

How we work: strategies portend outcomes

Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.

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Abstract: *Too many modern-day employees describe their work as “soul crushing.” This often refers to activities that may at one time have been, or could potentially be enjoyable and meaningful. Instead, they have been rendered joyless. This feeling breaks employee spirit and drains people of a sense of accomplishment. This type of work crushes motivation and enthusiasm. How we work matters. If superbly trained employees are treated well and with respect, they will perform at their best and deliver a quality product or service. They will take better care of their customers. They will help enhance the business bottom-line.*

I. Introduction

As Greek mythology has it, Sisyphus, the king of Ephyra, was sly, cunning, and deceitful. This infuriated Zeus, the father of gods. Fed up with Sisyphus' antics and hubris, Zeus punished Sisyphus by condemning him to push a boulder up a hill. As soon as he reached the top of the hill, the boulder would roll down, and Sisyphus had to push it back again – for eternity (Ariely). Had Sisyphus been pushing that huge rock up a new hill every time, he would have had a sense of progress. But because he kept pushing the same rock, up the same hill, over and over; his work was rendered meaningless.

II. The problem

Today, employees call this type of work “soul crushing.” Activities that may at one time have been, or could potentially be enjoyable and meaningful, become joyless. This futile feeling breaks employee spirit and drains people of any potential sense of accomplishment. This type of work crushes natural motivation and enthusiasm.

With “soul crushing” activities ubiquitous in our workplaces, it is no wonder so many workers are disengaged, while so few are actively engaged (hrcloud, 2021). Negative motivation has a profound deleterious effect on workers. Labor becomes, simply, a work-wage exchange (Smith, 1776). The labor market is nothing more than a place where individuals exchange work for wages. From the workers' point of view, this approach means they are nothing more than cogs in a wheel. They work only to earn a wage, without any real sense of how their tasks fit into the big picture of serving a greater purpose. A recent Gallup 2021 State of the Global Workplace report found that eighty percent of employees are not engaged or are actively disengaged at work. This lack of engagement costs the global economy US\$8.1 trillion, nearly 10% of GDP, in lost productivity each year. The root cause? Extensive research shows that employees are less enthusiastic and more stressed, worried, and angry than we realize. In fact, only 32% of workers rated themselves as “thriving”. (Gallup, 2021).

When an organization takes its hierarchy too seriously, employees are reminded they are easily substitutable and replaceable. They are reminded that they are only a small part of a huge organization which has many layers above them. Rather than their skills or their contribution, it is their relative place in the hierarchy that dictates the tone of their involvement.

To maximize outcomes, employees must be able to establish a sense of connection to their work and their workplace. When an organization disregards employee satisfaction, employees are reminded they are easily substitutable and replaceable, and only ; valued only for their direct productivity. They are reminded they are only a small part of a huge organization with many layers above them. They begin to ruminate over the feeling that rather than their skills or their contribution, it is their relative place in the hierarchy that dictates

success. These meritocracy traps (Markovits, 2019) fuel disinterest and disappointment, while killing motivation.

“Do more, with less”

Because we know the mantra that “no money = no mission,” we understand that organizations must maintain a competitive business advantage and optimize financial performance. As a result, we are all asked to be good stewards of limited resources, to “do more with less.” Often, organizations pride themselves on expressions such as “we run a lean organization”, “we need people who can scope and scale” or “we believe in maintaining a very flat structure”. We’re asked to efficiently maximize our capital and human resources, optimize cost-effectiveness, and execute innovative strategies - all while maintaining focus on excellent customer service. Our desire to shape our work to be meaningful and fulfilling faces myriad systemic threats. We’re seeing increased workloads, even with the influx of remote-work options. Our workflow is becoming ever more standardized and regimented to increase efficiency, throughput, productivity, and consistency. As Gallup summarizes, if only 80% of workers are vested, the organization’s resilience during a crisis will be at high risk, and leaders won’t be able to consistently reach their goals — there is no way for a leader to be effective when their people aren’t paying attention or, even worse, just don’t care (Gallup, 2021). Under the consistent pressure to eliminate anything conceived as “waste,” at what point does that begin to also include the very people we need to retain?

