

Are U.S. Employees Disengaged or Mismanaged?

by Jon Craighead

In a recent blog posted July 15, 2013, in Strategy+Business, James O'Toole discusses the continuing problem of disengagement in the workplace. He begins: "Given the lingering recession and stubborn rates of unemployment, you'd think Americans lucky enough to have jobs would be working their tails off to keep them. But according to a recently released Gallup poll, only about 30 percent of employed Americans are actively engaged at work." The same poll indicated that "more than half of the U.S. workforce passively shows up at the office without enthusiasm, kills time till lunch and closing, and exerts little effort... [toward] productivity of the organizations that print their paychecks." And, most discouragingly, a full 20 percent of our workforce "is actively disengaged, contributing to inventory 'shrinkage,' causing accidents, blowing off customers, showing up late (or not at all), and, in general, creating extra work for supervisors and colleagues." This last group is estimated to cost employers \$500 billion annually in lost productivity.

If this is correct – and I believe it is, based on other findings and my own experiences consulting – it begs the question: why are people behaving this way? This Gallup poll states that, as we would expect, businesses enjoy record profits and hire more employees when their employees are fully engaged. Conversely, organizations with low engagement are shedding jobs and losing customers. Although it is typical to suspect the cause of this malfunction lies with the workers themselves, surprisingly the Gallup poll points out that the source of this recurring malfunction lies distinctly at the feet of management. As O'Toole affirms, "many managers fail to do the things necessary to generate employee involvement." He points out that there are some organizational cultures such as Walmart and McDonalds whose business models deliberately discourage employee engagement, because their primary goal is to insure that workers simply do as they are told and nothing more. Furthermore, many other organizations have similar cultural practices that are more hidden but no less damaging. His ultimate assertion is that good management is an unnatural behavior; that "ego, greed and the desire for power are parts of human nature, and thus devilishly hard for managers to overcome."

In my consulting practice I have found that more often than not poor leadership is the source of most worker discontent and organizational failure. Many managers have worked hard and made sacrifices to move up the management ladder, leaving them

with a sense of privilege. With such a mindset leaders are more prone to be focused inwardly and see themselves as separate from others, and they will take any opportunity to exert their power, even in instances where it is unnecessary or ill-advised. Such behaviors drive a wedge between the workforce and management. These actions result in employees feeling powerless, irrelevant, and disrespected.

My experience in the military was and remains contrary to the idea of superior and disrespectful disconnection toward team members. In a combat situation your life depends on the person next to you, and you are always very clear about that fact. In the civilian workplace your mortal life may not be at stake, but surely your managerial successes are. It is an established and irrefutable truth that people, regardless of their station in life, want to be acknowledged and appreciated. When this basic need of the people in an organization is not recognized, it creates a dysfunctional environment, leading to recurring and irreparable disengagement. Although this might seem an obvious fact, it is more often than not missing in personnel interactions. It is management's responsibility to promote the self efficacy of their personnel, regardless of status or rank. While this is clearly understood by many managers, for far too many others it is dangerously missing. Demoralizing actions on the part of management result in a profoundly negative impact on individual lives, productivity, and organizational viability.

On the other hand, an organization that promotes an environment of shared values, which encourages workers to take on a certain level of ownership and responsibility, and which values employee input, will consistently generate high productivity. In such workplaces employees who, for whatever reasons, refuse to participate in the spirit of community and purpose will either self-select themselves out or become easily identifiable for dismissal.