

## “I Quit but I Forgot to Tell You”

### *The Disengaged Worker*

BY TERRI KABACHNICK

As customers, we’ve been waited on by people who quit but never left. As employees, we’ve been managed by bosses who quit but managed to stay. As managers, we have managed people who physically attend but mentally pretend.

Disengaged workers are costing U.S. based organizations in excess of \$250 billion per year, as noted by a 2002 Gallup poll. Our own research shows that three out of four workers polled are disengaged. This price tag includes co-worker and customer dissatisfaction plus loss of loyalty on both sides. Who wants to work with a person who performs only enough to get by? Who wants to be served by a person who barely does what is expected?

In a 1995 article, “Turning the Tide Against Turnover,” I wrote about the tremendous cost to retailers of employee turnover and what companies needed to do to retain workers (*Retailing Issues Letter*, Vol. 7, No. 5). Today, retention remains a critical challenge for all businesses, but we need to redefine retention because a new virus is invading the workplace—disengaged workers. Retention is taking on a whole new meaning.

#### **Engaged Employee, Strong Asset**

First, consider what it means to be an engaged employee: involved, occupied, committed, meshed, participating. The most significant definition for me is “unavailable to anyone else”—as in other employers. When fully engaged in work, a person’s energy and focus become a laser directed on outcome and satisfaction. Think of an engaged couple and how they begin planning their life and setting goals—pursuing dreams. Results become rewards, producing a euphoric feeling of high self-esteem, control over one’s destiny, and approval from others. Similarly, engaged workers also feel the grass is greener on *their* side. They become a company’s strongest asset, one that cannot be stolen.

#### **Disconnected, Detached, Disheartened**

Why do people become disengaged in the workplace? No applicant takes a job with a plan to fail. No employer hires with the intent to fire. Both want to succeed. So what happens?

Here’s a not-too-unusual example. The CEO of a 30-year-old successful specialty retail chain wanted to improve the hiring process and raise the bar on customer service. He told us that he wanted to hire people who naturally understand what service means. He felt that training was not the company’s answer. He said, “We have some terrific people. We need more of them.” Was it a question of hiring or retaining and engaging? Were “terrific” people already on board and overlooked?

#### About the Author

**Terri Kabachnick** is an internationally recognized expert on “perfecting the human side of business.” In 1984 she founded *The Kabachnick Group, Inc.*, and uses her knowledge and experience in sales management, finance, marketing, and restructuring to help organizations build and retain a talented, productive, and peak performance workforce. With more than 25 years of first-hand retail experience in executive management, Terri is one of retailing’s most sought after productivity specialists. She serves as a coach and confidante to some of the world’s most successful business leaders and is one of five people worldwide to hold certification as: speaking professional, professional behavior analyst, professional values analyst, and attribute index analyst. *The Kabachnick Group* is now celebrating their 20th year in business.



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Our company conducted an on-line survey of front-line workers; supervisors; managers at the store, district, and regional levels; and executives. They were asked questions related to their perceptions of several job positions as well as their view of company effectiveness in several areas, including employee development, recognition, communication, and performance issues.

The results were unexpected. Employees widely disagreed on what particular positions required in behaviors, attitudes, and values in order for a person to be successful. Qualifications for success in that company were based on what exists rather than what is possible. This is like allowing the performance of a second-string team to become the benchmark for top performers on the first team. Often top performers in one company would be only average if placed in the same position in another company.

Another important discovery emerged from that survey. An individual who became a “good employee” was expected to remain at that level without much feedback, recognition, or involvement. The only way to get a raise or recognition was to try to be promoted to the next level, even though the employee might not want to leave a current position.

Final analysis revealed that managers played the most important role in employee retention, development, and satisfaction, yet they were never held accountable for this. A lack of accountability, however, reduced efforts in individual employee development and took focus away from talented employees, letting them do what they had to do rather than motivating them to grow. Lack of

accountability became a major cause of disengagement.

These findings pointed out that disengagement in that company was widespread and the result of distorted perceptions about how and why people do what they do and about what workers expect from gainful employment.

#### **Spreading Virus**

Generally, as the survey discussed suggests, the reasons for disengagement are both economic and behavioral. Mentally leaving a job where you’re unhappy but guaranteed a paycheck is better than no job at all. For many disengaged workers, this makes total economic sense. However, the behavioral factor, I have found, has even more power.

Forty-two percent of the North American population is classified as having a behavior style identified as “High S” or high steadiness. A few characteristics of this behavior preference are: prefers little or no change, avoids risk, tolerates ambiguity, evades confrontation, passively disagrees, prefers sameness and routine work patterns. In other words: “I may be unhappy, I may complain (to friends and co-workers only, never to my boss). I may think of leaving—eventually—meanwhile, I’ll put up with my frustrations until something else comes along.”

