Stories, Analogies and Metaphors about Leadership and Employee Engagement
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Managing Low-Wage Employees

If you’re not paying your employees 20% more than your competitors, you’ve got a problem. Thankfully, the 20% doesn’t need to be made up of cold hard cash.

People happily give up a bit of money, and sometimes a lot, so long as they’re getting something extra. In the workplace, the magic number is 20%. If your company’s salaries are lower than your competitors’ and you’re unable to increase them, you need to provide extra intangible value that’s 20% more than what your staff could get elsewhere.

The world of luxury shopping is one example where consumers happily make a financial sacrifice in the hope they’ll get more out of it. In many cases, people happily hand over $1000 for a $50 handbag just because it contains a logo which signifies enhanced quality, a finer buying experience, or quite simply, status. Whatever it is, they’re sacrificing money for extra intangible value.

On the other end of the scale, convenience stores are flourishing even though their prices are often two or three times as much as what you’d pay in a supermarket for the same products. That’s because they’re also offering extra intangible value such as 24-hour shopping and the handiness of being a short walk away from your home or office.

The 20% extra intangible value that you provide can consist of more opportunities, greater flexibility, increased responsibilities, challenging work, more autonomy, career development, unparalleled training, involvement in decision-making, fabulous team-mates, and of course, unbeatable management.

The options you choose would vary from person to person. One employee may have no interest in challenging work whatsoever but be intensely motivated by the thought of having total autonomy. Your task is
to find out what rocks their boat, and ramp it up to a level where they’re getting 20% or more than they would anywhere else.

If your company is the financial equivalent of a $2 bargain basement store, it doesn’t mean that it can’t be a Gucci at heart.

**Employee Turnover**

Employee turnover comes down to just one simple word: commitment. And we only need to look at the ultimate commitment of the world’s longest marriage to really see it in action.

In 2005, Percy and Florence Arrowsmith (from Britain) celebrated their 80th wedding anniversary, a world record at the time. The following are their responses when they were asked for their secrets to a happy and committed marriage, and how these can be adapted to create a happy and committed workforce.

**Saying “yes, dear”:** Percy said he often used the phrase “yes, dear” to keep Florence happy. At work, we don’t use “yes, dear” enough. We’ll come up with reasons why something can’t be done rather than trying to find a way to make it happen. We’ll dismiss employees’ ideas, use negative language, and criticise employee wrongs more than we recognise their achievements. Instead, say “yes, dear” more often.

**Never go to sleep as bad friends:** Florence says that they’ve always gone to sleep with a kiss and a cuddle. There’s something powerful about being a manager and apologising for a mistake. There’s something admirable about dealing with issues as they arise rather than saving them for a performance appraisal. There’s something great about asking for feedback on how you can improve your managerial skills.
Hard work: Both Florence and Percy agree that it's taken a lot of effort to maintain their loving marriage. How much effort are you dedicating to your employee relationships? If you're spending more time on operational tasks than with your team, or if you're not going out of your way to support your employees, or if you're not working as hard to achieve your employees' objectives as you are your own, then you're not putting in enough effort.

Understanding: Florence and Percy made it a mission to truly understand each other. At work, we get frustrated when our employees don't see things our way, when they fail to comprehend instructions, and when they don't grasp the importance of what we're saying. But, as Dr Stephen Covey says, in order to be understood, we must first seek to understand. If you don't have an intimate knowledge of your employees' thoughts and goals, then you don't really understand.

It's a coincidence (and a shame) that we're living in such a disloyal age where half of marriages end in divorce and many companies are struggling with employee turnover. And in both cases it's because we've forgotten the art and the magic of commitment.

Learning at Work

Companies often get learning confused with listening. They provide lecture-style training sessions which go through one ear and out the other, when the key to learning at work is to trigger some kind of emotion.

Someone can tell you ten times to stay away from a hot stove, but it's not until you accidentally touch a scorching saucepan that you learn to change your behaviour. The emotion: pain.

You can read every self-help book, but it's not until you hear of someone beating the odds to achieve something remarkable, that you learn to set some goals. The emotion: inspiration.
And so it is with learning at work. Here are just a few of the emotions that you can stir up to stimulate your employees’ learning:

**Pain:** Even if you see a mistake coming, let it happen. It might have a short-term negative effect on the business, but it’ll have a longer-term positive impact on your employees.

**Joy:** People learn best when they’re having fun. The body is relaxed, the mind is more open, and what you’re teaching is easily embraced. Your learners have got to be laughing.

**Enthusiasm:** Instead of just offering development on job-related technical skills, also provide employees with training that’s more relevant to their career objectives and personal interests.

**Confidence:** Less than 10% of learning comes from training; the rest is from job experiences. Trust your employees with responsibilities that seem beyond their capabilities.

In most workplaces, trainers and managers are preoccupied with the *transfer of knowledge*, when it’s the **motivation to embrace** the knowledge that makes the biggest difference. And what generates motivation? Emotions.
Effective Communication

Cicero, from ancient Rome, and Demosthenes, from ancient Greece, are two of history’s most powerful orators. “A home without books is a body without soul,” said Cicero, while Demosthenes is famous for saying that “all speech is vain and empty unless it be accompanied by action”.

Renowned for their eloquence and mastery of words, they’ve been hailed throughout history for being so brilliant that the only competitors they had in the field of oratory were each other. There was, however, one key point of distinction.

It’s recorded that whenever Cicero addressed audiences, they would applaud and praise him for his speaking abilities. But, when Demosthenes presented, his audiences were compelled to take up arms to bravely fight against the enemy. The difference is that people admired Cicero because of how well he spoke, but people admired Demosthenes for how well he persuaded – and that’s an important consideration for any leader communicating in the workplace.

