

THE STEPFORD EMPLOYEE FALLACY

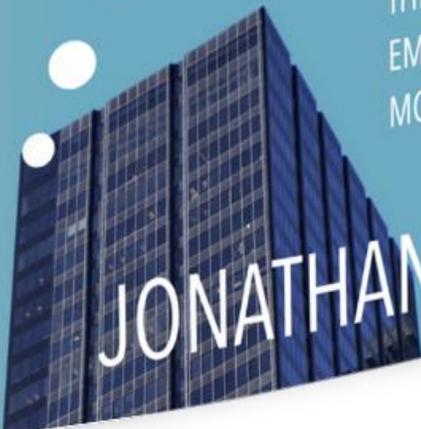
JONATHAN D. VILLAIRE

"... Tackles the concept of employee engagement with a gutsy and compelling new perspective... Leaders, get ready for some truth." – Kevin Kruse, CEO of LEADx, New York Times bestselling author of *Employee Engagement 2.0*



THE STEPFORD EMPLOYEE FALLACY

THE TRUTH ABOUT
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE
MODERN WORKPLACE



JONATHAN D. VILLAIRE

Chapter 1

The Sad State of Employee Engagement in Today's Workplace

What comes to mind when you think of work? What images or emotions does it conjure? For a majority of employees, going to work elicits feelings of despair, frustration, anxiety, boredom, or just plain indifference. They either lack the inspiration to care about their work or are too busy dealing with all of the nonsense present in today's workplace that makes caring almost impossible. Considering that we spend the majority of our waking hours during the week at work, it's pretty depressing to know that most employees are so dejected or at least not engaged in their jobs. Many associate work with servitude or drudgery and too many think that's just fine. They think work isn't *supposed* to be fun or enjoyable or inspirational, that employees get a paycheck and do their jobs and that's all there is to it. These are the same people in management positions who bleat and fume about poor business outcomes like customer dissatisfaction without realizing they are the toxic by-products of low engagement.

THE NUMBERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Gallup, the global leader in measuring employee engagement, regularly publishes its findings on the current state of engagement in the United States and worldwide. And the results paint a pretty bleak picture of how employees feel about work. In 2017, approximately 60 percent of U.S. workers were classified as feeling disengaged based on Gallup's survey and analytics.¹ To put that into context, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that there are approximately 123 million full time employees in the United States.² Out of those 123 million, almost 78 million employees are disengaged. That's more than the combined populations of California, Texas, and Michigan. That's a lot of unhappy workers.

Gallup estimates the cost of disengagement for U.S. employers to be between \$450 and \$550 billion per year.¹ Here's a little perspective: In

2017, the U.S. GDP was about \$18 trillion.³ Employee disengagement costs businesses the equivalent of nearly 3 percent of America's GDP. Clearly, the problem has a severe financial impact for organizations, and an argument could be made that it also affects the economy on a macro level. After all, goods and services aren't just selling themselves. People make companies successful and are responsible for their performance on a highly competitive economic playing field. It just makes good business sense to have employees on board and committed to helping their organizations achieve success instead of just barely giving enough effort to get by. Unfortunately, the facts and research show that less than one-quarter of employees worldwide actually fit the engagement bill.

What makes these statistics even more disturbing is the fact that employee engagement levels have remained mostly stagnant despite increased awareness among managers and executives. By now, most business leaders are at least generally aware of the employee engagement concept and understand that it connects to organizational outcomes. There are, of course, those for whom employee engagement is an unfamiliar notion, and they certainly can be blamed for some disengagement in the workforce. They simply don't know any better than to do business the way it's been done since the days of the Industrial Revolution. Employees today, like their factory worker forebears, are merely a means to an end. However, there is another group of leaders that combines this factory-era management mindset with a gross misunderstanding of how employee engagement actually works. The result is a bizarre work culture in which employees are still treated like pieces of machinery, but they get an ice cream social and company picnic in the summer and free yoga classes and ugly sweater contests in the winter.

