regular basis?
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- Do you feel you are respected by your bosses, peers, and direct reports?
- Do you tend to hoard information? If so, why? What would others say?
- Do you have a tendency to "play favorites?" If so, how do you justify that behavior to others?
- If the thrill is gone for you, what one baby step can you take this week to get it back? You do want it back, don't you?

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