

Create an engaging work environment



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My friend Marie returned from the 2014 Psychotherapy Networker Symposium with an audio file from a presentation titled "Attachment Leadership" and suggested, "You need to listen to this."

Now I try to be pretty open-minded on where my next lesson might originate. But I was a bit skeptical that something from a psychotherapy symposium would find usefulness in my work with clients.

I've already listened to the file three times.

The presentation was a collaboration between Donald Rheem, an organizational consultant, and his wife, Kathryn, a psychotherapist. They point out that few management fads are grounded in science with empirical data to support them. As a recovering engineer, they had my attention.

According to the Rheems, every employee comes to work every day with discretionary effort. They decide, consciously or subconsciously, how much effort they're going to put forth — their level of engagement.

Research shows that a distribution curve for the level of employee engagement can be constructed, like any other variable that describes us (height, IQ, etc.). At the low end of the curve are a minority (typically 5-15 percent) of employees classified as actively disengaged.

This group can be described by a number of factors, including high absenteeism, high accident rates and low productivity, typically putting forth about a half day's effort for a full day's pay (productivity factor = 50 percent).

Next higher on the distribution are those classified as Somewhat Disengaged with a productivity factor of 67 percent, followed by the Somewhat Engaged with a productivity factor of 100 percent.

Finally, at the top end is another minority called Actively Engaged with a productivity factor of 150 percent.

Each company, even department, has a unique employee engagement distribution. A primary factor defining that unique distribution is the unique culture of the company, (or micro-culture for a department) with culture being defined simply as the answer to, "What does it feel like to work here?"

The default for new employees is on the positive (En-

gaged) side of distribution, but over time they tend to disperse across the curve for their work unit. The implications are enormous as the productivity of the Actively Engaged is three times that of the Actively Disengaged.

So the natural question becomes: What can managers do to create a culture conducive to Actively Engaged employees? To answer that, the Rheems turned to physiology of the brain.

Throughout evolution, survival of the human race

relied on its ability to cooperate as a tribe for safety, connection and ability to share the load. This is now hard-wired into our brains. Today's tribe is the workplace and we yearn for safety (albeit more emotional than physical), connection and sharing.

The primitive center of our brain (limbic brain) is hyperactive and focused on safety. It's constantly asking "What's next?" and "How am I doing?" It is constantly running in the background, requires little fuel and is not especially bright.

The creative and problem-solving portion of our brain is the prefrontal cortex. Because it requires great

energy to run, it is often on standby unless called on by the limbic brain due to a safety alert or it is motivated to solve a problem.

The presenters provide an excellent analogy of driving a car along the same road but under vastly different weather conditions. During a beautiful, sunny summer day we arrive rejuvenated by the drive; on an icy, stormy winter night, we are exhausted. The difference is not in the amount of physical effort, but rather the degree to which we taxed our prefrontal cortex.

That same taxing occurs when employees are consumed by worry at work. Conversely, supervisors free up the creativity centers in their employees' brains for productive work when they provide a safe haven in which people feel connected and work is fairly shared.

A safe haven shouldn't be confused with a coddling zone, but rather an environment free of unnecessary drama and guided by a supervisor whose actions are consistent and predictable. It should be a place where one feels genuinely appreciated and challenged to grow for both the benefit of themselves and the tribe.

RICK SAYS

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