I have a name for this perversion of the employee engagement concept. I call it the Stepford Employee Fallacy. Essentially, *engaged* employees are expected to come tap dancing into the office every morning wearing smiles so big that their facial muscles cramp up and cheerily exclaim, "Hi! How are you? Are you engaged? I sure am engaged! Oh boy! Oh gosh gee golly willikers! I love this company! I love my job! I'm going to give 110 percent every day just because I'm getting a paycheck!" They should act like high-performing robots with attitudes so positive that they leave rainbows in their wakes as they skip out of the office at 8:00

p.m. every night. It's easier for leaders to believe and reinforce this fallacy than it is to face the verity of how employee engagement really works and make substantive changes to their organizations' employee experience.

It is my observation that the leaders who perpetuate this dysfunctional model are more culpable than their oblivious counterparts for the mass levels of employee disengagement because they subscribe to the Stepford Employee Fallacy. They use the actual business benefits of employee engagement to justify their approach, telling employees, "We need and expect you to be fully engaged so we can beat our competitors/dazzle our customers/please our shareholders." They see business results as the ends and employee engagement as the means, but put forth superficial and perfunctory efforts toward the latter. Scratch the surface of many companies with a Stepford Employee mindset and beneath the facade of smiley employees working hard or having fun in the office egg-tossing contest, you'll see human beings putting on a performance just to make it through the workday. The same disengaging leadership behaviors, decisions, and interactions are present. There's just some extra-sugary coating to hide the bitter taste.

My first full-time job out of college was working for a company with this kind of culture. Employees were treated like toddlers instead of business partners. Managers reprimanded you if they felt you were misbehaving (i.e. raising valid concerns) and simultaneously insulted you with patronizing gestures that would have been more appropriate for preschoolers. One day, I arrived at the office to find that one of the supervisors had left little stickers and cutesy knickknacks on everyone's desk for Employee Appreciation Day. This came from a management team who, around the same time, fired a single mother for taking too many absences to care for her sick child. Did the tchotchkes have any effect on our engagement? Nope. We threw them in the trash.

For years, I used to take the train every day to Boston where I worked at a job that, for several reasons, just wasn't making me feel happy or engaged. At the end of the workday, I and hundreds of other commuters would pile back on to the train, jockey for a seat—or at least a place to stand—and ride back home for just a few hours of rest before doing it all over again the following day. I can still remember the sight of crowds of workers shuffling along the train platform each morning, marching grimly toward jobs they probably hated. The image of

employees slowly and miserably ambling into the office as if they were cattle headed for slaughter certainly reflects the sorry state of affairs for employee engagement in the modern workplace. There are more people disengaged in their jobs than there are those who feel engaged. And that trend doesn't seem to be getting much better anytime soon, unless the future promises some key changes to the way organizations treat their talent.

SOCIO-POLITICAL, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND ECONOMIC FACTORS AT PLAY

Over the past decade, there has been a fundamental shift in the way employees view and relate to their work. A powerful blend of socio-political, technological, and economic factors such as The Great Recession of 2008, the proliferation of social media, and the influx of millennial workers has influenced employee engagement in profound ways. Work is no longer synonymous with the dull, repetitive labor and strictly autocratic management model of the Industrial Revolution, though some organizations and their leaders still haven't come to terms with that reality. It also has lost the confidence granted by near-guaranteed stable employment, a clear career ladder, and shared prosperity typical of organizations in the late twentieth century. Now, constant uncertainty, downsizing, and slowed wage growth are the new normal in today's knowledge economy. Market volatility and disruption keep businesses in a constant state of flux while their employees work in fear and frustration, clinging to whatever livelihood pays the bills and puts food on the table. There's little reason for employees to feel engaged, and their leaders aren't helping the situation by creating an unattractive work experience that only makes things worse.

After a calamitous economic downturn in the late 2000s, millions of Americans were left unemployed, under-employed, and disenfranchised. U.S. corporations outsourced talent, froze salaries, cut benefits and pensions, and moved operations to cheaper locales, leaving the working class feeling powerless without much to be engaged about—until a wealthy non-politician stepped forward pledging to upset the establishment and return power to the people. The working masses have always been a prime audience for politicians eager to score votes with

promises of improving their work lives, and the man who would become forty-fifth president of the United States sure gave them quite a show.

