

## CHAPTER ONE

# Invisible People

Invisible People. That's what the Highlanders of the island called the mysterious beings who filled their vaults with treasures—but were rarely ever seen.

On special occasions, in candlelit halls, the elders sometimes gathered the Highlanders together. In low voices, they repeated the legend of how the Invisible People had once lived openly among them; but had slowly faded into the background until they were mere hints of the men and women they had once been.

"Yet, they live among us still..." the storyteller would say, looking vaguely past the flickering lights. "They are a part of us. It is they who scale the mountains for the valuable jewels. It is they for whom we leave the Fruits of the Laborer."

A thrill would run up the Highlanders' backs. Many would glance nervously at the shadows of chairs and children and water jugs dancing around the edges of the room. But the Highlanders' eyes, dimmed by generations of disuse, saw nothing more.

Always at this point, a child would innocently ask in a high voice, "Doesn't anyone ever see them now?"

"Never." The elder would say firmly. "It is the way."

And around the room, all would breathe a collective sigh of relief. It was good to know that tomorrow things would go on as they always had on their island in the Medeokr Sea. Invisible hands would do the work. The Highlanders would go on seeing what they always saw, missing what they always missed. All would be in order. And that was enough for them. . . .



And what of the Invisible People? At their own meeting, high in the mountain foothills, the Wurc-Ur tribe, as they called themselves, huddled together, the fire crackling and popping.

"You want to be safe," an older tribeswoman said to the young. "You want to be comfortable. If you don't want to experience failure and criticism and exhaustion, then you must perfect the art of silence. The art of invisibility."

Another elder nodded and added, "It has become our only refuge."

Young Star, a tall graceful Wurc-Ur, could recite the next part by heart. Silently, her lips mouthed the story of the days when the Highlanders had earned their name by scaling the mountains themselves.

The gems were so plentiful then that the Highlanders had brought thousands of Wurc-Urs to the island to help harvest them. In time, the Wurc-Urs became so skilled that the Highlanders rarely ventured up the mountain themselves, preferring instead to remain at the base, where the water flowed cold and pure and the trees grew tall and strong.

Still, they kept the name of Highlanders, as a denotation of their high status on the island—for they controlled the mountains with their riches and the lowland orchards with their jewel-toned fruit.

“We brought down many rubies—and even diamonds—in those days,” the elder of the Wurc-Urs would remember. “Before...before that terrible time.”

Yes. *That terrible time*, thought Star, when the Highlanders eliminated many hundreds of Wurc-Urs. The few remaining tribespeople worked harder and harder, but their efforts rarely met with approval. Finally, they retreated into the shadows of the mountains, their spirits beaten. Star had been a baby at the time. But her father had been there. He knew.

She vowed never to let the same thing happen again.

And so Star learned not to stand out. Not to display her strengths. Not to do more than was necessary. Like everyone else, she learned to blend in. It was an art. She and others learned it young and learned it well.

Or at least, most Wurc-Urs did. Once, just a few years before, an innovative and committed tribesman had traveled to the top of one of the mountains,

where glittering diamonds littered the crevasses. Few Wurc-Urs had ever made it to that height. The journey was treacherous, tiring...and lonely. But he had done it—and brought back a bag bulging with the rare glittering stones. The Highlanders had received them greedily. And for a brief time afterward, Wurc-Ur's motivation to reach the summit was rekindled. But their extra efforts were greeted with silence from the Highlanders—as if diamonds of this quality were to be expected. And eventually the Wurc-Urs abandoned plans for new journeys to the top. Their quiet lives soon returned to normal. After all, why should they risk so much for so little?

*I will never find a diamond. Or even an emerald,* thought Star. It was more a statement of fact, or maybe even an oath, than an expression of regret, for she had never really wanted to climb to such heights. No one did.

And so, in this way, the dim-sighted Highlanders and the unremarkable Wurc-Urs managed to live side-by-side for generations on mountainous Kopani Island. Safe, but forever stagnant. No heroes. No villains. And they liked it that way.

Or so they thought....

## INVISIBLE EMPLOYEES

### Why Employees Feel Invisible

It can happen to anyone . . . anytime . . . anywhere. You're hunched over the speaker during a conference call, straining to hear, or picking up a fax, and *wham!* Suddenly, you're invisible.

