



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H0122P
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
NOVEMBER 24, 2014

ARTICLE **MANAGING PEOPLE**

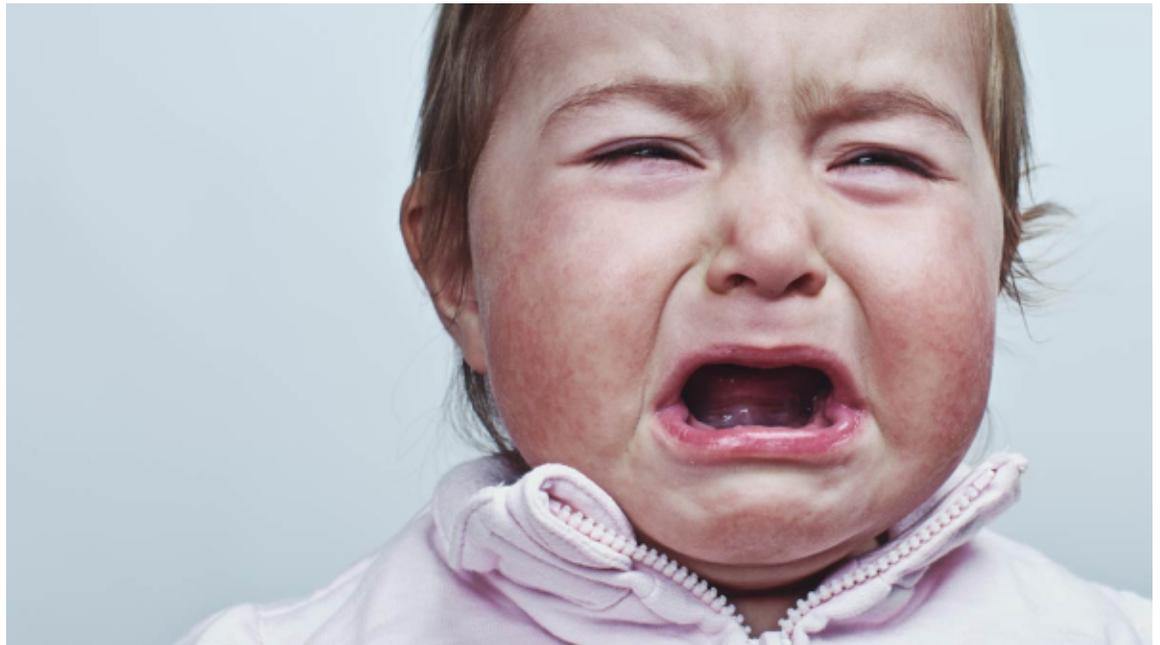
Why Middle Managers Are So Unhappy

by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman

MANAGING PEOPLE

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Who are the unhappiest among your workers? And what's driving them crazy? They may not be who you think they are. They aren't who we would have thought.

To find out, we gathered data from the most unengaged and uncommitted employees from more than 320,000 employees in a variety of organizations. We then identified those employees whose engagement and commitment scores were in the bottom 5% and compared the responses of these 15,729 unhappy souls to the rest.

You might think these would be the people with poor performance ratings or the ones in over their heads – people with inadequate training, education, or experience for the job. Or perhaps they're the ones who haven't been on the job long enough to decide they're a bad fit and move elsewhere.

But when we examined the demographic characteristics of these employees, we found instead that they could best be described as those “stuck in the middle of everything.” The most common profile for the bottom 5% is that they've:

- Earned a college degree, but not a graduate degree
- Have five to 10 years' tenure,
- Work as mid-level managers
- Receive a good (as opposed to a superior or a terrible) performance rating

Yes, there were some young hot shots, poor performers, and a few higher executives in this disgruntled group. But for the most part, these unhappy people were steady, good performers who'd been in the organization for some time but appeared to have gotten lost in the shuffle.

What were the main factors causing their dissatisfaction? In ascending order of importance, here's the litany of their unhappiness.

9. Their distinctiveness is not valued or appreciated. Diversity is talked about but rarely practiced.

8. They see the organization as inefficient and ineffective. Many organizations are guilty of wasting money, making poor decisions, and resisting innovation – in other words, failing to correctly apply resources to enable employees to succeed.

7. They're overworked. Many organizations will tell employees that they think it's important to have work-life balance but then assign too large workload for anyone to handle effectively. The inconsistency between what's said and what really happens creates significant frustration.

