

Are You an Accidental Soul-Sucking CEO?



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I have to admit it. I am, frankly, quite baffled. For the last 20 years, and all around the world, we CEOs have invested untold millions into the question: “What does it take to have an engaged workplace culture?” We’ve bought books, retained consultants, rolled out surveys, and looked deep into the hearts and minds of the people who work for us. We know how crucial it is to having talent who love working for us and who will offer discretionary effort and innovation - and introductions to their friends. We even know how to quantify all this stuff.

We are at the leading edge of an historic conversation. Our predecessors – the generations who ran the factories and cracked the whips – would look at us and our workplaces in awe. We know better than anyone at any time in the history of humans what it takes to create a workplace where people want to come to work, joyfully invest their efforts and talents into a cause greater than themselves, and go home happy to children who are learning from their examples.

And yet we’re still screwing it up. Gallup – which has made it its business to track these kinds of numbers – reports that 51% of American

employees are actively looking for a job. Elsewhere. Do you know what that means on a global scale? As historically smart as we are in this whole engagement conversation, more human beings than ever before are actively seeking to leave their current employer and find fulfillment with another one.

It occurs to me that Amazon Prime and Costco have a better customer retention rate with their discretionary paid memberships than employers throughout the world have with their employees. If retail operations can more reliably keep their discretionary relationships with people who have to pay for that relationship than we can with our employees, who earn their livelihood with us, we need to take a serious look at how we're creating the environment for those relationships.

It Lands On the CEO's Door Step

Gallup statistics continue to be grim. According to their latest report, the cost of employees who are either non-engaged or actively disengaged amounts to between \$960 billion and \$1.2 trillion globally. Employees tell us that the relationship they want from their supervisor is one of being a coach, not a boss. They want clear expectations, accountability, a "rich purpose," ongoing feedback and, well, coaching. Only 50 percent report that they know what's expected of them on a daily basis; only 41 percent say that their actual work aligns with their formal job description (i.e., the job they signed up for in the first place). Only 44 percent say that they can see a connection between what they do and their company's objectives.

Those who report positively in all these areas show true returns on the investment in engagement efforts. They are anywhere between three and four times more likely to be engaged than their frustrated counterparts. When it comes to return on investment, pretty soon that adds up some real money.

The problem here is that the responsibility is conventionally assigned to

the direct supervisors of employees. They're the ones who receive the reports, who are made to study the online dashboard dials and stoplights. They have to go to the trainings, and then report up line to their managers annually to account for why that needle hasn't budged. Their supervisors are doing the same. And their leaders are doing likewise. Up, up, up the org chart this accountability goes.

In the meantime, they're all receptive to calls from headhunters. Including the brain trust on your organizational development team.

The one who really should be studying how to move that needle is, well, you. While your OD department might be working so diligently to refine the behaviors of your managers to staunch the flow of your expensively acquired talent, it might be *your* office that is sucking the joy, vision, and dedication from your tribe.

Why do I use the expression "soul-sucking?" That's how it feels, especially when an organization that promotes itself as being committed to an engaged culture is led by a CEO who is unfocused, unserious, unkind, or simply doesn't get it. It's more than simply clumsy leadership. It's a breach of promise. And it makes your entire tribe feel depleted and dispirited.

How to Be a Soul-Sucking CEO

As I travel the world, leading what we call our *tribe*, I also am invited to give speeches and advise our customers and partners. I see a fervent desire to create workplace cultures that emulate the collaborative, supportive environment celebrated at WD-40 Company. And I'm gratified to be able to help them when I can.

But I am also continually surprised to see an almost entrenched, dated attitude CEOs have toward their people and their culture. It's the only way I can explain the demoralizing engagement statistics that research companies such as Gallup serve up to us annually. With everything we

now know about how to create engaging cultures, if your employees are suffering disengagement, I can only assume that you're doing this on purpose.

Since time is money, I thought I'd lend you a hand and help you further your mission of creating and sustaining a corporate culture that will drive your talent out your doors – preferably in the direction of my company. If you want to be a soul-sucking CEO, this is how you do it:

You have no compelling purpose.

As it turns out, having a clearly defined purpose that speaks to the hearts and minds of employees is actually critical to creating an engaged culture where your people know they belong among kindred spirits who are passionate about serving a cause larger than themselves.

