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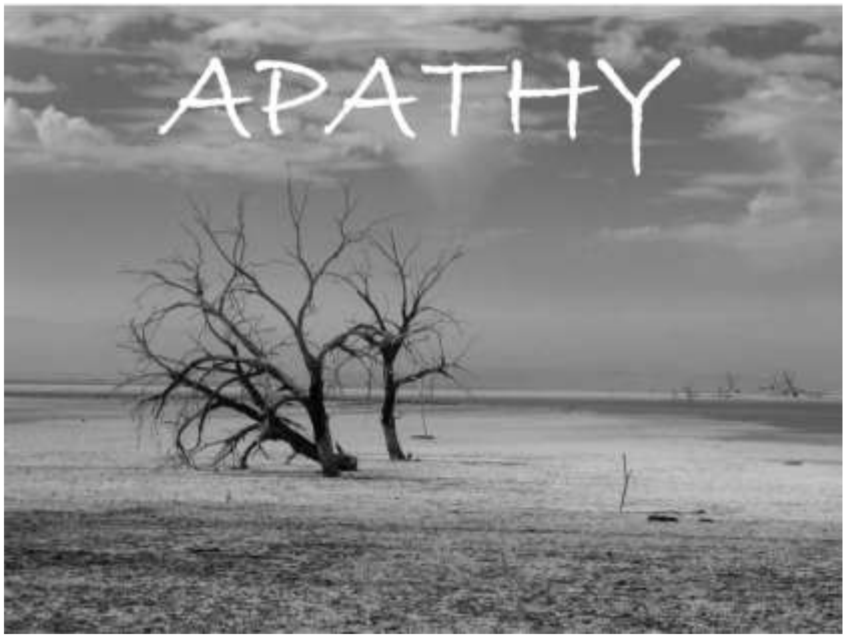


# 10 Company Behaviors that Drive Employee Apathy

By Damon Baker

Employee apathy is often driven by a variety of external factors, such as personal issues, the economy, and company performance -- ad infinitum. However, internal factors also drive employee apathy. The consequences of employee apathy can be dire. Capozzi (2017) states that employee apathy can result in negative corporate culture, high turnover, and reduced productivity. Nonetheless, there are also numerous factors that companies have direct control over. The following behaviors are a few of the corporate no-no's that drive employee apathy.

**1. Avoiding Risks** – Companies that avoid risks foster a risk-averse corporate culture. Whether a company is providing a service or manufacturing a product, doing business always entails some degree of risk. By avoiding risk, companies blindly stifle employee creativity. Returns on Investment (ROIs) are viewed as the sole justification for "good" risk management. Typically, such risk-averse organizations are characterized by a top-down management style that requires that all ideas go up the ladder for review and (dis)approval. What then, employees often ask, is the point in even trying? After all, what are the odds that new ideas will be embraced (let alone heard) by senior management that is both autocratic *and* stagnant? Ultimately, this management style causes employee apathy.

**2. Punishing Failure** – Often, companies will make an example of employees who took a risk by advancing a new idea or process, one that unfortunately failed. Instead of receiving praise by superiors for a worthwhile effort, they are instead punished. Sometimes, the punishment is subtle. An employee who has failed in this kind of company may be overlooked for future projects, or at worst, even fired. Indeed, the employee with the failed idea is less likely to take chances in the future. Once one’s colleagues have witnessed the punishment, they too stop taking risks, dooming themselves to self-imposed isolation and apathy.

**3. Fixating on Reds** – Companies that fixate on an uncontrolled, proliferation of reds, (missed goals) are obsessed by metrics. Even the most minute employee functions and company processes are reduced to measurable data, never bothering to ask the question...should we even measure it in the first place. Such metric overloads create chaos and confusion among employees, who eventually succumb to an apathetic attitude. Satisfying the demands of absurd metrics, their productivity is instead driven by nit-picky, controlling micro-managers who insist on a form with which to measure nearly everything. Remember, if everything is RED, nothing is a priority.

