

Article 42 – The problems of disengagement

I have always maintained that as automation and Information Technology leads to fewer people being employed in a particular organisation, the more important the latter become. They are the primary source of competitive advantage. Given their value, one would have thought that every effort would be made to nurture and motivate them by creating a workplace culture that resulted in high job satisfaction and – to use the word of the moment – high levels of engagement.

I don't see this happening and recent studies on this issue have shown that less than 20% of employees are "engaged" with the organisation for whom they work.

I believe that the problem lies with management – senior management.

It is said that people join companies and leave managers. Given the company's public persona and their understanding of the role that they are being asked to play, on joining their expectations are high. Over time they become disillusioned as their efforts are met with increasing levels of indifference. Eventually they leave – either of their own volition or because they are deemed superfluous to requirements.

Geraldine Doogue once said, "she would believe in equality between the sexes when there were as many incompetent women in positions of authority as there were incompetent men". And there are a lot of incompetent men.

My theory is that incompetent people promote incompetent people because they don't feel threatened by them. If perchance, a competent one or two slip through the screen, eventually they either leave of their own accord or are destined to fall victims of restructures and the like.

I am a great believer in the Peter Principle that Dr Laurence Peter formulated in his book of the same name. 'In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence.' My observation is that incompetence initially manifests itself in the management of people rather than in the management of the business. It reveals itself in an unwillingness to listen to ones subordinates in the belief that to act on any of their recommendations is to show a lack of confidence in one's own judgement – I'm a manager now, it's my job to make decisions. Poor business decisions are made as a consequence and our manager, rather than admit that mistakes have been made and seek to re-engage with his or her subordinates, becomes more isolated and defensive. Before long, the subordinates, particularly the competent ones, are seen as threats to our manager's position and authority.

Some time back, a personal friend of ours introduced me to an impressive manager. Our friend worked for him and suggested that I met with him as she thought that he might be interested in using Towards Ten Thousand – bpi's Workgroup Effectiveness Survey. Highly qualified, he spoke at international conferences but above all, he was well respected by his staff. In short, he was a leader. Then a few weeks ago, he was told that he had been made redundant. No reason was given. He suspects that his boss had taken a dislike to him. Why? Because he was a lot more competent than his boss.

David Ogilvy, founder of the advertising agency bearing his name, used to give every newly promoted office manager a Russian matryoshka doll. Inside the smallest one, the manager would find the following message. "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 who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants".

It takes courage and leadership to hire people who are bigger than we are.

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November 2007