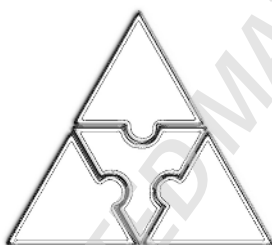# The Application of Engaged Leadership

Years ago I was scheduled to speak at a management conference for a large corporation. Prior to the event, I spent some time with the leader of the organization, explaining my plans to speak on engaging the disengaged employees in his company. I'll call him Greg.

"Why should we spend time with the lazy, unmotivated employees?" Greg asked. "I want you to teach my management team how to make their good people better! I'm getting rid of the lousy ones this year."

First of all, I'm a big believer in making good people better. Not only does it improve their performance, but it makes them feel appreciated

and helps us retain the people we should be trying to retain. While there was nothing wrong with Greg's focus on his best employees, I needed to convince him of the importance of focusing on employee engagement.

After we spent some time together, I was able to persuade him that engaging the disengaged is an important way to make his good people better. Good people get worn out when they feel they're surrounded by employees who aren't dedicated to the organization.

Second, I was concerned with his comment about lazy, unmotivated employees. In his mind, anyone who wasn't one of the "good" employees he wanted to make better fell into the category of "lazy and unmotivated." Even after a significant amount of time discussing the importance of working on his disengaged employees, Greg still couldn't see the value in spending time with those employees. I was going to have to take a chance.

Many professional speakers will tell a client what he or she wants to hear, knowing they'll get glowing reviews and the opportunity to return in the future. I suppose there may have been a year or two in my early career where I did the same. I've learned over the years that it's not my job to tell a client what he wants to hear, but to tell the client what he needs to hear. This was one of those times.

"Greg," I asked, "if you have lazy, unmotivated employees, how do you suppose they got that way?"

He thought for a moment. "I don't know," he responded. "I guess they showed up that way."

After a brief chuckle, I replied, "Greg, if they showed up lazy and unmotivated, you do not have a management problem. You have a hiring problem. I'm not convinced you're hiring lazy, unmotivated employees. In fact, I bet they were enthusiastic and engaged when they first got here. Your management team caused them to become disengaged, and you have the responsibility to fix it. I can show you how to build a culture to overcome the employee disengagement that's holding you back."

Greg wasn't the first client to not understand disengaged employees, and will likely not be the last. The problem with his view of the workforce was the breakdown. He thought he had good employees and bad employees. Gallup's research mentioned throughout this book accurately describes three groups—the 26 percent at the top who are engaged, the 55 percent in the middle who are disengaged, and the 19 percent at the bottom who are actively disengaged. After explaining this to Greg, he admitted he lumped the 55 percent in with the 19 percent at the bottom.

This brings me to the third concern I had with Greg's initial comment. He said he planned to get rid of the "lousy ones" this year. There are certainly times when termination is the only remaining option for an employee, and I believe we should act quickly and decisively when we've come to that conclusion. However, I have seen that an all-too-common approach is to focus on the bad employees. "We need to get rid of these bad apples." "We need to put these people on a

Performance Improvement Plan." "It's time to cut loose the negative characters."

I'm aware of the myriad of legal issues that must be maneuvered to terminate an employee, and strongly encourage anyone who has chosen that route to follow the law and the steps that must be taken. However, I don't believe eliminating the bottom 19 percent is effective as a strategy to improve an organization, and I have encountered many leaders who spend the majority of their time dealing with these actively disengaged employees.

I believe the biggest opportunity lies with the 55 percent of disengaged employees. Again, these aren't bad people. They simply see their work as a job. In many cases, they have no idea how they contribute to the bigger picture. We all love being around the 26 percent who are engaged employees, and should be doing everything possible to recognize their efforts and help improve their performance. However, our future success lies in our ability to engage the disengaged employee.

The issue of employee disengagement is a real concern for most organizations. While some people, like Greg, dismiss it as laziness or a lack of motivation, the opportunity to overcome employee disengagement lies within the control of leadership. In fact, if you have disengaged employees, it's because you have disengaged leadership.

The solution is simple. Anyone in a position of leading employees has a responsibility to provide

three aspects of leadership. As illustrated in the fable, the three aspects of *Engaged Leadership* are:

I have been introducing the concept of *Engaged Leadership* as a trainer, consultant, and professional speaker for many years now. What I have found is that many participants attempt to place employees within one of these categories. Those at the top of the organization are expected to set the vision as Directional leaders. Those in middle management are expected to inspire the team to want to pursue the vision as Motivational leaders. And those on the front-line are expected to develop the team as Organizational leaders. While that may be natural, the concept behind *Engaged Leadership* is that all leaders focus on all three aspects of leadership.

Also, the key to success with *Engaged Leadership* is not in understanding the concepts. In

fact, the concepts of *Engaged Leadership* are not difficult, and are based on some universal, common sense ideas in business today. The key to success with *Engaged Leadership* is in the application of the ideas.

In the fable, Hannah shared four lessons each in Directional, Motivational, and Organizational Leadership. To encourage you to put the concepts in this book to use within your organization, I am going to offer these lessons as challenges within the three areas of *Engaged Leadership.* Furthermore, I will offer some specific action items along with each challenge.

Let's get started with Directional Leadership.