The 2016 presidential election resulted in one of the most shocking political upsets in U.S. history, and with it came much controversy and discourse over corporatism. Republican candidate Donald Trump ran his campaign on a platform of making America “great again” by returning jobs to those hit hardest by the recession while repealing job-killing regulations to usher in a new era of business growth that would benefit working families. After his narrow victory, the newly elected president began the process of staffing his cabinet with Wall Street insiders and corporate moguls whose agendas leaned toward removing “burdensome” worker protections and granting tax breaks to the wealthy. Whether trickle-down economics actually benefits average workers is and has been a subject of heated debate, and is beyond the scope of this book. However, the new administration’s legislative goals certainly stirred vocal commentary and notable activism from the political left and right. With companies free to operate in a more *laissez faire* capacity, many Democrats and Independents feared Trump and his staff would turn back the clock on workers’ rights, an action that would surely have an eventual effect on employee experience and hurt engagement. Regardless of voters’ political leanings, the election made it clear that U.S. employees are not happy with the way work is currently *not* working in their favor. It’s an indication of the underlying anger and disengagement people feel; a warning sign to organizations that whatever they are doing (or not doing) to address employee engagement isn’t helping.

Along with socio-political elements like globalization, outsourcing, and deregulation informing the current state of employee engagement, technology is playing a major role as well. The threat of job loss to artificial intelligence has not yet been realized to the extent that so many feared. However, technology and the Internet in particular have made employee engagement a lightning rod topic for both workers and their leaders.

Social media has enabled employees with unprecedented access to information about companies and voices to instantly share it. Before the Internet, employees had to rely on their own circle of connections to learn what it was really like to work for a certain organization. Companies enjoyed a high degree of control over their reputations and could easily

get away with mistreating workers or maintaining toxic work cultures. They also controlled pay data and held all negotiating power in the hiring process. With the advent of LinkedIn, finding a contact who works at a company where you plan to apply for an open position takes only a minute. Now, one can learn all the dirt about a company before they apply, leveraging digital networks and anonymous forums to understand more about the working world than was possible even fifteen years ago. Websites like Payscale and Salary give employees insights into wage equity and arm them with information proving they are underpaid in their jobs. Glassdoor gives current and former employees of companies across the world the opportunity to share their experiences, providing transparency for job seekers and accountability for employers.

This new era of knowledge sharing has riled many employers now that the cat's out of the bag and their less-than-perfect work cultures are put on display for the whole world to judge. Disengaged employees now have the means to give honest feedback without fear of reprisal for being insubordinate or disparaging the company. They raise awareness of their leaders' damaging behaviors and poor decisions, upping the stakes for employers who otherwise resist accepting and implementing employee feedback. Whereas employers could comfortably go about doing business as they pleased before ubiquitous Internet scrutiny, nowadays they actually have to put an effort into creating an attractive employee value proposition (why someone would want to work for their company and not a competitor).

Sites like Glassdoor not only publicly post reviews of employers—the good, the bad, and the ugly—but they also aggregate and score companies on the basis of what reviewers have to say. High-value or high-potential job seekers can instantly screen out an ill-suited employer with just a cursory glance at its Glassdoor page. Current employees can determine whether the grass is greener and jump ship if a competing organization offers a better employee experience. Some employers have resorted to posting fake reviews on Glassdoor to artificially boost their overall scores, while others have tried strong-arming the site's administrators into handing over the identities of reviewers. Neither tactic is recommended or very useful. The responses of these employers are very telling of how they view and handle criticism from the people they should really be trying to keep happy and engaged: their employees.

They also show how much this area of IT has affected engagement and how workers express the reasons for their disengagement.

Discussion of social media and the Internet would not be complete without mentioning the people who use this technology. And the people most associated with all things tech are millennials. Having been the first generation to grow up with computers and demonstrate proficiency in web surfing, these twenty-to-thirty-somethings let their tech-savvy nature color the way they go about life, including work. Millennials are called the Glassdoor Generation for a reason. Just as they are likely to go on Yelp to read reviews in search of the best local sushi joint, this cohort will refer to Glassdoor as a primary tool for deciding on a potential employer and have no qualms about sharing their thoughts on employment experiences via the Internet.

