Chapter 3

WHY I HATE MY JOB

Fran is very personable and charismatic, but above all she is smart…really smart. Fran sailed through high school and wound up at a top-tier university. After graduation, Fran worked for a few years, then she discovered her niche. It all seemed to happen as if by chance (or fate). She was given her first project to oversee because all the other Project Managers (the usual suspects) were focused on other, more important initiatives. The project was behind schedule and over budget. Fran began managing the project and took to it like the proverbial fish to water. Although Fran loved the business end of her job, she soon realized she had a gift and a passion for project management. Within a few months, she became the go-to person for important projects. Over time, the assignments grew from small projects to major initiatives. No matter what was given to her, she was always up to the challenge. Her career was fast-tracked. Fran was recognized by the top leaders as a superstar. She was given the nickname "the golden child."

Fran never pictured herself as a job hopper. In fact, in many ways she was just the opposite—she was extremely loyal, often to a fault. She didn't view moving from company to company as a legitimate way to advance a career. Fran endured corporate restructuring, RIFs (Reductions In Force),

times of being under-staffed, and periods of economic instability, but remained faithful to her company. She had been approached by multiple headhunters over the years, each offering jobs with more responsibility and better pay, but she never truly entertained any of the offers. Even with its many shortcomings, she liked where she worked. She could see herself there long-term, plus the company's location made her commute reasonable. And, in spite of the occasional crazy person (because every company has at least one; if you don't know who the crazy person is in your office, it's because it's you), she liked her coworkers, too.

Then one day it finally happened—Fran was offered a huge promotion into her dream position. For years, she had worked her way up the ladder, constantly having to prove herself while honing her skills. She had built a great reputation and won the trust of many within her company, while turning down other more lucrative opportunities. It was finally all going to pay off. This would be her big chance; it was a golden opportunity. It was a chance to make her mark within the organization while utilizing the skills and experiences she had been gaining for the past 15 years.

There was only one problem: Steve. Steve's reputation within the organization was atrocious. He had a reputation of being difficult to work with. He was short-tempered, territorial, and constantly micromanaged everyone around him. Despite this and the fact that most in the organization knew this about Steve, he still managed to obtain a senior position.

Although Fran had never directly reported to Steve, she had worked with him on a number of major initiatives within the organization. Those times working with Steve confirmed everything she had heard about him. And he was the one thing standing between her and her dream job. Fran knew that having her dream job would also mean that Steve would be her boss. This caused her great apprehension.

At the advice of one of her mentors, Fran decided to meet with Steve before deciding on the position and express her concerns. During the meeting, Steve confided in her that he had been under tremendous stress due to a family situation as well as the pressure of recent layoffs and that what she had experienced was not who he really was. Steve assured her that he had no need or desire to micromanage her; she would have the freedom she needed to be effective. He told her, "I completely trust you which is why I specifically requested you for this position. It would make no sense for me to not let you do what I'm bringing you here to do in the first place." After doing a lot of soul searching, Fran decided this was an opportunity she just couldn't pass up and the risk was worth the reward. Worst case, she could ride it out a couple of years and then either move on to another position in the company or to another organization altogether. But, either way, this would be both a great experience and something that would look great on her resume. So, she went for it.

It only took a couple of weeks for Fran to realize she made a big mistake. Regardless of his promises, Steve was exactly who he had always been. He was not only nitpicking and

micromanaging everything she did, he also began demeaning her in front of her staff. "Maybe he will change," she thought. "Maybe this won't be so bad once I'm used to it," she believed. She even rationalized the infamous, "I'm building character." But, soon she realized it just wasn't worth it. She began her search and, although the job market wasn't great, within a few months she had left the company for another job.

