

# Being a Victim or a Champion – Your Choice

By Dr. Chance Eaton

I've been watching how the disengaged employees (approximately 70% of the country) and engaged employee (approximately 30% of the country) function together at work for many years; and they all share something in common – choice. Despite the perception and attitude they carry about their employment, they can never get away from the unique human quality of free will.

Carl is actively disengaged at work. He shows up to work each day and his stress response is turned on Sunday evening as he begins to mentally prepare for his Monday morning. The stress response stays relatively high throughout the work week and finally comes down Friday afternoon as he leans into the weekend. Carl can't help but be cynical to every management decision. He is addicted to creating drama around the office, and loves nothing more than to propel a juicy rumor with the hopes of making someone feel miserable. His coworkers hate working with him and the union representative sighs every time Carl calls. This isn't Carl's first rodeo; he has a history of job hopping hoping to get away from a crappy company, only to find himself in the same crappy company again and again. You see, Carl is a victim – but as crazy as it sounds, he chooses this path.

Simone is actively engaged at work. She enjoys the challenges of work, and is in a role that fits her personality, motivations, and career goals. Simone is motivated at work to express her talents, and mastered the art of listening to understand and speaking her truth. She enjoys the opportunity to truly collaborate with her colleagues; and as a result, coming up with creative and meaningful solutions for her department's unique challenges. She loves nothing more than watching her colleagues succeed and mentoring the up and coming employees. This isn't Simone's first rodeo either; she has a history of being successful at work. On a few occasions she has grown out of one job only to move onto another great job that brings greater challenge and satisfaction. You see, Simone is a champion – which doesn't sound crazy at all, she chooses this path, just as Carl chooses his.

Despite how different Carl and Simone's work situations are, both are actively expressing choice in their work. They choose how they perceive the situation, how they feel, think, and even behave. Being a victim or a champion at work – is a choice.



Many famous authors have spoken on the subjects of choice, free will and responsibility. One such author was Existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. In his book *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (1957), he eloquently said “you're free, choose, that is, invent” (p. 28). In just a few words he sums up what it means to be a champion; which is by the way a challenge that Simone accepts daily. Further, Sartre notes that to be responsible is to be the uncontested author of an event or thing, even to the point that where not choosing is a choice in itself. Even in the case of the actively disengaged Carl, the position of the victim is also one of choice.

Psychotherapist Irvin Yalom (1980) said that to be responsible is to be aware that you create your own destiny, your own self, feelings, and even one's own suffering. Further, in cases where an individual cannot accept one's responsibility no real help is possible because options don't exist, only limitations. This may explain why actively disengaged employees like Carl are so difficult to motivate in the work place. They choose their situation and attempts to motivate and develop appear as impossible strategies. This highlights just why hiring the right employees is such a critical component to the engagement process.

Stephen Covey (1989), a noted leadership and development guru, spoke about how the space of freedom

of choice exists between every stimulus and response in life. He said that humans are always faced with new stimuli, and due to our unique consciousness, we are capable of reacting in ways that serve us. Another extremely powerful voice on choice came from Psychiatrist Victor Frankl, who was a Nazi concentration camp survivor. Even during the horrendous situations that Frankl faced in the concentration camps, he came to realize that we always have choice; “everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (1959, p.66). The credibility of his concentration camp experience is extremely high considering the circumstances that he witnessed and personally experienced. A real feeling of power comes when you come to recognize this gift of perceiving, choosing, and inventing our way; “fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstance, decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually” (p. 66).



I am well aware that in employee engagement research the direct supervisor plays a significant role in how engaged team members are due to their high ability to control engagement factors. The data says this, and from experience, I see this to be very true on a daily basis. But at some level, you simply cannot ignore the reality that regardless of how well another person sets the stage for you to succeed, some people refuse to take note. Though victims are skilled at blaming their environment, their history, their situation, they still are the ones choosing their misery.

An ingredient to the engaged employee, the champions, is that they realize that they own their perceptions and reactions to the world. There is such an important lesson to choice; whether you know it or not, you decide how you are going to live. You are the programmer to your life, you write the program, and you run the program.

One very simple technique to visualize how to move into the space of being a choice champion is referred to by Covey (1989) as the circle of concern and the circle of influence. The circle of concern is the space where you have no control. Take a simple situation; you are stuck at a red light and you are late for work. The person that lives in this space becomes angry and frustrated at a situation in which they have absolutely no control. The circle of concern is home for the victim mentality – where they can express their cynicism and hope that you can share in their misery. The circle of influence, according to Covey, is the space where you have control in any situation. Back to the red light, by shifting your attention ever so slightly to the space you have control, you come to realize that there is nothing you can do about the light itself – but you can mentally prepare for your work day, take a few moments to reflect on your family, listen to radio, and feel gratitude for all that you have. People that know how to be champions in their experiences live in the space where they have control, and leave the circle of concern to universal probabilities of randomness. Regardless of the situation, you always have the opportunity to move into the space of influence – the choice to perceive, react, think, and feel.

As an example of the circle of concern and circle of influence, a few years back I was working with an employee that had a very sick kiddo. This included significant time in hospitals, physical pain, and fear for the child’s survival. I commented to the employee that it must be very challenging, and I couldn’t imagine being in that situation. Then I asked her what in the situation she could control. She was not happy with my question, and she continued to describe how difficult the situation was. I again sympathized but asked her what she could control in the situation. We went a few rounds and then it hit; she looked at me and said with tears rolling down her face, “I can be strong for my kid...I can recognize the pain that my child is in...I can recognize the pain that I experience...and I can’t take away the situation...but I can be loving, supportive, and available.” She came to the special place of moving from being a suffering victim to a champion; experiencing pain but having control of her response.

I'm not saying it is easy, but shifting your attention from the circle of concern to the circle of influence is powerful.

Whether it is our challenging work situation, the elections, climate change, or our eventual death – we always have choice in how we perceive the world. The space between every stimulus and our eventual reaction is very powerful. Learn to identify when you are stuck in the circle of concern, the space where you have no control, and shift your attention back to the circle of influence, the space where you have infinite control of your perceptions and reactions. We are the programmers of our lives, and the best way to forecast our future is to create it, reinvent ourselves, and take responsibility for the choices that we make.

Covey, S. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Fireside.

Frankl, V.E. (2006). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Sartre, J.P. (1987). *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. New York: Citadel Press



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