The ultimate objective of communication is to persuade people to follow your instruction, or to accept your vision, or to think and act differently in some way. That’s unlikely to happen if all they do is sit back and admire how smoothly you were able to articulate it. But it’s far more likely to occur if you’re able to persuade them by stirring up some kind of positive emotion that inspires them to pay attention and then act.

A series of studies from the University of Southern California has produced four main steps to persuasive communication in the workplace:
Establish credibility: In order to influence your employees, they must perceive you as being knowledgeable and as someone they can trust. Often, this has a lot to do with the quality of your relationships and their perceptions of the decisions you've made in the past.

Find common ground: Clarify the mutual benefits arising from what you want employees to do. It helps to discover in advance the issues of highest priority to them so that you can explain how your proposal will alleviate their angst.

Use evidence: Strengthen your point by using language that engages their preferred style of communication. That means incorporating stories, metaphors, statistics, case studies, and other examples to which your employees can relate.

Make a connection: Most employees don’t react to announcements rationally; they react emotionally. That’s why it’s essential to identify their underlying emotions, and then adjust your words and tone to accommodate how they’re feeling.

And then, really, it’s all about practicing. When Demosthenes decided he wanted to be a public speaker, he had a weak voice characterised by stuttering and stammering. Audiences laughed at him, ridiculing his ambition. To cure himself, he practiced speaking with pebbles in his mouth, he strengthened his voice by reciting poetry while running up a hill, and he worked on his posture by rehearsing with a sword balancing on his shoulder.

Because, to influence others, sometimes you have to begin by influencing yourself.
Managing your Manager

There’s a great scene in the movie *Matilda*, based on the fabulous book by Roald Dahl, in which the slimy father, Harry Wormwood, is giving his kids a tour of his used car yard. He shows them how he sells vehicles in excess of their real value, how he glues rather than welds bumper bars, and how he uses a power drill to wind back the odometer.

His daughter, Matilda, is appalled. “Daddy, you’re a crook,” she says. “What?!” replies her father, walking contemptuously towards her. “This is illegal,” she protests. “Do you make money?” he spits at the 6-year-old. “Do you have a job?”

“No,” says Matilda. “But don’t people need good cars? Can’t you sell good cars, dad?”

“Listen, you little wiseacre,” retorts her father. “I’m smart, you’re dumb. I’m big, you’re little. I’m right, you’re wrong. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

There’s actually a lot she can do about it. The rest of the plot chronicles her revenge on the irrational adults in her life. You, too, might have irrational bosses who think they’re smart, you’re dumb; they’re big, you’re little; they’re right and you’re wrong.

But you, too, can change the situation. The process begins by understanding the concept of **bounded rationality**. This is when people’s decisions are negatively affected when they’re restricted by a lack of *information* (what they don’t know), a lack of *cognition* (what they can’t comprehend), and a lack of *time* (what they can’t accommodate).
What this means is that your senior leaders, when presented with a wide variety of decisions, might just go with the simplest and easiest - but that might not be your preferred option. If you’d like greater influence over that decision-making process, you need to somehow reverse the limitations of information, cognition, and time.

**Information:** Provide your leader with more than one option – but never more than three – articulating the pros and cons of each. Your boss, however, might not be interested unless what you communicate is framed in the context of how it meets his or her problems and objectives. Frame your proposed solution based upon those issues, not your own.

**Cognition:** People more easily understand information when it’s communicated in their own language. This means using data if your boss is analytical and using stories if your boss is expressive. It also means building a solid relationship that makes you appear credible, so that your opinion is valued and trusted rather than ignored.

**Time:** Carefully select the best time to approach your superiors. As a starting point, identify their circadian rhythms that determine whether their energy levels are at their peak in the morning or in the afternoon, and then bring up your proposal then. Also, be cognisant of their working style. If they’re fast-paced, talk quickly. If they’re relaxed, slow down.

As the narrator of *Matilda* says, “Every human being is unique ... for better or for worse.” Your task is to discover the unique idiosyncrasies, priorities, and preferences of the person you’re trying to influence, and then adapt your style in a way that makes them think a little more rationally. You know, a little more like you.
Leading through Change

See if you can identify what the following short (but true) case studies have in common.

Malcolm was recently involved in a car accident that left him with a temporary disability. But no matter what he did, he just couldn't get better. He tried everything from physiotherapy to hypnotherapy, but his injuries remained.

Nadine, for a long time, suffered from agoraphobia – a fear of wide-open spaces – that left her locked inside her own home, unable to leave the house. She went to regular counseling sessions to no avail. Her condition didn't improve.

Oliver is an elderly gentleman who has endured back pain for several months. He's been to see chiropractors and osteopaths, all of whom say his back has fully repaired, but Oliver swears the pain still persists.

All three individuals are reticent to change their condition because of a psychological factor known as secondary gain. This is when people derive an unexpected benefit from their handicap. The term was made famous by Sigmund Freud, who referred to patients “clinging to their disease” as a way of retaining the benefits to which they had become accustomed.

In Malcolm's case, the secondary gain was additional time away from work the longer his injuries prevailed. In Nadine's case, the secondary gain was the luxury of having her husband do all the chores that required venturing outside such as shopping, gardening, and picking up the kids from school. In Oliver's case, the secondary gain was the alleviation of loneliness because his grandchildren visited him more frequently whenever he felt unwell.

Secondary gains also occur in the workplace, especially during times of change. If you have employees who are particularly resistant to change – even when those changes are necessary and positive – they might simply be clinging to the status quo because they fear they're going to lose certain benefits. These benefits may include power, money, ease, responsibility, status, friends, convenience, respect, knowledge, comfort, and many others.
And just like Malcolm, Nadine and Oliver, employees will never be ready to embrace change unless you first help them overcome those secondary gains. The key thing to keep in mind, though, is that people aren’t consciously aware they’re being held back by their addiction to a secondary gain. The initial step for you must be to raise their awareness.

