

Engaged Leadership

Building a Culture to Overcome Employee Disengagement

Clint Swindall



“According to a survey conducted by The Gallup Organization, only 26% of employees are engaged.” (Swindall 2007) What this means is that most employees are actually disengaged; they aren’t bad people or bad employees, they just don’t have a strong passion for the work they’re doing.

Disengagement is very hard for leaders to deal with in any organization. Not only are they dealing with robot employees showing up just for the pay cheque, they’re trying to manage the other employees who end up demoralized after having to carry most of the workload. Managers usually spend most of their efforts managing tasks and not enough time leading people. The way to overcome disengagement and allow employee engagement to flourish is through strong leadership.



Character



The Fable

Jamie Henry was living the dream. She had graduated with a degree in business and assumed naturally that managing people wouldn't be that difficult. She figured that although she was mediocre in school, she could lead employees like nobody's business. Jamie liked to be thought of as everyone's "go to" gal and thought she did a great job of inspiring others.

Jamie had successfully landed a job with a top company in Calgary. One last step in the interview process required Jamie to fly to Calgary to see the office and meet the people before deciding if she would accept the job. She flew to Calgary, and anxiously awaited the opportunity to finally meet her new boss in person who was picking her up at the airport. Her new position was Call Centre Manager for a national call center company with offices all over Canada. She liked the idea of working for a large firm, as it would provide a lot of opportunity for growth and advancement.

Upon meeting Cliff, Jamie's new boss, they grabbed Jamie's luggage and jumped in a cab. The hour-long cab ride gave them ample opportunity to get to know each other and talk shop. Cliff explained his desire to shape the culture of the organization, to which Jamie responded "I don't know what you mean. Don't they have a culture already?" Cliff explained that every organization has a culture; "our company just doesn't have a good one," he said. He said to Jamie "Tell me about your worst job." Jamie talked about her part-time job as a pizza delivery girl and how her boss treated everyone like dirt, always talked down to them, yelled at them for being late and then turned around and was late for every shift. Jamie hated that job and hated going to work everyday. "There!" said Cliff, "that is culture. You can't touch it or explain it very well, but it is how you *feel* about your job, your passion and motivation to perform. The employees that work for me are disengaged right now; they just show up for work, do the minimum and take home their paycheck. I want engaged employees, not disengaged," he said. Jamie wondered all the way home how one could create a culture of engagement.

At the office, Jamie was scheduled to attend a managers meeting to meet her coworkers. Everyone introduced themselves, and Jamie was quick to make observations about everyone; the guy that was early, the girl that ran in late, and the lady that didn't even show up.



After the meeting, Jamie and Cliff went into Cliff's office where he asked her what she thought of everyone. Jamie had a difficult time answering, but Cliff assured her it was safe to be honest. "Well I wasn't really impressed with Jill. I'm not sure what it is, but there is just something about her," Jamie said. "I don't have a good impression of Carmen; she knew there was a meeting and yet she decided it wasn't important enough to show up," Jamie said. "I agree," said Cliff. "I'll let you in on a secret. She hasn't liked me since the day I showed up and became her boss. I know she doesn't like change, and she likes to be in control; if it isn't her way, it's no ones way." Cliff and Jamie talked some more and Jamie was beginning to feel more and more at home.

Cliff went on to explain how the call center works, that essentially the staff are broken up into four groups, all of them competing with each other for the most sales. If Jamie were interested in coming to work for the company, the teams would be mixed up so that she wouldn't be managing the worst performing group. Cliff attributed the bad performers to "bad leadership" but Jamie didn't agree. She didn't think it was necessarily bad leadership, she wondered if it was perhaps a "lack of leadership."

On the way back to the airport Cliff asked Jamie if she was still interested in coming to work at the call center. Jamie was up to the challenge, and so enthusiastic she told Cliff to leave the teams just as they are; she wanted the challenge of turning the worst team around. They said good-bye to each other and planned for Jamie's arrival in two weeks.

Jamie arrived for her first day on the job. She put down her things and was given an immediate task to go out and meet all of the managers one-on-one, and then following that; schedule a meeting with her entire team to introduce herself. She asked what she should talk about with her staff, and Cliff said it was up to her to decide that. As she walked out, Cliff also mentioned that the team has an "attendance issue" that she needs to start working on immediately. She had no idea where to start.