**4. Undervaluing Efforts** – When senior management undervalues the efforts of their employees, they fall into the trap of becoming too “results-oriented”, as opposed to process-oriented. Well-mapped, logical processes are at the root of productivity and profitability. When management stresses outcomes at the expense of processes, apathetic employees become the norm. Despite their Herculean efforts to be valued as productive employees, their success is always measured in terms of results, not the processes they used to get from Point A to Point B. Thus, no matter what employees do, their efforts are not congratulated, praised or even appreciated – an environment that causes apathy. Far worse, is that they begin to adopt a "results at all costs" mentality, which drives short-term or perhaps unethical decision-making.

“Every system is perfectly designed to get the result that it does.”

― W. Edwards Deming

**5. Shifting Priorities** – Organizations that shift priorities are in a chaotic, frenzied state of constantly starting over. Before employees can even begin to deploy process-oriented improvements, they are told to take another tack -- another route towards the desired results. Such companies send out contradictory, “schizophrenic” messages. Workers are left wondering, “When is the next thing going to hit? When will we be told to prioritize a competing project?” "What's the new flavor of the month?" The result? Employee apathy.

**6. Limiting Communication** – Similar to totalitarian nations, companies that limit communication are typified by a lack of transparency and candor. These companies are characterized by a veil of secrecy, where only certain people are kept “in the know”. Winning companies know that transparency and candor contribute to engaged and enthusiastic employees.

When employees are viewed as outsiders and management views themselves as the stewards of the process, employees become apathetic.

**7. Moving the Finish Line** – Companies that move the finish line discourage employees by creating a new target while workers are still in the middle of a process. A frustrating tactic, employees may find it impossible to hit their targets, which are always being "re-defined" by senior management. If the reward at the end of achieving a stretch target, is yet another even higher stretch target, it will not take long for employees to figure out the system is rigged in favor of the house each and every time, and therefore they stop trying. Eventually, employees become exhausted, and sooner or later, become apathetic.

**8. Dishonoring Commitments** – Companies that dishonor commitments often say that they have their employees' best interests in mind. Many times, however, such companies over-commit to their employees, and task their leaders with telling them the brutal truth. Other times, companies, playing the proverbial shell game, discourage future out-performance of a target by taking away rewards -- *after* they were promised. The simple, often overlooked fact is this: work gets done with and through people. There's nothing more impactful on people, their work, and their performance, than TRUST.

**9. Tying Hands** – Analogous to a "one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest", tying hands is more commonplace than one may think. I remember a particular situation with a client where they had placed 90% of their overall spend out-of-scope from an opportunity standpoint, thus reducing the degrees of freedom we had to pursue to drive results, and therefore pre-supposing the answer. After some cajoling, they came around, but this could have been disastrous. Other examples include: ambitious strategies that do not have adequate financial backing, reductions in headcounts followed by increased expectations of output, stifling policies and procedures that grind the commercial engine to a halt...and on, and on...apathy abounds.

**10. Filtering the Truth –** Some companies hide behind an overuse of corporate jargon or sophisticated legalese to relay what is otherwise a simple message to their employees. When a company that lets go of 10% of their employees says, "Mr. Sanders, we greatly appreciate your long-standing dedication and contributions to XYZ Corporation. However, after a comprehensive Budgetary Review and Recommendation Report of the Portfolio Committee and a concomitant stakeholder buy-in, XYZ and its subsidiaries are currently divesting themselves of FILL IN THE BLANK WITH EXCESSIVELY CORPORATE JARGON and other assets in our unwavering commitment to the XYZ Way and its global mission of service to all valued XYZers, their customers, and affiliates." Such verbiage comes across as condescending, impersonal and oft-confusing. A simple "Mr. Sanders, we are letting you go because we want to increase XYZ's shareholder value" is much more direct and honest.

