

The Disengagement Epidemic: Can ONA Rescue Us?

A tool called Organization Network Analysis (ONA) allows companies to uncover their hidden Zappers—those who create energy—and connect them together into networks that fuel discretionary effort. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



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Today's accelerating rate of change and compounding degree of complexity is taking a significant toll on the global workforce. Deloitte's *2019 Global Human Capital Trends* reports that more than half of today's workforce (51 percent) is dissatisfied with their job. Globally, more than 1.7 billion people who show up for work every day are not happy, and 2.4 billion are disengaged.

The price of disengagement is high. Gallup reports that high-engagement organizations achieve 21 percent higher profitability and four times earnings-per-share growth over competitors. Some 84 percent of organizations see engagement as an important issue, and almost a third rank it as a Top 3 concern. But only 9 percent of organizations today say they are fully prepared to address employee disengagement.

So where to begin? Here are three key steps to building employee engagement in the workplace:

1. Put people first. Our outdated Industrial Age accounting system labels "people" as "liabilities" and "things" such as property and equipment as "assets." We have come to view people—literally and figuratively—as interchangeable "COGS" in an organization machine where we constantly strive to reduce the "cost of goods sold" to improve the bottom line. The result is that people frequently become a cost-savings casualty. Today, we speak of land as "physical capital" and employees as "human capital," and we treat them all as equal and interchangeable in manipulating our financial statements. They are not.

The first step to reengaging the workforce requires recognizing the primacy of people over all other forms of capital. We must recognize that people—not things—have the power make organizations stop or go. It is through the energy and ingenuity of people that organizations identify new avenues for growth and encourage others to join them on a journey of discovery to fertile grounds of opportunity.

2. Rally around energy. William Byham taught us that employees can be Zappers or Sappers. Zappers create energy, while Sappers drain it. Zappers walk into a room and light it up. Sappers

leave a room and light it up.

Zappers attract and retain the best talent, deliver more creative and innovative solutions, and encourage more discretionary effort from others. Sappers do the exact opposite. Worse, to move the engagement needle, you need two Zappers for every one Sapper.

But where do we find Zappers? Just as Galileo created a new tool to reveal hidden stars in the universe, a tool called Organization Network Analysis (ONA) allows companies to uncover the hidden Zappers and connect them together into energy networks that fuel discretionary effort. ONA examines the informal networks that employees establish organically to solve problems, make decisions, and share information. Think of it as a powerful X-ray machine to see what is really going on inside your organization.

3. Lead the followers. Studies show that at least 70 percent of the variance in engagement is explained by the quality of the manager or team leader.

Traditionally, a future leader is chosen by an existing leader based on that future leader's perceived potential or demonstrated performance. This high-potential talent pool then is developed and advanced into the management ranks to lead others. But are we sure these existing leaders are choosing the right successors? If they were, shouldn't engagement scores be a lot higher?

Here again, ONA can help. The journey begins with a simple truism: "Without followership, there is no leadership." ONA can X-ray the organization to reveal those individuals employees would willingly follow. Early research suggests that up to 30 percent of the individuals followers identify are not part of the traditional high-potential leadership talent pool. That is a lot of leadership potential that could be tapped into to "zap" the organization.

ONA is gaining traction: In 2017, Deloitte reported that almost half of the organizations it surveyed (48 percent) were experimenting with this tool with many positive outcomes. If you are concerned about the disengagement epidemic, you might consider joining them. **■**