You can achieve this by having conversations during which you ask the following questions:

- What are some of the benefits in maintaining the status quo?
- What are the negative consequences of sticking to the past?
- Are the benefits greater or lesser than the negatives?
- What are some of the potential problems that might arise if nothing changes?

Once you get employees confessing their underlying secondary gains, you’re then able to put in place solutions to overcome them. For example, you might articulate the greater benefits that will eventuate if they were to accept the proposed change. Or you might establish some measures to ease the loss associated with giving up a secondary gain. Or you might even find a way to retain the gain even after the change has been implemented.

But the first step is always awareness. As Sigmund Freud wrote: “Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise.”
Learning and Memory

Let’s say you’re driving to a place you’ve never been before. You have neither a map nor a GPS. Unfortunately you get lost on the way, so you stop and ask someone for directions. The helpful local might reply with something like this: “Just keep driving straight ahead and take the second left then your first right. Keep going down ‘til you see the café on the corner and then turn left. At the second set of lights, turn right, and you’re there.”

Those directions are straightforward. You hear them, say thank you, and drive off. But as soon as you take the first part of those directions, you stop, having totally forgotten the rest – despite making a conscious effort to remember.

If that’s ever happened to you, it’s because of something known as foresight bias, which occurs when we overconfidently presume that our memory will retain information.

For example, you might think of a great idea, and it’s so fantastic you decide there’s no need to write it down because it’d be impossible to ever forget an idea this good! But then you forget it. Or you might place your car keys somewhere, in a location you just know is so obvious. But then you lose them.

These occurrences often arise because of the foresight bias. It’s a cognitive illusion that many of us experience when we overestimate how easy it’ll be to remember something. That’s why, in the workplace, you might be baffled as to why employees are still completing a process in an old way when you’ve already instructed them on the new procedure. Or why you’ve taught something in a training program that people can’t recall at a later date. Or why you deliver a coaching session but there’s still no behavioural change.
Instead of apportioning blame, consider that the foresight bias might be having a negative influence. Here are some solutions to help your team overcome it:

- In coaching sessions, do more asking than telling so that employees do more thinking than listening.
- When outlining a new process, ask employees to summarise the instructions using their own words and, if possible, to write them down.
- Use a variety of means to convey the same message such as pictures, diagrams, stories, statistics, and activities.
- In training manuals, include more blank spaces than text so that people can write what they hear in ways that most resonate with them.
- Identify the preferred learning method for each individual and then tailor training programs to suit those learning preferences.
- Understand that in an era where people are bombarded with more information than ever before, it’s essential to repeat it in different ways over a longer period of time in order for it to be retained.

At the very least, let employees know the foresight bias exists so they can prepare for it. Because there’s wisdom in the old saying that what we need more than foresight or hindsight is… insight.

**New or Leaderless Teams**

You may be aware of the scientific theory that ‘nature abhors a vacuum’. In quantum mechanics, it’s referred to as the vacuum state, which basically means there’s no such thing as a vacuum.

Let’s say, for example, that you created some kind of glass container closed off to all physical particles. From the outside looking in, it would appear as though it was empty. But really it’s not. That space, at the very least, contains electromagnetic waves and particles. If the slightest piercing were to penetrate the container, it would then be filled with air. And, depending
on where the container was located, a slightly larger opening may see it consumed with water or sand or any other substance.

That’s why philosophers like Aristotle have professed that vacuums don’t exist. As soon as we think that one is there, something instantly fills it up.

Such is the case at work – an environment notorious for the vacuums that arise. When there’s a vacuum of information, it’s filled with gossip. When there’s a vacuum of training, it’s filled with mistakes. When there’s a vacuum of opportunity, it’s filled with disengagement.

If we were to look specifically at new teams (or established teams that have been leaderless for a while), there are four vacuums that are especially present: structure, knowledge, relationships, and authority.

**Structure:** This represents the systems that are in place, the ways in which the team is organised, and the rules that determine how and when the work gets done. A vacuum of structure is often filled with misguided people.

**Knowledge:** This reflects the collective expertise of the employees, an awareness of their developmental gaps, and the principles that influence their decision-making. A vacuum of knowledge is often filled with costly errors.

**Relationships:** This includes the level of trust among the team members, the degree to which they understand each other, and the extent to which they like and respect one another. A vacuum of relationships is often filled with conflict.
Authority: This is in relation to the informal power that some employees hold, the credibility of the leader to lead the team, and the ability of the leader to inspire change. A vacuum of authority is often filled with power struggles.

If you’re a leader taking over a new or leaderless team, it’s important to fill those four vacuums before other (unfavourable) elements infiltrate them. As the American writer Tennessee Williams wrote figuratively: “A vacuum is a hell of a lot better than some of the stuff that nature replaces it with.”

The trouble, though, is that a vacuum doesn’t last very long. Or at all.

Commitment and Buy-in

When Beethoven was 26, he started to lose his hearing. It began as a ringing in his ears that got worse and worse until he was almost completely deaf. It became so bad that the only way he could communicate with his friends was by getting them to write down what they were saying in a book, into which he would write his reply.

Beethoven’s devastation over what was happening led him to live alone in an Austrian town where he spent time contemplating suicide. And yet he persevered. In letters penned to his brothers, he wrote that he remained committed to his work because he saw his art as something that had to survive even if it meant enduring the heartache of not hearing his audiences applaud. “It seemed unthinkable for me to leave the world forever before I had produced all that I felt called upon to produce,” he wrote.

