



TEN THOUSAND HORSES

**HOW LEADERS HARNESS
RAW POTENTIAL FOR
EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS**

JOHN STAHL-WERT / KEN JENNINGS

An Excerpt From

***Ten Thousand Horses:
How Leaders Harness Raw Potential for Extraordinary Results***

by John Stahl-Wert and Ken Jennings
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PREFACE



In our work with leaders and managers from many industries, no issue recurs with greater pain and frequency than that of worker underperformance. Every leader knows that a fully engaged employee can make an extraordinary impact on the success of the enterprise. Engaged workers show up with a committed attitude; they bring their whole selves—all their experience, talent, imagination, brains, and heart—with them to work.

The pain lies in the fact that engaged employees are the exception. The majority of workers in every business are disengaged or worse.

If you lead or manage people, you suffer from this pain. A few of your followers give it their all. Most of your workers, by contrast, are disengaged. They do the necessary minimum. They show up on time, do just what is expected, and leave on time. Far from bringing their whole selves to work, they bring what they must, and no more.

Here's what every observant leader knows: worker inattention and apathy in our enterprises result in losses of momentum and opportunity that arguably represent our number one cost of doing business.

The pain we hear about in our work with leaders and managers is the pain of what might have been—of what could be—if only more employees decided to really show up!

Significant and recent breakthroughs in management thinking have advanced our understanding of worker “engagement” and its impact on innovation, competitiveness, and profitability. When it comes to organizational results, workers who only satisfactorily comply with performance expectations bear no resemblance whatsoever to workers who actively engage themselves in the purposes and goals of their enterprise.

Research by the Gallup Organization, for example, shows that only 29 percent of workers are engaged at work (that is, they display passion for and feel connected to your company and share their ideas with you for moving the company forward). By contrast, 71 percent of workers are disengaged (they essentially sleepwalk through the day, meeting only your baseline expectations, or in the worst cases they’re actively working to undermine your company’s performance). Do the math: 29 percent are engaged, but you pay them all!

On the other hand, the research shows that work groups that display high levels of employee engagement produce a 44 percent higher-than-average employee retention rate, a 56 percent higher-than-average level of customer loyalty, a 50 percent higher-than-average safety record, a 50 percent higher-than-average rate of productivity, and 33 percent higher-than-average profitability.

The facts are these: worker disengagement (and worse) is omnipresent. What causes worker disengagement and what would cure it are well researched and diagnosed, but little has been done to date to translate the new findings of this research into everyday leadership and management practices.

In short, a practical guide that could be used every day for transforming a workforce into a fully engaged “achievement force” is still largely missing from the toolboxes of most leaders and managers. What is not missing is the recognition by hundreds of thousands of company, divisional, and work group leaders that the problem of worker disengagement is vast and that it costs us big time on our bottom line.

The pressures of the expanding global marketplace will only take this challenge to a new level of urgency. A fully engaged workforce fuels competitive advantage and sustainability. A future of innovation, upon which a national economy must increasingly rely, likewise requires fully engaged workers. The worker-engagement challenges that leaders and managers must face will only sharpen and intensify in years to come.

Beyond this organizational need for worker engagement is the broader societal problem that it mirrors: wasted and thrown-away human potential. Untapped human energy, passion, ideas, and talents within society represent an incalculably great and largely hidden cost to every human community. “Engagement,” fully understood, is a need that touches each of us in every sphere of our lives.

We suggest you read this short story without pen and paper the first time. Take it in—its characters, story line, discoveries, and conclusions. A few charts scattered throughout will introduce the model we use for worker engagement—the Engagement Equation, as we call it—that underpins the story, but these charts will be reviewed again in full at the end, so there’s no harm skimming past them. Online, a free-to-use, complete Engagement Planning Workbook will take you from this story into your own real work as a leader of others.

We also invite you to take in the aspects of this story that are more personal. Without giving away secrets from the story line, this book about engagement touches upon business-related and deeper matters in our lives as authors—matters that we care about deeply. At the most significant level, the story we bring you is true. The characters and what they experience in these pages are well known to us. While names, places, and details are fictional, we know the people in this book. It is more than likely that you know them, too.

The people who work for you, whether few or many, are capable of doing much more to advance your enterprise, for your own—as well as their own—great gain. As a matter of fact, most of them would like to *do more than they're doing, contribute more powerfully, and make a greater difference*. No kidding! For the most part, human beings carry around an unspoken yearning to get to the end of their workday—not to mention their work life—feeling that it was actually worth it.