Let's think about this for a moment. Although Fran worked for a company that she respected, enjoyed her work, liked her coworkers, was well-compensated, and even worked within a reasonable commute from her house, she eventually left the company. And she didn't leave because she was offered a better position, she left because she was unhappy with her boss. That's incredibly important. Often things like compensation, interesting work, work-life balance, and upward mobility are cited by surveys as the things employees and employment candidates view as most important in a job. I do believe that each of those elements is essential to attracting good people, but experience and data tell me that, although those features may help attract talent, they rarely are enough to compensate for the presence of a bad boss. As Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman in their best-selling book, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently* (Simon & Shuster, 1999), famously state, **"people leave managers, not companies."**

And Fran is in no way an anomaly. I spend most of my time working with organizations trying to improve their work environment in some form or fashion. The majority of the

time, a problem had been brewing for a while, and it finally grew to the point where it could no longer be ignored or tolerated. And the only problems I deal with in the workplace are people problems (relationship issues). Whether they are looking for training, coaching, or consulting, these companies have finally come to the conclusion that their organization's people problems are hurting them enough that it's worth paying to address them. And let me tell you, Fran is in no way the exception to the rule. In fact, I have met hundreds of Frans. They may have had different faces and different locations, but all had one thing in common: regardless of all the other great benefits of working for their company, as well as how much they enjoyed their actual work, they now hated coming to work every day because of a bad boss, and it showed in their performance, their engagement, and their attitude.

This idea is echoed by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman ("Motivating People, How Damaging Is a Bad Boss, Exactly?" *Harvard Business Review*, July 16, 2012). They determined that, after studying the effectiveness of 2,865 leaders in a large financial services company and validating this information through the similar results of numerous surveys by multiple organizations, the overall leadership effectiveness of a boss (based on a 360 review) directly impacts not only employee satisfaction, but engagement and commitment as well. These results are not unusual. Study after study have produced the same conclusion: the number one factor affecting workers' effectiveness is their direct supervisor.[1, 2, 3]

Leaders really are the trump card when it comes to an effective workforce. Companies need to really ask themselves how good of a job are they doing when selecting and preparing leaders? The answer to this question has a direct impact on the company's bottom line.

Shouldn't we already know this? Isn't part of a leader's job to positively impact the performance of those they are leading? Isn't that the reason we have supervisors and managers in the first place? To an extent, we already *do* know this. The problem is that, in the moment, we are often so overwhelmed by the symptoms of a dysfunctional workplace, we forget to address the real disease. When employee engagement is down, when turnover is high, or when employee satisfaction is low, most organizations don't first look at the quality of their supervisors as being the likely source of their problem. Instead, almost reflexively, they blame the employees themselves for not being committed enough or lacking a strong work ethic, in spite of the all of the evidence to the contrary.

People often speak about employee engagement as though it is some strange abstract concept that requires some hidden, esoteric knowledge to understand. Employees are described as being engaged, fully engaged, disengaged, partly engaged, etc. Then, many of the solutions begin with things like aligning people to the organization's mission and so on and so forth. By the time we're all done, trying to find a real, practical, and workable solution to all of this engagement stuff is like trying to locate the Yeti or the Loch Ness Monster.

All of this engagement analysis is way too complicated. Let's make this really simple. Employee engagement is a measure of how much someone really cares about his or her job. I don't mean care if they *have* a job, but actually care about how they *do* their job. It's really that simple. That's why the phrase "emotional commitment" is so often used in describing engagement; it's a measure of how much someone is emotionally attached to his or her job. Everything else—enthusiasm, ownership, time at work, going the extra-mile, and even performance—is simply a symptom or indicator of whether engagement exists. These symptoms are signs of life, but not life itself. At the core, the real issue is how much does this person really care about his or her job?

For some, the entirety of that answer is internal. There are employees who work hard regardless of what's going on around them. They take ownership for their work even when surrounded by those who don't. Whether it's due to a sense of responsibility or their own sense of character and ethics, they will come to work and engage themselves regardless of the circumstances around them and how they are treated. These employees often perform *despite of*, not *because of,* their manager and their work environment. But they are the exception, not the rule.

For the vast majority, work environment has a significant effect on engagement. Their manager, their coworkers, and their workplace culture play a substantial role in their ability to remain focused and engaged during the day. And in all honesty, in many cases, the work environment is sucking the

life out of many employees and turning good employees into disengaged ones.

