

The Disengaged Employee: Interdisciplinary Research on Discovering Their Needs and  
Coaching Them to Engagement

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### Abstract

High employee engagement is a strong predictor of positive performance for organizations, thus it is, or should be, a goal for human resource departments and organizations everywhere. Engaged employees are enthusiastic about their work and the companies that employ them. They are emotionally attached to their employers and believe in what they do. What causes employee engagement or its opposite, disengagement? How does a disengaged employee affect the organization they work at, and to what extent? Does a disengaged employee adversely affect his or her own physical, social, and community health? Can an employer fix employee disengagement problems and improve the organization's bottom-line? What does it take to have a highly engaged workforce? How do leaders affect employees and their engagement levels? What are the roles of the employee, manager, and human resource specialist in creating engagement? Employee engagement appears to have far reaching implications and is clearly a topic that deserves exploration. This paper looks at the above questions and more utilizing an interdisciplinary approach through research in the human resource management and psychology fields.

*Keywords:* Employee engagement, Job performance, Job stress, Management

## The Disengaged Employee: Interdisciplinary Research on Discovering Their Needs and Coaching Them to Engagement

Engaged employees are a driving force of successful businesses. Engaged employees are energetic, confident, passionate, committed, and satisfied. They are focused on productivity, customer satisfaction, company profits, and safety, and they are typically able to resist solicitations of employment from other organizations. Disengaged employees, conversely, contribute to a different outcome for their employers. They are often disillusioned, tired, less productive, skeptical, and disappointed. The disengaged worker erodes the organization's bottom line through increased absenteeism, higher safety infractions, lower quality work, pilfering, and high turnover, while creating negativity, possibly resentment, and discourtesy amongst coworkers. The damaging effects of disengagement do not stop there. Evidence shows that work stress and incivility amongst coworkers may be spread not only within the organization but also brought home where it affects families and personal relationships. While areas of the disengagement topic remain murky, it is clear that employers need to develop an employee engagement strategy and link it to the achievement of corporate goals to help them thrive in today's business world. To do so successfully, leaders and human resource professionals must concentrate on improvements in leadership, management, and communication.

What does it mean to be an engaged employee? "The term employee engagement refers to the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work," says Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes (2002, p.2). Research by BlessingWhite, Inc. (2011) indicates the term "employee engagement" may mean job satisfaction to one organization, or employee commitment to another company, and thus they believe it is a blend of an

individual's contribution to the company's success and the personal satisfaction one gets from their role within the organization (p. 5). According to Wollard (2011) engagement is much more than just satisfaction as one "can be satisfied with a job because it pays the bills, or is close to home but that does not guarantee that they are physically, mentally, and emotionally invested in the organization's success, the hallmarks of employee engagement" (p. 527).

An engaged employee is an enthused employee who is willing to invest themselves in their employer and expend the energy necessary to help their organization succeed. In her research, Johnson (2004) finds an employee that is engaged has a belief in their organization, an understanding of the business's strategy, a desire to improve their work, a willingness to demonstrate extra effort in their work, the ability to collaborate with and assist colleagues, and the drive to continually enhance their skill set and knowledge base (p. 14). There are a host of other definitions that exist for the term employee engagement, all purporting in one form or another that it involves what the employee brings to the table: time, knowledge, brainpower, ability, desire, emotional connection, and effort to name a few (Johnson, 2011, p. 13-14).

Employee engagement is a two-way street, however. Employers must freely provide autonomy, direction, recognition, feedback, the right equipment and tools, career opportunities, teamwork, collaboration, support, empowerment, and effective leadership to drive the engagement process. When managers do these things, they are creating a more thoroughly engaged workforce and as a result will have employees willing to go the extra mile without complaint.

Is a disengaged employee then the polar opposite of an engaged one? The answer to this question is as vast as the number of characterizations for employee engagement. Wollard (2011) seems to describe disengagement best when she writes “it is characterized by the disconnection of individuals from their work roles to protect themselves physically, mentally, and/or emotionally from real or perceived threats” (p.528). Disengaged employees are unhappy with their work. They are no longer passionate about their organization, or their time spent there. Garnered from the research of BlessingWhite (2011), an engaged employee stays with an organization for what they are able to give, they like their work and are able to contribute; whereas a disengaged employee will stay for what they get, a secure job, suitable pay and benefits, and satisfactory job conditions (p. 14).

