



THE FOUR LEADERSHIP OBSESSIONS

management mistakes that stifle employee engagement

Could one of the four leadership obsessions be destroying productivity in your organisation? Keith Ayers sheds some light on the hard truth.

The Gallup Organisation caught the attention of many business leaders in recent years with its research on the impact of employee engagement on organisational productivity and profitability. Business leaders across the country have implemented programs to increase employee engagement, but despite the billions of dollars spent worldwide, there has been no significant increase in workforce engagement levels. The startling evidence is that in some countries, Australia included, engagement levels are actually falling.

According to the 2008 *Gallup Employee Engagement Australia survey*, only 18 per cent of Australian workers are engaged in their work. This is a three per cent drop from 2006. What should be of even greater concern to business leaders is that although almost everyone joins an organisation as an engaged employee, after one year of service, fewer than 20 per cent of employees say they are still engaged. What's more, the longer the employee stays with an organisation the lower that figure gets until only six per cent are engaged after 10 years of service.



are apprehensive about speaking up. Finally, in a last-ditch effort, they talk with their manager to see if they can improve things and get some of their expectations met. Still nothing changes! At this point employees realise the situation is not going to change, give up on getting their expectations met, switch off and start thinking about leaving. The final stage is when they decide to quit and actively begin looking for another job, or more commonly and costly, they quit and stay!

LEADERSHIP HAS FAILED

Clearly leadership efforts to increase engagement are not working. Leaders at all levels are failing to sustain the natural enthusiasm and commitment their employees have when they start with the organisation, and what's worse, most leaders are not aware of the significant part they play in destroying employee engagement and passion. The pressure to grow the business and meet budget requirements results in many leaders being caught up with one or more of the following obsessions. These destroy engagement and diminish productivity and profitability.

1. An obsession with financial results
Financial success is essential for every organisation. However, to drive myopically toward achieving financial results alone—while ignoring the impact of this strategy on employees and customers—is actually damaging to bottom-line performance.

Obsession with financial performance and cost-cutting can achieve some short-term gains, but it will ultimately cripple the organisation's ability to sustain long-term growth, build customer loyalty and retain talented employees. Long-term business success can only be achieved with passionate employees who go to extreme lengths every day to give their best performance. Passionate employees have higher customer satisfaction ratings and stay at jobs longer, ultimately giving more energy and enthusiasm to everything they do.

Lasting business success comes from employees who are switched on and passionately support the organisation.

Successful leaders know that the key to increased financial results is to invest in their people, who, in turn, will return that investment to the company many times over.

2. An obsession with control

Control-based leaders assume people cannot be trusted. These leaders clearly communicate this message to employees by micromanaging them—enforcing strict policies, procedures and rules that stifle creativity. These managers assume employees either don't have the intelligence to know what to do, or that they don't really want to work; therefore, they need to be told what to do and monitored to ensure they are doing what they're told.

Many of these control-based managers believe they have all the knowledge and experience and therefore they should make all the decisions about how to improve performance. There is no research that shows this approach achieves superior results. In fact, the opposite is true. These autocrats are a liability to the organisation, squashing natural enthusiasm, creativity and ambition—driving away the most talented employees.

3. An obsession with avoiding responsibility

Lack of engagement, performance problems and high levels of employee turnover—it is never the manager's fault. They blame their employees or other external factors when what they really should be doing is looking in the mirror! The number one cause of lack of engagement, poor employee performance and staff turnover is the relationship the employee has with his or her immediate supervisor.

Without a strong relationship with a manager, who establishes clear objectives, gets to know and trust their employees, and is willing to invest in their growth, employees will not be engaged and are less likely to stay with the organisation. If a team is not performing the way the manager wants them to, first look at whether the leadership the team members are getting is allowing them to perform at their best.

What happens during that first year to turn employees off? New employees start with high expectations and enthusiasm, believing this is the job for them. After all, it was a big decision to accept the job. The decline starts when they realise their expectations are not being met and they begin to wonder whether they made a mistake by joining the organisation.

They start talking with co-workers about their expectations, only to get confirmation their expectations are not going to be met. However, because they are new to the company, they



4. An obsession with logic

Left-brain thinking is the rational, analytical, logical and sequential side of the brain. The world of work has been ruled by left-brained thinking since the beginning of the Industrial Age. Left-brained professionals such as engineers, accountants, economists, lawyers, scientists and businesspeople dominate the executive offices of most organisations. Yet every organisation, whether its leaders realise it or not, is in the people business!

Leaders hire people, sell or provide services to people and partner with people. People are behind every success the organisation achieves. All people have feelings! Managers obsessed with logic and left-brained thinking tend to be dismissive of emotions—they believe feelings don't belong in the workplace. They do not believe engagement has anything to do with organisational performance or that people can be passionate about their work. "They just need to do their jobs," they say as they switch off any engagement their employees may have. Managers need to understand that emotional intelligence and right-brain thinking are critical skills for successful leaders in the global economy.

LEADERSHIP IS NOT A SOFT SKILL

While working with a senior executive team in the United States a few years ago, I asked what they thought the solution to their engagement problem

would be. One of them said, "That's easy. We just need to identify the disengaged people and get rid of them! Then we can just hire engaged people."

He failed to recognise that they had already hired engaged people. Despite this, if the leadership approach and the work environment don't change, the new crop of engaged workers will invariably become disengaged—within a year, as Gallup has shown. It is a never-ending cycle that cannot be broken until new ideas come into play about how to lead an effective team whose members are not only engaged in their work, but also committed to delivering value to the customer that your competitors can't match.

Controlling employees is easy. Keep the pressure on, drive them hard to produce results and offer financial incentives for those who meet expectations. Or, micro-manage them. Refuse to give them an inch, check everything they do and monitor every phone call for quality control. It may be time consuming to exercise this control, but it is easy to implement.

The hard thing to do is to trust employees: to believe in them and know that if given more freedom, responsibility and trust they will perform at their best for you. It is hard for a leader to create a positive, nurturing environment where every employee is passionate about their work and their organisation. By focusing

attention on building the people skills of your leaders, so they can encourage their teams to commit to delivering value to internal and external customers, you will be amazed at the changes you will see within your organisation.

There is no shortage of evidence to prove that organisations with great leadership and engaged employees are significantly more successful financially than their competitors. *Built to Last* by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, *Good to Great* by the same Jim Collins and *Hidden Value* by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Charles O'Reilly III are just a few of the many books that provide compelling research.

The truth is, however, there is no quick fix for the problem of disengagement. If you are serious about getting your employees to be as passionate about your dream for your organisation as you are, focus on igniting passion in your employees. Passionate employees are engaged, and more! There is no shortcut to getting employees to feel passionate about their work and your organisation. You cannot achieve it by increasing compensation, improving working conditions, or offering incentives such as bonuses or share options. Golden handcuffs may prevent people from leaving but they do not buy passion and they certainly do not buy engagement. The only way to get the best performance out of every employee is by providing them with great leadership—leadership that creates a work environment in which everyone wants to, and can, perform at his or her best.

About Keith Ayers

Keith Ayers is the CEO of Intégro Learning Company, an international consulting organisation based in Sydney. He is also the author of *Engagement Is Not Enough: You Need Passionate Employees to Achieve Your Dream* (Elevate, 2008). You can find more on employee engagement and how to create passionate teams on Keith's blog, "Trust Inside." Go to keithayers.typepad.com.