And so, in the face of pain and struggle, he miraculously continued to compose music. In fact, some of his most brilliant and famous work
emerged during the period that his deafness was at its most severe – truly magnificent pieces like his Symphony No. 9.

The reason Beethoven was able to continue so resolutely in the application of his craft can be attributed to the word why. As is often said, when the why is big enough, the ‘how’ takes care of itself. In Beethoven’s case, the why was the influence his music had on the world.

The power of why has been proven empirically by psychologists at Ohio State University. In a number of experiments, researchers discovered that people who considered ‘why’ they performed a challenging task were more likely to persevere with it. In comparison, those who focused only on ‘how’ to do it were more likely to give up.

So, if you’re trying to get your employees to be committed to a project or to an activity that’s difficult or unenjoyable, or if you’re eager to get their buy-in for an idea or a change that you know they’ll resist, there is rarely anything more urgent than to articulate why. In particular:

- Why this?
- Why now?
- Why them?
- Why from you?
- Why in this way?

The why gives people the purpose to follow your vision and it adds meaning to a job that may otherwise be uninteresting. It may be invisible, but the why is what generates the visible. To those who are feeling uninspired, it is music to their ears.
Attitude

In the magnificent musical *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle is a poor girl with a ghastly accent and a terrible grasp of the English language who sells flowers on the streets for a living. She meets Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, who makes a bet with a man named Colonel Pickering that he can turn the rough Eliza into a high-society lady of proper behaviour.

During the next six months, Professor Higgins tries to teach Eliza how to speak and how to act – but his teaching style is abrasive. He yells and insults her, calling her “infantile”, “brainless”, “wretched” and a “presumptuous insect”. In contrast, Colonel Pickering, who’s present during the lessons, treats Eliza with kindness and compassion, with politeness and respect. He expects the best irrespective of her background.

Eventually, Eliza nails it. She becomes a lady admired by all, including the king and queen. Of course, Professor Higgins takes the credit for the transformation. But, as Eliza explains, the credit actually belongs to Colonel Pickering:

“The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves but how she’s treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will. But I know I shall always be a lady to Colonel Pickering because he always treats me as a lady, and always will.”

That story is a famous example of The Pygmalion Effect, which means people’s attitudes are often influenced by what their leader or teacher expects. If a leader or teacher truly believes that every employee and student can be brilliant, then empirical research demonstrates that chances of behavioural change are substantially higher.
This research, pioneered by Dr Robert Rosenthal (a social scientist), revealed four key elements of The Pygmalion Effect, all of which are evident in the workplace.

**Climate:** This represents *mood*. If you’re like Professor Higgins, you’ll avoid eye contact, rarely smile or nod, and use condescending phrases. But if you’re like Colonel Pickering, you’ll be genuinely focused, using positive words and open body language.

**Input:** This represents *information*. If you’re like Professor Higgins, you’ll share minimal knowledge to those you deem no-hopers and plenty to those you favour. But if you’re like Colonel Pickering, everyone benefits from your teaching, clear instructions, and resources.

**Output:** This represents *responsiveness*. If you’re like Professor Higgins, you’ll provide opportunities only to those you admire. But if you’re like Colonel Pickering, all employees have a chance to ask questions, to get involved, and to express what they think and feel.

**Feedback:** This represents *quantity* and *quality*. If you’re like Professor Higgins, you sparingly give praise unless it’s to someone you already respect. But if you’re like Colonel Pickering, everyone is entitled to detailed feedback with fair amounts of praise and criticism.

You undoubtedly have expectations of the people in your team. Those expectations subconsciously influence how you interact with them, and these interactions subsequently impact your employees’ behaviour and performance. That’s why it’s so common for an employee’s attitude to be affected more by a leader’s attitude than anything else.
Effective Coaching

Imagine this scenario. A friend has invited you to her place for dinner. She always takes pride in her cooking and, on this particular occasion she has been slaving in the kitchen for hours, wanting to make a special dish just for you. When dinner is eventually served, you’re startled to see it contains an ingredient you detest. Just looking at it makes you queasy. You don’t want to cause any offence, so you slowly begin to eat the meal, trying desperately to conceal your feelings of disgust.

If that situation were real, do you think you’d be able to disguise how you felt? If you’re like most people, you’d be convinced that despite your best attempts, your friend would see straight through you, realising quickly just how much you hate her cooking.

An experiment, very similar to that scenario, was conducted at Cornell University. The researchers found the participants experienced something known as the illusion of transparency, which means they overestimated the obviousness of their emotions. They thought the friend could tell how they were really feeling, but in reality the friend could not.

The illusion of transparency plays out in other situations, too. When performers are rattled with nerves, they overestimate the degree to which the audience can sense those nerves. When married couples are unhappy, they overestimate their partner’s ability to know when they’re upset. And, of course, it happens in the workplace when leaders overestimate how much employees comprehend what the leader thinks of their performance.

Many of us presume that other people can read our facial expressions and interpret our words more effectively than they actually can – but the truth is they can’t – and your potential to be a great coach is diminished whenever you make such assumptions.
You can test for the illusion of transparency by reflecting on the following question: *If a third party were to ask your employees to articulate what you think of their performance, would your employees clearly state the following?*

**The Problem:** the aspect of their performance that’s below the required standard

**The Impact:** the consequences of their poor performance on the business

**The Cause:** the underlying reasons why they’re not meeting expectations

**The Solution:** the prescribed actions in place to ensure there’s an improvement

All four are essential points of discussion in a coaching session. If afterwards your employees are unable to state the answers to any of those statements, you can safely bet that the illusion of transparency has infiltrated the way you give feedback, prohibiting your ability to be an excellent coach.