In a specialty chain retailer, our research discovered that disengagement was taking its toll on company-wide productivity, motivation, and customer service even though the disengaged employees were relatively few. Here’s what we uncovered: Two disengaged store managers were adversely affecting their supervisors and associates, causing these workers to reduce

their customer service efforts. The result was an attitude of “why bother?” The ensuing low customer service scores and sales results over time caused a negative and disappointing reaction from the entire region; the region went from number one to number five status. Two disengaged workers with an impact on hundreds. What is the cost?

In another company, a category chain operation, the disengaged director of advertising inadvertently caused her team to negatively impact certain buyers in the company. Her lack of involvement resulted in a profoundly negative perception of the entire marketing department. The senior vice president of marketing eventually bit the bullet and let the director go, only to find out from the rest of the team that this problem had endured for almost two years. At what cost?

Why would a CEO allow a bad employee to remain on the job for two years? Disengagement occurs in stages, and many disengaged workers are passively but not yet actively disengaged. Through lack of involvement or interest, they are doing only what absolutely needs to get done so they seem to be working. Here’s when it is critical to diagnose the problem. Our studies show that within nine months to a year after the initial but hidden disengagement, the worker becomes actively disengaged: exhibiting harmful behaviors such as criticizing other’s efforts, speaking negatively about co-workers and bosses, refusing to do what needs to be done, or undermining initiatives.

#### **Turned Off Yet Shining**

All disengaged workers are not the same. During the course of an organizational

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survey, I asked Suzanne, a district manager in her late thirties, to explain confidentially why her colleagues were concerned about her loss of enthusiasm and involvement. Her answer was honest, simple, and insightful: “My heart’s not in it anymore.” When asked to explain, she told me that when she first started with the company she was considered a bright, fast-rising star. She was given challenges and then was either praised or criticized. She welcomed both because they helped her learn and grow, a very important factor of her work. When a new boss arrived, the learning eventually stopped, conversations with her boss became one-sided and solely numbers focused. She was told to keep doing what she was doing because she was doing well. Several months later, Suzanne was given a bigger district to manage.

Suzanne’s example expresses the soul of disengagement. It is also, unfortunately, emblematic of most disengaged workers.

1. Disengaged workers most often were once engaged, caring workers.
2. Disengaged workers are not necessarily poor performers.
3. Disengagement usually begins with either a new boss or a boss who becomes disengaged.
4. Disengagement often occurs after changes in job position.
5. Disengagement begins when learning and development stop.

Suzanne is in the first stage of disengagement, which I refer to as *reactive disengagement*. Without intervention, this virus will turn to *active disengagement*. Reactive disengagement describes persons who *react* to their boredom and/or unhappiness with

their job by simply doing nothing except what has to be done. Simply put, they have lost initiative and interest. Active disengagement means they quietly begin involving others in their discontent through negative comments and begin to express their resentment of their co-workers, leaders, and the company.

#### Mediocrity Wins

All new employees go through a “honeymoon” period of adapting. This is a time when the newness of the job, the excitement of meeting new people, making new friends, and learning about the job and the company create adrenalin-filled days. Managers, co-workers, and reports pay more attention to a new worker than they do to the seasoned ones. This holds true whether the new employee is a line person or an executive. Problems begin when the honeymoon period ends and the expectations of fulfillment continue. The same people who lavished attention now begin taking the new worker for granted.

At the same time, managers spend an overabundance of time on mediocre and poor performers, hoping against hope they can make “fish fly and birds swim.” Meanwhile, productive workers are left alone, or even worse, given more responsibilities and tasks because everyone knows they’ll get it done. It’s almost a punishment—more work, fewer rewards, less attention. Disengaged and mediocre workers are “rewarded” with extra attention, lower expectations, and benefit of the doubt. The result? A confusing path that eventually leads productive workers into reactive disengagement.

Many companies mistakenly create incentive programs in an attempt to boost mediocre productivity. The question I

raise: “Why should these mediocre performers do better?” Do they suddenly know how to do a job better? In other words, is the employee’s attitude, “I know how to perform better, but I choose not to unless I get an incentive or more money.”

#### “B” Workers Not Disengaged

Every organization today is searching for talent. Talent is exciting, energizing, and enveloping. Talented people draw you in with their creativity and innovation. Their ideas and commitment to making something happen are infectious. Talent comes in many different forms. Take what I call “A” players. These employees are hungry for results, impatient for promotions, willing to sacrifice life for work and its meaning in helping them identify who they are as individuals.