Like most people, Allison never saw it coming. Working in the public relations department of a prominent national bank, one of her assignments was to write the cost-of-living report for the corporate economist. It took a fair amount of time. She met with the economist a couple times each month to prepare for the press conference and to review the report. Things were going well until one day . . .

"I was walking down the hall and overheard him [the economist] talking to my boss. He said, 'Could you get this over to the *girl* who does the cost-of-living report?' The *girl*? It was like someone had punched me in the stomach. We'd worked together for more than a year. I'd improved the quality of the report and the media reach. I'd spent hundreds of hours on his project, met with him at least twice a month. And he *didn't even remember my name.*"

Wham! Inexplicably, unbelievably, Allison suddenly found herself *invisible*.

"He didn't see me as a person. I was just a cog in the machinery. It was an eye-opening experience for me."

Sadly, Allison isn't the only one feeling invisible these days. Some 88 percent of employees surveyed say their biggest beef with their organization is "not enough acknowledgment of their work," says Adele B. Lynn of Lynn Learning Labs. That's not a few malcontents, but a remarkable 9 out of 10 workers who feel unappreciated.

Here's another frightening stat: *Time* magazine reported in February 2005 that 80 percent of employees believe they get no respect at work. That kind of disrespect can break your heart, literally. Just listen to this: In a study of health care workers, employees working for a boss they disliked had higher blood pressure than those who liked their bosses. Which, according to British scientist George Fieldman, could increase the risk of coronary heart disease by one-sixth and the risk of stroke by one-third.

We say in jest that a bad manager is "killing me." In reality, they just may be.

### **Invisible Employees Do Unremarkable Work**

In your employees' perspective, managers and senior leaders hold all the power. Management decides when they come and go, what they work on, how much they get paid, what their dental plan looks like, when they take vacation, when they get yelled at, and when they are smiled upon. And, if the company does particularly

well, it's management that gets almost all the rewards.

Feeling overlooked, ignored, and unappreciated, invisible employees fight back the only way they know how . . . by staying hidden in the corporate shadows, doing just enough to get by, grumbling about this and that . . . and passing these techniques along to new hires.

After all, they reason, why bother shining when no one notices your above-and-beyond achievements? Why bother trying when you could be in the next batch of layoffs?

David Sirota, coauthor of *The Enthusiastic Employee*, sees it all too often. "About 16 percent of the companies we deal with have a hostile workforce," he says. "But the bulk of the problem is not hostility. It is that people have become indifferent. That is the silent killer."

The Global Employee Commitment Study by Hewitt Associates has quantified the problem: As high as 54 percent of the workforce within lower-performing companies is made up of disengaged employees and people who place themselves or their careers over company needs. Backing that up is a survey of 5,000 households by The Conference Board, which found that two out of three workers do not feel motivated to drive their employer's business goals.

In other words, it's a thankless job . . . and employees are not about to do it. Or, at least, not very well.

## **An Engaging Solution**

It's not that way for everyone, however. Some leaders engage their people in their cause and find a way to bring out their best. How do they do it?

Not with more money, although for many, that's their first resort. Hit employees with a quick shot to the pocketbook to keep them or make them happy. But although a paycheck (even a fat one) will get people to show up at work, it never bought long-term commitment.

Said Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman in their book *First, Break All the Rules*, "If you are paying 20 percent below the market average, then you may have difficulty attracting people. But bringing your pay and benefits package up to market levels, while a sensible first step, will not take you very far. These kinds of issues are like tickets to the ballpark—they can get you into the game, but they can't help you win."

No, the best managers move their teams and companies from ordinary to extraordinary by something as simple as:

- *Setting* a guiding vision
- Actively *seeing* employee achievements that move your organization toward its goals
- *Celebrating* those achievements

Great leaders, you see, lead people—not systems, processes, technology, strategy, or functions. Because, when it comes right down to it,



all those things can be replicated—but your people can't.

Ruben Roman is a young, brawny plant manager at the Comanche Plant of Xcel Energy in Colorado. He knows recognition isn't the soft side of business. In fact, he knows the company's recognition program, Xpress Ideas, which rewards employees for innovative ideas and solutions, generated more than \$15 million in savings to the company over the past year.

