

This is first of three parts in MetaTrends on reengaging the disengaged.

REENGAGING THE DISENGAGED: DISENGAGEMENT FACTORS

Disengagement is a worldwide phenomenon. However, it seems that “employees in Singapore are among the least committed in the world – just a notch better than bottom-ranked Japanese.”¹

In a separate Gallup Study², it was found that more Singaporeans are disenchanted in their work. In fact, the survey shows that

17% are ‘Disengaged’,
77% are ‘Not Engaged’
and only 6% are ‘Actively Engaged’.

Employees’ disengagement has serious repercussions for the organization. Disengaged workers have lower productivity and will severely impact the company’s financial performance³. Peter Record, ISR senior consultant, reports, “Companies with high levels of employee commitment achieved significant gains in financial performance and those with strong employee commitment scores consistently outperform those with low scores.”⁴

What are the factors contributing to disengagement?

1. Global Factor

No one would deny that the world has changed dramatically after 9/11. There is greater uncertainty. Business has become more competitive. Leaders have higher expectations. They want more for less. Andy Grove of Intel wrote a book entitled, “Only the Paranoid Will Survive.” Employers are paranoid and employees are nervous.

Rapid change has become a buzzword. Job security is no longer a certainty. Work is extremely stressful. Instead of rising to the challenge, employees become disillusioned with management, especially when leaders don’t engage with their workers and communicate rationales for any change. One employee puts it this way, “I know I have to change but I don’t know why I have to change.” As a result, they become disengaged.

2. Organizational Factor

Organization cultures that will drive workers towards disengagement include:

Performance-driven-relation-less culture. Drive for performance makes leaders unconcerned about staff morale and welfare. This will result in what I call “killing the goose that lay the golden eggs.”

Highly-politicized oppressive culture. Some organizations promote more politics than principles. Both managers and staff are more concerned about getting ahead in the corporate ladder than generating energy to improve the organization. This promotes a ‘who-you-know-is-more-important-than-what-you-do’ type of organization.

Bureaucratic command-and-control culture. In some organizations, position, power and pushing are important. There is lack of trust and empowerment. Workers are treated as clogs in the production line.

Unethical cut-throat culture. In the drive to stay afloat and survive, ethics are thrown out of the window. This culture seeks to win at all cost. Financial manipulation and under-handed ways become a way of life.

3. Leadership Factor

Another important factor accounting for employees’ disengagement is the leadership factor. Although our country's workforce rated -corporate leaders highest on questions of financial stewardship, integrity and respect for workers, these leaders scored appreciably lower on the key dimensions that drive workforce innovation, engagement and performance⁵.

Vision-less, incompetent and uncaring leaders are least likely to be respected by their followers and are most likely to create dissension and disengagement. Other leaders suffer from what I call communication-deficit-dysfunctional syndrome. They don’t communicate enough with their employees. They are not ‘M & M’ (Mix-and-Mingle) leaders. Other leaders’ communication is harsh, tough and abusive. Very few want to work for bosses like them, unless they share their bosses’ values. If they do, they are only interested in the dough at the end of the month and are not engaged in their work.

4. Peer Factor

Employees with affinity-needs become disengaged when they don’t have good relationships with their supervisors or peers. Incompetent and irresponsible peers are a bane. The disengagement quotient becomes incredibly high when trust has been eroded, relationship is soured, and when self-interest or ‘turf-guarding’ in the team is a way of life.

5. Personal Factor

Last but not the least, the personal factor is perhaps the most important factor in understanding employees’ disengagement.

Labor chief Mr. Lim Boon Heng is blunt, when he challenged workers, “Bosses here may be bad motivators, but workers should also take responsibility for their own career development... Workers must also take the reins of their work lives.”⁶

It boils down to our values, our expectations, our personality types, our own communication styles, and our tolerance for adversity.

Especially in our money-driven society, it is easy to equate our own self-worth with how much we make. If money is our driving value, then we assess and evaluate the

organization and people based on how much they can contribute to us financially. We don't value good relationships. We measure and treat people differently based on their return on our investment.

When our organization goes through tough times, and is cutting cost in order to survive, we accuse our leaders of unfair practices, forgetting those good times when we were amply remunerated. We become ingrates.

For others, they may have still not yet managed and readjusted their expectations at work in the new global environment. They are still living in a dream world. The good old days are gone. They will have to do more for less, work smarter, and more creatively. Self-learning and improvement must be a way of life. They will not survive in the 21st century if they fail here.

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¹ Teo, A. (2003). Study of Employee Commitment International Survey Research. Reported in The Business Times. Singapore.

² The Business Times, 18 September 2003.

³ Perrins, T. Working Today: Understanding What Drives Employee Engagement. The Towers Perrin Talent Report, 2003.

⁴ Teo, A. (2003). Study of Employee Commitment. International Survey Research. Reported in The Business Times. Singapore.

⁵ Singapore Organizational Leadership Index 2003. Media Release by the Singapore Institute of Management and The Gallup Organization.

⁶ Chia, Sue-Ann. (2002). Lousy Boss? Then take charge of your own career. The Straits Times. September 16, 2002. Singapore.