6. They don't believe that if they raise an issue it will be addressed. They tend to feel helpless and with no advocate. They feel that their opinions do not matter.

This is a symptom of the more fundamental feeling:

5. They don't feel valued or appreciated. To a large extent they feel that they are taken advantage of.

Worse,

4. They feel they are treated unfairly compared with others. They believe others get better pay or opportunities, while all they get is a grossly unfair share of the workload.

3. Their work lacks meaning and purpose. When people feel that they accomplish something worthwhile, they have pride in what they do and commitment increases. But these employees feel that they are lost in hollow, throwaway jobs that make very little difference.

2. They see no career or promotion opportunities. They feel they are on a treadmill rather than a path to a desirable career.

And ultimately, the factor that causes the most dissatisfaction:

1. Poor leadership. Fundamentally our data confirms that an ineffective leader generates dissatisfied, uncommitted employees. The average employee commitment score for the group we studied was at the 3rd percentile (that is 97% of their colleagues were more committed than they). But they were not alone: the average employee commitment score for all the employees working for that same leader was only at the 20th percentile — meaning pretty much everyone was unhappy.

As employees deal with these frustrations, one issue tends to have a compounding effect on another. Say, for example, a poor leader shows little interest in an employee and never discusses career or development opportunities. This causes the unhappy worker to question the value of the work he's doing, since he sees no payoff for himself. That prompts him to start to question the workload. If he believes that "nothing I do has any impact or makes a difference," then he will feel unappreciated and unfairly treated.

"Why should I care?" some of you may be saying. "It's only 5% of the employees." But everyone should care: that 5% has a powerful impact on others. Their lack of motivation creates drag on the organization. Most firms have fairly narrow profit margins, and turning that 5% around could have a dramatic impact on profitability.

More fundamentally, the critical point here is that these are workers who were valuable in the past and should be contributing now and to your company's future. They're not incompetent; they've been poorly managed.

What to do? Quite simply, we think it boils down to helping their managers change — or changing their managers.

First, give the manager a chance to change. No matter how great a trail of unhappiness they leave in their wake, we've found, these leaders typically have no idea how destructive their own behavior is to their subordinates. So we suggest starting by giving them a healthy dose of feedback in a constructive way. That may take the form of conversation with their boss, or sharing the results of an employee survey or 360-degree feedback.

In coaching conversations, a toxic leader's boss should focus on the behaviors that were most serious in the eyes of the subordinates, asking the leader to select one or two behaviors to dramatically

change. Effective changes can be as simple as providing some positive feedback to employees about their contributions to the team's output, seeking subordinates' views on ways to streamline work processes, or taking care to engage in periodic discussions of subordinates' career ambitions rather than focusing only on the work at hand. While the leader's boss should make sure that the choice of behaviors address issues important to subordinates, taking action on any two is more important than exactly which two are chosen, since addressing any problem will likely have a positive effect on several others. The leader's boss should follow up periodically to encourage the change to continue.

If that doesn't work, a dispiriting leader who has contributed positively in the past might be moved to a new department or a new role in the organization, if given extensive help in the new role. That's provided he's willing to respond to feedback and make changes. But it makes no sense to move a manager into a new situation where he's apt to fail. If he shows no signs of taking feedback seriously, and if he's not willing to make near-term behavior changes, then the move may unfortunately need to be either downward or out.

All that said, we would be remiss if we did not point out that, sometimes, the employee is the problem. Some employees work for bosses their colleagues find extremely inspiring and motivating, and yet they are still disengaged. The same approach that works for a poor leader can work for them. Such employees deserve clear feedback about how they display their lack of engagement and the negative impact that has on the group. Then the choice to change behavior or leave should be left to them. To stay but not change should not be an option.

Our bottom-line view is simple: When a good leader is in place, there's no reason to put up with a disengaged employee. But every employee deserves to work for a good leader. No organization should tolerate the harm that bad ones do to their people and their business.

Jack Zenger is the CEO of Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy. He is a coauthor of the October 2011 HBR article "[Making Yourself Indispensable](#)" and the book *Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution* (McGraw Hill, 2016). Connect with Jack at twitter.com/jhzenger.

Joseph Folkman is the president of Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy. He is a coauthor of the October 2011 HBR article "[Making Yourself Indispensable](#)" and the book *Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution* (McGraw Hill, 2016). Connect with Joe at twitter.com/joefolkman.