In one case in Roman's plant, a sealed air blower used to create a positive air system around the coal feeders went out in the middle of the night. The coal dust in the air created a dangerous environment for workers. Since there was no spare blower or redundant system, it looked like they would have to take the unit offline until a replacement blower could be brought in two days later.

"But Xcel Energy employees, any time they hear a problem, are looking for a solution," said Roman. "So they figured out a way to attach air hoses to pressurized air headers so we didn't have to take the unit offline."

Roman estimates the cost of losing power for those two days would have totaled about half a million dollars. And if his employees were disengaged, that's probably just what would have happened. Instead, the employees came up with a creative idea. And what did Roman do? The very next day he presented them with tangible recognition awards, costing a few hundred

dollars, and the employees were thrilled with the public recognition of their accomplishment.

Over time, ideas like that add up.

“Recognition absolutely encourages ideas,” says Roman. “You see someone with an iPod and they tell you it’s from recognition. Suddenly, everyone has a lot of ideas—about things people have been tolerating for years because that’s the way it’s always been. . . . It’s good for companies to have these programs because otherwise the ideas just stay out there in people’s heads.”

Of course, the impact of company strategy, products, and technology cannot be overlooked. But neither can a company live by a spreadsheet alone. Successful companies have to have that *something extra* to create staying power. And that something extra is the passion of your people who feel noticed, valued, and appreciated. In other words, they feel *visible*.

In the Gallup organization’s ongoing survey of more than four million employees worldwide, there is a remarkable evidence of the business impact of recognition and praise. In a supporting analysis of 10,000 businesses units within 30 industries, Gallup found that employees who are recognized regularly:

- Increase their individual productivity
- Increase engagement among their colleagues
- Are more likely to stay with their organization

- Receive higher loyalty and satisfaction scores from customers
- Have better safety records and fewer accidents on the job

Not too shabby. And it just makes sense. How else do you build a global company like DHL with their worldwide on-time delivery, or The Men's Wearhouse where everyone will treat you as nicely as the bearded owner in the commercials, or Edward Jones, which for two years in a row was named No. 1 in *Fortune's* "100 Best Places to Work" list?

The answer is: You can't . . . without a committed, engaged workforce.

To achieve your goals of profitability, growth, client satisfaction, or innovation, you have to have employees who care. They have to commit. They have to feel good about what they are doing. They must be able to trust that company leadership will listen to and recognize their accomplishments.

And their ability to do all that hinges on the ability of a leader to do those three simple leadership steps we mentioned earlier. In other words, they:

1. **Set** guiding core values for their team or company—values that they believe will bring greater productivity, profitability, and market share.
2. **See** employee behaviors that support the core values and create value.

3. **Celebrate** those behaviors in a public manner through recognition—communicating what activities are most important to their organization and encouraging their repetition.

And when a leader does these things, he or she is destined to succeed.

Kent Murdock, CEO of the O. C. Tanner Recognition Company, used the process this way: During a companywide meeting that kicked off a daunting computer overhaul that he knew would tax the entire organization, he asked every one of the 2,000 employees for their personal help. It was one of the most human, moving speeches we've heard.

He said, "I'll tell you how we're going to save this company. . . . I don't know. But if human ingenuity can bring about a miracle, or something smaller than that, then we're going to do it. And I will do everything in my power to accomplish this. But my power doesn't include all the ideas or all the work or all the working together that we need. My brain doesn't contain all the answers, but I'll know a good one when I hear it. And I'll recognize that person for it. Our future is in your heads collectively. Together, we can be Albert Einstein. We can be geniuses. What do you say, can we do it?"

He then opened his door, walked the halls, and he listened.

And ideas started coming in. Tentatively at first. But when he recognized the good ones in

public celebrations, they started *pouring* in. And the result? In the three years since that speech—by better noticing and recognizing employee efforts—his 75-year-old company has grown more than 20 percent in sales while actually reducing headcount through attrition.

It's a simple formula, but one that eludes most managers.

And perhaps some confusion is understandable. We have, after all, been laboring for years under a flawed management mind-set. Conventional wisdom says that increasing customer, investor, and employee loyalties are three different and distinct business objectives. We extrapolated that to believe they were mutually exclusive.

