



u.s. business review

Reprinted with permission from US Business Review Magazine, Apr 2007

WHO CARES?

By John P. Foppe

Does engaged apathy define your culture?

In the 1999 film satire “Office Space,” Peter Gibbons, an underappreciated and unchallenged computer programmer at a company called Initech, admits to a pair of efficiency consultants that he does as little real work as possible, “I just stare at my desk, but it looks like I’m working,” he admits. “I do that for probably another hour after lunch, too. I’d probably say, in a given week, I probably do about 15 minutes of real, actual work.”

Later, Peter explains that “it’s a problem of motivation, all right? ...I have eight different bosses right now. So that means when I make a mistake, I have eight different people coming by to tell me about it. That’s my real motivation – not to be hassled. That and the fear of losing my job. But y’know ... it will only make someone work hard enough not to get fired.”

AMPLIFICATION OR ACTUALITY?

For many corporate employees, “Office Space” is more than hyperbole. It represents workplace reality, and Peter Gibbons is their poster child. Consistent with the less-than-ideal workplace theme, consider these supporting statistics compiled by Harris Interactive for Stephen Covey:

- Only 37 percent of full-time employees said they have a clear understanding of what their organiza-

tion is trying to achieve and why.

- Only one in five full-time employees was enthusiastic about their team and organization’s goals.
- Only 20 percent fully trusted the organization for which they work.
- Only 14 percent felt they worked in a high-trust environment.

These statistics are not insignificant. They beg us to ask three important questions: Why do these conditions exist; why are employees so apathetic toward the company vision; and, more importantly, how can the trend be reversed?

‘THE TALL, GREEN GRASS’

One reason these conditions exist is apathy, which ultimately kills the vital initiatives of companies. Unfortunately, apathy is rarely as obvious as someone no longer showing up for work. Most exasperated employees show up and, as Gibbons says, work hard enough to not get fired. Contrary to popular definition, they are not disengaged. Rather, they exhibit an engaged apathy, which allows them to keep their jobs but keeps them from advancing the company vision.

A friend uses a vivid metaphor to describe what engaged apathy looks like to the information technologies department of a large company. He says it is a relatively effortless job he and his cohorts hold – but they’re not necessarily complaining, at least, not yet.

His team secretly refers to the department as “The Tall, Green Grass Department.” The implica-

tion is that their jobs are cool – away from the heat of revenue pressures – where it is easy to hide from additional challenges. There, they are content to allow the grass to grow under their feet, engaged in their daily tasks but unconcerned about their effect on the company.

Although this tall, green grass is the gathering place of overlooked, undermotivated employees, it can also become an overgrown cemetery with headstones etched with fizzled career dreams and failed company visions. The danger is that the tall, green grass can spread rapidly as conversations swell outside the teams, groups or departments where it initially sprouted. Co-workers talk about their perceptions of exasperation and these perceptions, widely held, ultimately govern company culture.

When this happens, execution is stagnant, and vision is out of mind. Employees are doing enough to not get fired but care little about the direction of the company.

MOW THE GRASS

To begin the process of reversing engaged apathy, it's important to recognize the conditions that make it ripe to develop and spread. Here's a list of the observable conditions:

- Good intentions are commonly met with stalled efforts.
- Outcomes remain just out of reach.
- Excuses are frequently made.
- Shifting of accountability is a common practice.
- The finger of responsibility is pointed.
- Frequent turnover is the rule.

When one or more of these conditions are present, organizational members easily fall into a state of dismay as they face the decision of getting up or giving up. The absence of outcome is often accompanied by a prevailing sense of resignation and apathy shared among organizational members – which is supported by a perception that it is useless to do anything at all.

These conditions lead to a more permanent state of engaged apathy that ultimately spreads throughout the organization, leaving outcomes stagnated. Once this occurs, organizational members react in very predictable ways. Consider these telltale signs that a company's culture is governed by engaged apathy.

Employees profess:

- To be motivated, but they usually end up going through the motions and marking time.

- To be enthusiastic about the initiative, but remain skeptical and afraid to speak up.
- To be empathetic to the organization's challenges, but are more concerned about how those challenges will affect them.
- To be clear about priorities for moving forward, but generally demonstrate a lack of interest or concern about taking new action.

Meanwhile, leaders profess:

- To notice those employees who have withdrawn, but are not comfortable addressing them because they are themselves unsure about how to move forward.
- To be optimistic and tend to believe everything is fine because they don't hear any complaints (“no news is good news”).
- To be interested in the employees' challenges and concerns, but often think the employees are just making excuses.
- To be aware of employees' difficulties but unwittingly dread digging deeper, insisting that employees will figure out a way to pull through the challenge themselves.

These are not exhaustive lists, but one would be hard-pressed to find an organization where engaged apathy is king without at least two or three of these conditions present.

As we take a step back, lists in mind, it's time to survey the landscape of our companies. Remember that engaged apathy can be difficult to spot. Many workers like the tall, green grass. There, they earn a pressure-free paycheck with minimal accountability. They have little reason, at least initially, to reveal their secret. “As a result, they become effective at playing the role of productively engaged employee – only in rare cases do they completely check out like Peter Gibbons.

Don't be discouraged if it's initially difficult to get a good reading on the presence or absence of engaged apathy. This is a big first step that can take weeks, if not months to ascertain. Continue observing, and the company's true colors will eventually become clear. Once you recognize engaged apathy, you can begin to lay new groundwork and recultivate the landscape to reverse the trend, strive for better execution and create a more satisfying workplace.

Born without arms, John Foppe speaks, coaches and trains on how to maintain momentum when executing initiatives, and translate visions into outcomes. He is the CEO of Visionary Velocity Worldwide, based near St. Louis, MO. For further information, visit www.visionaryvelocity.com.