

Part I: Understanding the Basics.

At the end of this part, we'll have a good understanding of the potential of a workplace with engaged and driven workers. We will see how it becomes a powerful and robust organization, capable of tackling any problem. Workers become emotionally connected with the organization and focus their energy on its advancement and success. They see the organization as an important component in their life's satisfaction and happiness. Is this too far-fetched or too ambitious? Let's see.

Chapter 2:

Job Dissatisfaction Destroys; Engagement Builds.

"When the mind suffers, the body cries out." Cardinal Lamberto,
The Godfather.

I was dissatisfied with my job. Are you?

In the later part of the 2000s, I used to set up my alarm at 6:15 am every day. My commute was short, and even stopping by the fridge for a quick snack, I would get to the office by 8 am. I remember that every single day, I hit the snooze button all the way to 7 am. When I finally made myself get up, I did so feeling tired, not well rested, and often feeling ill. Slowly and in a quiet and serious mood, I got ready to go to work and perform my duties of the day. At the beginning, I attributed my bad feeling to physical illness, but later I understood that something else was going on with me. There was an intriguing clue. Saturdays and Sundays, I woke up at 6:00 am with no alarm, no feeling of tiredness or illness, and looking forward to doing many awesome things. The same thing happened week after week, month after month.

Only after many months of the same observations, I began to think about it and its possible causes. My job seemed fine. I had a good position, with a good salary, in a good company. I had been recently

promoted, and my boss was an excellent manager. I was also working in the industry I liked best: automotive. Had somebody asked me whether I was satisfied with my job, I would have looked at it from afar where everything seemed well and answered "yes, of course." Still, underneath it all, I wasn't that happy. I often felt my job was too administrative and constraining. I felt it lacked imagination and purpose. I now believe that my body took upon itself to show this to me.

What do most people do in similar situations? We tough it out. We were taught to be responsible and carry on our duties. We don't have to be in love with the job; we just have to do it. We may remember our grandparents who worked hard on the land or in the shop. And those were hard jobs; ours are much easier. This way, I continued doing it for a while, until one day I finally couldn't do it anymore.

Taiichi Ohno, the creator of the Toyota Production system, uses the analogy of "lowering the water to expose rocks." The idea is that when there is a considerable amount of inventory in a system, the problems, or "bugs," stay hidden. In a river where much water flows, there seem to be no rocks. By limiting inventory in the process or "lowering the water," managers can see which processes struggle to keep up. This is where the rocks are, and this is exactly what happened to me. Because I felt ill, I had less energy to withstand a situation that was not working out for me anymore. The water level was down, and I was forced to see my rocks. I finally understood it. My job was not giving me what I needed. I needed to make changes, and fast.

Had I not had the "water level" down, I am sure I would have endured it and continued going to work every day, attempting to make the best of it, as probably you do and as many other people do. Unfortunately, the United States (and many other countries) seems to be plagued by the same disease. I am not referring to a physical illness, but one that leads to low job satisfaction.

The conference Board Research Group,¹ Harris Interactive, Inc.,² and other organizations report that satisfaction in America is at its lowest levels, at around 45%, in 2010. Although these numbers are particularly low because they are measured at the height of the worst economic recession since the Depression, these surveying organizations claim that worker satisfaction has been on a downward trend for more than two decades. They report that only about 20% of all the workers feel

passionate about their jobs. For the younger generations, the problem is even more significant. Only 37% of those younger than 25 report being satisfied with their jobs. The reports claim that these young workers are more distressed and feel the least amount of loyalty to their employers.³

When we are dissatisfied, we are not good workers.

Let us ponder for a moment. More than half of all workers in America are dissatisfied with their jobs! Two-thirds of the young workers are dissatisfied! How could a worker do a good job if he is dissatisfied; if he feels he has a regular, boring, must-be-done, or little-impact job? He may be trying to do his best out of the principles he was taught or perhaps from fear of losing the job, but his performance would be vastly less than spectacular, perhaps even mediocre.

When we are dissatisfied, our energy is low. Our inside pessimism sifts out. It shows in our attitude, the way we tackle problems, and how we react to new ideas and proposals. We have little initiative, and we are a drag on our teams. Instead of the goals or long-term objectives, non-engaged workers are focused on the tasks and requirements of the job, be it a number of hours on the chair or the number of work items completed.

Compare that performance with one of someone who is enthusiastic, connected, and engaged with his work. This person engages others and transmits enthusiasm and energy. His attitude helps him tackle any problem he encounters. He sparks the best in others.

Among all the dissatisfied, disengaged workers, there is a group at the bottom that is even more problematic. These workers are the ones who complain about the company's policies or actions. They see everything through a dark glass, and their mood permeates to other workers. They undermine the productivity and positive attitude that other workers bring. They plant the seeds of distrust, anger, and resentment with whomever they talk. They are the most dangerous workers for the organization.

