The Enemy of Engagement

Put an End to Workplace Frustration – and Get the Most from Your Employees

Mark Royal and Tom Agnew

Introduction

In today’s business world, organizations are constantly challenged to “do more with less.” Companies must determine how to translate employee motivation into better performance at the individual, team, and organization-wide levels. Research conducted seven years ago by Mark Royal and Tom Agnew at Hay Group revealed that workplace barriers are a major but often overlooked threat to employee engagement. The resulting frustration decreases employee engagement. The authors wrote The Enemy of Engagement to help managers address this problem. To illustrate their concepts, they employ the fictional Bernette Financial case study as a foundation to defining workplace frustration and its negative effects on organizations, as well as to describe how to identify its root causes, and discuss how to promote higher levels of employee enablement and improve company performance.
integrate both Bernette’s and Green Tree’s products. However, this request was refused by senior management. Stacy Robbins, the shift supervisor reporting to Lauren, is under considerable stress as call center representatives are forced to use inefficient and outdated tools. Service levels are dropping and Beth, Lauren, and Stacy are concerned about employee morale. Further complicating matters is Bob Joseph, a call center representative who is a talented writer, but slow at customer service. He has excellent customer satisfaction scores, but his work pace is slower than his peers. Beth wants to move him to marketing, where his skills can be better used as a technical writer. Meanwhile, Lauren’s level of dissatisfaction with Bernette has caused her to launch a job search.

The majority of Bernette’s call center employees are engaged in their work, but it is not clear that engagement is enough. The authors note that the higher the levels of loyalty and engagement in a company, the more frustrated employees become when they encounter obstacles. They become frustrated because they care about the organization and its well-being, yet they cannot do their jobs effectively. Frustration in the workplace prevents employees from succeeding due to organizational barriers or the inability to use one’s talents on the job. Different people deal with frustration in different ways. Some individuals react positively, while others react in a more negative fashion. The authors describe three responses to workplace frustration:

1. A breakthrough. Some employees discover ways to overcome obstacles. They use positive problem solving techniques to deal with their frustration.

2. A breakdown. Some employees conclude that it is not worth their time to give their best effort. As a result, they give up trying.

3. A clean break. Some employees decide to look for another job. This response is common among high potential employees.

Research conducted by Hay Group suggests that 20 percent or more of the total workforce is comprised of frustrated employees. Unfortunately, most companies do not recognize this group because they are not asking for their feedback, they cannot hear their input, or they simply prefer not to know. Hay Group has

**Key Concepts**

In *The Enemy of Engagement*, Mark Royal and Tom Agnew define workplace frustration, describe how to identify its root causes, and discuss how to promote higher levels of employee enablement as a way to improve performance.

1. Workplace frustration reduces organizational effectiveness. Frustration in the workplace prevents employees from succeeding due to organizational barriers or the inability to use one’s talents on the job.

2. Employee engagement and employee enablement are the keys to improved performance. Engaged employees are highly attached to their employers, but employee engagement is not enough to sustain high levels of effectiveness over time. The missing link is employee enablement.

3. Before employee enablement solutions can be implemented, the underlying issues must be diagnosed. Problems associated with employee enablement can be identified by analyzing the following factors: performance management, authority and empowerment, resources, training, collaboration, and work, structure, and processes.

4. Managers should view themselves as organizational change agents. When managers understand the causes and results of employee frustration, they can build a business case for enabling workers.

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http://www.haygroup.com

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By Jim Haudan
found that both frustration and the lack of company support for performance is a problem that occurs in every job level, function, industry, and geography. Between 32 and 48 percent of employees experience work conditions that prevent them from being as productive as they could be. The irony is that frustrated workers want to make a greater contribution, but they are hindered by companies that ask them to do more.

**Enabling High Performance Levels from Engaged Employees**

**The situation at Bernette Financial:** Despite her best efforts, Lauren is having trouble meeting her goals at the call center. She is responsible for scheduling the appropriate number of representatives to cover the phones 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The right number of representatives is affected by factors like new product launches and new promotions. Unfortunately, over the past few months, Bernette’s marketing team has not been notifying her of their new initiatives. Beth has approached her new manager, Angela Lohan, who is the senior vice president of operations. Beth explained that the call center’s overtime costs were excessive and that if Lauren’s CRM proposal could be funded, the company would enjoy significant savings.

Unfortunately, Angela claimed that resources are not available and that the call center needed to “do more with less.” Beth decides not to raise the issue again, even if doing more with less negatively affects the call center’s employee retention rate. Up to now, Bernette had enjoyed one of the lowest call center turnover rates in the industry. Stacy is facing her own frustrations with regard to transferring Bob to the technical writing job in marketing. After the merger, the bank adopted a Green Tree policy which prevents employees on a performance improvement plan from being promoted. Bob’s transfer now appears to be in jeopardy. Bob is disappointed, but he commits to trying to improve. He feels like he was already giving the call center job 110 percent and he is unsure how much longer he can maintain that level of effort.