Employee engagement is a real problem. In 2016, Gallup determined that 32% of employees were engaged (up from 31.5% in 2014)[4]. That sounds like good news. Engagement is increasing, but let's not miss the reality: if 32% of employees are engaged, then 68% of employees are not engaged. Pause for a second and let that sink in—over 2/3 of American employees are not engaged. When you consider how that lack of engagement manifests into lost production, employee turnover, poor customer service, and missed opportunities, the costs are gargantuan. The only thing more alarming than all of this is that, for most, it's not alarming at all.

We've come to accept low engagement as the norm. Engagement statistics are provided by many reliable sources annually, and I've never read an article stating that these numbers should be cause for alarm. We would never accept these results in other areas of our lives. If you took your car to the mechanic and he (or she) said, "The problem with your car is that only 32% of your engine is working at full capacity," you wouldn't say, "Oh, well that doesn't sound too bad. How long can I drive it before it becomes a problem?" Assuming you have a mechanic who you trust, you would either pay the money to get the car functioning at an acceptable rate, like 100%, or you would decide that the car isn't worth the money and begin looking for another means of transportation.

If you went to the doctor for a checkup and she (or he) said, "Everything's fine except it seems your heart is only

functioning at 32%," you wouldn't say, "Glad it's nothing serious." You would not only take whatever measures necessary to fix the issue, you would identify the root cause of the problem so that you would be assured that the problem never occurred again.

Unfortunately, we've come to accept and even expect mediocrity in the workplace. Engagement is a serious issue that needs to be addressed.

This can't all be blamed on "bad hires." Don't get me wrong—it is possible to hire the wrong employee. We've all made that mistake. Either they're not a good fit for the organization, they have their own agenda, or they look good on paper, but, in reality, are nothing like their resumes or represent a variety of other mistakes. But that still can't be the only problem. From personality assessments to all types of background checks, companies are doing everything possible to find the best possible candidate or at least weed out the potential bad hires. I'm far more concerned about the good people we hire who over time disengage. It's hard for me to imagine that companies are wrong about who they hire 68% of the time. There is something else going on, something that's happening *after* the hiring process.

The obvious place to look should be the managers. Organizations must be aware of what's going on with supervisors, managers, and other leaders. It's widely accepted that an employee's relationship with his or her direct manager or supervisor is the leading factor influencing employee engagement. So, if you really want to improve employee

engagement, then address what's going on at the management level to give you the biggest bang for your buck. Jim Clifton, CEO of Gallup, is quoted as saying, "Here's something they'll probably never teach you in business school: The single biggest decision you make in your job—bigger than all of the rest—is who you name manager. When you name the wrong person as manager, nothing fixes that bad decision. Not compensation, not benefits—nothing."

What is really eye-opening is the state of the engagement level of the managers. An oft-neglected fact about the Gallup's research[5] is that, among job categories, managers, executives, and officers had the highest levels of engagement in 2014 at 38.4%. That means more than 60% of those in leadership positions were not engaged. These are the people who are coaching, training, and mentoring other managers. These are the one's creating your "culture." If *they're* not engaged, imagine what they're giving to their direct reports.

But this shouldn't be surprising either. Managers are still employees, and most still have others to report to. Do you really expect the student to surpass the teacher?

Of course, there are other questions that need to be asked, as well: How is the overall work environment? Does the company really value its employees? Are people's daily responsibilities aligned with their skillsets? Do people really know how to perform their work? And yes, are you hiring the right people? But let's start with the managers and supervisors.

For executives and business owners, this should be an eye opener. These are the people who are often focused on

trying to address low engagement and high turnover in their organization. Instead of trying new recruiting methods to weed out the uncommitted and avoid the job hoppers, it's time to start focusing on what to do with people once they become employees. Who's managing them? In fact, are there pockets of high turnover within your organization? Look at the manager. How is he doing? Is she the right person for the job? Did we really do a good job in selecting them and setting them up for success? What have we done to equip them and prepare them to lead and engage people? Would any sane, non-masochistic person work for them?

You can hire and train good leaders to create a culture that fosters engagement, and then hire good people to foster that culture, or you can ignore the problem and let your culture contaminate the good people you hire.

But there's one question we haven't asked yet: What is a good leader?