You can overcome it by doing more *asking* than *telling* in your coaching sessions. If it’s your employees – rather than you – identifying the problem, the impact, the cause, and the solution, you’ll ramp up their ownership of the situation.

As George Bernard Shaw famously wrote, “the single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place”.

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**Employee Engagement**

Maybe smartphones should really be called dumb phones. A recent survey by Harris Interactive found that three-out-of-five people couldn’t go an hour without checking their phone. Half of us use it in bed, 40 per cent use it in the bathroom, and a third can’t even have a meal with friends without tapping away on a device.

That last point is especially concerning. In a study released this year by the University of Essex, researchers discovered that the existence of mobile
phones damages relationships. If you’re having lunch with a friend, for example, the mere presence of the phone on the table – even if you don’t touch it – harms the interpersonal connection between you and your mate. In the series of experiments conducted, the respondents rated the trust, empathy and quality of the relationship negatively whenever a phone was around.

According to the researchers, this occurs because mobile phones diminish our social consciousness. Their presence is a subliminal reminder of all the other things we could be doing in the world, thereby making it difficult for us to connect meaningfully with people.

This is probably happening in your workplace. If you’re in a coaching session and your phone is on the desk, attention is being held back. If you’re in a meeting and phones are on the table, focus is being depleted. If you’re in a workshop and phones are allowed, learning is being diminished.

The enormous amount of evidence on employee engagement is clear. At the core of engagement are the factors of connection, support, relationships, and understanding. And it could be that smartphones and other forms of technology are becoming barriers to your ability to engage with employees. Some suggestions:

• Make coaching sessions, meetings, and workshops a mobile-free zone
• Communicate face-to-face more than email, particularly when people sit near you
• Dedicate periods of the week during which employees can switch off their emails
• Encourage staff (and yourself) to leave smartphones at work when the day is done
• When having casual conversations, keep the phone in your pocket, bag, or drawer
And always – always – avoid using text-speak because, seriously, it is: (a) not English, (b) easily misinterpreted, (c) uninspiring, (d) juvenile, (e) lazy, and (f) unprofessional.

It is true that smartphones have made us more connected than ever before. Paradoxically, they have also made us more disconnected than ever before. The challenge for you as a leader is to notice when real connections are being sacrificed for shallow connections, and when engagement is being neglected for the sake of convenience.

Rumour and Gossip

There's something quite fascinating about conspiracy theories. Even when people don’t really believe them, there's a natural curiosity to listen to the stories regardless.

One of the most famous is that the American government was behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a way of getting support for war. There are also those who still don’t believe the 1969 moon landing ever took place, amassing a stack of evidence to disprove the video footage. And then there are the fans who don’t accept that Elvis ever died, insisting instead that he faked his own death.

There are many more examples. The bigger question is: how do these conspiracy theories begin? The answer can be found in research conducted several years ago at Rutgers University. Psychology professors discovered three main factors that are present whenever conspiracy theories are formed. These are alienation, distrust, and insecurity.

Alienation is when people are isolated, and this disaffection makes them feel as if they're powerless against ‘the system’. Distrust is when they feel as
though they can't rely on authorities or institutions for support. And insecurity is when they sense they're at risk of danger. When one or more of those three factors are present in an individual, they start to concoct conspiracy theories as a way of combating the underlying feeling.

Rumour and gossip in the workplace follow a similar trajectory. They're fuelled whenever alienation, distrust, and insecurity are present. If employees feel alienated from management, or they don't trust management, or they feel as though their jobs are insecure, it's natural for them to resort to rumour and gossip as a way of plugging the gaps.

If rumour and gossip are an issue in your workplace, put aside the symptoms and focus instead on the problems:

- To minimise alienation, communicate openly and honestly, listen to what employees have to say, and build genuine relationships with each of them.
- To minimise distrust, stick to your promises and commitments, treat people with respect, and lead by example.
- To minimise insecurity, be upfront and clear about the future, unearth your employees' expectations, and correct any that are untrue.

There's another thing that rumour and gossip have in common with conspiracy theories: they all need to be heard – they need an audience. None of them work when individuals keep them to themselves. This makes them a contagious social phenomenon. And that's why they continue to spread and gather momentum. That is, until you create the type of workplace environment that gives employees decent alternatives to rumour and gossip.

Only then will they realise that Elvis really has left the building.
Managing your Time

Fiona O’Loughlin is one of Australia’s most popular comedians, famous for the jokes and stories she shares about motherhood: “I’ve got five kids. I know that’s an awful lot of kids in this day and age but my husband and I are going to keep trying till we get one we like!”

In her extraordinary memoir, *Me of the Never Never*, she writes about one of her stand-up shows at which she delivered an underwhelming performance. When a colleague asked how it went, Fiona replied: “The audience seemed happy, but I definitely phoned it in tonight.”

‘Phoning it in’ is an expression used among comedians to describe the times when they perform on autopilot. They’re still funny. The audience still laughs. But the comedian isn’t truly present. They’re there in physical form, but it’s somewhat robotic. They say all the right things and make all the right moves but their heart isn’t really in it.

Many managers in the workplace also phone it in. They give good feedback, they pass on relevant information, and they tick off the items on their management checklist. But their heart’s not in it. And when their heart’s not in it, it appears in their deflated body language and it comes out in their disinterested tone. They’re there but they’re not really present.

The situation is always exacerbated whenever their workload increases. When, all of a sudden, they have a lot of work to do, they resort to the ultimate phone-it-in: time management. They look at their to-do list and contemplate what should be done, delegated, or dumped … You know, all the stuff we learn in time management courses.

