Reinvigorating Disengaged Staff

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It's time to work on YOU. So sit back and listen to practical,
actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

According to a survey conducted across 142 countries by Gallup [1], just 13% of
employees worldwide are engaged at work. Symptoms of disengagement may include
apathy, poor communication, absenteeism, missed deadlines, and cynicism. So, how
does this translate into day-to-day experiences in the workplace? What does
withdrawal mean for businesses more broadly, and what can you do to revitalise
employee engagement?

In this track, we'll explore the methods for reinvigorating employees who you detect
are disengaging. We'll cover:

- How to determine who's losing motivation
- Identifying problems with engagement
- Diagnosing engagement issues, and
- Communicating effectively with disengaged employees

As Susan David highlights in an article for HBR [2], employee engagement "is a
business imperative, linked to a number of performance outcomes, including
profitability, customer satisfaction and turnover." The Forbes Human Resources
Council argues [3] that "high levels of employee engagement can have an extremely
positive impact on a work environment. Productivity rises, communication flows more
openly, and projects move from idea to actuation faster."

Perhaps you've experienced a situation where you've hired an extremely capable and
dedicated new recruit, only to observe their enthusiasm wane over time. You saw them
at their most energised and watched them go above and beyond on so many
occasions. They initially seized new learning opportunities and were keen to develop
new skills, keeping you in the loop about their achievements. But down the line, they
appeared despondent, and you noticed them doing the bare minimum. Tomas
Chamorro-Premuzic's article for HBR [4] examines "the problematic gap between a
person's maximal and typical performance. When engagement is high, there's very little
difference between the two — meaning people are performing at their best on a

regular basis. But when engagement is low, maximal performance (or the best a person can do) is rarely on display."

And what's the result of this? You might be familiar with the term quiet quitting. Anthony C. Klotz and Mark C. Bolino explain in their piece for HBR [5] how "quiet quitters continue to fulfil their primary responsibilities, but they're less willing to engage in activities known as citizenship behaviors: no more staying late, showing up early, or attending non-mandatory meetings." At first glance, this might appear to be largely unproblematic as long as enough work is being done to an adequate standard. But team morale might be shaky, other colleagues might start to feel resentful, and staff turnover might be unsustainably high. There might be a general sense of despondency or indifference. And what pride can be found in adequate output and a company that does *just enough*?

Your first step in reinvigorating a team is to determine if someone's lack of visible enthusiasm is indeed a lack of engagement. People have different dispositions and personalities and can convey contentment very differently. Getting to know your team means you'll know when engagement levels have reduced. As Stacey Browning of Paycor says [3], "When someone exhibits change, it's time to inspect and open up a dialogue for explanatory insight." Having an understanding of how your employees appear on a typical day means you'll be able to detect if something is different. Over time, you'll tune into people's communication styles and working preferences. Somebody might not be contributing in meetings because they don't feel confident speaking in large groups, not because they have a fundamental dislike of their job, or feel a disconnect with their colleagues. They might never have initiated a meeting with you, but again, that's not necessarily a cause for concern. Similarly, somebody might be a valued, communicative, and extremely productive member of the team, but childcare commitments might mean they leave at exactly 5 pm each day. Conversely, somebody might appear willing to work every hour offered to them, but they might inappropriately delegate most of their tasks or spend 95% of their breaks verbalising to co-workers how deeply unhappy they are with their role.

These subtle differences highlight the importance of
1. Identifying if there are any issues with engagement, and
2. Diagnosing any problems.

Plus, timing is crucial here. You want to catch someone as they are in the process of disengaging, and motivation is only beginning to fade, as opposed to when they've entirely mentally checked out. This isn't always possible, but it's certainly worth having as an aim in order to remind yourself to remain alert.

So, start with frequent check-ins. And make sure you set time aside for one-to-one meetings with everybody, not just the one person who appears to be disengaging. Foster an environment where catch-ups aren't framed as terrifying ordeals. This could even be a case of sharing with the whole team that you have check-ins scheduled for everyone, in order to reassure individuals that they're not the only ones being spoken to. Prioritise asking open-ended questions, framed to get rich information out of an

employee. Susan David examines [2] how "engagement is an emotional and deeply personal experience; it's not simple or straightforward to address." When you're working with people, you're working with an array of complex circumstances and unique experiences. Be prepared that by talking to people, you might unveil their strong feelings and negative feedback. Remember that demonstrating you're listening and prepared to make appropriate changes is a skill in and of itself.