Employees who are not engaged are likely not exhibiting full commitment and wasting their efforts and talents on tasks that do not matter much. The disengaged have misgivings about their employer and do not plan to stick around for things to change in their organization. “Disengagement is not simply the absence of engagement, but a cognitive decision, emotionally charged, which manifests in behaviors that put physical, mental, and emotional distance between the worker and their work, their peers, and their organization (Wollard, 2011, p. 529). The level of disengagement for an employee may go from a basic “not-engaged” to a full out “actively disengaged”. Johnson (2011) explains that not-engaged employees participate at work but consider their efforts as only serving time and have no lust for their work at or for the company, while actively disengaged employees are more than just no longer happy at their work, as they reach a point of acting out their unhappiness through deviant behaviors (p.14). BlessingWhite ranks employees

in to five levels of engagement with their level of contribution to the company and their level of satisfaction:

- The Engaged Employee: High contribution and high satisfaction
- The Almost Engaged: Medium to high contribution and satisfaction
- The Honeymooners & Hamsters: Medium to high satisfaction but low contribution
- The Crash & Burners: Medium to high contribution but low satisfaction
- The Disengaged: Low to medium contribution and satisfaction

The most disengaged employees are the most disconnected from organizational priorities, often feel underutilized, and are clearly not getting what they need from work. They are likely to be skeptical, and can indulge in contagious negativity (2011, p. 6).

Many employees are not actively engaged at work and they are looking for new opportunities outside of their organizations. A cursory look around most organizations today will find disengaged employees. BlessingWhite, Inc., (2011) states, “fewer than 1 in 3 employees worldwide (31%) are engaged” in their work. Levels of disengagement will range from the retail clerk not assisting shopping customers, to the IT worker cyber-loafing, to the office receptionist on personal phone calls, or the public relations representative pilfering marketing merchandise. Disengagement may be cyclical and fluctuate over time as personal wants, needs, morals, and integrities are questioned and pressed to the nth degree.

Disengagement may stem from any number of events such as an organizational management change, a company restructuring, or from a negative employee appraisal, but

it clearly starts when the employee becomes cognitively and/or emotionally detached.

“The employee begins to focus on what isn’t working and attempts to correct the problem,” explains Wollard (2011, p. 530). At this point, the employee may work to improve the situation through communication within the organization or begin to leave the company. This is a critical juncture and one where the employer should focus much attention. Through positive efforts of the employer, the employee may reengage and exhibit new belief in the organization and improve their work, alternatively the employee may remain unengaged, exhibit no passion for their work as they just spin their wheels, and contribute little to the organization, or the employee may actively disengage.

The path to active disengagement is littered with stress, fatigue, anger, confusion, irritability and frustration. These unhappy employees are likely to “collect a paycheck while complaining or looking for their next job,” (BlessingWhite, 2011, p. 6) and act out their “unhappiness in the workplace through deviant behaviors,” (Johnson, 2011, p. 14). As the employee becomes more cynical, they may also become more resistant and rigid and partake in passive aggressive behaviors. Burnout, turnover, absenteeism, incivility, theft of property and time, or other destructive acts are not uncommon in behavioral disengagement (Wollard, 2001, p. 531).

Turnover of an actively disengaged employee, who cannot be brought to a level of engagement through coaching, has a positive more than a negative outcome on the individual and the organization as a whole. While turnover can be expensive through costs of the employee separation itself - vacancies, recruiting, hiring, and training, the cost to the company that retains an actively disengaged employee can be substantial as a result of negativity and deviant employee behaviors.

Disengaged employees bring the company they work for down. Companies with disengaged employees are less productive overall and consequently less profitable. Disengaged employees miss an average of 3.5 more days per year, are less industrious, less safe and cost the U.S. economy over \$300 billion per year (Markos and Sridevi, 2010, p. 89). A study conducted by Dane Peterson (2002) showed all respondents self-reported engaging in at least one form of deviant work behavior such as, working on a personal matter instead of work for their employer, repeating gossip about a co-worker, padding an expense account, intentionally working slower than could have, or taking property from work without permission, to name a few (p. 54). Building and promoting positive employee engagement in the organization should decrease workplace deviance considerably.

Disengaged employees bring themselves down. A recent study concluded that low quality work, as a result of disengagement, "can be more harmful to an employee's mental health than being unemployed, yet greater than half of all workers go to work every day feeling less than engaged," cites Wollard (2011, P. 528). One's perception of work can affect their attitude towards life, family, and towards themselves affecting their mental and physical health, playing a casual role in absenteeism, turnover, and maybe even lifespan (Thiruchelvi and Supriya, 2012, p. 157). Employees want to feel appreciated and contribute value to their organizations. Creating a culture where respect and positive contributions happen is good for the employee's mental wellbeing and the employer's financial health.

Disengaged employees bring their coworkers and the coworkers' relationships at home down. Disengaged employees are often negative, less communicative, hostile, cause



work slowdowns, and care less about safety, the company, and their coworkers.