But, sometimes, we don’t need time management. What we need is attention management. There is a disproportionate amount of effort allocated in workplaces to learning how to manage time. Of greater urgency, perhaps, is to allocate less effort on managing
time and more effort on managing attention. It’s not about doing more for employees; it’s just about being aware of them. In particular:

- Look out for unexpected changes in their behaviour and the words they use
- Listen as though you need to share what you’re hearing with someone else
- Take the occasional break so that your mind is refreshed and refocused
- Know that multi-tasking is doing two activities feebly rather than doing one well
- Get a decent night’s sleep so that you’re more alert
- Consider that maybe you’re the employee you most need to motivate
- Remember to breathe (it raises levels of awareness when done deeply enough)

Richard Moss is a doctor and author who specialises in conscious living. He once wrote: “The greatest gift you can give another is the purity of your attention.” That’s the kind of thing that just can’t be phoned in.

Overcoming Resistance to Change

Imagine this scenario. Paul and Jane are arguing over whether or not people should wear seatbelts. Paul says yes. Jane, though, claims you shouldn’t wear them because she heard of an accident in which a car fell into a lake. As the car sank below the water, the driver couldn’t get out in time due to the fastened seatbelt. She also tells another story of a similar accident, one in which a passenger was unable to flee a burning car quickly enough, again because the seatbelt was done up. As a result, Jane thinks the risk of wearing a seatbelt is far greater than not wearing one.

You probably think Jane is totally irrational – of course seatbelts save more lives than they take. But, when that actual scenario was put to students in a famous study conducted at the University of Pennsylvania, the
results were very different. Even though Jane’s stories were anecdotal, many of the students concluded that, yes, seatbelts were just as likely to kill people as they were to save them.

Jane and the students were led to an illogical conclusion because of something called the neglect of probability bias. It occurs when people’s decision-making abilities are damaged by their activated emotions. For many of us, when a worst-case scenario enters our mind, we ignore the improbability of its potential occurrence and choose instead to panic, complain, or make irrational decisions over situations that have no real chance of ever happening.

We see this in the workplace all the time. As soon as a new change initiative is announced, employees’ emotions are triggered. Their emotions are triggered for a variety of reasons. Maybe they’ve been burnt by bad implementation in the past. Or perhaps they fear they’re going to lose something as a result of the change. Or maybe they’ve been influenced by negative stories told by disgruntled colleagues. Or they could just be fatigued by too much change already imposed upon them.

The reasons aren’t really relevant. What matters is that when their emotions kick in, so too does their neglect of probability bias. This means they disregard the fact there’s a low chance of their worst-case scenarios occurring, and instead they worry over what might happen – even when the chances of that happening are tiny. That’s when resistance to change firmly sets in.

The question becomes, how do you overcome it? One thing’s for sure: it’s very difficult to overcome it by using reason. Too often, managers resort to logic and explanation to get employees to embrace change. Without doubt, that’s a key part of change management, but it’s rarely strong enough to counteract powerful emotions.

The antidote is relationships. Managers frequently underestimate how much sway their relationships have on the degree to which employees are
receptive to change. When a trusting relationship exists, employees are more willing to listen and they're more open to negotiation. They're also more discerning about the baggage they carry from their past experiences, and they're careful about what they take on board from loud colleagues.

To build meaningful relationships with employees, especially during change:

• Seek their opinions and feedback in advance about decisions that impact them
• Get to know them personally, so that you understand their fears and resistance
• Communicate openly and honestly because voids are filled with drama
• Be there and be present, both of which are very different things
• Involve them in the implementation of the change
• Get positive employees to be spokespeople
• Tell your own stories so that your team has an alternative point of view
• Acknowledge and thank those who overcome any initial resistance

And keep your seatbelt on.

Breaking Down Silos

Decades ago, scientists conducted an infamous experiment called Ratopolis. They placed a bunch of rats into an enclosed environment, and they let the rats breed and breed without increasing the amount of space in which they had to live. As the population grew, the enclosure became more cramped while the food became less sufficient.

Eventually, the rats went crazy. They became vicious cannibals. They attacked their partners. Instead of playing and mating, they would fight. When females gave birth, they'd eat their young.
The experiment’s extraordinary video footage showed the transition from collegiality and friendliness to outright hostility and rat-war.

The research contains similarities to the conflicts that occur in workplaces. When silos exist between teams and departments, there are usually five main causes:

- Limited *attention* results in people competing to be heard and appreciated
- Limited *space* to work and think results in people becoming protective of their turf
- Limited *information* results in power plays where the winner is the know-it-all
- Limited *resources* result in people hoarding and defending whatever they can get
- Limited *opportunities* result in people doing whatever it takes to get ahead

In each case, there’s an insufficiency of something – whether it’s attention, space, information, resources, or opportunities – and that lack is what creates a toxic culture of one team against another. In the scientific experiment illustrated above, the rats resorted to violence over collaboration. Humans, of course, are much smarter, and if prompted by a good manager, they can become more collaborative in the workplace.

The problem, though, is that managers often implement initiatives that are about *cooperation* rather than *collaboration*. Cooperation is when people occasionally work together while pursuing different higher purposes. It is a shallow form of team-based working, and participants are usually focused on individual success rather than group dynamics.

Collaboration is more intense. It requires a group of employees working towards a shared goal. It is strategic in nature, and it involves a collective
focus on producing an outcome that's bigger than just one participant's aspirations. Collaboration requires cooperation as a starting point, but takes it to a new level. And that new level is propelled by managers who create the right conditions for collaboration to prosper. Three of those conditions include:

- Being aware of the five limitations listed above and actively turning them around
- Inventing projects for two opposing silos to work on together
- Ramping up the contact between each group's members using a variety of methods

The existence of silos is ordinarily just a symptom that indicates there's something more significant happening underneath the surface. It's important to tackle it, not just when it becomes a serious issue, but as soon as you smell a rat.

