



What Are Your Blind Spots?

Conquering the 5 Misconceptions that Hold Leaders Back

Jim Haudan and Rich Berens | McGraw-Hill © 2018

Statistics say that about 70% of your employees suffer disengagement from their jobs. Unfortunately, many leaders have no idea how to engage their employees, often because of insidious “blind spots” in their thinking. Root Inc. consultancy co-founder Jim Haudan and CEO Rich Berens warn that failing to recognize these blind spots can cause you to stifle your best employees instead of giving them the autonomy to do their finest and most engaged work. To transform your organization and unlock the potential of your employees, the authors say, just open your eyes.

Take-Aways

- Almost every employee must contend with feeling disengaged.
- Blind spots are mistaken but appealing management concepts that executives mistake for great ideas and that breed employee apathy.
- These five blind spots commonly delude leaders and impair engagement.
- Do not base your management policy on these misguided ideas:
- One: In business, purpose counts – but profit matters most. It doesn't.
- Two: Our employees love the story we tell about our company. They don't.
- Three: The best way to engage employees is with fact-filled presentations. It isn't.
- Four: Our employees won't do things the way they should unless we monitor and control their actions. They will if you give them autonomy.
- Five: Our employees feel free to speak their minds, no matter what the circumstances. They don't, but you can fix that.
- For real engagement, conquer your blind spots and join your employees in authentic dialogue.

Summary

You Can See Clearly Now

High employee engagement equals high performance. For engagement, leaders must treat those they lead with consideration and respect – and earn their respect in return. Start by avoiding the “blind spots” that impede your leadership and block your vision.

Carefully consider the five blind spots and 13 lessons below. When you put these lessons to work inside your organization, you can radically transform it for the better and engage more meaningfully with your employees. With today’s rampant employee disengagement, cynicism and apathy, you must foment change. As a leader, you know that cultural change begins with you.

Bloodletting

In mid-December 1799, George Washington, the recently retired first president of the United States, turned slightly ill. At 67, Washington suffered a cold and a sore throat. This was nothing unusual for the dead of winter in Virginia, the site of Washington’s Mount Vernon estate. The weather had been chilly with snow, hail and rain – perfect weather for colds. As the master of his sprawling property, Washington had been spending considerable time outside in the inclement weather.

“If you can’t find a way to your employees’ hearts, their minds won’t follow.”

When Washington also developed shortness of breath, his wife Martha and his personal secretary, Colonel Tobias Lear, summoned physicians. While waiting for their arrival, Washington asked George Rawlins, Mount Vernon’s overseer, to perform a bloodletting – opening a vein and letting the blood flow freely into a container. Rawlins quickly removed at least 12 ounces of Washington’s blood.

“The dignity that people feel when their ideas and perspectives are valued, and the power that is unleashed when their discretionary effort is freely contributed, is an unparalleled competitive advantage.”

Bloodletting was a common medical procedure in Washington’s time. It traced back to the ancient Greeks, who believed “blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile” dominate the body and saw illness as a sign that these elements are out of balance. Bloodletting supposedly puts the elements back in balance. Obviously, this is utter nonsense.

“With only 30% of professionals being engaged, the vast majority of human talent is not showing up at work to innovate, create, build, change and find better ways of doing things.”

Washington's doctors conducted four more bloodlettings. By the time his doctors finished opening his veins, Washington had lost nearly half of his body's entire blood supply in a single day. Not surprisingly, he died shortly thereafter. Washington was bright and knowledgeable. The men who treated him were qualified medical professionals. How could these intelligent men think that draining a person's life's blood would magically cure his illnesses?

"Connecting your strategy and decisions in a meaningful way to [your] employees is crucial to bringing your strategy to life."

This illustrates an eternal, basic human truth: People routinely subscribe to the craziest ideas. That was true in ancient Greece and colonial America, and it remains true today.