Then there are the “B” players—loyal, dedicated, focused on helping others succeed—they do not like the spotlight on themselves. They are the “worker bees” with very few demands. “B” players are balanced—an enigma to “A” players who truly do not understand them. As a result, “B” players and their value are overlooked. Their contributions are minimized and they leave everyone confused. Hiring managers routinely pass on them primarily because they do so poorly in interviews. Remember—they don’t like the spotlight on themselves, but they are the foundation of an organization’s productivity. Highly developed listening skills make them, by default, the sounding board for others’ issues and concerns. As a result of their caring nature, they become the behind-the-scenes counselors and coaches. Unfortunately, many “B” players are mistaken as disengaged—most often the result of “A” players’ perceptions.

## Defusing Disengagement

1. Coach employees continually about how to improve their job performance.
2. Alert employees when they're about to make an embarrassing mistake.
3. Teach new concepts so employees can increase their value.
4. Be brave enough to communicate in clear, direct language.
5. Focus on an individual's assets.
6. Be honest in understanding your own strengths and limitations as a leader.
7. Pay special attention to your "B" players, recognize their consistency and dedication, and reward them in quiet ways.
8. Invite top performers to meetings they would not normally attend.
9. Take the temperature of your organization often. Use unbiased tools and assessments to give you the truth.

recent studies also show that most people spend 80 percent of their time doing tasks and only 20 percent of their time achieving results.

Therefore, it is critical for managers to be sensitive to and aware of every report's job satisfaction status. Frequent conversations and involvement with the employee's views, preferences, and goals are a must. However, if disengagement has already set in, a thorough assessment must be completed before any solution initiatives are prescribed. Trying to determine reasons for or causes of disengagement by simply asking the employee is like determining a heart condition by listening to the heart. Management needs to know the exact root of the disengagement and define the focus of improvement. In addition, the worker must agree that these assessment analyses are correct. Opinion has no role here.

The significant difference between "B" players and disengaged workers is their heart. "B" workers truly care about their coworkers, company, and customers. They are mentally present in contrast to disengaged workers who are mentally absent.

### Identifying "Mental Absence"

How do you discover and fix the "mental absence" before disengagement takes its toll on morale, productivity, and integrity? The first step is to identify the signs and degree of disengagement.

Some of the initial external signs of reactive disengagement include:

- Increased absenteeism
- Disconnection from boss
- Disinterested
- Uninvolved
- Uncreative
- Longer lunches and breaks
- Less communication
- Little initiative

Additional signs when active disengagement sets in:

- Depression
- Missed deadlines
- Work-related accidents
- No talk about the future
- Anger
- Poor or non-existent discussions with boss
- Undermining others' contributions
- Late in, early out

The second step is to understand what underlying personal and work factors must exist for the disengagement virus to grow and spread. Chiefly, disengagement

has become a coping mechanism for job related stress, most often the result of several factors:

- People mismatched to positions
- Little or no control over work patterns
- No opportunity to grow, learn, develop, or contribute
- Lack of pride in the job one does
- No involvement in decisions or changes
- Feeling unneeded
- Lack of accountability
- No recognition
- Ineffective communication
- Lack of future opportunities
- Communication difficulties
- Work pattern and behavior differences with boss

### Engaging the Disengaged

When a manager becomes aware of poor performance, what generally happens? Unfortunately, the manager often waits too long to speak with his or her direct report, hoping the negative behavior will fix itself. Therein lies the biggest problem. *It's not about healing disengagement, it's about prevention.* By the time active disengagement becomes apparent, the damage is done. Look at these statistics:

Poor performance by co-workers is the number one reason that dedicated and caring—engaged—employees leave their jobs. In a recent survey conducted by The Kabachnick Group, more than 1,500 executives and front-line people were assessed. The majority—92 percent—agreed that their companies do not identify or deal with poor performers. Our

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### Individual Matters

In *Principle-Centered Leadership*, Stephen Covey writes, “In a very real sense, there is no such thing as organizational behavior, there is only individual behavior.”

How well do you really know and understand your direct reports? How do you approach those you must encourage, develop, teach, and coach while ensuring productivity and top performance? During my years of experience teaching and coaching executives and managers, I have inevitably found that assessment results show marked differences in what a manager *thinks* is true about an individual versus the *reality*. As human beings, we cannot avoid bringing our personal biases, opinions, and work style preferences to the workplace and making comparisons and judgments based on our values and behavior style. This is why managers who rely on validated assessments are able to retain talent at far higher percentages than managers who rely solely on their instincts.

I have successfully used a particular survey process in many companies that identifies critical factors in three distinct areas specifically contributing to superior job performance. As we know, the key to successful individual excellence lies in the combination of a person’s behavior, values, and personal skills—or attributes. This survey provides a clear reading on *how* a person does what they do, *why* they do what they do, and *will* they do what they say they will do.

