

CHAPTER

# 3

Detached, Disheartened  
and Disconnected... Do  
They Work For You?

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As customers, we have been “served” by people who quit but never left. As employees, we have been managed by bosses who quit but managed to stay. As managers, we have managed people who physically attend but mentally *pretend*.

Over the years, I have warned retailers about the tremendous cost of employee turnover and what they must do to retain valuable workers. Retention remains a critical challenge for all businesses, but it is time to

redefine the term. As disengagement spreads through the workplace, we must re-examine the reasons for retention, as well as its true benefits and costs.

### **To Retain or Not**

Retention is not a cure for turnover. Retaining a disengaged employee is far worse than letting him go – regardless of how valuable he once was.

Too many resources are devoted to training programs aimed at trying to change natural styles and preferences. These are little more than futile attempts at get fish to fly and birds to swim. Tremendous amounts of money are spent on incentive programs that reward mediocre players at the expense of top performers. Far too much time is wasted on seminars and workshops teaching disengaged workers how to “talk the talk” when in the end, they won’t walk the walk. Instead, we must learn to recognize disengaged workers before wasting more time and money in futile attempts to change them.

Why do employees become disengaged? No one takes a job intending to fail. No employer hires with the intent to fire. Both parties want only the best. They want to succeed. So what happens? Our research has pinpointed the very soul of disengagement:

1. Most disengaged workers were once engaged, caring workers.
2. Disengaged workers are not necessarily poor performers.
3. Disengagement usually begins with either a new boss or a boss who becomes disengaged.
4. Disengagement often occurs after changes in the responsibilities of a position.
5. Disengagement can set in after a promotion.
6. Disengagement begins when learning and development ends.

The reasons for disengagement are both economic and behavioral. Mentally leaving a job where you're unhappy but guaranteed a paycheck might be better than having no job at all. Money motivates many disen-

gaged workers to stick with jobs they hate. But behavioral factors are an even more powerful motivator.

Behavioral science studies reveal that 42% of North Americans possess a behavior style that prefers a work environment of steadiness, little change, predictability, and consistency – routine work with little interruption. This work preference style shies away from risks and instead, seeks guarantees. Other characteristics of this style include:

- A preference for predictable situations
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Evading confrontation
- Passive disagreement
- A preference for sameness and
- Ritual work patterns

In other words, “I may be unhappy. I may complain, but only to friends and co-workers. I may think of leaving – eventually – but I’ll stew in my frustrations until something better comes along.” Without a manager who understands this style and recognizes the early signs

of disengagement, this worker may meet all the criteria for becoming a fully disengaged worker.

## The Cost of Disengagement

All disengaged workers are not the same. Yet the cost of different forms of disengagement is relatively equal in size – huge! As you will see in the examples below, employee emotions drive disengagement. Employee emotions are triggered by the attitudes, values and beliefs of their leaders, which in turn govern how the leaders treat their employees.

During the course of an organizational survey, I asked Suzanne<sup>3</sup>, a district manager in her late thirties, to explain confidentially why her colleagues were concerned about her loss of enthusiasm and involvement. Her response was honest, simple and insightful. “My heart’s not in it anymore.”

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<sup>3</sup>Name changed

When I asked her to explain, she said that when she first started with the company, she was considered a bright, fast-rising star. She was given challenges and then either supported with praise or provided constructive criticism. She welcomed both because she felt it helped her learn and grow. However, when a new boss arrived, the learning process ended. Conversations became one-sided, and focused solely on numbers. Suzanne was told to “keep up the good work.” She did. Then several months later, without any recognition for the great job she had already done, she was simply given a bigger district to manage. I realized that Suzanne was a terrific person and as an employee she could be “saved.” Toward that end, I designed an intervention program that included coaching both Suzanne and her boss. Several months later Suzanne was promoted to vice president of stores, and has continued to rise in her leadership role. What a difference involvement and engagement can make. (See Chapter 15 for the details of the Coaching process).

Suzanne’s situation illustrates another discovery that emerged from our research. Too often, managers believe that an individual who becomes a “good employee” will always remain a good employee—even without much feedback, recognition or involvement. For this reason, many employees think the only way to receive more money or recognition is to accept a promotion, even if they don’t want to leave their current position.