The job satisfaction surveys also report that about 60% of American workers intend to leave if the economy improves. These workers are probably daydreaming about their new job and paying considerable attention to job applications and resume submissions. At the least, they

have little interest in the long-term performance of the organization where they currently work.

"Job: Means by which at least 30% of your life is stolen from you to enrich the owners of a company making useless shit that some other poor idiot in a job will buy." UrbanDictionary.com

Is job dissatisfaction a factor behind the U.S. crisis?

In America, we have a crisis. I am not talking about the financial crisis; I am talking about the job engagement crisis. We cannot come up with leading products and technologies that create the way of life of the future if we don't care about what we do or if we are looking to leave our jobs.

We blame the economic crisis of 2008 on the sub-prime mortgage market, insurance-linked securities, and excessive consumer spending, subjects with which you are now quite familiar, but there may be another way to think about this crisis. When the Spanish conquered America, they traded objects with the American Indians. They traded small mirrors for large pieces of gold. In the Native American market, gold, although precious, was less scarce than mirrors. Today, we may laugh at them because they exchanged gold for mirrors, but the latter was the technologically advanced product that simply commanded a high price, even in gold.

Imagine you are the only person in a small isolated town who knows how to bake bread. Assuming you are able to keep your recipe a secret, your bread will command a high price. You will have a nice life in this town because you are the only one who knows how to make it. If most folks in the town farm potatoes, could they also command a premium price for their potatoes? No. If the price seems to be high, you'll buy potatoes from somebody else, but one loaf of your bread may be exchanged for several pounds of potatoes.

This can be explained with the value pyramid. This simple tool contrasts companies that produce complex and sophisticated products (and command higher prices) with others that produce commonly manufactured products (and cannot command a premium price). The technologically advanced producer resides at the top of the pyramid,

where there are few producers; whereas the regular producer resides at the bottom, where there are many competitors.

We can use this tool with countries, too. If a country produces premium products that can only be produced there due to their technological sophistication and creativity, the country will command premium returns and will have a nice standard of life. If the country produces products that anybody anywhere can produce, the country will only be able to maintain the standard of life as the poorest of them. This may explain why the United States and other developed countries are in crisis. They used to produce almost every technologically advanced product, from engineering services to manufacturing equipment. If other countries, such as Brazil, Russia, China, India, and Korea, can nowadays produce products as technologically advanced as the United States, why would markets pay higher prices for the ones made in the United States?

In order for the products to command higher prices, they need to be better, more creative, better developed, and better manufactured. Functionality and capacity not only have to be higher but the product also has to grab the customer. Think about tennis shoes. Today, every country can produce top-quality tennis shoes, and these days, those that do must have a tangible labor cost advantage. It is impossible for the United States to compete, at least with the same product, but the product can be redefined with technology. Perhaps the tennis shoes, using acupuncture principles, massage foot nerve endings to address the customer's specific physical needs, which were determined by a picture of his iris, taken with his computer online. I don't know if this would work as I am not a doctor, acupuncturist, or iridologist, but if it did, it could redefine the market. The shoes would command a much higher price, perhaps enough for the United States to be a competitive country of manufacturing.

"You can't just ask customers what they want and try to give that to them. By the time you get it built, they'll want something new." Steve Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple Computers.

When we are engaged, we cannot but win.

When I was in college, I played water polo. I was not particularly talented and could only get to the "B" team. One day, in a tournament match, we were playing against the "A" team. They were superior by far; they had been playing for a lot longer than us; and they were faster, more organized, and more skilled. They had also promised they would crush us.

In the middle of the game, with the score heavily sided toward them, they made one mistake, and we used it to score. It was a silly mistake, and they became angry. They started yelling at each other, which made them even more upset. Our team celebrated the point. We felt united and enthusiastic. We started playing better, and they started playing worse. We kept scoring and they became more frustrated, arguing among themselves even more; such a dishonor it was to be accepting goals from us. We did not win, but we did level the score considerably. That day, I learned the importance of a united, enthusiastic team.

We see it all the time. Teams with strong players crumble down and are overcome by weaker players who suddenly become enthusiastic about the game. If it is so easy to see this in arenas, such as sports, why do we not see it in the business setting? True, in sports, we don't use the term "satisfaction" or "engagement," but it is the same thing. When team members are disenchanted with each other, upset that others are not doing their part to overcome their adversary, the team doesn't do well. When the coach keeps making strategic mistakes, the team feels demotivated. When the team believes they can't win, they won't. All these problems are psychological. In contrast, when team members feel united and coordinated, know what they want, and trust each other, they simply produce magic.

Remember a time in your working life when you felt passionate about your job. Something was at play that prompted you to get up every day full of energy, work for many hours without getting tired, and go home happy and satisfied with your work day. Perhaps, it was a new job, you just had a great time at work, or you felt your input had a significant and positive impact on the results of the organization. You were, in fact, "engaged!"