Organizations that incur coworker incivility experience diminished morale and the targets of the incivility are found to have increased depression, anxiety, and work-to-family conflict as a result of the spillover stress from their uncivil disengaged coworkers (Ferguson, 2011, p. 571). Organizations that focus on employee relations and stress management to buffer the effects of disengaged employees on the remaining workforce and their families can potentially stop the ripple effect of incivility from work-to-home and back again.

Disengaged employees even bring their own family and friends down. Feelings of stress, underutilization, unfairness, burnout, exhaustion, inferiority, and hopelessness, are often brought home resulting in unhealthy behaviors, clashes with family and friends, and ineffective leisure and recovery. The damaging thoughts and outcomes this causes at home crosses back over from home-to-work and a viscous cycle of negativity and conflict endures. The employee-employer relationship is often more than the eight plus-hour day a worker spends on the job, and it reaches beyond the employee themselves, to the employee's partner in life, family, and friends. Organizations that focus on positive employee engagement will assist the employee in achieving a healthy work-home life balance, ultimately impacting the company in a beneficial manner.

What does it take to engage employees? While the employee themselves must understand their own values, interests, talents, and aspirations, they also need clear direction from their organization, understanding what it is the company is striving to achieve. Markos and Sridevi report there are various drivers which increase employee engagement levels including senior management's interest in employees' well-being, challenging work, decision making authority, sense of feeling valued and involved,

communication that allows the opportunity to feed their views and opinions upwards, as well as being kept informed about what is going on in the organization (2010, p. 91). The Gallup Organization, through thirty years of research, has identified twelve core elements of employee engagement that link powerfully to the critical outcomes of organizations

- I know what is expected of me at work
- I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right
- At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day
- In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work
- My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person
- There is someone at work who encourages my development
- At work, my opinions seem to count
- The mission or purpose of my organization makes me feel my job is important
- My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work
- I have a best friend at work
- In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress
- This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow

According to Gallup, these 12 statements best predict employee and workgroup performance (2010, P. 2).

Achieving employee engagement takes everyone. Employees need to own their individual engagement, but managers need to help them align and commit with the goals and purposes of the organization. To achieve a match between an employee's personal desires and talents, and the employer's priorities, the manager must know their people and build relationships with them. Managers need to understand each employee's uniqueness,

communicate effectively with them, and help steer their motivation towards company objectives. Leaders must create a clear strategy of engagement through commitment, trust, accountability, direction, communication, culture, and a hunger for high performance. Human resource professionals need to facilitate employee engagement strategies by providing education, measures, directions, tools, training, and support. Melding the psychological employment satisfaction and engagement needs of the employee with positive business outcomes for the organization is a significant challenge and one that will require substantial changes and improvements in communication and relationships within many organizations.

To create these necessary developments and advances within their organizations human resource professionals should borrow from the common and successful principles of couple's therapy. Through research Benson, McGinn, and Christensen, identified five of the most common forms of evidence-based couple therapy theorized to be essential for treating relationship distress 1) altering views of the relationship, 2) modifying dysfunctional interactional behavior, 3) eliciting avoided private behavior, 4) improving communication, and 5) promoting strengths (2011, p. 26). These principles provide a framework for improving interactions between employee and manager, thus increasing levels of employee engagement. HR professionals can facilitate the 'treatment' of their organization by educating managers and employees on these principles, and utilizing them to assist individual managers in the coaching of their disengaged employees.

Like couples who often fail to see or consider their partners viewpoint on conflict or how their own behavior contributes to relationship difficulties, employees and managers often fail to consider the employees engagement level from the others perspective. An

important first step to improving employee engagement levels is for each side to understand the others views, needs, and motivations, and to recognize how their own behaviors affect commitment and satisfaction levels. Behaviors that are detrimental to the work relationship must be eliminated and the avoidance of problems, concerns, or issues must be addressed and dealt with. Constructive feedback, positive recognition, and interpersonal communication must become a priority for managers, and improvement of the employee's own speaking and listening skills to enhance effective communication should receive immediate focused attention. Finally, attention on the positive strengths of the work relationship shall be emphasized. The aim of these therapy principles is to increase the strength of a relationship. In the employee-employer connection, the increased strength will result in higher levels of engagement for the previously disengaged employee.

Like other sophisticated strategic business goals and employee wellness programs an effective employee engagement program needs multilevel leadership support and alignment with the culture of the organization, it must be comprehensive, engaging and of high quality, available to all, and it must be communicated constantly. Employee engagement is a mission that when done successfully will enhance the personal effectiveness of employees while improving their quality of life, all the while benefiting the organization's bottom line.

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