Here are two more examples of what happens when the virus continues to spread:

At a specialty chain retailer, our research uncovered that disengagement was taking a toll on company-wide productivity, motivation and customer service, even though the percentage of disengaged employees was fairly small. Two disengaged store managers were adversely affecting supervisors and associates, causing these workers to reduce customer service efforts. The result was an attitude of “why bother?” Over time, low customer service scores and falling sales figures caused a negative reaction within the entire region plummeting it from number one to number five.

Two disengaged managers had dramatically impacted hundreds of workers and caused a notable decline of an entire region.

At another company, the disengaged director of advertising caused an adverse impact on the company's merchandise buyers, which created a profoundly negative perception of the entire marketing department. So much so that eventually the senior vice president of marketing had to let her go. Not until this point did the manager discover that this problem had been festering for nearly two years.

### **What do you do when the boss is the problem?**

Even if you consider yourself an engaged leader, others may have a very different perception of your attitude.

When I was president of a retail operation, one of my senior managers asked if he could schedule a meeting with me and several other managers early on a Saturday morning. When I arrived in the appointed

room, I noticed 10 chairs arranged in a semi-circle surrounding one chair in the center. I felt uncomfortable and wondered what this was about. Somewhat sarcastically, I asked where they would like me to sit. They pointed to the chair in the center. You see, all of my managers wanted this meeting because they had reached their breaking point with me.

As I sat there, one-by-one they told me everything I was doing wrong. For one, they said I would walk along the sales floor and never even look at the sales associates. I would pass managers in the halls, and rarely ever acknowledge them with eye contact – never mind a friendly word. As I sat listening to these accusations, I silently told myself their comments were “trivial” – justifying in my mind that they were just complaining from times when I had crossed the sales floor on my way to the bank – after all, it was a period when we were having cash flow problems because of poor sales. Didn’t they realize my mind was elsewhere on more important things?

While I had been focused on low sales, poor cash flow, payroll, the need to extend credit lines, etc., my managers had instead focused on the fact that I wasn't smiling, socializing and offering feedback. I thought to myself, "Did these employees know or care about my issues? No. All they cared about was my behavior toward them." Based on my behavior, they determined that I was totally disengaged, disinterested in them, and causing them to perform poorly.

I rarely get emotional, but I sat there with tears rolling down my face, because I thought, "My people didn't understand my issues." But should they have? Maybe if I had been more vocal and forthcoming about our issues they would have understood. But I didn't want them to worry about these issues, because I feared it would negatively affect their performance. Ironic, isn't it? I learned an important management lesson that day.

I learned that keeping people engaged means bringing them into your universe – sharing the good, the bad and the ugly of financial and performance issues. I real-

ized that one of the reasons for our poor sales was employee frustration with my perceived disengagement. In retrospect, I was lucky these employees recognized the issue, then cared enough to confront me. Many employees would have simply said nothing and quit. Instead, we cleared the air. We began to talk openly and share. They began to understand the issues from which I'd been “protecting” them, and amazingly, business began to pick up.

Does this mean you should spill your guts to any employee willing to listen? No! But you can help people understand and anticipate your behavior, so they're not surprised, or worse, think you're reacting negatively to them. If you do have concerns with business and employee performance, it's your job to state those concerns – immediately. If you want people to be partners in your business, you must treat them like partners. Sit them down and say, “Here are the numbers— this is where we are— this is how you can contribute—this is how you can help.”

People need to know where they stand. They need to know how they can appropriately be involved. They need to know specifically what they can do to help. That's when employees take ownership – when they know they are part of solutions and growth and can specifically contribute to the company's welfare. That is empowering. That is engaging.

## **8 Fateful Reasons of Disengagement**

The Kabachnick Group research has identified eight fateful reasons for Disengagement. They are:

- 1. Job-Employee Mismatch:* Resumes are often written by people looking to “sell” a job candidate and often resemble advertisements. They are not always accurate. References, afraid of repercussions, are not always truthful and forthcoming. As a result, applicants are hired because of what they claim to have done in the past rather than what they can and will do in the future.

Job positions are defined by tasks to be done rather than the behaviors, values and attributes required for success.

*2. Overworked and Under Appreciated:* People become disengaged because of a heavy workload, long hours, and lack of appreciation. Many times management recognizes the person who meets deadlines, completes tasks efficiently, and produces quality results. But, because of this high performance, the employee is often given more tasks to perform. The occasional “Atta Boy” and complimentary lunch are insufficient recognition.