Engaged workers are highly attached to their employers and want to remain a part of the organization. However, Hay Group’s research shows that employee engagement is not enough to sustain high levels of effectiveness over time. To maximize performance, companies must provide organizational systems and work environments that support both personal and organizational effectiveness.

The term “employee enablement” is defined as the ability of engaged employees and teams to make maximum contributions. The authors describe the two components that make up employee enablement:

1. **Optimized roles.** This means that workers’ skills and abilities are put to good use, through alignment of the employees with their positions.

2. **Supportive environment.** In a supportive environment, work arrangements are structured in a way that contributes to employee productivity. Workers have the necessary resources to complete their jobs.

Interestingly, employee engagement and employee
enablement do not always co-exist in organizations. Companies with high employee engagement, but low employee enablement are incubators for frustrated employees. The functions associated with leadership closely align with the drivers of engagement found in Hay Group research. These functions include setting organizational direction, ensuring alignment at every level, and motivating employees. In contrast, the functions associated with managers align with the drivers of enablement. These functions include planning, organizing, staffing, and problem solving. The authors believe that in recent years, executive assessment and development programs have focused excessively on leadership. They suggest that employee enablement can be improved through a balance between leadership and management.

Hay Group data on hundreds of companies demonstrates the benefits of combining employee engagement and enablement. Companies that are in the top quartile for engagement and enablement enjoy a five year return on assets, return on investment, and return on equity levels that are 40 to 60 percent higher than the industry average. Companies with highly engaged and enabled employees also have significantly lower voluntary turnover and higher performance than their other firms.

The key to sustaining the energy and positive outlook that new employees typically bring with them when they enter an organization is ensuring adequate support for success in job roles.

Sometimes Engagement Trips Over Enablement

The situation at Bernette Financial: Stacy Robbins has many years experience with Bernette Financial. She started work as a part-time teller during her senior year of high school. After graduation, she accepted a full time job as head teller and enrolled at the University of Denver as a part-time student. When Bernette’s online division opened two years later, she worked as a call center representative with the understanding that she would be promoted to supervisor. Stacy became a key resource when employees from marketing or IT needed to shepherd a project through the call center. Outside of work, she is now studying for an MBA and aspires to eventually secure a senior management role. However, she no longer thinks that path will be possible at Bernette. The size of the call center teams are getting bigger, so it is hard to spend adequate time with each representative during a shift. In addition, the number of escalations has increased dramatically over the last few months. Due to the CRM problems, representatives are unable to find the information needed to resolve calls. First time calls resolved was once at an industry high of 80 percent. Now they are at 65 percent, which is unacceptably low. The plummeting service levels frustrate Stacy. When the call center first opened, Stacy worked with IT to develop an onboarding plan which ensured that new call center employees were working soon after training. She had created the plan on her own time, but given her current frustration with Bernette, Stacy is unlikely to spend any of her own time on work related issues. Stacy has updated her resume and will soon explore other opportunities through job interviews.

One of the findings from Hay Group’s global employee opinion normative database is that employees with less than one year of service have the highest levels of motivation. Employees with between one and five years of service have less favorable opinions of their employers, while employees with more than five years experience with a company have more positive opinions. When there is a lack of alignment between an employee’s expectations about their work and reality, disengagement often results.

Many companies try to align employee expectations and organizational realities through pre-hire and post-hire programs. Examples of these programs include realistic job previews (RJPs) for pre-hires, and solid onboarding experiences for post-hires. RJPs are designed to give candidates honest information about both the positive and negative aspects of a job. Onboarding helps assimilate and accelerate new employees into an organization’s culture and methodologies. It is much more in depth than basic orientation.

New employees usually display high levels of both engagement and enablement. Over time, however, dealing with obstacles erodes engagement and enablement. Royal and Agnew believe that the day
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today reality of a job is based more on enablement than on engagement. As a result, RJP's and onboarding are not enough. Managing the overall enablement levels in a company is a better method for reducing turnover. The authors state that any time declining engagement levels appear, one of the first suspects should be enablement issues.

Understanding Enablement

The situation at Bernette Financial: Ray Pough, the former head of operations at Bernette, was well respected by everyone at the company. As a result, Beth decides to meet with him at a local coffee shop to discuss the problems that have arisen at the call center. Ray notes that many high potential employees at the company must be going unnoticed because there is no time for performance management. He also comments that energy and resources will continue to be wasted until Bernette clarifies cross-functional relationships. Ray observes that people must be given specific decision-making accountability and that mechanisms need to be developed to share decisions with everyone affected by them. He recommends that Beth and Lauren develop charts to show Angela Lohan which demonstrate the cost of waiting to integrate the call center CRM system.

