

Management's Plea to the Employee: Engage Thyself



By Leigh Branham

(Adapted from guest column by Leigh Branham that originally appeared in THE KANSAS CITY STAR.)

Ever since 2008, when the cease-fire was declared in the war for talent, corporate leaders started worrying less about keeping employees and more about getting the most out of them. "Employee engagement" continues to be an oft-repeated management consulting buzzword. If your company's management hasn't started talking about conducting an employee engagement survey, it probably will be soon.

Put simply, an engaged employee is one who brings his "A" game to work, goes the extra mile and feels a strong sense of commitment both to and from the organization.

The Gallup Organization, which regularly surveys the degree of engagement among the American work force, reports that only 25 percent of workers are engaged. While this is a truly alarming statistic that translates to the loss of trillions of dollars in productivity per year, it is also explainable.

Working conditions in many companies—from overwork, to lack of resources, to untrustworthy company leadership—are less than ideal for optimum engagement. And we all know that many employees who have been downsized during the past few months and years will never be as engaged again as they once were.

As usual, line managers get caught in the middle. Senior leaders and consultants now survey employees to track the percentage of engaged employees in each department, then challenge department managers to do whatever it takes to better engage their people and improve their scores in next year's survey. While this does engender accountability for managing people with skill and emotional intelligence, there is a potential downside.

It is simply this: The responsibility for being engaged does not just fall on the shoulders of the manager—it is the employee's responsibility as well. One manager asked, "What about the employees? They shouldn't just be waiting around for the manager to engage them. Why don't we just score each employee on how well they are keeping themselves engaged?!"