Expediency is usually the cause of overwork. Managers ask themselves, “How can I get XYZ done fast? I’m under pressure to show results.” Therefore, they pick the “good soldier” to shoulder the burden, without considering the long-term ramifications. Their thinking is “today” focused, rather than considering what these actions will cost the company down the road.

**3. Culture Shock:** Cultures often change when companies merge. People believe they no longer fit, especially when management fails to prepare them for the new order.

A media/printing company had a very casual dress code. Management thought casual synced with what the clients wanted. Then one day, the company merged with another firm that required every manager to wear a suit and tie. After 10-12 years of corporate casual, many of the managers didn't even own suits. Following the merger, management gave no reasons for the new dress code. They simply changed the policy.

Almost immediately, one of the top performers— a person many colleagues recognize as a natural leader— sent an email that read: “Do you believe this sh\*\*t? We're going back to the Dark Ages. I'm outta here!” Two weeks later he took a job with a competitor. What followed was a chain reaction of emigration. Some of the best managers also jumped ship and moved to the competition. And, to make matters worse, they took their support people with them. Much of this could have been avoided had there been better communication.

Important Note: Your good people are always the first to leave. They're the ones with the most confidence and a proven track record. They know they're talented and that their odds of getting a new job are very good. In today's world, people follow the natural leader, regardless of official job title.

*4. Politics & Perception:* One of most frequent irritants to employees is the perception that managers play favorites. It's one of the primary causes of disengagement. Do managers intentionally play favorites? In some cases, yes. But for most it's simply a matter of liking some people more than others – a natural human outcome. That affection is often demonstrated through informal socializing—lunch, dinner, drinks and by friendly joking around. Sometimes it's nothing more than the manager having small talk with those he feels more comfortable with while talking only business with others. Small talk is an important part of establishing

rapport—it shows that you see the individual as a person, not just a resource who is only there to get the job done. It establishes a human touch. Managers need to establish rapport with all of their people, not just some.

5. *Politics & Control*: Some managers—usually new hires— make it known that they intend to fire some or all existing employees in order to bring in “their own people.” This attitude has more to do with comfort, allegiance, payback and insecurity than politics. Sadly, entire departments are wiped out by such irrational behavior, often causing the loss of valuable top talent. Senior executives should be more than suspicious when new managers report that dependable all-star players have suddenly turned “bad.”

6. *The “Peter Principle”*: People do not consciously accept job promotions because they hope to “rise to the level of their incompetence.” They accept promotion because it’s usually the only route to a better salary and benefits. This fact is obvious in union shops where salary ranges are assigned to particular positions, and a dramatic pay raise must be accompanied by promotion.

Everyone could likely use extra money, but could everyone use additional responsibilities and workload, especially if they're happy where they are and/or believe the promotion will lead to their downfall? If you ask the average person, "Would you like new responsibilities," her mindset is usually, "If I don't accept, I'm history. I can't pass up a promotion." Rather than accept unwanted promotions, the best people leave for greener pastures. Those who stay become disengaged, whether or not they accepted a promotion. That's because the "target for promotion" is often given more work anyway, which breeds resentment.

7. **Business "By the Book":** Too many companies favor adherence to rules, guidelines and processes over creativity and flexibility. That's because it's easier to run a business with rules and regulations than to encourage innovation, individual contributions and compromise. There's no thinking required: just do as you're told. "Display the merchandise this way. Handle returns that way. Left, right, left, right."

This is not to say that business systems, procedures and policies are not valuable or necessary. Such systems are established so employees with baseline skill levels can achieve various objectives without having to “reinvent the wheel.” But, as companies and the business climates change, there comes a time when management must seek out new ideas. There comes a time when managers must rely on genuine teamwork, instead of simply paying lip service to a few individuals who follow the rules.

8. *The “Bad” Boss:* This book is as much about disengaged managers as it is about frontline workers. While the bad employee may affect his co-workers, the bad manager causes an even greater widespread damage and disengagement. He affects other managers, as well as employees.



- Retaining a disengaged employee is far worse than letting him go – regardless of how valuable he once was.
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- Disengagement begins when learning and development ends.

## I Quit, But Forgot to Tell You

- The Eight Fateful Reasons of Disengagement are:
  - Mismatching people to positions
  - Overworked and under appreciated
  - Culture shock
  - Politics and perception
  - Politics and control
  - Unwanted promotions
  - Business “by the book”
  - The “bad boss”