As Jamie looked through the employee list, Jill popped into her office and sat down. Jamie said she was planning on meeting with Jill sometime today and Jill offered to meet right away as she had some free time. They talked openly with each other, and Jill provided some history about the low performers she used to work with, whom she now manages, and that it is best not to rock the boat too much with any of the employees; it will just cause conflict and that won't turn out good. Jamie questioned Jill about a name on her employee list, Mattie. Jill said she used to be a good employee but now she works for Carmen who doesn't have any patience for anything, so she completely left Mattie to do her own thing. Jill then abruptly stood up and left the office to attend her meeting.

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Jamie walked over to Carmen's office to inquire about having her employees all scheduled for a one-hour meeting. In response to Jamie's request, Carmen paused, didn't look up from her computer screen, and then said "you can meet with them at 3:00 for one hour." Jamie thanked her and asked if she had a few minutes for the two of them to talk and Carmen said she was too busy preparing for a meeting, and suggested another time. Just as she walked out of Carmen's office, Aaron, the other manager, asked Jamie if she wanted to go for lunch. They planned to meet in the lobby at 12:00.

The next day Jamie met with Cliff to discuss future planning. He mentioned to Jamie that he wanted to introduce something new to the managers, called *Engaged Leadership*. He explained that in order to have engaged employees, they would need to have engaged leaders. Jamie was curious what all this meant. The management team gathered in the afternoon and Cliff explained to the team how they were all going to work towards being an engaged leadership team. Up until now they've been missing the puzzle pieces that lead to engagement which are vision, motivation, organization and character core.

In terms of 'Vision' the managers are going to be responsible for preparing the organization for the changes to come. They must let the employees know how they are contributing, and that the progress must consistently be communicated. They began doing this by having weekly team meetings to review stats, and gather input and ideas from the service reps as to suggested ideas for improvements. They came up with a list of items that could be achieved within the first quarter, and then long-term goals to be achieved throughout the year.

In order to 'Motivate' the group, they celebrated with food and snacks, and met individually for constructive feedback. The managers set monthly targets with each employee in order to have them working towards success and rewarded them with praise and more challenging sales targets. The managers worked hard on being positive and celebrating the small successes, which they realized, go a long way.

In order to be 'Organizational' leaders the managers worked to adjust their management style to recognize the diversity of their team as well as the diversity of the organization as a whole. This means understanding and respecting where all individuals are coming from and that everyone has a different way of doing things. With that support eventually came employee empowerment, which is what a manager always wants from their employees. The reps felt knowledgeable and confident enough to make reasonable decisions for the good of the customer and good of the company. This freed up the managers' time allowing them to do more strategic and visionary work.

The last aspect of *Engaged Leadership* is 'Character Core.' This piece of the puzzle is unique because it isn't a separate entity; it is in all aspects of *Engaged Leadership*. This refers to the integrity of an individual and how they conduct themselves both personally and professionally. The managers worked hard to demonstrate respect for their staff and customers, and always required the same from their employees.

An extremely busy year went by that entailed quarterly management meetings, monthly staff meetings, hundreds of coaching sessions, countless potluck team gatherings, sales scores through the roof, 82% decrease in employee absenteeism,

wait times diminished, and an overly eager group of call center staff loving their jobs and excited to start each day on the phone. Jamie couldn't believe a year had already passed, and on top of that, couldn't believe what had been accomplished. There was still a lot of work to do, but Jamie learned that although it may be extremely hard to change a culture, it isn't impossible.



The Application of Engaged Leadership

Employee disengagement is a genuine concern for many organizations today. Some managers will chalk it up to be laziness or lack of motivation when in fact the opportunity to overcome engagement is within the control of the leadership. Any person of power in the organization has a responsibility to provide the three aspects of leadership, which are Directional (vision), Motivational and Organizational.

Senior management has already created a vision and the employees within the organization responsible for carrying out the vision are eager to know what it is. Somewhere between strategy development and implementation, things go sideways and management fails to pass along the information to the very people responsible for realizing the vision. The concept of Directional leadership is very simple; “whether you’re creating a new vision or mission from scratch, or you’re tweaking an existing vision or mission because of changing times, you have a responsibility to share it with the people who can help you realize the vision.” (Swindall 2007) It will be hard to gain buy-in from employees when they don’t understand where they’re going or what they’re doing. According to the results of the Gallup survey that indicated only 26% of employees are engaged, managers need to recruit support from this top group; they are the ones excited to be on the team, they’re dedicated and productive employees getting the work done. Employees also need to be prepared for the changes to come; they need to understand what changes that are taking place and why they’re occurring in order to see the benefits.