An employee at Yelp was fired in 2016 for sending the company's CEO a letter criticizing various aspects of its employee experience and then posting the missive online.⁴ Her actions sparked admiration from some and scorn from many others. Detractors flung the usual stereotypes about millennials her way: spoiled, entitled, and lazy. The endless discourse on Generation Y in the workplace is evidence that this age group has taken the business world in a new direction, one where employers must adapt and respond to their expectations, or at least consider the benefits of doing so. But that's how employee engagement actually works. It's interesting, though not surprising, that it took the youngest segment of the workforce to shape the practice and understanding of employee engagement. Really, it's not just about what millennials want out of their work; it's what all employees want. Every age group certainly has its common qualities, but individual employees have their own engagement drivers that leaders should learn and leverage.

Millennials pose a quandary for business leaders who aren't quite sure how to attract and retain them without appearing to give in to their demands. On one hand, the idea of flexing to meet your subordinates' needs, especially those who are much younger, might make some managers' eyes twitch. On the other hand, employers will soon have no choice but to cater to millennials. They are already closing in on becoming the dominant age group in the workforce. By 2025, they will make up 75 percent of the talent pool.⁵ So, even if you tire of having to

give Matty Millennial constant positive feedback while telling him for the tenth time that you can't promote him after just a year, and you decide to fire him, you will probably be replacing him with Missy Millennial or Mikey Millennial.

Some organizations are trying to capitalize on millennial talent, but in all the wrong ways and for all the wrong reasons. They create an image of having a cool startup culture with beer on Fridays and a ping pong table in the break room, or they play up their corporate social responsibility efforts to seem like a company that cares. It's all fluff covering a dysfunctional culture that lacks any true engagement levers. Employers will advertise the fun perks and quirks, appealing to candidates from an emotional angle in the hopes of luring enthusiastic, energetic, young talent. Meanwhile, their older workers, who've been around the rodeo and can see through the organization's saccharine facade, are being targeted for replacement. I've seen this scheme in action. Although the seasoned employees represent a wealth of institutional knowledge, they are also considered expensive liabilities. Why keep cranky Bev at \$65,000 a year when you can bring on eager-to-please Jenni and pay her \$35,000 to do the same job? Does it matter *why* Bev says she's "had it with this place"? Nah, just get rid of her and hire some new blood by waving Whole Foods gift cards, free beer, and other shiny objects in front of their faces.

Millennials are catching on, though. They're becoming just as burnt out and disengaged as the generations before them. That's why engagement levels among the different age groups are all roughly the same (i.e. not good). Modern Survey, a talent analytics think tank, published a report in 2015 showing that, among the three main generations at work—millennials, Generation X, and baby boomers—only about 14 percent of each cohort reported being fully engaged in their jobs.⁶ When it comes to engagement, leaders expect discretionary effort from these groups while continuing to ignore the real factors that inspire employees to go above and beyond.

GENDER DISPARITY AND THE DIVERSITY STRUGGLE

The concepts of diversity and inclusion are fairly nebulous for plenty of business leaders and difficult for them to grasp. They

understand on a superficial level that having a diverse and inclusive organization creates an attractive employee value proposition by giving the appearance of being a welcoming, progressive organization. They might even have an appreciation for the fact that diversity, like employee engagement, has a measurable effect on the bottom line.

What leaders fail to realize, or even accept, is that having a population of diverse talent merely paints a colorful picture of their organizations. The story behind the painting is quite different, though. In other words, executives set hiring quotas for traditionally underrepresented groups but don't address the underlying reasons why those people aren't being hired, or, if they are, why they aren't sticking around. They think of diversity and inclusion as a numbers game: attract diverse talent through targeted recruiting and retain them by pushing a designated percentage of them through the advancement pipeline. If they can get more women (or any other marginalized demographic) into senior leadership positions by setting ambitious goals for female advancement, then they've ostensibly succeeded at cultivating diversity in their ranks. But it rarely works, at least not for very long. Why? Because there are cultural barriers preventing women and minorities from stepping outside the traditional white male business paradigm and acting as authentic, unique individuals at work.