Avoiding Leadership Blind Spots

Think of such faulty ideas in management practices as blind spots: mistaken concepts that send people down blind alleys. Leaders' blind spots can derail companies and generate employee cynicism and apathy. Leaders are subject to five primary blind spots that can be hugely destructive:

1. Purpose

The belief behind this blind spot is: "Purpose matters, but it doesn't drive our numbers." Profit matters more. The reality is that today's employees want to work for firms whose purpose they respect and support. Leaders must make purpose vital to their companies. Unfortunately, while many leaders tout their devotion to purpose, research indicates that up to 90% of employees don't think the stated mission really drives their organization. This disparity can turn your employees into embittered cynics.

"Beliefs and approaches that now seem absurd were not only embraced by many people, they were actually promoted and endorsed by the leading companies and experts of the time."

To cure this blind spot, executives must ask themselves: Do my daily words and actions support my organization's declared purpose? If all you talk about is boosting the numbers, take a step back and rethink your message. Remember that an admirable purpose and impressive profits are not mutually exclusive objectives; organizations can readily achieve both. In his noteworthy TED Talk, author Simon Sinek clarifies that purpose doesn't concern what you do. It concerns "why you do what you do."

2. Story

This blind spot says, "We have a compelling story to tell that our people care about." In fact, most firms' backstories are boring banalities that turn employees off and never inspire them.

Most organizations don't do a good job of developing strong stories about their origins, activities, intentions and future plans. Most executives think their companies' stories deliver the necessary messages, but most employees would disagree.

"Slideware may help speakers outline their talks, but convenience for the speaker can be punishing to the story, content and the experience of the audience." (Yale professor emeritus Edward R. Tufte)

Leaders must take off their blinkers, recognize their platitudes as tedious, and replace them with compelling stories that inspire employees and stakeholders. Your stories should touch your people's hearts. To achieve this goal, tell stories about how your employees' contributions help make your company special.

3. Engagement

This blind spot is the belief that "rational...presentations engage the hearts and minds of people." The reality is that you can't win people over with logic – or with fact-packed, data-driven reports.

Employees "must believe it's their store, their hotel, their office, their factory or their hospital."

You win people over when you engage with them in meaningful dialogue, appeal to their emotions. Leaders must put away their PowerPoint slides and discussion points and start to talk with their employees in a relevant, respectful and ongoing exchange.

You engage employees when you speak to their emotions. Author Alan Deutschman advises leaders to move away from standard heavy-handed refrains commonly repeated in communications to employees. These include "force" (we'd better change), "facts" (the need for change is obvious) and "fear" (without change, we're in big trouble). Instead, structure your communications around hope. Evoking optimism and faith in the future requires "authentic conversations," not "well-scripted presentations."

4. Trust

This blind spot rests on believing that "people will not do the right thing unless you tell them what to do and hold themselves accountable to do it." In reality, if you force your employees to stick to rigid scripts, you severely limit what they can accomplish as individuals with singular talents and capabilities. Instead, trust your employees and let them become their best selves. This is where greatness lies – for employees and organizations.

"Simple can be harder than complex: you have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple." (Steve Jobs)

Without rules and regulations, organizations can fall apart. The challenge – and it's a tough one – is to walk the fine line between controlling employees and trusting them to use their wise judgment at work. To meet this challenge: 1) Establish clear priorities, 2) provide context for why these priorities are important and 3) invite employees to leverage their strengths whenever that makes sense.

5. Truth

This blind spot comes from thinking, “My people feel safe telling me what they really think and feel.” The reality: In many organizations, no truth-telling exists, whether in formal meetings or during discussions among employees and executives. Employees fear that if they speak candidly their boss will demote them, fire them or push them aside.

“While there was a time when employees were only paid to complete a specific set of tasks, there is way more to it than that today.”

This insidious fear can cripple positive relationships among employees and their leaders and poison the work environment. Leaders must find practical ways to unlink worry, fear and danger from basic truth-telling by employees, managers and executives.

