

Curb Employee Disengagement: Give More Control

I just tried meditation at work for the first time, and I'm not sure if I'm doing it right or if it will make a difference. Especially since I skipped my morning meditation because I was running late for a meeting, and my brain was whirring at high speed, trying to be mental Red Bull sneakers, running faster and jumping higher.

STAYING FOCUSED AND MINDFUL AT WORK IS TOUGH

Like most people, my "to do" list feels insurmountable at times, dwarfed only by my "to read" list. It's daunting to try and stay on top of it all. But I'm one of the lucky ones - I LIKE my job. I like it so much that I have found myself sitting alone on a Friday evening engrossed in a project until I realized that all my colleagues have left to do something decidedly more fun than hang out at work.

But, according to the Gallup organization, and our own research at Steelcase, I'm in the minority. The vast majority of workers are disengaged - meaning they're basically just doing what it takes to get by. Disengaged workers make up 87% of the global workforce (both Gallup and Steelcase arrived at that number, even with different research methods), quietly sapping energy and, in turn, profits from their organization.

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Just to be clear, I'm not suggesting that people who leave work at a normal time are disengaged - in fact, they probably have a healthy awareness of their need to rejuvenate. Working late isn't necessarily a sign of engagement. But we all know people so motivated that they lose a sense of time at work and get into a state of "flow." They exude optimism and a sense of purpose. And we also know people who don't.

SOLVING FOR EMPLOYEE DISENGAGEMENT

While many leaders see the huge albatross employee disengagement has become to their organization, it's not always clear what to do about it. There is research indicating that the intensity of work and feeling overwhelmed can cause people to burnout and disengage (hence, my fledgling start at meditation).

In his "New York Times" op-ed "[Rethinking Work,](#)" Barry Schwartz, argues that it's a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy. He believes this state is brought on by the Adam Smith line of thinking that work should be all about efficiency, divided into predictable parts, and that people will be motivated to work harder to achieve tangible rewards, aka more money.

The well known down side to the division of labor is when it leads to monotonous, routine tasks from which people derive little satisfaction. Fair pay is important, but what people want, notes Schwartz, is “work that is challenging and engaging, that enables us to exercise some discretion and control over what we do.”

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Leaders who are trying to tackle employee disengagement can try many different strategies, but one easy place to start is with control. Our research found that control was one of the biggest factors that impacted people’s workplace satisfaction with their workplace and their engagement levels. We found that 88 percent of highly engaged workers globally can choose where they work based on the task they’re doing, but 86 percent of highly disengaged workers can’t.

HOW TO INCORPORATE CONTROL INTO YOUR WORKSPACE

Give people more control over where and how they work. Let them have some options for how they want to get their work done and where they want to sit (or stand, walk, recline, perch).

Establish clear boundaries and expectations. When giving more control, it’s important to establish clear boundaries and expectations or you might wind up with too many people opting to work at a coffee shop or on their sofa too often, which can hurt group cohesion as well as their backs.

Focus on ways to give people more autonomy and discretion. Focusing on ways to give people a little more autonomy and discretion over their work day is a good step toward helping them feel like a grown up whose work matters.

Give permission to experiment. Help employees feel safe by giving them explicit and tacit permission to experiment with new ways of working – even letting them choose to spend five minutes meditating in the afternoon can be a way for people to regain a sense of control over their lives and begin to build a foundation for higher levels of motivation and engagement.

Introducing New Research on Engagement + the Global Workplace

1/3 of workers in 17 of the world’s most important economies is disengaged, according to new research from Steelcase. Working with global research firm Ipos, the Steelcase Global Report is the first to explore the relationship between engagement and the workplace.

Christine Congdon

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In her work at Steelcase, Christine is deeply focused on the role of physical environments in shaping the behavior of people at work. She is co-author of “Balancing We and Me: The Best Collaborative Spaces Also Support Solitude” featured in the Harvard Business Review and regularly writes and speaks about workplace issues for a variety of publications and conferences. Chris collaborates with leading organizations to help them rethink the strategic role of their physical environment and is a passionate advocate for the idea that organizations can leverage their workplace to help shape strategy, brand and culture.

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