

HELP! MY BOSS IS SUCKING MY SOUL DRY

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Theft in the workplace commonly involves a taking of property, time, or information which rightfully belongs to the employer; however, an expanded view might include the taking of creative energies or productivity from talented employees or the destruction of their engagement or intentional sabotage of their work product. Theft of employee abilities and competencies by inadequate managers has a direct causal impact on productivity and profits.

Waste, fraud, and abuse of the employer's property might include each employee's engagement in work activity in fulfillment of the mission and goals of the enterprise. A recent Gallup poll revealed that 72% of the US workers are disengaged and simply come to work because they have to. In the US it is estimated about \$370 billion are lost due to poor productivity, waste, duplication of efforts, lack of inventiveness, or other insidious means caused by disengagement. The worldwide results among employed residents aged 18 and older in 142 countries is 24% actively disengaged, 63% not engaged, and 13% engaged.

If this enormous amount of time, effort, energy, creativity, loyalty, and interest, all essential elements for success, are missing or reduced, can this loss or diminished individual investment be considered theft from the employer? Businesses must adapt and change to global economic conditions while maintaining high-productivity workplaces. Effective leadership is an important element to employee engagement and satisfaction as is a culture of compassion.

If the culture of the workplace encourages or, at the least, does not address the basic emotional need of feelings of belonging, the theft of engagement may fall upon the manager whose responsibility it is to provide guidance, feedback, and recognition. An enlightened workplace recognizes its people, communicates in a respectful and compassionate fashion, and encourages trust. Stressed, overworked, or unhappy people cannot be creative or productive. Knowledge workers need to know their role and purpose in contribution to the success of the organization.

Theft by poor management should be a measurement of lost profits or productivity. A University of Virginia study (*Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, August, 2013) suggests we are hardwired to emphasize and closely associate people who are close to us with ourselves. The researchers found that our self-identity is based, in part, on whom we know and feel close to. Regions of the brain responsible for threat response became active under threat of electrical shock to self and that same brain activity was similar under threat of shock to a friend. Does this mean we model ourselves to others, and people close to us become an important part of our self-identity? When a friend is under threat we also feel that affect and, as people spend more

time together, they become more similar. That collaboration is necessary for survival, and we develop workplace friendships with people we trust to expand resources and protect against threat.

Researchers at the University of Akron and Michigan State University developed the Workplace Arrogance Scale (WARS) to identify arrogant tendencies and mitigate them and the resulting problems in the workplace. Lacking compassion and emotional intelligence, arrogant bosses often cause employee turnover and bring about a negative overall work atmosphere. This can occur when arrogant managers attempt to prove superiority and competence, such as:

- Placing a personal agenda ahead of the company's agenda.
- Demonstrating different behaviors with subordinates and supervisors.
- A pattern of discrediting others' ideas to make them look bad (bullying).
- Recurrent rejection of constructive feedback (bullying).
- Exaggeration of personal superiority to make others feel inferior.

Merely because one has the power to make others feel inferior, embarrassed, humiliated, or demeaned does not mean this form of theft of motivation and engagement should be tolerated. It is counter-productive to use intimidation or bullying techniques on anyone, and especially those on whom leadership relies on to get the job done. Stealing energy from co-workers is a type of workplace theft that drains resources and adversely impacts the organization.

More than 20 years ago, psychologist John Gottman and a research team wanted to learn why couples separate and recorded 80 married couples in a recent disagreement, as reported by the *Scientific American*. The researchers coded all behaviors observed in their brief conversations and 14 years later located the subjects, some of whom had divorced. They identified 4 behaviors common to the divorced couples with a degree of accuracy of 93%. Those toxic behaviors are:

1. Contempt —anger mixed with disgust; treating people with disdain.
2. Criticism — beyond merely behavior; an attack about personality.
3. Defensiveness — the drama of being victimized; the other is more wrong.
4. Stonewalling-stressed out physiological disengagement; beyond distraction.

Can these same behaviors help explain why we disengage from workplace relationships? The most effective people at leading and adapting to change at any place in the organization are those who have the highest level of emotional intelligence. Many intractable problems in the workplace result from poor communication and lack of self-awareness and other emotional intelligence competencies. In today's economy, corporations are faced with the challenge of continuously improving efficiency to remain competitive. This means strict oversight and tight

controls on those elements that effect an organization's cost structure. Historically, the focus has been on tangible costs that are easily identifiable and can be accurately measured.

Now, in order to continue down the path of efficiency, many companies are focusing on costs that do not appear on the financial statements and that may not be easily measured with traditional systems. In a more culturally complex and age diverse workplace, managers must appreciate and better understand the filters and differences in communication and listening and develop the compassion and emotional intelligence required to be an effective leader. The empathy that emotional intelligence encourages may be a feel-good moral reaction but is no substitute for acting compassionately. The culture within the workplace must encourage and reward compassion as a compelling sense of duty. The structure of a corporate culture to that goal may be enhanced through learning programs, modeling, and coaching.

A healthy workplace must begin in the corporate suite; it is essential for durable, satisfying, and rewarding relationships and can be achieved through productive communication, understanding, and respectful interactions. A policy that states we must be respectful of others, not bully, and treat colleagues with dignity is only a piece of paper if it is not practiced. People naturally engage in conflict and this is good if it leads to something better like understanding, guidance, insight, or explained expectations. When conflict is not properly managed and causes discomfort, becomes chronic, or interferes with performance this destruction encourages disengagement, diminishes relationships, and makes the corporate culture toxic.

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