

# Why your best talent is leaving, and 4 ways to win them back

by William Schiemann, Ph.D.

Most leaders of companies today recognize the importance of having engaged people at work. Yet research from the Metrus Institute, Gallup, and others say that between 50 and 80% are not fully engaged. For many organizations, a majority of employees are only partially engaged, which a lot of research has shown reduces performance and customer satisfaction while increasing turnover. Worse yet, your best talent—those with lots of options—are most likely to leave.

An interesting phenomenon occurs in most organizations. On day one, most employees are fully engaged as these fresh hires are excited to begin a new experience. And yet, according to Metrus Institute, engagement levels drop considerably during the first few years, and often far more than you would expect after a honeymoon period. Clearly something is going on, and most organizations need these four key actions to minimize this degradation of engagement and reboot it to formerly high levels:

**1. Change Work-Life Balance to Work-Life Integration.** A major contributor to reduced engagement levels is the stress often caused by work-home conflict. Today, work and home are not separated by an impermeable boundary. A large majority of workers today respond to texts or e-mail at night or on the weekend, or work feverishly to finish a report or presentation. And yet many are frightened to address personal issues that come up during their workday. This pressure detracts from their engagement because it feels one-sided.

One thing that must be recognized in our interconnected lives is that good or bad issues traverse all spheres of our lives—work, family, friends, hobbies, health. One HR professional in a financial services company said, “I got so caught up in my job that I constantly felt guilty about neglecting my family,” and another reported, “I was constantly torn between being successful at work and being successful with my kids.”

This constant tension leads to debilitating stress and burnout, which can be avoided by updating policies and educating leaders on how to help employees integrate different sectors of their lives. For example, smart firms are focusing on results and not time and reviewing workloads frequently to ensure that people—especially the high performers—are not becoming overloaded to the point of burnout.

**2. Help Employees Build Resilience.** Developing resilience to setbacks or grit to push through barriers is increasingly important in a multitasking and rapidly changing world. As we cope with a relentless increase in demands to remain competitive, it is more important than ever to develop these compensatory strengths. Roughly 95% of people interviewed in a recent Metrus Institute study had major setbacks at some point during their lives and many intermediate ones yearly, but very few had the coping mechanisms to quickly recover and get re-tracked in their lives. Over time many had discovered techniques to accelerate the process of recovery. For example, those who had mentors and a deeper network of good friendships—not simply Facebook friends—were able to weather storms better.

Another technique that companies can use is a ‘pull the switch’ option, an employee friendly and open way for

someone to say “enough” and that they need support. This was an approach which was employed quite successfully in high performance safety environments for years—why keep the line or individual going when they are becoming less and less effective? It does not mean they are not good employees, but rather that they need support—guidance, resources, information, skills—to continue moving forward.

**3. Empower Your People to Take Charge.** Engagement is not something that can be given to people—they have to feel it. Research on happiness and fulfillment has shown that we control 60% of our own happiness. But over time, many employees develop learned helplessness, often at the hands of leaders who have constantly said ‘no’ or taken control away from people to manage actions and performance.

If you listen in to 90% of focus groups I have conducted with employees over the years, the amount of learned helplessness is mind boggling. People have just given up attempting to change things because they feel stupid trying to make an impact when they just keep hitting barriers. Resilience is one thing, but repeatedly running into the same wall is the definition of insanity. Try passing more authority and accountability to employees—but also empower them to take actions to accomplish the results.

**4. Train Engagement at the Leader and Employee Level.** Engaging others comes naturally to some, but to many new and even experienced managers, it is difficult. Few were given engagement training when they took oversight responsibilities. And for managers, one of the biggest culprits is sameness. It is far easier to assume that everyone should be treated the same—something HR has dictated for years.

You can’t get into trouble when you treat everyone alike. But that assumes people are robots (who knows, robots may even resent it!). When we studied great leaders in restaurants, for example, we found that the best managers were those who got close to their people and helped their team and individuals achieve their goals. Not just their work goals, but their life goals. They knew who was dealing with child or adult care, who attended school, who had challenging commutes and so forth, and they formed their teams to engage people by accepting and leveraging their differences. They treated people as individuals—the way most of us want to be treated.

Employees too can be trained on how to take greater control of their engagement. What are they passionate about? What saps or fuels their energy? What elements of the workday can they control better?

These four simple steps will put you and your employees on a far better road to creating a highly engaged workforce.

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*William A. Schiemann, Ph.D. is CEO of Metrus Group. He is a thought leader in human resources, employee engagement, and fulfillment and author of *Fulfilled! Critical Choices - Work, Home, Life*. For more information visit [www.wschiemann.com](http://www.wschiemann.com), follow Dr. Schiemann on Twitter, @wschiemann and connect with him on LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/wmschiemann](http://www.linkedin.com/in/wmschiemann).*