

## Branham on Re-Engagement

---

Leigh Branham's book *Re-engage* (co-authored by Mark Hirschfeld) looks for lessons in the extensive data of the *Best Places to Work Survey*<sup>1</sup>. However, before touching on the analysis I asked Branham about the feeling that "All workplaces suck and these smiley face stories about delightful workplaces are not really true."

*"It's a common reaction. In fact, when a newspaper reporter was asked many years ago to write about great places to work, his reaction was "Will there be anything to write about?" But, to his surprise he did find some and it was that work that led to Fortune's great places to work list. The trouble is those great places to work are so rare that most people can't relate to them."*

This is, I think, a very deep issue. No one is going to say that being a great place to work is a bad idea; but if managers can't connect to the idea it will be hard to get traction. Branham pointed to an insight from our favourite management expert, Scott Adams:

*"There is a certain amount of cynicism developing around engagement, as can be seen in the Dilbert comic where the boss says 'I don't know the details, but it has something to do with you idiots working harder for the same pay.'" (<http://www.dilbert.com/strips/comic/2009-11-25/>)*

It may be that despite all the evidence that engagement matters, the real reason highly engaged workforces are rare is that managers don't genuinely believe it is possible. Leigh elaborated on why high engagement is so rarely achieved.

*"It's difficult to do; it takes a real commitment and caring for people. Most CEOs are concerned about bottom line without seeing managing people as way to the bottom line—or if they do see people as key, they think in terms of driving people with negative consequences. They are just not smart about people and they've had bosses who weren't smart about people."*

---

<sup>1</sup> Survey carried out by Quantum Workplace, Nebraska

And this brings us to Branham's important observation: those companies that are great places to work all have a CEO who had a goal to create a great place to work.

*Conventional wisdom is that employees join companies but leave managers; but that's not the whole truth. Managers are constantly taking their cues from their senior leaders. In the long run, engagement is about the senior leaders; but they may not want to hear that."*

Branham said building a great place to work was difficult. It may not be difficult in the sense of needing extremely clever programs or brilliant decisions or large budgets. It may be difficult in the same way losing weight is difficult.

Branham's book is about the detailed analysis of what makes engagement work and one thing that caught my attention was what he called 'crosswinds'—factors that made engagement more difficult.

The first crosswind is that the bigger the organization, the lower the engagement scores. There's a rather nice graph showing engagement scores averaging over 90/100 for organizations of 1-10 people, falling through each subsequent size category to a low of around 81/100 for organizations over 5000 employees. This is not a shocking finding, but it is a caution for large organizations who want high engagement.

Branham offers various tactics for counteracting this crosswind, the most universal one being that you have to gear up communication exponentially as the organization gets bigger.

Cross wind number two is generational diversity: organizations where there is a fairly even mix of the generations have lower engagement than ones dominated by a single generation. Again, this may not be surprising but it is a bit depressing given how much we promote the value of diversity.

*"Where one generation dominates they tend to have common values and common perspectives. Sometimes people don't want to hear what the younger or older generation think about the world or how work should be done."*

For me this is a reminder that managing diversity is difficult, and all those programs we have to help managers get better at diversity really do make sense. Branham is now studying those organizations that manage to have both

high generational diversity and high engagement. I'll keep in touch with him to see what he finds out.

A third crosswind is organizational turbulence.

*"When the organization is going through difficulties, employees become anxious and it's very hard to engage employees when they are feeling that way. We looked at companies after the financial crash in September 2008, and in two-thirds, engagement went down dramatically. In that one-third where engagement went up, they had worked to remove fear. They didn't sugar coat things but they communicated and they also asked employees for help in dealing with the situation. They avoided the natural tendency to hunker down and not get in front of employees for fear they'll say the wrong thing."*

I started my conversation with Branham on the idea that people didn't believe great workplaces were possible; towards the end we hit upon a similar and equally serious issue.

*"Many managers don't believe they should have to make an effort to get employees engaged. They think it's the employees' responsibility, that they should be engaged already. You see this strongly when older generations deride Millennials as praise-hounds. They think, why should I break my back trying to engage these snot-nosed kids? I also was struck by a case of a CFO in one of my workshops who said, 'I'm having an epiphany; I realized for the first time that managing people is a big part of my job.'"*

Too often when we read about engagement and great places to work we focus on programs and practices without realizing how much unacknowledged beliefs may be driving the actual engagement outcomes. If managers don't believe great places to work are possible, or don't believe they have a responsibility to engage employees, it will be very hard to make progress.

---

Note: You can take the engagement survey at <http://www.re-engagebook.com/>

David Creelman writes and speaks on human capital management ([www.creelmanresearch.com](http://www.creelmanresearch.com))