WIN THE HEART

HOW TO CREATE A CULTURE OF FULL ENGAGEMENT

MARK MILLER

International bestselling author of
Talent Magnet and *Chess Not Checkers*

WIN THE HEART

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Introduction

The life of a leader can be hectic. On most days, we have a dizzying array of problems screaming for our attention—internal pressures such as staffing, quality, and capacity issues combined with external storm clouds propelling the war for talent, competitive pressures, and ever-changing governmental regulations, to name just a few.

In the midst of this cacophony is brewing a threat to our organizations, often unseen and unheard above the daily din—the thief of sales, profits, customer satisfaction, and the pride in a job well done: low employee engagement.

The data on this topic is so consistently shocking, most leaders have become numb to the annual statistics. Some have even retreated into denial and chosen to stop thinking and talking about engagement. This is not the answer.

Engagement matters for several reasons.

First, there are the people. Their work life matters. As leaders, we have an opportunity to help

people find meaning and purpose in their work. We can create a place where they can bring their best selves to work every day. The workplace we create determines, to a large extent, how engaged someone is at work. Do your people go home *energized* or *disempowered* at the end of a long day? We really do have the responsibility to decide.

Leaders should also care deeply about engagement because of the opportunity it presents. If we can harness the untapped potential buried deep within the hearts of our people, we can turn engagement from a liability into a real, sustainable competitive advantage and usher in gains in productivity unseen since the industrial revolution!

Finally, for many organizations, engagement is the final hurdle to becoming a high performance organization. I outlined this journey in my book *Chess Not Checkers* and have done a deep dive on some of the best practices in other recent books. For those who are not familiar with the concepts, here is a ten-second summary:

All high performance organizations have four things in common. They **Bet on Leadership** (*Leaders Made Here*), **Act as One** (*Talent Magnet*), and **Win the Heart** (covered in this book). These three "moves" enable them to **Excel at Execution** (to be covered in a book to be released in the spring of 2020).

Here's my encouragement to you: keep an open mind, check your assumptions about engagement at the door, and get ready to unleash the full potential of your people and your organization.

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Epiphany

Life was good: the kids were thriving, Megan was happy and involved in the community, and their income was better than it had ever been. And yet, at work, something wasn't right—and Blake was having trouble putting his finger on it.

He had read the reports, studied the financials, talked to customers, and listened intently to what his employees were saying about the state of the business. Blake was not merely listening to the music; he was attempting to hear the space between the notes, attempting to discern what was true but unspoken.

The best leaders all have the ability to see the unseen: changing trends, strategies that are coming to the end of their productive life, the untapped potential in people, and even threats just beyond the horizon. This leadership intuition compelled Blake to seek answers.

As he drove to work one morning, he considered the facts as he saw them: The organization's performance had plateaued. The competition was

slowly gaining ground, but no one had even seemed to notice. People showed up, did their work, and went home.

He believed his people were just going through the motions. Now, their discontent was almost palpable; he sensed it in the shadows, avoiding for now the bright light of the monthly financials. Blake could imagine everyone in the organization calling out in silent desperation, *I really don't care!*

That's it! he thought. That was the problem.

Blake didn't know what to do with this epiphany. However, once a problem was identified, even the faint outline of one, he wanted to move toward a solution—and fast.

As he made his way into the parking lot, the root cause of this dilemma was already beginning to crystalize in his mind.

A combination of busyness, uncertain markets, surging competition, and turnover on his own leadership team had caused Blake to lose sight of his people. In an instant, it was clear.

Their current reality and the malaise that had now overcome his organization was a direct consequence of his choices as a leader.

Before Blake made his way to his office, he stopped by to see Charles, the head of their people function.

"Good morning, Blake," Charles said. "How was your weekend?"

"Okay," Blake began, clearly distracted by his newfound insight. "The kids are good, Megan is good. Everything is good . . . and that's the problem."

"Whoa! Where did that come from?"

"I've been thinking," Blake said.

"And . . ." Charles waited.

"Things are just okay . . . and I think that's a problem. We need to create a plan."

Their current reality and the malaise that had now overcome his organization was a direct consequence of his choices as a leader.

"Slow down. I lost you at 'that's a problem,'" Charles smiled.

"I know. It sounds loony. You and I, and the entire team, have worked really hard over the last few years."

"We have," Charles nodded.

"And we've seen some improvements," Blake continued. "But I'm not convinced . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Convinced of what?" Charles asked.

"Let me ask you a question," Blake said.

"Okay, shoot."

"Are you happy at work? Are you fully engaged? Do you really care?"