As a result, during the 1990s and early 2000s, as our collective mind-set turned to shareholders, we turned away from employees.

It was a terrible, terrible time.

Even today, almost every senior executive (90 percent, according to a recent investigation) say that people are their company's greatest asset, and a full 98 percent declare that increasing productivity would enhance the bottom line. But that's where it stops; it's just talk. Given the chance to rank the strategies most likely to bring success, executives put the people issues—performance and investment in the workforce—near the bottom.

As a result, an astounding 65 percent of Americans reported receiving no recognition for good work in the past year. Not only that, half of managers agree that they do not recognize or

reward their employees for performance. And nearly 75 percent of managers do not see a need for a companywide systematic approach to managing employee performance.

In response, workers have created another statistic: Only 14 percent report being very satisfied with their jobs, according to a 2005 survey by The Conference Board. Less than stellar engagement, to say the least. Actually, less than *abysmal* engagement, to tell you the truth.

So what can we do about it? That's next.

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### **SURVEYS: AN EYE-OPENING EXPERIENCE**

Is your hair standing on end? We wouldn't be surprised if it was. We've been quoting some pretty scary numbers on employee satisfaction. On the other hand, you may feel your team or your company has much less dissatisfaction than the 40 percent to 50 percent we have suggested can occur—and we certainly hope you are right.

Either way, it's good to know for sure. And an employee survey will tell you exactly what kind of company you are keeping.

But beware: Surveys can be tricky. We were recently in one of the largest companies in the world after a workplace satisfaction study had been conducted. The leaders of this multibillion-dollar concern were thrilled to find the survey showed just single-digit dissatisfaction in their

ranks. But when we spoke with workers, we heard of some creative test prep from middle managers around the world. Said one employee in a phone center in the western United States, “Our boss announced an across-the-board twenty-five cent an hour raise right before the survey.” Said an employee in Canada, “We were warned by our division director that centers that scored low in the past had been closed.”

Perhaps not the most unbiased data.

To really find out what percentage of your employees are disengaged, carefully conduct your research with an outside firm if possible and listen to their advice on test taking—whether to use a census or a survey, which questions to include, what response rates are acceptable, and so on. There are many wonderful organizations that do this kind of research. And we’ve put a few examples of survey questions on our web site at **invisibleemployee.com**. When you get there, click on Surveys.

Now, if you have a smaller organization or you lead a team and want your own results, there’s nothing to say you can’t do this on your own. However, the lack of anonymity might keep many of your employees from responding openly to a formal survey. A simple tactic is to conduct personal, one-on-one interviews in your closed office. Turn off the phone, put a do-not-disturb sign on the door, and use the following open-ended questions:

- From your perspective, what are the most important goals of our team/organization?

- Other than an income to pay your bills, what motivates you to do this job well and live the values of our team?
- What are some of the things that might be keeping you from realizing your full potential or realizing our team goals?
- As a manager, how should I be helping you achieve these goals?
- Do you think we celebrate enough the successes of our team, and your personal achievements?

By using these simple questions, as well as others you develop, it is possible to extrapolate a fairly accurate picture of your workplace. Most importantly, the mere act of measuring or inquiring about employee satisfaction has its own benefits. It shows you care. And that is always a good place to start.

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## **VISIBLE TOOL**

### **Quiz: You're an Invisible Employee If . . .**

1. You have only the foggiest idea what the formal goals/values of your team or corporation are, and you don't really care to know.
2. It's been several years since one of your ideas was implemented by management.



3. Your boss doesn't listen to you, in fact, rarely even looks up from checking e-mail when you are in her office.
4. You haven't been recognized in the past week with specific praise from your direct supervisor.
5. It's been at least a year since you've received a tangible award in a public manner for a great accomplishment.
6. When you receive recognition, it often comes weeks or months later.
7. You can't remember the last time your manager celebrated an important team victory.
8. Everyone in your area gets the same rewards, no matter what their individual contribution is.
9. You wouldn't even dream about recommending your company to a friend.
10. At 5:01 P.M., every day, you are on your way home.

### Score

If you agreed with:

- |                 |                                       |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 or 2 answers  | You may be an invisible employee.     |
| 3 to 8 answers  | You <i>are</i> an invisible employee. |
| 9 or 10 answers | You are about to blink out.           |