You can make this happen! As a leader, you can make the difference that allows the folks whose paychecks you sign to make their difference. Not only can you make this happen, but as the leader, you're the one—yes, this too is verified by research—who decides whether or not it does happen. Leadership makes the difference!

May this story and the work tools that come along with it encourage and equip you to start today.

JOHN STAHL-WERT
KEN JENNINGS
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
April 2007



**END
OF THE
ROPE**



Matt James was slumped forward onto the executive conference table, his forehead pressed against the gleaming rich mahogany finish, his arms outstretched before him as though in prayer. He was alone, his mute supplication aimed at no one. His boss and the company's executive team had departed the meeting half an hour before, leaving him to ponder their ultimatum and to stare down into the depths of his ruin. They'd given him one more chance to try to light a fire under his lackluster team, and at the very end they offered him words of hope and encouragement. They were sticking with him, they had said, because they believed in him. They just knew he could turn his twenty-two-member team around, tap into "all that incredible talent" that was going to waste, and get some real results!

But Matt knew that he couldn't. He had already tried everything he could think of and had nothing to show but two years of divisional losses in advertising clients and profits. The executive team had said they believed in him, but their faces told him something else. The team's collective show of faith hadn't come easily; their smiles and affirming nods had required an obvious exercise of unwilling muscle. It wasn't that he blamed them. The truth was, he didn't believe in himself anymore.

Matt closed his eyes, letting his forehead rest more heavily on the table's surface. He'd orchestrated two downsizings in his brief, unimpressive tenure as the company's newest "rising star."

He'd brought in expert consultants and spearheaded a major strategy change—but to no effect. His division at Lumina Communications Corporation was sluggish at best. The great potential he thought he saw in his staff had not made any public appearances. It was as though they didn't care; their minimally "satisfactory" performance was no better than could be expected from a gang of clock punchers, and often it was worse.

Most troubling of all was that people in the division he'd inherited had treated him well in the beginning. They'd seemed excited about his appointment as team leader and, truth be told, had given him the benefit of the doubt—for a while.

But then their energy had waned. One by one, members of his team began to back off. Where at first they brought their whole selves to the job, now many of them seemed to bring nothing more than scraps and leftovers.

Matt's job was now on the line. Though "a final chance" had just been offered, he knew it was just the extra rope required to finish him off. There was no doubt about it, Matt concluded. He was finished.



Seventeen hundred miles away, David Butler was absorbed in a timeless dusty dance, his cowboy boots moving with a languorous rhythm in a circle around his new partner, a highly agitated mustang stallion. David's posture and bearing were relaxed, the mustang's wary and tense. David would take a few slow steps forward along the horse's left flank, always leaving the mustang's forward path open, quietly speaking to him all the while. Whenever the horse's head and neck would crane high, ears erect, David would pause and wait for the panic to



subside. If the mustang took a step or two forward, testing the openness of its path to freedom, David would move in nearly the same direction as the horse, his back turned slightly toward it, and take a few steps as though to offer leadership. "I'm not here to trap you, boy," David would say quietly. "See? I'm just moving a little ahead of you. Stay on your own course if you like, or follow mine; the choice is yours."

David and the mustang were inside a rough wooden corral surrounded by miles of high-elevation, open grassland. The snow-covered peaks of Rampart Range rose up to frame the western backdrop to this rugged scene. An intensely blue sky laden with massively brilliant clouds caused man and horse to seem small and vulnerable, too perilously exposed to nature's raw wild beauty.

"That's a good boy," David said quietly, encouragingly, when on his next lead the mustang altered his course to take a few small steps after him. "That's a good boy," he repeated. "It's a beginning!"



In an instant, Matt James jerked up out of his seat, his body reanimating so quickly that the motion might have been caused by the yank of a puppeteer's strings. Standing erect, his shoulders squared, Matt stared out over a great distance, a new hint of possibility flickering in his gaze.

Unbidden, the face of his old mentor had appeared in his mind's eye, staring back up at him from the depths of his despair. *It's not the end, Matt*, he heard David say, the customary edge of good humor goading him to lighten up. *Not the end at all, my boy; it's a beginning.*

That's exactly what David would say, Matt mused, his conviction growing that he'd had an extremely good idea. His former mentor, David Butler, the now-retired celebrated corporate turnaround specialist would say just that. Put him into the room with almost any despairing board or executive, tell him the plain truth of just how bad things were, and David would shrug; smile his unperturbed, seen-it-before smile; and call it a starting point, a place to begin.