Each individual is a key factor in the success of an organization. Each individual has a unique way of working. Each individual within the right job with the right guidance has incredible potential. Each person does not necessarily want to be a

hard driving, winner-takes-all “A” player. The steady doers who are consistent, loyal, dedicated, and helpful to others—the “B” players—are often overlooked for promotions or exciting projects. Decision makers who prefer assertive, energetic, or outgoing people rarely select a “B” player as a team leader. How wrong and unfair.

Many managers are so focused on results and tasks that they lose sight of a critical component for their success—their people and their impact on the organization. It is necessary to repeatedly identify the mixed messages sent to executives and managers about the importance of focus. Focus allows only one focal point—what needs to be accomplished. But without a wide-angle lens, you lose the surrounding elements that create the entirety of the landscape.

### Motivating Engagement

Understanding each person’s unique abilities, skills, motivators, and work styles is the key to engagement along with a managing style that focuses on the real individual rather than a manager’s perception.

- Benchmark the job by focusing on the job requirements rather than the “type” of person you think you want in the job.
- Match the person to the position by measuring individual behavior preferences, beliefs, values, and attributes.
- Understand from the start date the emotional requirements of a new employee by discussing with them their strengths and limitations, needs, and reasons for working.
- Watch for behavior changes during the first six months of employment. Job

performance either improves or drops during this period.

- Provide informal feedback monthly by asking specific questions related to the employee’s perceptions of how he or she is doing.

### Firing Is a Favor

The damage that an unproductive and disengaged worker can cause is impossible to tally. In my research on organizational behavior patterns, I have found that co-workers recognize disengagement much sooner than management. As a result, the impact on employee morale, as well as its effect on customers and productivity can be devastating. The conversations about dissatisfaction, frustrations, griping, and complaining create such a vortex that it even sucks in the productive and engaged workers.

In our studies of identifying disengaged workers and the reasons for poor performance, we have discovered that a manager waits an average of nine months to first recognize unacceptable work patterns and another three months to begin addressing the issue. The employee is now actively disengaged as nine to 12 months have elapsed since passive disengagement set in. Yet, it will normally take an additional six to nine months for the manager to conclude that the individual needs to be separated. This totals an average of 18 to 21 months during which a disengaged employee negatively affects co-workers, customers, and reports. This pattern exists at all levels—from front-line to executive.

If you make the wrong decision in hiring, recognize this early and deal with it. Either change the position or change the person.

*Do the individual a favor.* Show them how to face the fact that the match is simply not there: Job? Company? Boss? Perceptions?

*Do other employees a favor.* They know before you may know that a co-worker is ineffective or a detriment to the company.

*Do yourself a favor.* How much time are you spending with the poor performer? Your time is costly—to you and your company. Use your time to develop engaged employees with potential.

*Do your customers a favor.* An unhappy worker does not deliver satisfying and happy service.

Here's a serious statistic to consider: 68 percent of an employee's productivity is directly attributable to the supervisor. Fixing people can actually yield negative returns in productivity. You need to know when not to retain an employee and why.

### People Need Purpose

A CMO of a large mid-western retailer explained to me that his awareness of purpose began one evening with a sweet and simple question from his daughter. She asked, "Daddy, did you make anyone happy today?" He felt as if someone had hit him in the chest because the innocent question caused him to think about his effect on people and what actually makes people happy? What had he done lately to find out about his coworkers? He realized that focusing on tasks to accomplish leaves little time to understand one's purpose for taking a job, working long hours, putting up with conflicts. Why? He discovered in the process that it certainly is not money.

Do you know your purpose for doing what you do? What are your drivers? Do you receive a quiet satisfaction and have an unrevealed reason that causes you to go to work? Do your employees know their answers to these questions? If not, you'll never benefit from "purpose driven engagement."

### Become a Company of Giants

A friend of mine told me he heard a speech recently by a Ph. D. in physics. This man earned his degree about 20 years ago. He made this statement: "More than half of the correct answers I gave on my finals 20 years ago are no longer true. What we have learned in science in the past 20 years has yielded new truths that didn't exist 20 years ago."

We get it in science, but we don't get it with people. We need to change and build upon what we now know about people to foster engagement in the workplace.

What is true today? Motivation—therefore engagement—comes from loving what you do. You love what you do when you're in the right position and growing.

David Ogilvy said: "If each of us hires people who are smaller than we are, we shall become a company of dwarfs. But if each of us hires people bigger than we are, [we] will become a company of giants."

People want to achieve at their highest level of potential. They want to be seen in the best light. They *want* to be fully engaged. Your people are your most important asset and therefore your responsibility. Help them love what they do and they are yours—fully engaged.

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