Further, there are biases and ideals that undermine the very meaning of diversity and inclusion while purporting to maintain institutional integrity for the sake of doing business *the right way*. All this mindset accomplishes is it reinforces the status quo. Never mind that there is no single correct way to operate a complex organization, just as there are different approaches to doing a job. Silicon Valley is known as the cradle of innovation where the technological revolution continues to be fought. What we are seeing in recent years, however, is that women working in technology face unintentional and even blatant discrimination despite noble efforts from industry leaders pushing for equality. Gender disparity of course is not isolated to one industry. The World Economic Forum published a report in 2016 showing that Information and Communication Technology actually represents the third lowest population of female talent out of the nine industries and 371 companies surveyed.⁷

IT is of particular interest because women have, until recently, typically felt left out of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) disciplines. One of their male counterparts offered a controversial explanation as to why so few women land and keep coding jobs at Google. The Google staffer's manifesto on diversity within the tech giant went viral during the summer of 2017, and he took a good deal of heat and praise for what he wrote.⁸ In his memo, the software engineer—a young, Caucasian male—laid out his argument that diversity for its own sake is not necessarily beneficial for businesses and that programs specifically aimed at developing minorities is discriminatory toward anyone who does not fit into one of those groups. He also made the unfortunate assertion that the gender pay gap is a myth in spite of countless studies across every economic sector demonstrating women are, indeed, paid less than men for the same work.

However, for all of the confusing and inaccurate observations in this open letter, its author actually made some valid points while recommending effective cultural changes to promote sustainable diversity. One of his central arguments is about biological differences between the genders being detrimental to women in the workplace, which is true. Rather than recommending that women should find less stressful jobs because they are, on average, more prone to anxiety, he advised a shift in Google's culture as well as a redesign of certain roles so they allow both sexes to thrive. That's a good thing! Google is viewed from the outside as one of the most progressive businesses in the world, yet its workforce is comprised of mostly white men. The company's self-reported statistics on diversity and inclusion show that women only make up 31 percent of its employee population.⁹

One of the leading experts on gender diversity in the workplace, Barbara Annis, published a book several years ago introducing the concept of Gender Intelligence, which is an informed appreciation of the innate differences between the sexes.¹⁰ In the book, Annis exposes the critical blind spots and communication gaps between men and women in the workplace and explains why women are leaving their employers. The result of Gender Intelligence is equality in *value*, not just equality in representation, for both men and women at all levels of an organization. Since women do not feel valued, that they cannot be themselves inside a male-oriented business model, they are “voting with their feet,” as Annis

describes, and going to work for competitors or starting their own businesses. The diversity problem is cultural, and it requires a commitment to change that starts at the very top. Sadly, the rate of change is slow. Women are unlikely to reach parity with men in the business world anytime soon, which is a shame because, as we've seen, the costs of disengaging such a large segment of the workforce are simply too great to be ignored.

It is my belief that the problem of diversity in the modern workplace and, by extension, the dismal state of employee engagement are attributable to a lack of empathy. Another point the Google engineer raised in his memo was that the company places too much emphasis on empathy in making policy decisions and should instead be more rational. He went on to dismiss Google's focus on microaggressions because, in his opinion, it increases sensitivity and makes perpetrators afraid to speak their minds. The main flaw with this train of thought is that it essentially gives anyone license to say whatever they want to colleagues without taking responsibility for how it might affect them mentally or emotionally. As I say throughout this book, however, human beings are emotional creatures. To ignore that fact, especially in business, is terribly short-sighted.

Under the former Googler's premise, microaggressions are necessary in everyday discourse if an organization hopes to foster open and candid communication among employees. He implied that, because microaggressions are unintentional, they should not be given such attention when considering effective strategies for diversity and inclusion. Well, that's just flat out wrong. Microaggressions may be unintentional, but they can nevertheless be harmful to engagement and will subvert efforts to increase diversity. For example, consider the comment, "I'm surprised you've done so well coding! Women don't seem well suited for highly technical roles." That's the kind of unintended slight that, while appearing innocent to the person saying it, is insulting and denigrating to the recipient.