Beth takes Ray's advice. She and Lauren convince Angela through time sheets, graphs, and call transcripts that the call center's CRM improvements represent a source of cost savings that will be easy to obtain. In the meantime, Stacy has been on a second round interview where she favorably impressed the senior vice president of finance at a competing bank. The vice president wonders how many additional employees he can poach from Bernette.

Building employee engagement relies on two factors: (1) promoting employees’ confidence in the company and their role within it, and (2) ensuring that workers are rewarded for their contributions to the company’s success. If employees feel that their pay is significantly below the norm, their motivation will suffer. However, recognition is a greater motivator for employees to deliver superior performance.

Leaders and managers must engage employees, and also help them direct their effort in a productive and effective way. Royal and Agnew discuss six factors that promote high levels of role optimization, as well as a supportive work environment: performance management, authority and empowerment, resources, training, collaboration, and work, structure, and processes.

1. Performance Management. With regard to performance management, leaders must specify clearly for employees what needs to be accomplished, set challenging but attainable performance standards, and provide ongoing feedback about employees’ progress toward those goals.

2. Authority and Empowerment. Managers must give employees both the authority and decision-making responsibility required to do their jobs. Employees should have input about how their work is structured and they should be encouraged to develop new ways of doing things.

3. Resources. Leaders must provide employees with the resources they need to complete their jobs. All necessary information must be available and up-to-date. In addition, adequate staffing levels should be maintained. As the organization changes, job designs and workloads must be reviewed.

Employee enablement involves getting people in job roles that draw on their distinctive abilities to contribute, as well as ensuring that they are able to carry out their job responsibilities as efficiently and effectively as possible.

4. Training. Before employees can be expected to perform to their full potential, they must be fully trained. Managers should guarantee that employee skills keep pace with changing job requirements. This means providing training opportunities so employees can expand their current skill set.

5. Collaboration. Managers must strive to facilitate strong cooperation and teamwork within their groups. They should also cultivate relationships with other functional areas that the group is connected with. These relationships are the foundation for effective sharing of resources and information across the organization.
6. **Work, Structure, and Processes.** The work processes within each unit should be structured and organized in ways that ensure optimal efficiency. Decision making accountabilities should be coordinated with other functional areas. This will improve cross-unit operating effectiveness. Managers must also continually seek new technologies and creative approaches that will improve the effectiveness of operations.

While you don’t need to wait for approval or support from more senior leaders to begin making positive changes, it is of course likewise true that no team within an organization is an island. Your success in enabling your people will be influenced by broader organizational dynamics.

**Diagnosing Enablement Issues and Prescribing Solutions**

*The situation at Bernette Financial:* After their successful meeting with Angela, Beth and Lauren meet again with Ray Pough to report their results. Lauren feels that it was beneficial that they did not address multiple issues during their discussion with Angela. Ray notes that many enablement solutions do not require upper level management approval. He suggests that Beth and Lauren meet with every call center representative, ask them what is frustrating about Bernette, and listen to their ideas. He also suggests that cross-functional teams could help promote information sharing across the company. Lauren notes that perhaps someone from the call center could attend the monthly marketing staff meeting. Beth and Lauren follow Ray’s advice and meet with all their team members. They also implement a new system where call center representatives are not penalized if they have to leave their desk to get information which is not available in the outdated CRM system. When service levels are low, representatives are not penalized, but are encouraged to explain the situation and how to improve it. The call center team begins to feel that they have management support and Lauren decides to cancel her job search. Stacy, on the other hand, cannot see past her own frustration and forge ahead looking for a new opportunity outside Bernette Financial.

Royal and Agnew suggest that the first step to making positive changes in an organization is examination and diagnosis of the problems. They outline their recommendations for each of the factors needed for a supportive work environment.

1. **Performance Management.** Hay Group’s research shows that nearly one third of employees feel that their managers do not clearly communicate their teams’ goals and objectives. In addition, more than 40 percent report that their managers do not provide consistent feedback. Managers must engage in a dialogue with each employee to ensure that there is a common understanding of key targets and tasks. The authors emphasize the importance of setting challenging and attainable goals. One way to do this is to analyze high performers’ work and to use their performance as a benchmark for others. Managers must have the discipline to provide ongoing performance feedback.

2. **Authority and Empowerment.** Hay Group has found that one third of employees do not have adequate authority to carry out their jobs. In addition, nearly one third of workers do not feel their managers encourage them to develop better ways of doing things. Autonomy is important because it gives employees the flexibility they need to work efficiently and in a way that leverages their skills. Barriers to action include the fear of adverse consequences, lack of contact with managers, consensus oriented cultures, and a lack of clarity about what needs to be done.