**Discretionary Effort**

Have you ever wondered what motivates a consumer to buy one product over another? Marketing superstar Seth Godin thinks he has the answer. His research indicates that the most dominant marketing levers are **fear**, **hope**, and **love**. Marketers tend to use one of the three to compel people to buy whatever it is they're selling.

*Fear* as a marketing lever can be seen in politics, where politicians use it to trigger an emotion within the electorate. They'll invoke fear about out-of-control crime; fear about the spiralling costs of living; fear about anything to frighten people into voting for them.
Hope as a lever can be witnessed in wealth magazines that promise to show readers how to get rich; there's hope at speed-dating nights where people aim to find The One; and there's hope in beauty products that implicitly guarantee youthfulness and good looks.

Love as a marketing lever is much more difficult to sell. As Godin writes, “Few products or services succeed out of love. People are too selfish for an emotion that selfless, most of the time.” Companies like Google and Apple are able to trade on the loyalty that comes from those that love their brand, but most companies don’t attract that kind of diehard loyalty.

The same three marketing levers apply in the workplace when trying to get employees to deliver more than you ordinarily expect. To get discretionary effort out of employees, a marketing exercise is required that compels them into doing more. And as the marketer/manager, you have the same three options available to you.

Fear as a lever can be used when adopting threats as a motivator. This is a legitimate option if you’re at risk of losing an important account, or if your company’s survival is at stake, or if an employee’s poor performance is below standard. The trouble with fear as a motivator is that it’s effective in the short term but unsustainable in the long term. It burns employees out.

Hope as a lever can be used when you adopt bribes as a motivator. If you promise to give someone a pay rise, or a bonus, or a promotion, or time off, or a gift of some sort in exchange for a greater level of output, then this could be a very effective option for you. The trouble with hope as a motivator is that it can be expensive and some promises are difficult to fulfil.

Love as a lever can be used when you adopt loyalty as a motivator. This is when employees work harder because they want to, and not because they’re scared or greedy. It comes as a result of having a meaningful relationship with a boss who consults them and cares about their input. It also comes when they clearly understand why greater productivity is required.

There’s a place at work for each lever. You just need to discern which one is the most appropriate to use at which time. In regards to consumer marketing, Godin says “Brands that are loved usually start the process by
loving their customers in advance.” Similarly, employers that are loved usually start the process by loving their employees in advance.

Micromanagement versus Delegation

Thousands of years ago in Athens, a man called Draco was tasked with writing the laws of the land. But his laws were too severe; so severe they were written in blood. He imposed the death penalty for almost every offence, so that stealing a cabbage generated the same lethal punishment as murder. And if any citizens had debts outstanding, they were forced to work as slaves. The laws for the poor were also different to the laws for the rich. Of course.

Thankfully, living in Athens at the same time was a good man called Solon. The Athenians, so incensed at the barbarism of Draco’s laws, asked Solon to rewrite them. And that’s what he did. Farmers had their land returned, citizens had their debts forgiven, and the slaves were set free. But his best initiative was this: he set up an assembly and gave every citizen a vote, and he created a senate so that the Athenians made their own laws. Very quickly, the Athenians became happy and prosperous.

Solon called it “the shaking-off of burdens”. The difference between Draco’s approach and Solon’s is similar to the workplace equivalents of the Micromanager and the Delegator. The Micromanager rules with an iron fist, hoards all the power, and controls all the decisions. The Delegator, though, ‘shakes off the burdens’. He or she is more consultative than dictatorial, relinquishes power, and shares responsibility.

But many leaders get confused between Additional Delegation and Better Delegation. The former can result in a mess, whereas the latter results in
empowered workers. Here are five suggestions on how to become a better delegator.

**Delegate Authentically:** If it’s obvious you’re delegating just to abdicate some of your workload rather than to help employees grow and develop, your approach may backfire.

**Attitude and Skill:** Choose to whom you delegate carefully. People need to have the motivation (attitude) and the competency (skill) to be able to succeed.

**Define Success:** The clearer your employees are on your expectations, the more likely they are to fulfil them. Provide clarity on the result you desire.

**Focus on the Outcome:** Don’t be so bothered about how an employee achieves an outcome. Just be comfortable that they achieve it. The process is of lesser importance.

**Follow Up:** Once the task has been completed, provide feedback (and receive it) on what worked and what could be improved.

Prior to Solon taking over, Draco realised his laws were too harsh, so he started to amend them. The Athenians were so pleased that upon seeing him at a theatre, they threw their cloaks and caps at him in honour. They threw so much clothing at him, in fact, that poor Draco was smothered to death. And, forever more, his name would be synonymous with the adjective *draconian*, a word that could also be used to describe a Micromanager.
Staff Attrition

One of my favourite comedy movies from the 1980s is *War of the Roses* starring Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner as a married couple getting a divorce. Danny DeVito was their lawyer. In one scene, Michael Douglas asks Kathleen Turner for one reason – just one reason – why she wants to break up.

Her response: “Because. When I watch you eat. When I see you asleep. When I look at you lately, I just want to smash your face in.”

Staff attrition has a lot in common with marital divorce. In both cases, someone decides to call it quits. In both cases, there's an initial marriage – either to a person or a job – that lasts for a certain period of time. And, in both cases, there's often at least one individual with a little bit of Kathleen Turner in them, desperate to get out before it's too late.

Last year, a survey was conducted in the United States to identify the causes of marital divorce. Unsurprisingly, these causes apply to the realm of work as much as they do to the realm of love and marriage. Here are the top five in order.