I want you to remember the interaction with other people at meetings, having an informal chat at the water fountain, writing a memo or email, or requesting help. I may not be wrong if I say that, at that time, you were doing remarkably well. When negotiating with others, you were able to get agreements, and it took less time. When you needed help, you convinced others to help you out. You also were proactive and tried to help with the challenges of others. You deployed creativity and came up with solutions that were brilliant. When you explained your ideas, you convinced others to try them out. A meeting that normally lasted two hours would be over in one because everyone would get on the same page more quickly.

Maybe you were not making much money at the time; you were only starting your career; or it was a time of crisis and change for the company, but you were engaged with the company and its problems. You were right there with everything you had. Now, perhaps you may make more money and you are more stable, but you don't feel quite the way you did then, and it shows. Position and money were not driving you, but you did achieve superior tangible results.

Am I wrong? Do you remember those days? Yes, an engaged employee can have such a positive impact on an organization. Now imagine that more workers were in the same state. This is the contagious energy that was behind Alex's workplace that we discussed at the beginning of the book.

Towers Perrin, a consultancy with specialization in human resources, surveyed 50 multinational companies to understand the link between employee engagement and performance. They found that companies with low levels of employee engagement had a 33% annual decline in operating income and an 11% annual decline in earnings growth. Those with high engagement, on the other hand, reported a 19% increase in operating income and 28% growth in earnings per share.⁴

A group of engaged individuals is a powerful machinery.

You may already know them, but let's make sure we remember the characteristics of truly engaged workers. An engaged worker:

- Is emotionally linked with the company, its challenges and successes.

- Is preoccupied with doing his part and looks for opportunities to improve the business, even when they reside outside of his area of responsibility.
- Is not easily tempted by higher salary offers or better positions from other companies.
- Is a builder and works toward the long-term success of the company.
- Strives to use his talents and creativity to improve the company and is naturally curious to acquire more skills to advance the company further.
- Becomes less concerned with himself, and more concerned with the welfare of the whole.
- Has found his place, and believes it is home. He thinks he has a better life every single day he spends with his coworkers in this organization.

A company with driven workers at the level of engagement we are striving to have in this book is an extremely powerful organization that overcomes every obstacle in its path. It works like the human body, in which systems, organs, and cells work in a coordinated, precise manner to achieve a grander purpose.

There are trillions of cells, and each one has its own purpose, be it to secrete saliva, enzymes, or sweat; move muscles; sense its surroundings; and more. Whatever its function, every single cell in this complex organization, the body, is 100% committed to its job. If one of the functions shuts down, the whole body resents it and may even face termination.

The body expects every single organ to do its job and do it well. We do not have a spare brain or heart, or a third leg. Not having spare equipment allows us to be efficient and quick. We can see, run, swim, jump, think, and manufacture tools, and all of it is thanks to our body cells that are doing their job. It is as if the cells were "convinced" that the purpose of the whole is bigger than their own self existence. They are organized in an extremely coordinated fashion with almost no supervision. We know they learn, too, such as with a vaccine that helps them acquire the capacity to identify unwelcome guests.

Imagine some cells doing something a bit different from what they are supposed to do. Let's say they start eating a lot and reproducing

themselves. Their own small community grows and thrives. They seem to be doing well and don't let other cells interfere with their community. These cells no longer function for the well-being of the body. These cancer cells may eventually kill the body. The body cannot afford to have self-serving cells, only those that work for the betterment of the whole.

Now, as with the human body, imagine an organization with members convinced of the organization's purpose and willing to be part of its successes and troubles, organized in a strategic manner so that it can be nimble and fast. Imagine it fosters an environment that allows members to help each other, to teach and learn from each other, with minimal check points and management oversight. This organization would be able to run farther, think faster, and act better than its competition.

"Engaged workers stay for what they give (through their work), and disengaged employees stay for what they get (a secure job in an unfavorable employee market, a desirable salary or bonus, favorable job conditions, or career advancement)."⁵

Do you think it is possible to have workers that care more for what they contribute to an organization than what they receive in terms of salary or perks? We may be asking too much. Is this "engagement" level really achievable? Can we foster it?

Some of the practices we have in our businesses lead to their own demise. The life of the modern corporation is just above 40 years. That of small businesses is even shorter. We are obviously not doing this purposely, but there are forces that drive us there. We must understand what these forces are and how to deal with them before we answer the previous questions.



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- 1 Gibbons, John. *I Can't Get No ... Job Satisfaction, That Is*. The conference Board, 2010.
 - 2 Harris Interactive. *The New Employee/Employer Equation Survey*, 2008.
 - 3 Gibbons, John. *I Can't Get No ... Job Satisfaction, That Is*. The conference Board, 2010.
 - 4 Towers, Perrin. *Employee Engagement underpins business transformation*, 2009.
 - 5 Blessing White Research. *2011 Employee Engagement Report*, 2011.