3. **Resources.** Hay Group’s data reveals that one third of employees do not have the resources necessary to do their jobs well. More than half of workers also feel that their work areas are understaffed. Managers must prioritize and establish the return on investment (ROI) of resource requests. They must also ensure that existing staff resources are managed effectively through efficient planning, scheduling, and training. Leaders should listen carefully to employees, striving to identify the common themes that can help identify resource barriers to performance. Managers can also play
an essential role as “connectors” between individuals, work teams, and the broader organization.

4. Training. Research done by Hay Group shows that more than half of employees feel that job demands leave insufficient time to take advantage of job-related training opportunities. Almost half of employees are also concerned about whether new hire training is adequate. Training should not be viewed as an event, but rather as a process that occurs throughout an employee’s tenure with an organization. When companies provide insufficient initial training, new employees often become frustrated. Over the long term, organizations must invest in training and not allow today’s business demands to shortchange tomorrow’s success.

5. Collaboration. Hay Group has found that close to half of workers do not believe their teams receive high-quality support from other groups in the organization. In addition, similar numbers of employees are concerned about the level of encouragement given for cooperation and information sharing across the company. Royal and Agnew note that a lack of cross-functional collaboration often results from insufficient role clarity and accountability. Even if collaboration exists within a work group, there still may not be effective teamwork between work groups. Conflict between different groups’ operational goals can result in a lack of cooperation.

6. Work, Structure, and Processes. The Hay Group’s research suggests that nearly half of employees believe their organizations are not effectively organized or structured. More than 45 percent of workers also believe their companies are not innovative when it comes to new technologies or techniques for enhancing effectiveness. Not only do managers need to define work procedures and convey them to employees, they also need to evaluate processes periodically to ensure that both roles and work systems are aligned with work demands. When interdependencies are clear across the organization, it prevents redundancies and gaps in accountability between jobs. In addition, all managers have a role to play in facilitating innovations that will improve their team’s performance. Hay Group’s Inventory of Leadership Styles shows that leaders in the most innovative companies have a distinctive profile which includes the following leadership characteristics:

- Authoritative. These leaders provide strong vision and direction to the firm.
- Affiliative. These leaders promote harmony within their teams.
- Participative. These leaders build commitment and generate new ideas.
- Coaching. These leaders focus on long-term individual development.

These four leadership qualities help generate high levels of direction, empowerment, participation, and teamwork.

In our work with many of the world’s leading organizations, we have found that the remedy for frustration is enablement. Enabled employees will work harder and produce more because that’s what they’ve wanted to do all along.

MANAGERS AS ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AGENTS

The situation at Bernette Financial: Beth has started attending the monthly marketing meetings and as a result, the call center has more information about new products and their launch dates. The call center’s service levels have started to improve and the representatives are beginning to up-sell products to customers who call Bernette. With regard to call times, Lauren discovers that it is easy to quantify the time that representatives spend tracking down information that is not in the CRM and making adjustments to the tracking data. Since Stacy has left Bernette, Lauren monitors calls and finds that since the frustration has been removed from representatives’ work, their attitudes have changed for the better. Beth and Lauren meet with the senior executive team to present their case and the group decides to push CRM integration to the top of the company’s priorities. In addition, Beth is invited to the weekly senior management meeting.
Bob, the call center representative, is also promoted to marketing. In his new role, where his writing talents can be used, he quickly becomes a shining light.

Whether managers are working within their teams or with other functional areas to remove barriers, they can play an important role as organizational change agents. Royal and Agnew suggest that managers can build awareness by helping leaders recognize that frustration exists in the organization and how the root cause of that frustration is a lack of employee enablement. When managers understand the causes and results of employee frustration, they can build a business case for enabling workers.

To be a successful organizational change agent, managers must overcome three barriers:

1. **Failure to ask.** Managers are in the unique position where they can ask employees directly about what is frustrating them.

2. **Inability to hear.** By listening carefully during discussions, managers can create a space where employees feel safe when describing the reasons why they are frustrated.

3. **Reluctance to know.** When managers understand the root causes of employee frustration, they can help senior leaders recognize the business reasons why change is necessary and beneficial.

When managers have an enablement perspective, the directive to “do more with less” has different implications. With an enablement view, the focus shifts to allowing motivated employees to perform at their best. When managers and leaders allow this to happen, organizations stop leaving untapped employee performance on the table.

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**Features of the Book**

**Reading Time: 6 hours, 230 pages**

In *The Enemy of Engagement*, Mark Royal and Tom Agnew define workplace frustration, explain how to diagnose it, and describe how managers can reduce frustration in their teams through employee enablement. Key points are highlighted in callout boxes and some chapters include a “deeper dive” into important concepts. Chapter 10 also provides self-assessment checklists for managers. Since the Bernette Financial case study and the core concepts build on one another, the book should be read from cover to cover. *The Enemy of Engagement* is targeted at anyone who directly manages the day-to-day activities of a group of employees. At the end of the book, an index has been provided for reference.

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