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That's Not Leadership or Management!

The Impact of the Disengaged Leader (DL)

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We hear a lot about the importance of the engaged employee most of us have read the statistics – such as 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged, 90% of leaders think an engagement strategy will have an impact on business success but barely 25% of them have an engagement strategy in place, only 40% of employees know their company’s goals, strategies and tactics. And 75% of people voluntarily leaving their jobs don’t quit their jobs they quit their bosses.

With all this information about the impact of the disengaged employees you really don’t see or hear much about the Disengaged Leader (DL) or manager. We know employees quit them and we know the negative effect they can have on morale and business performance, yet it is often tough to spot them. But their direct reports can point them out in a minute, however these DLs seem to slide under the radar and are not recognized by their peers or even the executives they report to. Some even manage to get promoted or have important projects assigned to them. Knowing the ripple effect these DLs have on business it’s about time we have a profile of the “Disengaged Leader” (DL) so we can spot them, get them the development they need or help them to the door before they do any more damage.

I’m going to take a chance here and state that if we focused on the Disengaged Leaders (DLs) and managers within an organization the statistics above would dramatically decrease. I know if I had 70% or even 50% of a disengaged workforce and I could move the needle by transforming leader behavior then I’d be all over that. There is an estimate that disengaged employees cost the US between \$450 and \$550 billion dollars per year. Yes that was with a “B”, Billion. And Deloitte/Bersin estimates that companies spend around \$720 million dollars per year on engagement efforts, each year! Here’s another fact that may interest you – I’ve been watching disengagement statistics for about 10 years and that 70% disengaged statistic mentioned above has been hovering right there for that long, maybe longer.

How can so many companies, spend so much money over such a long period of time and all the efforts not have a positive impact on employee engagement? I say let’s look at leadership, not programs, rewards, gamification, etc. because obviously none of this has had much of an impact. Management and leadership – that’s where I want to focus.

The best place to look when determining how to decrease that 70% number is at the Disengaged Leader (DL). But the first thing we need to do is recognize who these “leaders” are, and note I use the term leader lightly when discussing these folks. Here are some tips to help ferret out who these DLs are:

1. Returning the calls or e-mails of their staff is a low priority – For these DLs “dealing with employees is too time consuming”, one of their favorite quotes is; if I don’t answer they’ll figure it out themselves. Huh? I thought that was part of your job, guiding, leading, developing and ensuring your staff knows how to navigate the organization – none of these can be done if you don’t have a pulse on your business and by business I mean your staff.
2. Missing in action – they bring a new definition to MIA. Their team/direct reports cannot find them, ever. They are elusive never to be found, not in their office, not in any meeting room, their Assistant doesn’t know where they are, they’re gone! Oh here they are, in an Exec’s office chatting about the game last night or what they want out of their next career move. Too busy to lead or manage what’s at hand – but plenty of time to manage their own career? Yikes!

3. If you're not "like them" then you don't get any time or attention – they only want to support and promote those employees that look and sound like they do, after all it takes too much time to deal with, who they consider are, outliers or team members that "don't fit their mold". Really? I thought this behavior was more in-line with high school students– rather than business professionals, we used to call them cliques. Lord of the Flies comes to mind here... (Hint: Managing diversity is a real struggle for these DLs.)
4. They are the first to say no, nope – that won't work, been there done that. To this manager a new idea simply creates more work and that will cut into other more worthy activities like managing their own career or hitting the gym (I'm not kidding here)
5. If you just do what they say then there is no need for a discussion and a discussion means they have to spend time talking to you and well they have better things to do. So just do as they say. Even if what they say is not correct, a new process they didn't care to learn, or even potentially harmful to the employee or the business. My way or the highway...
6. Favorite response is something like – well that's just stupid. And by the way every issue they have; poor performance, attrition, bad weather is their staff/teams' fault – "their people" are lazy, rogue or stupid.
7. They like to stay under the radar - I love this one, they want to do just enough to get by and get paid and they even complain about their job and being a manager – yet they want to stay in management. What?

Well these are just 7 obvious characteristics of the disengaged leader/manager I could go on but I think you get the idea.

So now the question is; if we can recognize these folks what path do we take to turn them around. Some of this behavior is learned and has been passed down from "generation to generation of leaders". I've actually heard people say – well if that got him there – then I'm going to listen and follow suit. And that brings up a whole other set of challenges for organizations. Which means it's time to start asking some tough questions and taking some action.

Some questions to ask are;

1. Does your organization perpetuate and promote such behavior
2. Do you know the facts how DLs (disengaged leaders) impact morale, attrition, productivity and profit within your organization
3. How can we take the steps needed to transform this behavior – is coaching or development needed
4. If a leader/manager is not willing to make the shift, how should the business respond
5. What does an engaged leader look like
6. How do we create the profile of the engaged leader
7. Once we've established what those engaged behaviors are, how do we replicate and sustain them

Getting insight into this kind of leadership (or lack of leadership) style is so important. As the war for talent continues, the 21st century employee, i.e Millennials won't stick around too long working for organizations that allow this kind of style to stay in place. We know that Millennials – will not stay very long if they don't feel valued or have a manager that is not a mentor and leader, Gen Y's want feedback and guidance. Which does not fit the profile of a DL.

Look I know leadership/management is complex and challenging and not always valued by the organization. There are long hours, e-mails, texts and calls coming in sometimes late at night. But it can also be a wonderfully rewarding experience – where small daily wins, seeing an employee move to the next level of development and big successes can be a reminder of why the role we play as leaders is so important.

I believe employees are the future of every organization and we have the data to prove that employees leave managers/leaders not companies. So let's start leading, let's be on the radar and be engaged – let's not be the source of attrition and distain for others– but instead be the leader that employees respect and your staff actually wants to be on your team and enjoys working with you!

I'm curious to see how organizations will meet the need for developing and sustaining engaged leaders! **There is a lot of work to do but if it means moving 70% of disengaged employees to 70% engaged employees then it's worth the effort**

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