“Place your own oxygen mask before assisting others with theirs”

To engage, inspire, and retain employees, companies say they’re prioritizing employee happiness. Yale University has created a renowned (and free) course on happiness simply entitled “The Science of Well-Being” (Santos, 2021). Despite a good salary, people don’t tolerate being unhappy - they leave. Optimizing financial, quality and safety outcomes requires developing a combination of customer and employee satisfaction. To provide optimal customer service, adapting Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), employees must first be physically healthy and emotionally fulfilled before they can satisfy others. To reduce burnout and promote engagement and wellness, organizations need sustainable processes that maintain employee autonomy, flexibility, creativity, and innovation. Otherwise, we risk burnout and turnover. Burnout threatens quality, increases errors, jeopardizes safety, hampers engagement, diminishes empathy, reduces productivity, and negatively impacts work-life integration (Olson, 2017). The combined effects on customer and employee satisfaction contribute to a compelling societal and business case to monitor and manage burnout (Sinsky, 2017). Because stress and burnout are system problems, not individual resilience problems, addressing work-life integration requires a strategic joint effort between individual employees, leadership, and their organization to focus on overall well-being.

III. The solutions

As the story of Sisyphus reminds us, we must foster and reinforce that which enhances employees’ feeling of meaning and connection. How is this done? Appreciate and respect people for their creativity, participation, and intelligence. Foster their sense of uniqueness, individuality, ideas, and creativity. A kind word, genuine appreciation, the feeling of progress and achievement are motivators (Ariely, 2016). Shanenfelt (2017) described several strategies to sustain employee engagement and well-being. As always, this starts with leadership. Carefully choose great leaders. Rotate them every few years to encourage new ideas (sooner if deemed necessary due to poor performance despite coaching and mentoring). Manage the workload: with rare exceptions in extenuating circumstances, adhere to a pre-determined appropriate workload. (...gone are the days of ‘face time’ staying late just to be seen). Optimize workflow: Redesign workflow to address inefficiencies. Work should be completed as effectively and efficiently as possible. Everyone makes the best use of their unique skill sets. Visibly prioritize well-being and work-life integration: Limit weekend emails. As one successful CEO commented “I respect employees’ vacations and want them to do the same. We limit after-hours messages, so no one feels the need to hit reply thank you just to prove they are online”. Encourage full use of allotted paid time off. Support continued learning and training. Organize social events. Celebrate achievements. Create a lounge (with fruit, beverages, television, quiet reading area). Provide funds for small groups to meet for casual conversation over lunch. Support flexibility: including options for part-time work and flexible hours. Flexibility in when and how we work (part time, start earlier, start later, longer days, shorter days, remote work) will benefit recruitment and retention. Reward, incentivize, recognize: Everyone wants to feel valued. Share positive feedback with entire group. Provide protected time for everyone to pursue meaningful aspects of work, a dimension of their work they find most meaningful (education, community outreach, quality improvement, teaching, administration, etc.). Financial incentives based on productivity are less effective than time, as they incentivize overwork and normalize long hours. The ideal, as described in the organizations listed in Fortune’s

100 Best Companies to Work in 2020, are realized with employee comments such as “we are not just a number, we feel truly cared for and valued” (Fortune, 2020).

The Wealth of Nations meets 21st Century Business

The long-term returns and benefits of investing in employee well-being creates a “win-win” for all stakeholders: the organization, its employees, investors, and customers. This concept is centuries old. The premise of Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith’s 1776 *magnum opus* “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations” (“The Wealth of Nations”) is that our natural tendency to fulfill individual self-interest has the unintended consequence of benefiting society. This invisible hand argument describes a web of mutual interdependencies allowing free trade (market) to promote stability and prosperity for all. In it, Smith describes how “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” It is in the butcher’s interest to sell good meat at a fair price, so both parties benefit in every transaction. This ability to think long-term curbs businesses from abusing customers. Wooten (2018) expands, describing a coincidence of interests between parties, which prevents encounters from being a zero-sum game. For modern organizations this translates to both parties (the organization and its employees) coming away from their transaction better off than before they entered it. As we hear it phrased: “considering the greater good”. The vesting and wealth of the group is created through an equilibrium which contributes to a recipe for successful partnership. An engaged workforce and employee wellness are critical ingredients to achieving an organization’s mission. The long-term returns and benefits of investing in employee well-being creates a “win-win” for all: the organization, its employees, and its customers.

IV. Conclusions

How we work matters. If we execute correctly, everyone wins. Organizations have the power to either nurture or to crush employee motivation. If superbly trained employees are enthusiastically treated with respectful consideration, they will be more satisfied, engaged as well as successful. They will be able to leave but will not want to. They will perform at their best and deliver a quality product or service. As a recent organizational psychology study reported, when people see their work as connecting to a relevant, broader, cooperative ‘calling’ they are happier. (Fast Company, 2021) In turn, they will take care of their customers with improved customer experiences, interactions, and outcomes. They will enhance the business bottom-line as customers will stay, come back, and refer their friends and families. Rather than pushing the metaphorical rock up the hill, employees who are treated well will reach goals through the strength of knowing that they matter; and therefore, what they do makes a purposeful difference.

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