Thirteen Leadership Lessons

Use these leadership lessons as antidotes to counteract the five blind spots:

1. **“Make purpose personal”** – People want to work for organizations they admire. They want to be part of companies with a solid reputation. They want to be able to look up to their leaders. To meet these expectations, leaders’ words and actions must always support their organizations’ purpose. This helps establish leaders’ authenticity. Leaders must be strong communicators who can connect in a genuine way with employees.
2. **“Be passionate about your purpose, not your numbers”** – In “purpose-driven” organizations, the numbers only measure progress. Never state your purpose in terms of numbers. Purpose inspires employees; numbers do not.
3. **“Proactively close the gap between what we say and what we mean”** – Telling employees to be “innovative,” “productive” and “more efficient” is pointless. People hear these words constantly. After a while, they become background noise, like birds chirping in trees. Communicate meaningfully; do what you say you will do.
4. **Tell great stories** – Compelling stories are memorable. “Data, slides and bullets” never are. Yet many leaders rely on dry data and statistics to make their points. They should tell engaging stories. You may have the best strategic plan, but if you can’t communicate it effectively – with a powerful story everyone will remember – no one will want to be part of it. Use stories to get your points across with employees and with everyone else.

5. **“Don’t place foolish emphasis on WIIFM”** – “What’s in it for me?” offers a powerful inducement, but you can use better motivators, such as “adventure and possibilities of what can be.” For most employees, these factors inspire more than self-interest. People like a challenge. They like to make a difference and find new ways to move ahead.
6. **“Focus on the emotional versus the rational”** – Many organizations handle change badly. Before implementing a change program, these organizations muster relevant facts, communicate their plans to employees and wait for change to occur. It usually doesn’t. Senior executives then think, “Our people don’t get it.” Next time, instead of focusing on facts, focus on feelings – specifically, on your staff members’ thoughts and emotions. If you can’t get employees on your side in tackling a change initiative, it will never get off the ground. Connect with them, and they’ll make sure it does.
7. **“Use dialogue to reach the hearts and minds of your people”** – Employees want to believe they matter to their organization. To demonstrate that you hold your staff members in high regard, talk to them regularly about important issues affecting your firm. Dialogue transcends standard conversations. It involves “caring, listening, questioning, refining new ideas and finding better solutions.” Through dialogue, you tap into the “collective intelligence” of your team. Such intelligence has great power. Leverage it for the benefit of your organization.
8. **“Flip the switch for your people”** – Often, when senior leaders engage in heartfelt dialogue with their employees, they end up amazed at the “untapped intelligence” they uncover. Keep your employees up to speed about the company’s latest challenges so you can gain meaningful input and learn from them. This is a much better plan than always instructing them. Show that you know you can learn from them.
9. **“Embrace human variability”** – Leaders generally want things to go according to plan. They aren’t fans of human variability, which, in fact, they should celebrate. Without it, you lose the individual high performances that make your firm special.
10. **“Clarify hard lines, guidelines and no lines to make the complex simple”** – “Control and trust” are essential for organizations. Leaders must ask when they should exercise a firm rule, and when they should let employees use their own good judgment. Balance the ideas of hard lines (how the organization always handles things), guidelines (guardrails as needed) and no lines (employees figure things out for themselves).
11. **“Use humor: It’s not just funny, it’s breakthrough”** – For decades the cast members of *Saturday Night Live* have used humor to communicate basic truths. Organizations can use humor for the same purpose. Humor makes the work environment a safe space. When employees laugh with one another, they’re more inclined to speak freely.
12. **“Create a truth-telling culture”** – Employees who can’t speak honestly about their companies often develop a victim mentality. Reach for “co-accountability” instead – a culture in which employees can tell each other the truth about the organization they work for and what they do.

13. **“To thyself be true and others will follow”** – Put aside your ego. Understand that everything at work doesn’t center around you. Instead of focusing on yourself, focus on the employees you lead. To engage your staff members, put them first.

“Dialogue is at the root of all effective engagement, and the only pathway to authentically engage the hearts and minds of people.”

About the Authors

Jim Haudan is a co-founder of Root Inc., an organizational change and development consultancy, where **Rich Berens** is CEO and “Chief Client Fanatic.”



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