In his 2018 annual letter to CEOs, Larry Fink, Chairman and CEO of global investment company, BlackRock, Inc., wrote: “To prosper over time, every company must not only deliver financial performance but also show how it makes a positive contribution to society. Without a sense of purpose, no company, either public or private, can achieve its full potential. It will lose the license to operate from key stakeholders. Demonstrate the leadership and clarity that will drive not only [your] own investment returns but also the prosperity and security of [your] fellow citizens.”

Purpose-driven, passionate people guided by strong values create amazing outcomes. At WD-40 Company, we know that having a purpose is highly motivating. Having a purpose absolutely rewards people who are driven by the need to make a contribution bigger than themselves.

There is a psychological, physical advantage to having a true purpose. Purpose is soul enriching, not soul-sucking. Purpose motivates people to feel part of something where they believe that they are making a difference.

When our tribe members at WD-40 come to work, they ask themselves, “What am I going to do today?” Their answer: “I’m going to create something positive for someone. I’m going to solve a problem. I’m going to make something work better. I’m going to create an opportunity. I’m going to cause a positive lasting memory for someone.” That’s much more motivating than saying, “I’m going to go to work today and I’m going to sell a can of chemicals.” Don’t you think?

The opposite of having a purpose isn’t just neutral. If you have no compelling purpose, it’s an active disadvantage in the sense that there’s a vacuum in focus and direction. That vacuum is going to be filled by absolutely the wrong things. You’ll find yourself creating unsuccessful products that don’t serve your customers. You’ll have a workplace of people treating each other in a way that’s shabby and disrespectful. The vacuum creates space for rumor mongering, inter-relationship suspicions and conflicts, and other destructive issues.

Your company has no positive values.

Without positive values, your people will require micro-management and consistent course correction. They will be made to feel fundamentally wrong from the minute they turn off their alarm clock in the morning to the time they drag their depleted bodies back up the front walk to their house in the evening. Without values they can’t be trusted to make decisions on their own. And they will know it. They are exposed, and they know their company is exposed. Any day some horrible headline about some unethical behavior committed by an executive will cause the whole company to come crashing down.

Values create freedom for purpose-driven talent to do their work well and independently. They are the written reminders of behaviors that we want within the business that protect both the people and the business. They also give people the freedom to be able to make decisions without having to beg permission up the hierarchy all the time.

A strong culture based on values also sets the stage for innovation and marketplace advantage because you now have employees who are not using their precious brain cells worrying about unexpected ways they might mess up. They're free to innovate and create market-differentiating, competitive ideas.

Having strong values protects you from measuring and rewarding the wrong behaviors and objectives. At WD-40 Company, we include values as part of our talent management system. Values override fiscal results when we evaluate our tribe members' performance.

The worst thing that can happen in an organization is someone getting really good results and violating values. Inevitably, people conclude that "it's results at all costs and values don't matter." That will kill your company over the long term. It demoralizes your people, depletes energy, squanders confidence, burns up the sense of belonging inside your culture. It creates friction among tribe members. People start doing really bad things; they hurt each other and your customers, just to get results.

You let your ego override your empathy.

Instead of treating people with respect and dignity, instead of showing vulnerability and humility, you might as well put a sign on your office door (always closed, of course) that reads: "I am the King of the World. Everyone bow down." You separate yourself from those you lead.

You don't take the time to truly understand what your people need to stay inspired and motivated. You don't know what they need to be whole in their entire lives, to feel fulfilled in every aspect of their experiences. It's all about you. Which is exactly as you feel it should be. Because you are, after all, the King of the World. You worked hard to achieve your position on the pedestal. And you're not about to step down now.

People with ego always want to speak first. They want to tell; they don't want to ask. They want to own every idea, even – or especially – if it means taking credit away from the person who originated it.

Marshall Goldsmith talks about “adding too much value.” As leaders we want to contribute our influence to projects that our tribe members own. Just a tweak here or a tweak there gives you the ego satisfaction of adding your golden touch. What you have done is dramatically reduce the enthusiasm of your staff member.. Your ego tells you that you must have your stamp on it.

You are short-term and reaction driven.

The vision-crushing ritual of quarterly earnings is not the measure of long-term success in any organization. Being continuously driven by the reward of the short term will suck the soul of the organization. Efforts to build an enduring, positive and effective culture take years to make a difference. There is no such thing as grabbing the "low hanging fruit," when the task is planting and nourishing a beautiful tree over time.

