

CHAPTER 1:

You Are the Key to Change

There is so much that is currently not functioning well in our companies. Some of these issues will be personally imperative for you to address if you want to change your experience at work, and the culture of your workplace. In this chapter we will first look at some of the problems you may be facing, and then examine a path toward solving them. Tackling these issues head-on is no small feat, and yet it can result in greater health, wealth, and joy for yourself and your organization. While these issues may appear to be “organizational,” the fact is, all organizations are made of the people who comprise them. Therefore, you are a critically important factor in change, and you do have the capacity, as a single person, to effect the change that needs to be made. Inspired individuals can spark enormous shifts in seemingly immovable systems.

The first step in making a difference is to get in touch with your intention. Making it personal and not abstract can help to focus your efforts. Why do you care to change your experience

of work and your work culture? How will these changes impact you? When you are clear about the benefits you will gain from your efforts, it will be easier to stick with your resolve to find solutions for what is not working for you.

Problems In The Workplace

If you work in a system or structure that doesn't allow you to use your talents, doesn't care about you personally, or doesn't help you align your purpose with your company's mission and vision, you may feel drained, frustrated, uninspired, and unwell. If you're feeling this way, you can't express your truth, or do your best work. The fear and aggression pervasive in dysfunctional work environments suppresses genuine communication, causes anxiety and stress, erodes engagement and motivation, destroys creativity, and inhibits collaboration and productivity. Over time, an oppressive work environment will cause health problems to multiply and employee turnover to soar. There is truly no sustainable upside to this type of workplace.

Employee engagement can be defined as “the emotional and functional commitment an employee has to their organization,”¹; employee *disengagement* is an indicator of the need for an organization's leadership to connect authentically and meaningfully with its workforces. According to Gallup polls, in 2015, fewer than one-third of US workers were engaged positively in their jobs, and about 17 percent were actively disengaged, angry, and resentful.² The Bureau of National Affairs has calculated that \$11 billion dollars are lost annually due to employee turnover,³ and that same Gallup poll revealed that companies with engaged employees outperform those without by up to 202 percent!

The responsibility for this disengagement is shared by both employers and employees, and so is the solution. In this way, the work environment is very much like a romantic relationship: both parties have a shared responsibility in helping it thrive. And yet a working environment is comprised of many individuals, and the impact of a single unhappy individual in the workplace has great consequences for the whole. Even one unhappy person in a work group or department can be the source of a virus of negativity.

To find the most effective solution to this problem, each of us must discover the point in the system where we can be effective, which may depend on whether or not you have a managerial role. In order to help shift a situation, we must be willing to open ourselves up to the reality we find ourselves in, and remain tender and strong as we determine how we can make a difference. You don't need to be a manager to lead change, but if you are in a leadership role you are in a particularly strong position to help your employees feel genuinely happy and engaged. You can help them to find meaning in their work, recognize their accomplishments on a regular basis, and help them connect to the company vision by translating strategic goals into personal goals.

Lack of Motivation and Incentive

If you were drawn to this book, it is likely that you don't spring out of bed each weekday morning excited about work. As noted above, the current Gallup engagement survey reports that 68 percent of American workers are disengaged, or, in the words of comedian George Carlin, "Most people work just hard enough not to get fired and get paid just enough money not to quit." This

unfortunate reality reflects a lack of inspiration in current work culture, and also a lack of imagination on the part of leadership to offer what motivates and energizes.

A paycheck is important, of course, but if you place even greater value on personal connection, community, meaningful work, peer recognition, and a career path that includes personal growth, you are in the majority. When these human factors are missing, the company misses out on contributions of creativity, collaboration, innovation, and loyalty. The stress and burnout from the lack of personal connection takes a toll.

There are a few important questions for you to consider regarding taking responsibility for your own motivation and connection to your work: Do you truly understand your company's mission and vision? Do you have clarity on your personal values and vision? And do your coworkers and leaders know or care about your personal vision and mission? These questions really matter, because if your personal vision and company vision don't have resonance and you are not being encouraged or mentored to establish this clarity and connection, confusion and frustration will ensue. If no one has shown interest in understanding what fires you up, or in aligning your work with your strengths and interests, the disconnect between your goals and the company's goals can be enormous and de-motivating.

So what can you do to turn this around? There is actually a lot in your control, even if you have determined that there is a complete disconnect between yourself and your company. As a first step, consider being an agent in bridging this clarity gap. You can start by adopting an attitude of curiosity about your current situation. The time you put into reconnecting with your reasons for being at your workplace in the first place can result in huge rewards for you and those you touch. It may be that

you are only at your current job because you need the money to pay your bills. Perhaps you originally felt a real connection to the mission or vision you thought your work represented, and somewhere along the way the flame went out. Either way, reconnecting with your heart and why you show up to work each day is a spark for re-engagement. Your clarity may even help reinvigorate your colleagues by inspiring them to ask themselves this same simple question.

A Reactive, Unkind Culture

Some pain will be present in the workplace even in the best of cultures, because as individuals, in times of personal struggle, loss, and sadness, we bring our suffering to work with us. Pain and hurt is normal and human, and when it is acknowledged in a healthy culture it can be healing and can bring a team closer. In fact, a culture that allows you to bring all of yourself, including personal grief, to work is one that embraces the type of compassion that instills loyalty and dedication.

There is another, problematic type of pain we need to address both personally and systemically, however: the pain that occurs in a toxic culture where colleagues or the leaders in your group are unreasonably and consistently critical and unkind. Although it may be helpful to know that behavior like this often results from the personal insecurity or emotional immaturity of the “tyrant,” that doesn’t mean it won’t still dramatically affect your feelings, as well as the culture of the company. If you work with individuals who express themselves in any of the following ways, you will need to draw upon your own leadership, emotional, and communication skills in order to begin to resolve this toxic climate for yourself and others.

Toxic behaviors:

- Excessive emotionality and reactivity
- Coldness and emotional distance
- Unreasonable expectations for productivity and goals
- Conflict avoidance
- Unwillingness to listen to others
- Lack of empathy and support
- Poor communication
- Aggression or intimidation⁴

One of my clients, Joe, worked for a mid-sized, privately owned manufacturing company where aggression and intimidation characterized the CEO's go-to style. Said CEO frequently berated his employees, both behind their backs and to their faces. He even treated the clients in the same hostile manner whenever they asked for something he considered to be outside of the contract they'd agreed to—and you can imagine how that was affecting business.

In meetings (which were rarely held, because the CEO undervalued communication), the CEO was unwilling to listen to others and often withheld pertinent information from his executive team. The overall climate was one of negativity, as the CEO's behavior was echoed by most of his subordinates toward their own team members. A trickle-down effect common in these kinds of environments was occurring.

Joe, however, was able to forge a different relationship with the CEO than anyone else on the team had. He practiced mindfulness both at home and on-the-spot at work, and through his practice found the personal confidence to not fear his CEO. Despite the negativity in his work environment, he genuinely liked the type of work the company was doing, and he decided to continue finding a way to move forward in his job. His regu-

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