**Communication problems:** There are two issues that arise with communication. The first is that managers don’t communicate enough, and the second is that they don’t adapt their communication style to suit the recipient’s preferred method. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, the biggest problem with communication is the illusion it has taken place.

**Unhappiness:** Occasionally, it's difficult for people to pinpoint a specific reason why they want to quit. They're simply unhappy. How-
ever, three common origins of workplace unhappiness include: (1) the neglect of employees’ talents, (2) incongruence between an employee’s values and the organisation’s, and (3) a lack of challenges and interesting work.

**Incompatible with spouse:** Sometimes, two people just aren’t meant to work together, but usually it’s more a case of managers not investing the time to build a relationship with their employees. This is despite research by Gallup showing that when employees have a close relationship with their boss, they are 2.5 times more likely to have high job satisfaction.

**Emotional abuse:** If a manager’s moods are unstable, employees view this unpredictability as too effortful and draining. If work colleagues are catty and bad-tempered, amiable workers get fed up and leave, thinking it’s not worth the stress. Or, as is increasingly the case, there could be a workplace bully in the team making work unbearable.

**Financial problems:** If an employee resigns to go elsewhere for a pay rise of less than 20 per cent, chances are they're not really leaving for more money. They’re most probably leaving for other reasons (one of the above), and that little bit of extra cash is just a bonus. Studies show that employees desire *fair* compensation, rather than the highest.

There’s another scene in War of the Roses that reminds me of the corporate world. It’s one where the lawyer, Danny DeVito, says: “There are two dilemmas that rattle the human skull. How do you hold onto someone who won’t stay? And how do you get rid of someone who won’t go?” And that latter dilemma is one thing worse than staff attrition.
Culture

During World War II, food shortages became widespread in the United States. It was a serious issue because the reduced availability of food resulted in it being unaffordable, not only for ordinary Americans but also for the government that had to pay ever-increasing prices to feed the troops.

The solution was to somehow encourage people to grow their own fruit and vegetables so that an abundance of produce eventually brought the prices down. But the challenge remained: how do you change the culture of people in an entire country – especially those living in the big cities – from being consumers of food to growers of food?

It started at the top. The presidency. Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt planted a vegetable patch at the White House. They called it a ‘victory garden’, named after a similar idea in the past which was a symbolic term representing the indirect contribution people could make to the war effort. By growing their own food, people were doing their bit for the war. And if the president and his wife could grow their own food, surely everyone else could do the same.

The initiative caught on. In an astonishingly short period of time, over 20 million households had planted their own vegetable patches and over 40 per cent of the nation’s fresh food supply was home grown. The culture had been changed.

The same principle applies in the workplace. Management textbooks are full of models and theories that provide guidance on how to create a winning culture. But, really, they just overcomplicate what is one of the most simple management exercises.

In order for the culture in your team to change, the process begins with you. Many leaders underestimate the influence they have on their employees’ attitudes and moods. It’s the seemingly insignificant things you say and
do that have the greatest significance. Once you identify the kind of culture you desire, all you need to do is personally be the culture you desire. Here are some examples.

- If you want employees to care, be caring.
- If you want employees to treat customers brilliantly, treat them brilliantly.
- If you want employees to work well together, work well with your own colleagues.
- If you want employees to be high performers, be a high performer.
- If you want employees to have a work/life balance, have a work/life balance, too.

Being a positive role model requires having a heightened sense of self-awareness. You're on show more than you might realise. The way you act implicitly permits others to act in the same way. Be aware of your strengths and inspiring attributes so that you amplify them, and be conscious of your faults and bad habits so that you keep them in check.

Despite the success the Roosevelts had with their victory garden, Americans abandoned their own vegetable patches in the decades that followed. Why did this happen? One reason is that leadership changed. Subsequent presidents weren’t strong advocates of growing fruit and vegetables at the White House, and so something that was once a national victory was quickly defeated. Leadership changed and the culture changed with it.
Negative Behaviours

One of the most memorable characters from the book, Winnie the Pooh, is the donkey, Eeyore, whose coat is as grey as his personality. In one chapter, his typical sadness is displayed when he says: “Good morning, Pooh Bear. If it is a good morning. Which I doubt.” You might have an Eeyore or two within your team. Always negative, nothing can ever be done to cheer them up.

Surprisingly, a study by the University of New South Wales discovered these Eeyores can be a positive influence.

Using a range of experiments, the researchers found that Eeyores communicate better, make fewer mistakes, think more clearly, are better at decision-making, and are less gullible. This is because grumpy people have enhanced “information-processing strategies”, which means they’re able to engage in critical thinking more effectively than joyful people.

These information-processing strategies were evident in a similar study conducted by the same psychology professors, one where they wanted to explore why sunny days make us happy and rainy days make us gloomy. The answer: sunny days make us forgetful, and so we’re less likely to be miserable when our worries are out of mind.

The basis of these information-processing strategies is that negative people pay more attention to their surroundings.

Likewise, in the workplace, even though negative employees can be a real drag, they don’t have to be such a bad thing. The greater attention they pay to their workplace surroundings can be beneficial if you’re able to harness what they have to offer. Here’s how.

- **Listen**: Provide them with opportunities to vent. They may have worthy ideas.
• **Consult:** Give them problems to solve. Their analytical minds prefer it.
• **Ask:** Seek their opinion. They might have picked up on stuff you’ve missed.
• **Share:** Be open and honest. The absence of information creates panic.
• **Accept:** Don’t try to change them. Their good aspects might outweigh the bad.

When their negativity is having a detrimental effect on others within the team, treat it as a performance issue on par with metrics like productivity, sales, and quality. But occasionally, it’s healthy to have a dose of an Eeyore’s perspective.