Striding out of the conference room with renewed energy, Matt punched the button for the forty-third floor and rode the elevator down three levels to his divisional offices. It had been a late-afternoon executive-team meeting, but he felt certain Deb would still be at her desk, veteran that she was. You didn't keep the privilege of serving a midtown Manhattan advertising executive, even a midlevel one, by abandoning your desk before six. More than that, though, Deb's tenure exceeded his own at Lumina; she was one of the few left whose commitment hadn't wavered, and he was happy he could still count on her.

"Glad you're here, Deb," Matt called out as he rounded the corner to her section, his lanky stride unbroken. "David Butler's an old mentor from business school. He's deep in my contacts file somewhere, but it's been a very long time and I haven't a clue where he's disappeared to." Matt passed Deb's desk, smiling his appreciation for her capacity to fulfill the task. "Would you find him for me?" he asked, passing into his own office and closing the door.

Deb found him, or rather, she found his ranch. The young-sounding woman who answered the phone, Sara Jarrel, told her that Mr. Butler could not be disturbed—this in spite of the air of significance Deb had put into her appeal. "A business colleague of Mr. Butler's," Deb had explained to the whelp. "Mr. Matt James calling from New York City."



She may as well have tried to impress this cowpuncher with her skill at hailing cabs. “David said no calls, ma’am,” Sara replied, her voice conveying a questioning tone that was aimed at Deb: *Are you getting this, Miss Tightly-Wound-Lady-from-New-York? Do you realize just how not an emergency this is?*

“We’ve just got in a new mustang,” Sara then added, deciding to give a small additional explanation. “He’s a real wild one, and they just got started. Could David call your man after dinner?” she then inquired, patiently taking down the number. “It’ll be Colorado time,” Sara added at the end, not certain her New York phone counterpart understood all that much about the way the real world worked.

Deb terminated the call as politely and quickly as she could to stop herself from saying something she would regret.

“And Matt, try not to forget that Mr. Butler will be calling you ‘Colorado time,’” Deb had repeated very earnestly at the end of her report of the conversation, her fingers scratching quotation marks in the air, her mouth turned in the barest hint of a smile. With nothing more to report, she turned to finish her work for the day back at her desk. “Her man” would just have to handle things from here.

“Good night, Deb,” Matt called after her, grinning at her recitation and at the amazing news of his old mentor. A ranch? Colorado? Wild mustangs?

That night David called Matt. They talked a long time, renewing a friendship that had meant much to Matt when he was in business school and David was an adjunct faculty member. David had taken a special interest in Matt during those earlier years, and as the younger man described in detail the problem he was facing, David quickly focused his attention.

“David, I’m up against it,” Matt concluded. “I’ve tried everything I know, but it’s not working. My tenure as a salesman was

tremendously successful when it was just me on the line. Ever since my promotion, it's like a totally different game. I'm leading a team of people," he added for clarification. "The talent that's on my team looks great on paper, but our results don't show it. Potential is all I've got, truth be told. Raw potential," he qualified.

"Could you come here and help me?" he concluded, his voice a plea.

After a long silence, David finally replied, "Matt, I care about what's going on; I care about you. But I can't come to New York."

"We'll make it easy for you," Matt countered. "We'll fly you back and forth to New York; you set the schedule."

"Ease is not the issue. Here's where my work is. What we accomplish here, working with . . ." David paused, searching for words.

"Wild horses," Matt interjected, completing his former mentor's sentence. He knew what David did.

"Sure. Wild horses are a part of it," David agreed. "But what we really work with is what you just told me you work with: raw potential. What we accomplish here doesn't take place in theory. I can't do this work in principle. It happens in real time, in person. I need to be here."

Matt's slump was back. Horses! His mentor had lined up his priorities and given him a lovely position—just to the backside of a horse.

Another silence ensued. "Tell you what," David said. "Why don't you come here? On the ranch I've got the time you need. Bring your story and your questions, and I'll do the best I can for you. Then go back to New York and apply what we've discussed. If you want, come back for more. Let's see if we can get you some real results!"



It was agreed. Matt would draw up a consultant's contract, though David warned him that it was going to be an unusual engagement. Matt would learn "hands-on," as David put it, at the ranch. He'd learn by working beside David, not by sitting in a room with flip charts.

"David?" Matt asked, just before they'd hung up the phones. "What does 'hands-on' mean?" He tried to make the question sound jaunty, but the nervousness in his voice betrayed him.

David chuckled. "Just depends," he answered cryptically. "You know the expression 'hang on to your hat'? Hands are real good for that, Matt, just to give you one case in point. They're also good for holding the reins, but maybe I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Just bring your hands," David concluded. "There's a lot to touch here and a lot to love; you'll see."

this material has been excerpted from

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