"What?" Charles asked. "Say all that again."

"Are you really happy at work?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Charles asked.

"Everything!" Blake said.

"You're going to have to say more."

"Are you happy, fulfilled, excited, motivated, and energized to be at work today?"

Charles had known Blake for many years, but he was the CEO and his boss, so he paused before responding. "Well . . ." He paused again and then spoke slowly. "Blake, you are setting the bar really, really high. I am thankful to have a job, I appreciate all you and the company have done for me person-ally, but I'm not sure what you are suggesting is real-istic. It is *just* a job."

"That's it!" Blake exclaimed. "You just articulated what I've been feeling. I think that's our problem."

"I didn't know we had a problem," Charles said.

"It's a huge problem! If leaders feel this way, what about the people building our products and serving our customers—how do they feel? Do they see their work as 'just a job' too?"

"I suppose so."

"Think about the implications. If people see their work as *just a job*, why would they bring their full, best self to work? Why would they go the extra mile?

Why would they take risks? Why would they chal-
lenge the status quo? Why would they help their
coworkers? Why would they suggest improvements?
Why would they care?"

Blake continued, "I think this explains a lot."

"Like what?" Charles asked.

"Sluggish performance, low urgency and energy,
indifference toward customers and the competition.
It may also explain why this place is a ghost town at
5:01 every day. Have you noticed people like to back
into the parking spaces?"

"Yes—I always wondered why they do that."

"Maybe so they can make a quick escape."

Both men chuckled, but it was forced because
they knew Blake's joke might have some truth to it.

"So, what do we do with this hypothesis?"
Blake asked.

If people see their work as *just a job*, why would they bring their full, best self to work?

"About the parking?"

"No! I don't think people really care about their
work, coworkers, or the organization."

"Whoa—you've just blown this thing way out of proportion," Charles said. "We have very good people."

"If I am correct, this is *not* a reflection on the people. This is my fault, and yours too, and every other leader in the organization. We are to blame."

"I'm not sure I totally get that 'leap of blame,' but we can talk more about that. Why don't we de-escalate this and see if we can collect some data?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"What we're discussing is called engagement. There are assessments we can use to find the truth. And *if* there is a problem, we can fix it.

"Then let's do that as soon as possible," Blake said.

Engagement

Charles and his team immediately began selecting the assessment instrument they would use to take the pulse of the workforce. If he was honest with himself, he knew he should have done this sooner. As a seasoned HR leader, he knew engagement had been all the rage for more than a decade. However, his default had been to focus on what he believed to be most important—selection, compensation, and benefits. Admittedly, the softer factors impacting the emotional commitment of employees he had largely left to chance.

"Good morning!" Charles said to his leadership team, who were assembled for their regularly scheduled meeting. Peggy, Kim, Gary, Rose, and Ben had all been with him from the beginning of his short tenure.

"Here's the situation," Charles began. "Blake and I have been talking, and we believe we need to assess our employee engagement. Have any of you ever used an engagement survey in your previous companies?"

Everyone's hand went up except Peggy's; she was the youngest member of the team and had joined the organization just out of college.

"That's good! You'll have the chance to coach me; I've never used a formal survey. Which instruments have you used in the past?" Charles went to the board and began to field the responses from the team. A moment later, he stepped back and looked at the list. "This is incredible; there are four of you, and you've used thirteen different assessments!"

Shaking his head in disbelief, Charles continued, "I guess we should talk about what you liked and didn't like . . . and how the assessment helped you drive improvement."

Gary was the first to speak. "Look, I can see why this is important work—goodness, engagement has been a big deal for years—maybe forever. However, I think our first issue is to define it. What exactly are we trying to measure or assess?"

"I think that's one reason there are so many different surveys out there. Very few agree on what engagement is to begin with," Kim added.

"Okay, let's get started," Charles said. "Everyone write your definition of engagement on a 3 x 5 card. Who knows? Maybe we will be closer than we think."

After everyone finished the assignment, Charles went back to the board and began to write:

Engagement is . . .

- *The emotional commitment a person has for his/her work*

- *The invisible force driving discretionary effort*

- *A reflection of the heart*

- *A measure of effort in the face of difficulty*

- *How hard someone will work when things get hard*

- *A psychological condition affecting energy, effort, and enthusiasm*

- *How much a person is invested in his/her work*

"Okay, wait, there are six of us and seven definitions," Kim pointed out.

"Yeah, I know," Ben confessed. "I cheated. I wrote two."

"You always were an overachiever," Rose said. "We'll forgive you—one more time."