Gallup’s Hierarchy of Engagement:

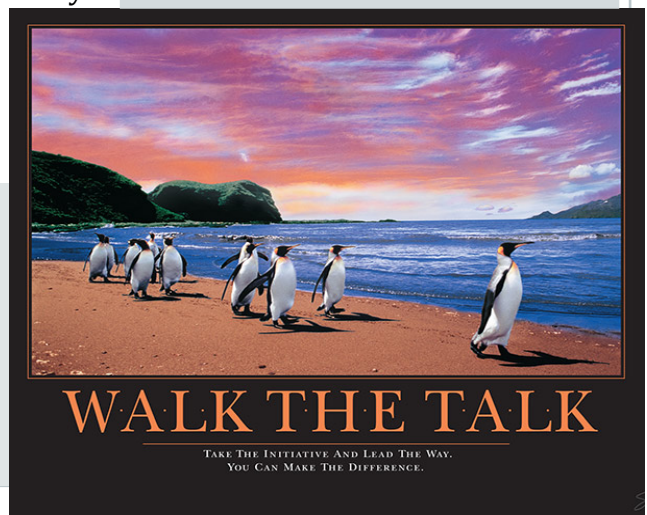
Stage one: meeting an employee’s basic needs

Stage two: employees think about their own individual contributions and their perceptions of how others view and value their efforts

Stage three: employees having an individual sense of belong in the organization

Stage four: an advanced stage whereby an employee feels a level of ownership and responsibility and wants to make improvements, learn, grow, and innovate

Organization

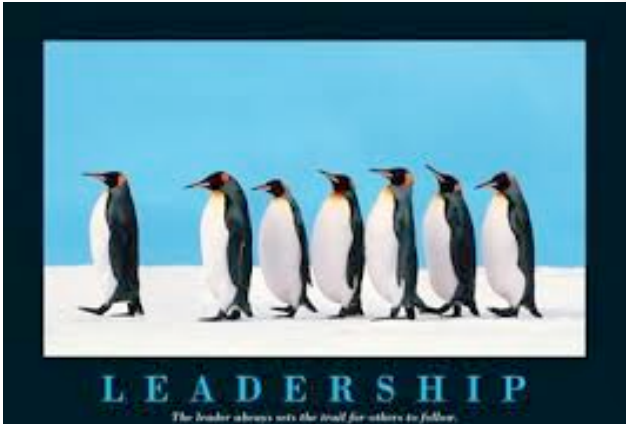


Leaders become great, not because of their power, but because of their ability to empower others.
~John Maxwell

Leadership is action, not position.

One of the most common reasons for an employee to leave a workplace is due to motivation; “employees don’t leave companies they leave bosses.” (Swindall 2007) Overall they didn’t feel appreciated and weren’t motivated enough to stay. Motivational Leadership involves leading the group with positive motivation. Employees need to have something to work towards, and it is up to the manager to ask employees what inspires them and to focus on what the employee is doing well. The manager needs to celebrate all successes, especially the small ones because it will mean a great deal to the employee when the little things are acknowledged. Managers can positively motivate their employees by demonstrating and encouraging a good work-life balance and showing that life isn’t always about work. Another way a manager can demonstrate Motivational Leadership is by providing a fair work environment. This means that all employees should be compensated fairly and consequences, if applicable, should be enforced consistently throughout the organization.

Motivate



If there is no strategy or vision, the company cannot grow. If employees are not inspired, then the journey will be dull and progress will be stagnant. If the right team is not in place to make everything happen, then the attempt to build a strong organization is virtually impossible. Organizational Leadership focuses on the development of the team. The goal here is to identify and position the appropriate talent within the organization. Managers need to know who the talent is, remove those employees who need to go, recruit appropriate talent for the company, hire based on attitudes, train the employees and always provide for challenging and meaningful work. It is important to empower employees to make decisions for themselves and the organization.

There are many examples of business failures that have occurred, but surprisingly not one of them failed because of bad decisions. Every example is the result of a person lacking personal ethics. "The leadership of any company or organization is based on the strong character of the individuals running the organization." (Swindall 2007) Employees are watching their managers much more than the managers realize; managers need to have integrity and demonstrate congruency in what they say and what they actually do. It's all about 'walking the walk and talking the talk.'

Overall, most organizations today are looking for Engaged Leadership. They want to have a vision. This comes with Directional Leadership. They want to be inspired to pursue that vision. This comes with Motivational Leadership. They want to be part of a productive team. This comes with Organizational Leadership. When you combine all of these aspects, and pair it with strong character, you have become engaged in the leadership process.

Jamie Henry
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Keith Walker & Bob Bayles



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