



# THE POWER OF ENGAGEMENT

By: Jeffrey W. Ganthner, AIA

Active employee engagement in an organization is a key component to driving organizational performance and achieving success. Many employees struggle daily with staying connected to their work and an organization's goals. Some have given up and are at best dead weight and at worst organizational terrorists focused on anything but achieving success for the organization. Connecting employees to something greater than themselves and even the overall organization can play a big part in keeping employees actively engaged in their work and the organization's success.

Gallup has been actively tracking the "disengaged middle" for a number of years and has found that about 50% of employees are not engaged in their jobs or emotionally disconnected from their workplace and are, therefore, more likely to be less productive. This same index tracks those that are actively engaged at about 30%. And most alarming it finds that about 20% of workers are actively "disengaged" and detrimental to the productivity of an organization (Gallup 2011). Additionally, this study has identified a strong connection between overall performance and an employee's engagement. To put this in perspective, out of a ten-person crew charged with rowing a boat across a lake, three persons are rowing in the direction of desired travel, five persons are just sitting there and adding weight to the boat, and two persons are rowing in the opposite direction. No wonder it is often felt that nothing ever gets done at work!

With 70% of employees disengaged to some degree or another, performance not only suffers, but the “engaged” employees may begin to lose heart and connection with the vision of the organization. If this happens, performance suffers even more and the organization will eventually fail.

Tim Keller in his book, *Every Good Endeavor*, recounts the story of J.R.R. Tolkien struggling to complete his life’s work and masterpiece – *The Lord of the Rings*. World War II had begun and Tolkien struggled with the darkness brought by this new war and his ever-increasing age. He was frustrated that he may not finish his work or that he would produce an insufficient product. He, like many organizations, was struggling with internal morale issues and external, marketplace situations that he could not control. Organizations faced with both internal and external problems often cause employees who may have been engaged and productive to lose heart and move to the disengaged middle or worse. Tolkien had run out of “mental energy and invention.” Once an engaged “employee” with his work, he was now becoming trapped within his own dying organization. His performance towards completing his work was terrible.

But Tolkien did not completely give up because he had something greater that grounded him to his work and a friend, named C.S. Lewis, which refocused him on a purpose. He awoke to a vision and wrote a story entitled “Leaf by Niggle.” It was about a painter named Niggle charged with painting a tree. However, Niggle, try as he may, could only produce a leaf or two and never the whole tree. Even his name – Niggle – means “to work in a fiddling or ineffective way...to spend time unnecessarily on petty details.” Niggle thought he was a failure for not completing the painting of a tree. Not until Niggle died and got to heaven did he see how beautiful his work had been and how his painted few leaves hung beautifully for all to see on a magnificent tree. Tolkien was Niggle and, as he wrote about himself, he recognized his own shortcomings towards work. He overcame his temporary lapse of vision and became engaged again to complete his life’s masterpiece.

Most employees do not take a job at an organization to not be engaged. However, problems develop that grind on employees and impact their performance. If you think about it, everyone is a Niggle. We all envision accomplishing more than what we do and when we do not produce

the results we want we become frustrated and disengaged and our performance suffers. When combined with other Niggles, we hurt the overall performance of our organization and we fail as individuals and our organization fails.

As leaders, we are challenged to motivate and to keep our employees engaged in their work. We are to cast a vision that will challenge our employees and keep them engaged in their daily tasks. If our competition is the norm with a 70% employee disengagement and we are operating significantly below with most of our employees engaged, then we will be first to the market, with better products and services, and with a clearer path to success.

As leaders, we need to connect our employees and empower our organization to produce its own masterpieces.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey W. Ganthner, AIA is a proven and well diversified professional expertise leading teams and organizations in the architecture, engineering, construction and technology industries. Jeffrey casts the vision for innovative thought, leadership, and solutions. He has led a distinguished and diverse career as an architect, engineer, designer, teacher entrepreneur, and business leader. He can be reached at [jeff@leadershiphunt.com](mailto:jeff@leadershiphunt.com).