Determine what engages **your** employees as both distinct individuals and members of a team. There's not a huge amount of value in one specific thesis or model if you're out of the loop of your own colleagues' needs. You might have identified gaps in engagement or heard complaints in passing, but don't impose your preconceptions. Avoid bad predictions and incorrect assumptions by taking the time to listen, and not only on one occasion. Reasons for disengagement aren't something to find out about just once. Crucially, rather than approaching disengagement with fear, shift your focus to what works well. Expand on the best parts of your current workplace and do more of what colleagues tell you feels most effective for them. Rather than looking for the negatives, ask your most energised and productive colleagues to find out what's going so well for them. Exchange ideas, pose questions, and share experiences. Analyse how the work environment might be impacting employee well-being, and remain curious.

Elizabeth Coakley, of C.H. Coakley & Company, highlights [3] the importance of employees being listened to. She says, "Everyone has trying days, but to become curt with other coworkers or clients can be a big sign. It could actually be boredom or that an employee is not feeling heard, which may cause little effort in the workplace." And in fact, your being inquisitive is a valuable asset [6]. If you want curiosity and energy from your employees, go ahead and demonstrate it yourself. If you want to know what team members find interesting and valuable, anticipate that they might want to see what's important to you, too.

Next, take a look at the expectations you've placed on employees. Maybe somebody is bored with their day-to-day tasks. Perhaps someone has been silently struggling through a certain project, and a lack of training has meant they feel ineffectual. Consider when you last reviewed job descriptions or spoke to employees about how their average working week feels. As Susan David continues [2], "People generally do well when they are empowered to make choices and decisions for themselves." Advocate for increasing employees' autonomy and for them to be able to give feedback on their own performance. Work on being approachable and be open to hearing feedback about yourself, too. It could be that an individual has evidenced a skill valuable to the organisation that's outside of their current remit, so speak to them about how their talents can be incorporated into their role. Be wary of disengaged employees working out of their depth, however. Someone who has disengaged may want to be given new responsibilities and broaden their horizons, and there's a case there for making their role more interesting and dynamic. Keep in mind, however, that rejuvenating a role isn't the same as giving someone work they're not appropriately trained for or don't have the resources to do.

Be realistic about what an individual can offer as well as how much you are able to change their situation. Don't resort to being demanding or domineering, and consider how it feels to be the person who's disengaged. If someone is particularly disengaged, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic advocates [4] you "keep things formal, concrete, and focus on the task, rather than trying to appeal to their emotions. Don't expect to win their hearts and minds. Enlist them instead in task-oriented activities, operating within the formalities of the organizational structure and explicit performance indicators they have." If intrinsic motivation isn't the key and an individual doesn't seem to be able to motivate themselves, you may need to consider incentives. What reasons can you give for increasing commitment and energy? What's in it for the employee? What does the individual value? Figure out how much you actually know about them and the way that they work.

Let's end with an invaluable statement from Susan David: "Engagement cannot be mandated, but it can be ignited." [2] You certainly can't, and shouldn't, force change. In fact, pressuring employees to do anything is a recipe for mass disengagement. Begin by recognising change needs to happen, demonstrating curiosity about what could be different, and inspiring progress with your own behaviours.

This week, focus on curiosity, empathy, and interrogating what feels valuable to you. Make a list of five things you enjoy about your job and five things you hope will change about it in the next year. This is a great starting point for helping you in listening to the feedback of your employees.

That's all for today, have a rewarding week!

[1] *Worldwide, 13% of Employees Are Engaged at Work*, Steve Crabtree (2013)
https://news.gallup.com/poll/165269/worldwide-employees-engaged-work.aspx

[2] *Disengaged Employees? Do Something About It*, Susan David (2013)
https://hbr.org/2013/07/disengaged-employees-do-someth

[3] *12 Signs Your Employee Is Disengaged (And How To Respond)*, Expert Panel, Forbes Human Resources Council (2018)
https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2018/11/30/12-signs-your-employee-is-disengaging-and-how-to-respond/?sh=59bb98b12928

[4] *How to Work With Someone Who's Disengaged*, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (2020)
https://hbr.org/2020/03/how-to-work-with-someone-whos-disengaged

[5] *When Quiet Quitting Is Worse Than the Real Thing*, Anthony C. Klotz and Mark C. Bolino (2022)
https://hbr.org/2022/09/when-quiet-quitting-is-worse-than-the-real-thing

[6] *The Business Case for Curiosity*, Francesca Gino (2018)
https://hbr.org/2018/09/the-business-case-for-curiosity