

Gallup's Workplace Jedi on How to Fix Our Employee Engagement Problem.

By Mark Crowley

The way we lead people in America is failing.

That's the only reasonable conclusion to be drawn from Gallup's "[State of the American Workplace](#)" report being released this month.

Over the past year, Gallup researchers interviewed nearly 150,000 workers--people in all states and industries--and discovered that a stunning number are miserable in their jobs. More specifically, only 30% of the nation's working population today admits to being fully engaged at work. While Gallup encouragingly notes that there's been a slight improvement to engagement since the Great Recession, it's hard to cheer when you realize 52% of Americans admit to being disengaged in their jobs, and another 18% to being actively disengaged.

If attaining high employee engagement has become one of the most important ambitions of leadership, why is it that our practices appear to be doing more harm than good? What's causing 7 in every 10 workers to disengage and under-commit themselves at work?

To fully comprehend these grim stats, imagine a crew team out on the Potomac River where three people are rowing their hearts out, five are taking in the scenery, and two are trying to sink the boat. It's hard to conceive how businesses can thrive when so few people are working to move it forward.

A decade or so ago, many in business dismissed the notion that there are clear links between employee engagement and an organization's overall success. Fast-forward to today, however, and you'll find few people who don't strongly agree that engagement is the wonder drug for maximizing workplace performance.

Numerous studies have shown that engaged workers display greater initiative, approach work more passionately and creatively--essentially do all they can for their organizations. Gallup's report specifically states that engagement drives greater productivity, lower turnover, and a better quality of work. For punctuation, it adds: "Organizations in the top decile of engagement outperform their peers by 147% in earnings per share, and have 90% better growth trend than their competition."

Three Categories of Worker Engagement:

- Engaged (30% of the U.S. population): Deeply committed to the success of their organization and emotionally connected to its mission and goals. Routinely willing to put forth discretionary effort.
- Disengaged (52% of the U.S. population): Less emotionally connected to their work and less compelled to put forth extra effort. They show up for work but generally do only the minimum required.
- Actively Disengaged (18% of the U.S. population): Actively against what the organization, and their boss, is trying to get done.

So, the \$64,000 question becomes this: If attaining high employee engagement has become one of the most important ambitions of leadership, why is it that our practices appear to be doing more harm than good? What's causing 7 in every 10 workers to disengage and under-commit themselves at work?

Perhaps one of the best people in the country for us to pose this question is Dr. Jim Harter, Gallup's chief scientist of workplace management and well-being. For the past 27 years, Harter has been on the forefront of employee engagement research; he initiated the first "State of the American Workplace" study in 1997.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Harter to solicit his insight on what's driving engagement down instead of up. Intimately familiar with the causes--and the cures--Harter offers workplace leaders the following guidance on how to turn things around:

Measure Engagement At Every Level Of The Organization

A surprising number of companies have no engagement metrics in place, and leave local level managers in the dark on how they can more effectively support employees.

"A lot of leaders understand the essential importance of improving engagement," says Harter, "just not enough of them. Many people see the macro engagement numbers and dismiss them as not relating to them or their firm. But when you show an organization their own results, it tends to shock them. And that's when they tend to want to do something to correct it."

Gallup long ago created a 12-question diagnostic tool that "measures things that matter" down to the lowest supervisory level. Tied to the results, leaders can identify the key causes of employee dismay and work to remedy them. As an incentive for putting measurements like these in place, Harter confirms he's seen many organizations greatly exceed the national average for engagement. "Some have moved as high as 70%. They didn't start there, of course. They worked on it and got there in time."

Harter also emphasizes that top firms have made engagement "as big a priority as performance," and do an exquisite job of communicating why it's so important to the sustained success of the organization. That clarity "resets all expectations" of managers and significantly alters their future behavior.

Put Systems In Place To Ensure The Right People Are Chosen For All Management Roles

Harter insists that nothing is more important to an organization's health and well-being than ensuring everyone selected into a leadership position has the talent to be an inspiring and effective manager. "If you get that wrong, it's really an uphill battle."

