Why Are My Employees Checked Out?

Without realizing it, too many leaders assume that the role of leadership is to control. They espouse Plato's 'division of labor,' which has influenced government and military structures for thousands of years, according to social thinker Hannah Arendt.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, she argues that corporate action, similar to those of monarchies and armies, proceeds in two phases: planning and execution. Accordingly, in most organizations you find a dichotomy of labor: the minds and the bodies, the brains and the backs, the knowers and the doers, the manipulators and the manipulated.

While leaders desire greater engagement from their employees, the way most organizations are set up engenders the very opposite. Organizations that perpetuate this leader/led distinction tend to be riddled with justification and blame. Those tasked with *doing* can blame poor performance on uninformed or unrealistic plans. Similarly, those who did the *planning* can blame failures on poor execution.

The Employee Engagement Conundrum

At the heart of this employee engagement conundrum is the way leaders see those they lead. Leaders who sees their employees as people, and not as mere doers, free themselves from the constraints of the leader/led distinction. Instead, they can create an environment that invites, encourages, expects, and empowers those they lead to be fully responsible. This means that they empower their people with the responsibility both to plan *and* execute their work.

Shifting the responsibility to *plan* the work into the hands of those who *do* the work requires more than simply introducing new programs or policies that only focus on behaviors or simply offer employee perks. However well-intentioned, these efforts limit the focus to having employees *act* or *behave* more engaged, without addressing the core issue that most contributes to their detachment: how leaders and employees see each other.

Only a leader who sees their employees as people—with goals, brains, creative energy, talent—can create an environment where their employees can be fully engaged to exercise all their creative energy and talent.

Case in Point

One of the largest IT companies on the Fortune 500 requested Arbinger to work with its leadership after the company experienced a dramatic freefall in market share.

When asked what they thought was the most important factor in their historic decline one leader spoke up.

"We had the best engineers in the industry. But we simply told them what to do. As leaders, we had all the answers and they were assigned to simply do what we determined was best. They did what we asked, and then went home at night and built

amazing technologies in their garages."

The point? Employees have brains, creative energy, and talent. If leaders don't see their employees as people and provide an environment for them to apply their energy and skills in the planning and execution of their work, those employees will find other outlets. Ultimately, their organization will likely be the worse for it.

Bottom Line

We know from our 38 years of experience in helping organizations create a culture of engagement that it's essential for leaders to see their employees as people—as full contributors—and act accordingly.

Research collected over the years by Gallup in their annual *State of The American Workplace* supports this conclusion.

Author and speaker **Mark Crowley conducted a recent interview with Dr. Jim Harter** who concluded that successful managers of highly engaged teams have one thing in common: "They share, teach, coach, support, and appreciate their employees." Crowley concludes, "Regardless of what's on their plate, they invest the time to know their people personally, what motivates them — their career dreams and aspirations."

Only when leaders begin to see and treat their employees as people with goals, objectives, and the capacity for creative initiative will organizations be freed from the chains of low employee engagement.

Want to learn more about how Arbinger can help improve employee engagement? **Here** are our initial research results that demonstrate just that.