Culturally aware, empathetic managers truly are better equipped to lead and engage diverse teams. They know which levers to pull and how their decisions, behaviors, and interactions can affect those they manage. It isn't coddling. It's having the knowledge of how to engage people and of how to not disengage them. Samuel Culbert, professor at

UCLA's Anderson School of Management, talks about being an other-directed manager in his book *Good People, Bad Managers*.¹¹ This stems from the concept of being a servant leader, which old-school-management types consider absolutely blasphemous. They don't understand the correlation between treating their workers how they, the employees, would like to be treated and higher engagement. While it might seem backwards, adjusting and flexing to employees greatly improves engagement. Yet, so few leaders grasp and accept this methodology, thus accounting for the low engagement we see today.

I once attempted to counsel a manager on becoming more culturally aware in her interactions with members of the diverse work group she led. One team member—I'll call her Xi—was an immigrant from Taiwan. This manager relied mostly on sarcasm to inject humor into situations and discussions that would otherwise be boring or straightforward. It was a well-intended attempt at bringing levity to the team dynamic. Unbeknownst to the manager, her sarcastic comments were causing confusion and stress for Xi because this form of ironic communication was totally inappropriate in her country of origin. Asian culture tends toward saving face and eschewing any type of language that might humiliate or embarrass someone. When trying to praise Xi in front of her teammates, the manager would say things like, "Xi completed her walk through of the requirements with all stakeholders and it went awful, just awful."

I tried to explain to the manager that sarcasm doesn't have the same humorous effect on someone from an Asian country as it would a Westerner, but she brushed off my concerns. When Xi led her first training session for a group of customers, I was mortified to hear that the manager prepared the class by telling them, "This is Xi's first time training, so please be sure to boo her and tell her what a terrible job she is doing." Xi eventually grew accustomed to her manager's sarcastic humor, but not before months of discomfiture had passed. Imagine this lack of empathy on a much larger scale to understand the gravity of the diversity struggle that so many employers can't seem to address.

Who would want to work in an environment where managers and co-workers lack the requisite empathy, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence necessary to foster positive relationships with people from diverse backgrounds? It simply isn't realistic in today's

globally interconnected economy where diverse talent views employee experience as the new currency. Those employers who offer the best employee experience for all, not just for the majority, are the ones who will win the war for talent and dominate their respective markets. Empathy and cultural awareness do not create overly sensitive leaders who lose sight of business priorities in favor of political correctness. Being empathetic *is* a business priority. I would argue that it should be a top priority because, as I say, organizations employ and do business with human beings. It's impossible to remove the human aspect of running a business without engagement and, ultimately, bottom-line results suffering. That is pretty clearly evidenced by the troubling statistics cited throughout this chapter.

LOOKING AHEAD

The current state of employee engagement appears pretty bleak. We've seen how a large portion of the modern workforce is disengaged and costing businesses billions of dollars each year. Next, we will try to understand how this came to be. In Chapter 3, I will point to the very nature of corporations as the smoking gun responsible for employee engagement's critical condition. But first, we must look at the way leaders react to what they perceive to be the problem, specifically that employees aren't engaging themselves and instead choose to disengage or even actively disengage.

Chapter 2 visits the notions of disengagement and active disengagement from an angle that some leaders will find a bit hard to stomach, because they knowingly or subconsciously subscribe to the Stepford Employee Fallacy. They view disengaged employees as the root cause of their employee engagement troubles, and they believe that purging these naysayers and complainers will miraculously transform their organizations into ultra-productive bastions of business supremacy. What we will see in the coming pages, however, is that disengagement is merely a symptom of underlying cultural or organizational weaknesses. It is workers' natural response to a poor employee experience, meaning one or more aspects of working for their employer is a factor *causing* them to be disengaged. Until leaders come to understand that they are responsible for creating an employee experience that engages (or

disengages) their talent, they will continue to perpetuate the cycle that has caused the sad state of employee engagement in today's workplace.

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