Focus on the short term and you'll cripple any ability for your people to plan confidently for the future, for both your business and their family. You will be helping your talent destroy their careers while you destroy their faith in your company. And then they take that feeling home to their families where they struggle to raise hopeful, empowered children.

You create a culture where people are driven by fear of their managers.

Fear is the most disabling emotion we have. Yet bad things happen in companies. It's just a fact of life. When your people are afraid to try new things, make a mistake now and then, despite the best of intentions, fear precludes creativity and freedom.

At WD-40 Company, we have a tradition called, “The Learning Moment.” It's the positive or negative outcome of any situation that must be openly and freely shared to benefit all. Anyone can openly say,

“I had a learning moment, here’s what happened, and here’s how it will be better tomorrow.” Or “I had a learning moment and here’s what happened, here’s the great result I got, and here’s what I want to share.” The number one responsibility of a leader is to be both a student and a teacher. And then pass both those values on to the entire organization. No one should be afraid of reprisals from their managers for making innocent mistakes. If you take the fear of the result out, you create a culture that’s more open to learning.

Inject fear of sharing critical learnings with managers and teams, and you’ll successfully suck the soul out of your cherished talent.

You don’t keep promises.

One of the ways you destroy trust immediately is to not do what you say you’re going to do. If you have a track record of breaking promises, it says two soul-sucking things to employees:

1. Anyone’s word inside the corporate culture doesn’t amount to much. Not only is the CEO’s word worthless, no one is expected to be accountable for their commitments. Breaking promises is a culturally accepted norm.
2. If your employees are on the receiving end of broken promises, the unspoken message here is that they aren’t worthy of the leader’s respect. That’s also soul-sucking. The only way your people can continue to function inside this culture is simply to not expect honorable interaction from their leadership and coworkers. Expectations are too high. Their hearts will break. Then they go home and kick the dog.

You hoard information.

Knowledge is power. We all know that. You can capitalize on that power by either sharing the knowledge throughout your organization, or let your ego compel you to hoard information. With all the critical

knowledge safely tucked away, you are now truly king of the hill because you know everything. And they (whoever “they” are at any given moment) know nothing. Your ego is more important than your people. Keeping critical information to yourself is your superpower. And your ego wants you to hang onto it.

Employees who suspect that their CEO is withholding valuable information experience the slow leaking of their spirits, confidence and dedication to your company’s success. That’s because they don’t feel like *their* success is your number one priority. A true soul-enriching leader is intent upon helping each person step into the best version of their personal self every day. And that requires a full, respectful sharing of the information necessary for your people to perform at their top potential. Every day.

There Are No Accidents

The title of this piece is “Are You an *Accidental* Soul-Sucking CEO?” Now that you know the many ways a disengaged culture can be manifested from the top, “I didn’t know,” or “I didn’t mean to,” can no longer be true. As the CEO, nothing in your portfolio should be allowed to be assigned to “accident.”

Two quotes come to mind at this point. One is slightly older than the other.

Back in 384 BC, Aristotle was quoted as saying; “*Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work.*”

Our job as the CEO is to put pleasure in the job for our employees, not suck the soul out of our people. The question as to whether it’s our job to make our employees happy comes in and out of fashion over the decades. But, based on Gallup’s findings, it would seem that Aristotle might have been on to something. In my own personal experience, pleasure in my job empowers higher quality in the work I do. And I see

evidence of the same in my tribe members. It's not about making people happy. It's about creating an opportunity for meaningful work, which is in itself a pleasure to perform. And then the result is a company that meets – or even surpasses – all its critical goals.

More recently, Stephen Covey said, *“I am not a product of my circumstances. I am a product of my decisions.”*

In this particular case, the decision I put to you is whether you will commit to being the leader where your joyful workplace culture begins. If you choose not to, that is certainly your prerogative. Just bear in mind that 51% people you pass in your hallways or meet in your cafeteria might be looking for a new job.

We at WD-40 Company would be delighted to consider their resumes. And we have a 93 percent engagement rate. Not to brag. I just want to give you an idea who might be welcoming aboard your best talent. Correction: Your former best talent. Now they're our best talent.

Your decision.