“Workplaces in general have paid a lot of attention to process and much less to people,” he continues, “and too often employees are given managerial roles tied to success in a previous role, or as a reward for their tenure.” It’s unrelated to whether they can effectively support and positively manage human beings.

Several studies in recent years have shown a remarkable number of people believe they work for a bad boss. As evidence of how deeply this affects engagement, 35% of U.S. workers polled by Parade magazine last summer said they’d willingly forgo a substantial pay raise in exchange for seeing their direct supervisor fired.

So, what are the qualities of leaders that businesses must now be seeking? According to Harter, it begins with a combination of being results oriented and authentically concerned about the development of every worker. “Some people are better at getting results and some are better at developing. But, we’ve found both are equally important.”

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Harter describes the most effective managers as being deeply caring--and capable of seeing, supporting, and adjusting to the differences in people. “They help people build jobs that fit them as an individual person, while still helping them get to the outcome they need from an organization perspective.”

They bring workers together in collaboration, provide clear direction, put good measures in place, and accept responsibility for maximizing each employee’s full potential. Ultimately, the differentiated manager is someone who understands that the more they do for their people, the more successful they will become. “The data proves it,” asserts Harter, “doing what’s right for people proves to be right for the organization.”

Getting The Basics Right

When I asked Harter to explain what influences people to become actively disengaged, even saboteurs, he had a surprising answer. “Most people come to work well intentioned and only turn sour when their basic needs aren’t being met. You have to get the basics right if you want great engagement.”

Here are four essential things managers must do consistently if they aspire to greatly improving their team’s engagement:

- **Get people in the right job:** Harter is insistent that managers only put people into roles that fully leverage their talents and strengths. Too often, employees are assigned work to which they’re neither well-suited nor emotionally connected. “Make sure to get people the right job so they can be efficient, effective, and fulfilled.” This is accomplished through vigilance in the selection process, and by keeping the guidance of author Brian Tracy in mind every time you have a position to fill: “The single greatest mistake a manager can make is a bad hire.”
- **Set clear expectations:** Gallup finds that only half of people surveyed have clarity on what’s expected of them--and this causes enormous frustration. “Unfortunately, a lot of organizations forget about that, or mess it up by not

communicating effectively when changes happen--or the local manager is unsuccessful in translating to the front line people what the organization is trying to get done. It comes down to showing people how their work and contributions impact the success of the entire firm. Disengagement starts with having a confusing job."

- **Give people what they need to do their job:** When employees don't have the equipment, support, or knowledge to do their jobs effectively, they quickly conclude their organization isn't paying attention to them. Once people begin to feel their work isn't important, or that they're not personally valued, they head down a slippery slope of disengagement. Conversely, Harter notes that giving people greater autonomy and control over their workday has profoundly positive effects. It leads people to feel trusted, and influences them to do much more for the organization.
- **Be extremely generous with praise and recognition:** One of a human being's greatest needs is to feel appreciated and valued. According to Harter, many people in leadership roles underestimate how essential this is to employees--and how recognition lifts employee spirits. One key reason why so many workers are disengaged is that they feel their contributions and efforts are overlooked--or taken for granted. Harter advises managers to lean in the direction of over-appreciating people, and to devote greater attention to praising good outcomes. "People need recognition frequently," he stresses. "We know there's a physiological response when we get recognition. A boost of dopamine makes us feel good in the moment. This lasts a while; but if we do good work, we have a continued need to be lauded for it."

Going forward, Jim Harter believes there's no reason why engagement in the U.S. has to remain so low. "I've done this work for 27 years, and I'm really encouraged by what firms like Hyatt Hotels, Charles Schwab, Stryker, PNC Bank, and the Cleveland Clinic have done to inspire much higher engagement."

If more firms follow their lead, Harter said he thinks "the upside in America is really high."

And remember: When you do get everyone rowing, no one will have time to rock your boat.

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