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WORKPLACE ENGAGEMENT Where the Canary Stopped Singing

In years past, Appalachian coalminers would take a canary in a small cage down into the bowels of the mine with them to serve as a sentinel. They set it near where they were working and the canary sang its cheerful song. If the canary stopped singing, something was wrong. The little creature was highly susceptible to poisonous gases such as carbon monoxide and methane and if it became ill, the miners needed to flee to the surface immediately to save their own lives.

As I travel the country consulting with firms from varying sectors of our economy, it seems to me that in many organizations the canary has stopped singing and the organizational climate has become toxic.

In 2013, Gallup issued the results of a major survey entitled *State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders*.

<http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163007/state-american-workplace.aspx>

Results from this study of hundreds of organizations and more than 25 million workers showed that in 2012, only about 30% of American workers are engaged in their work and that the other 70% fall short of reaching their potential. Even worse, almost a fifth of the workforce is “actively disengaged,” costing the U.S. between \$450 billion to \$550 billion each year in lost productivity.

[Choke. Plop.] What were those sounds you ask? It could have been the last canary in the U.S. workplace taking a final gasp and falling of its perch. Or maybe they are the sounds of the 30 percent of the “engaged” workforce collapsing as they strained to get their organization over the next hump in the road.

No doubt there are many implications from the Gallup study, but surely one is the cumulative effect of the engaged worker stepping in to take up the slack left by the rest of the workforce. They have to do more and more with less and less. They work in a “new normal” workplace that is a lot like whitewater rafting: fast and furious with little time for communication or considering what response would be best.

I don't believe that most disengaged employees choose or want to be that way. They do not enjoy it. I believe that many employees become disengaged because they are overwhelmed by what is being required of them on a daily basis. So the obvious question is, “Does it have to be this way?”

The answer is categorically “no!” The Gallup report states that ...”there are pockets of organizations in the U.S. that have figured out engagement, and some ...are reaping the

benefits of having more than five times the ratio of engaged to actively disengaged employees.”

Historically, most stress management programs placed total responsibility for life/work balance on the individual employee. And then made it nearly impossible for them to succeed. Today’s progressive leaders are stepping back and asking a different set of questions. How might our corporate culture be contributing to the stress levels of our employees? What can we learn from the best practices of the best places to work in America? How do we create a culture where the canary sings?

There are many answers to these questions, but consider this the real-life example.

Recently, one of my healthcare clients asked if I would be willing to conduct some “executive coaching” sessions with one of their physician leaders. I was told that he was clinically brilliant, but that he had anger management issues.

After two sessions with this mild-mannered emergency room physician, I concluded he did not have anger management issues. He had life balance issues. His occasional temper flare ups were the result of his sleep deprivation and state of exhaustion. Since medical school he had been driving himself to be all things to all people. He had never learned to “put his oxygen mask on first” and then assist those around him. Eventually he and his wife moved to a farm, discovered a new hobby in horseback riding. With the support of his organization this talented physician rediscovered balance and his love for medicine.

This example offers a general roadmap for improving the workplace. First employers need to rationally consider strategies to enhance the workplace in a way that benefits the health and well-being of the people who work there. In all organizations, employees are the most valuable asset. It behooves management to protect and enhance their lives.

In addition, individuals need to take charge of their lives such that they include good health practices, time with family and friends, and passion for things outside work, such as travel or hobbies. It is imperative that employees discover something outside the office that renews their energy and spirit. The philosopher Joseph Campbell was fond of saying, “If you are going to follow your bliss in life, you need a bliss station.” For more about Campbell’s perspective:

<http://www.jcf.org/new/index.php?categoryid=37&blogid=15>