

THE STEPFORD EMPLOYEE FALLACY

THE TRUTH ABOUT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE

Frequently Asked Questions

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What is the Stepford Employee Fallacy?

The Stepford Employee Fallacy is a set of misguided beliefs about how employee engagement works. These beliefs all stem from the assumption that employees will be perfect, happy, engaged robots regardless of what it's like to work for their employer. It just doesn't work that way. Humans don't work that way.

What inspired you to write this book?

Over the years, I have heard and read about employee engagement from management consultants, HR practitioners, and other thought leaders who profess to have the definitive answers on this topic. Something about what they were all saying just didn't sit right with me, though. These are people who haven't been employees for many years, yet they claim to know better than employees how engagement works. They spread the notion that workers are responsible for choosing their own level of engagement in spite of the quality of their employee experience. That's just wrong. Thinking back over my years working on the front lines, I reflected on all I had witnessed and experienced. One environment, in particular, served as inspiration for the book. It was a disturbing collision of factory-era autocracy and forced positivity. Employees were expected to be fully-engaged, smiling automatons who worshipped the company no matter what. If they objected to mistreatment or raised valid concerns, they were punished like children. So I decided to say what most employees today cannot: the truth.

Who is your target audience?

Anybody who's in a leadership position, really. I dedicated the book to employees everywhere, but it's their managers who need to read it. Management professionals—from front-line supervisors all the way up to C-level executives—will benefit from the lessons presented in *The Stepford Employee Fallacy*. There are some hard truths that they'll find unpleasant to digest (and even harder to act upon), but that's the only way they will ever move the engagement needle within their organizations.

What would you say is the most important lesson in your book?

Empathy. We need more empathy in the workplace. In fact, I spend an entire chapter talking about the topic of empathy. We need leaders to be more empathetic and to stop treating their employees like pieces of office equipment. Employees are human beings, not human capital. The *Stepford Employee Fallacy* is filled with examples of the many ways employers callously and (foolishly) disregard the needs of their workers. There is a severe empathy shortage in the business world and that is why we see so many disengaged employees today. I'd say the most important takeaway from this book is an understanding of how empathy enables engagement, whereas coldness, cruelty, and inhumanity cause disengagement.

Can empathy really be taught, though?

It can! The human brain is actually pre-wired for empathy, but the hectic, dog-eat-dog nature of the modern workplace makes empathizing with employees extremely difficult.

Compounding the problem is the tendency for power to interfere with leaders' ability to empathize—their authority acts as an empathy inhibitor. In the book, I talk about two methods leaders can use to jump-start their empathy engines: Situational Empathy and Experiential Empathy. Situational Empathy means mentally inhabiting an employee's circumstances and asking yourself how you would feel and how you would expect to be treated if you were in their shoes. Experiential Empathy is literally doing your employee's job so you can see first-hand what their work experience is like. Think of the television show *Undercover Boss*. Leaders today are too far-removed from the experience of *being* an employee—of being low man on the totem pole—so by living that experience, they can better empathize with employees and make decisions that engage (versus disengage) them.

What makes you an expert on employee engagement?

I first heard the term "employee engagement" years ago when I was an employee attending a mandatory presentation given by an organizational development consultant that our company had hired. His message was basically, "You all need to be more engaged in your jobs. If you don't like it here, then you should leave." And he was saying this to a group of employees who were overworked, underpaid, under appreciated, and treated like children by managers whose approach to leadership consisted of command-and-control dictatorship with a sprinkling of pot lucks, dumb contests, and insulting feel-good platitudes. They didn't want a culture of engagement. They wanted a culture of obedience. I remember thinking to myself, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. You can't just expect employees to be engaged, especially if you treat them like toddlers or criminals." So I spent the subsequent years educating myself, studying, and observing. I decided to dedicate my career to telling the world how employee engagement *actually* works: Employees don't engage themselves. Leaders engage employees. Leaders also *disengage* employees through their decisions and behaviors. I'm passionate about my message because I know treating employees better isn't just the right way to foster engagement, it's the right thing to do, period.

What was your writing process?

It probably wasn't too dissimilar from other authors. I stole whatever time I could to sit down and write out my ideas. However, I wrote the book in a fairly nonlinear fashion. I started with Chapter 3 and bounced around a bit. Whenever I felt inspired or a thought popped into my

head, I would write about that, no matter where it fell in the structure of the book. I did have the basic outline planned from the beginning, but I didn't necessarily stitch everything together in sequence. That's just how my mind works. I've had the idea for this book for many years, and now felt like the right time to turn it into something big.

Why did you decide to self-publish?

In short, I wanted control. It was extremely important to preserve the book's message and content. So I decided to retain all creative control and simply self-publish, which meant I also had to take on responsibility for marketing the book. As any self-published author will tell you, marketing a new book is even more intense than the writing process. But I'm glad I did it. It's been a tremendous learning experience. And now I feel a solid sense of ownership over the finished product. I feel proud.

Who are some other authors you admire?

I love the work of Kevin Kruse, who wrote *Employee Engagement 2.0*, and Dr. Paul Marciano, who wrote *Carrots and Sticks Don't Work*. Their contributions to the employee engagement space are exceptional because they both present the business case for engagement in ways that managers can understand. As I always say, employee engagement begins and ends with leadership, so their books are definitely required reading for managers who want a more engaged workforce. I also admire Simon Sinek and Liz Ryan for their humanistic perspectives on work and leadership. But my all-time favorite business book is *The No Asshole Rule*, by Bob Sutton. Bad managers are the number-one cause of disengagement in the workplace. Sutton's book gives those managers a fitting name along with some pretty blunt recommendations for dealing with them. The modern workplace would be much more engaging if fewer "assholes" were permitted to stay in management positions. That's a major theme I discuss throughout my book, and I'm grateful to Professor Sutton for having the guts to say it first.