Bottom line...organization culture drives organization behavior. Knowingly or unknowingly, leadership defines the culture. Understanding what gets noticed, and what does not, drives behavior and confusion. Conflict reigns supreme when leadership is unaware and inconsistent with their actions. To combat the apathetic organization, we must focus on improving employee engagement by creating a culture where employees feel fully absorbed by and enthusiastic about their work and thus take positive actions to further the organization's reputation and interests. In turn, changing an apathetic employee into an engaged one with a positive attitude towards the organization and its values.

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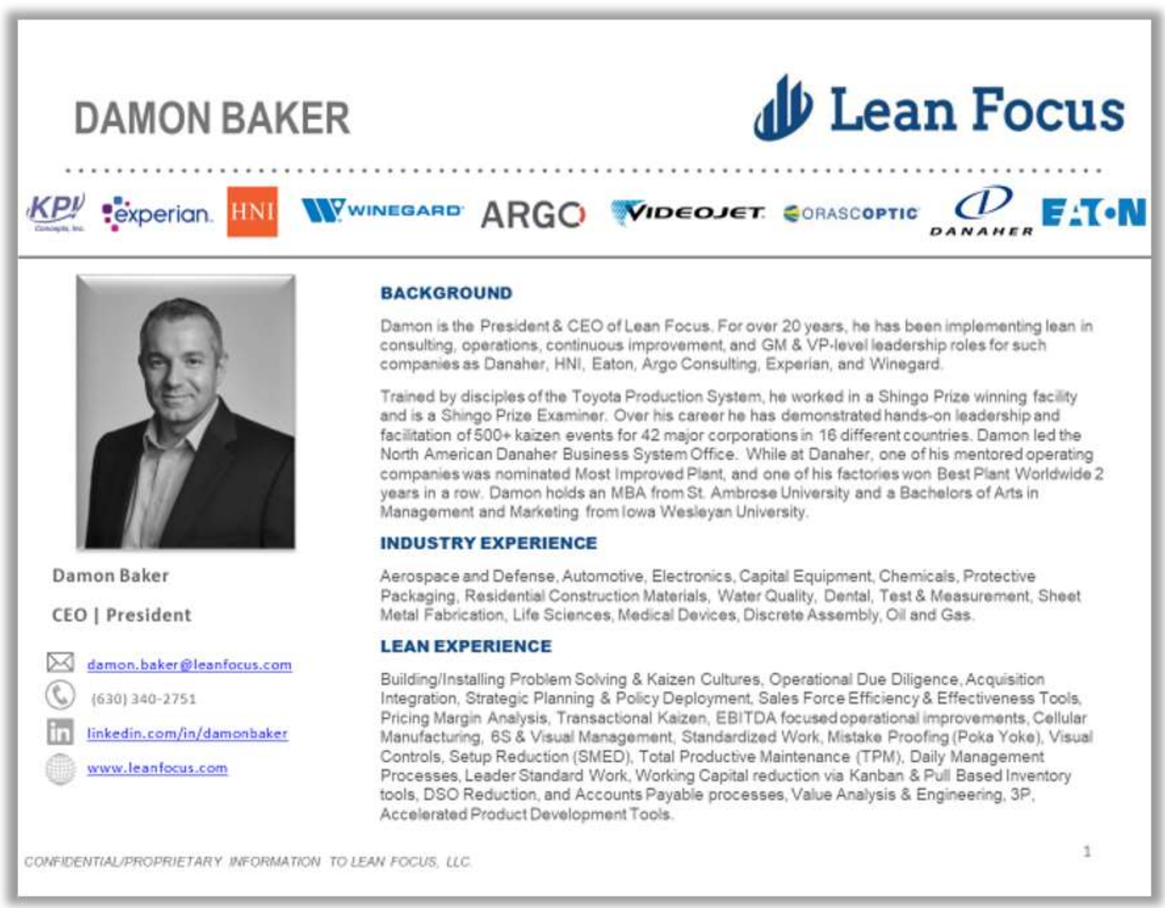


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