

Leadership Communication Unplugged

by Tom Ferguson



"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

TEDDY ROOSEVELT

"To stand upon a stage alone with an acoustic guitar requires bravery bordering on heroism."

RICHARD THOMPSON



Way back when MTV first introduced the idea of high powered arena rock bands sitting around on stools and playing acoustic versions of their songs, there were more than a few raised eyebrows. But, when the shows started airing, it was obvious that there was something very special about MTV Unplugged. The music was more intimate, even heartfelt. It was very transparent, as if we all had a chance to sit in on a practice session or the introduction of a brand new song by our favorite musicians. Artists felt comfortable talking about their music and even explaining some of what it all meant. Before long, people were hooked on the unplugged concept.

Leadership communication can be unplugged as well; intimate, real, transparent, and emotional, all while still being effective and, yes beautiful. Even in our dot.com, #hashtag world the evidence says that more and more people long to work for a manager that communicates in an unplugged manner and have very little enthusiasm for the brand of leadership that is loud, uncaring, and distant.

STATE OF THE WORKPLACE:

A Perspective on Meaningful Work

A popular assessment today of the degree of contemporary employee commitment is the universally accepted measures of engagement courtesy of The Gallup Organization. Gallup's dominance in this measure for more than two decades is widely accepted and frequently covered in business and leadership journals. In 2015, Forbes Magazine writer Kevin Kruse wrote this about Gallup's engagement statistics: *"The percentage of US workers in 2015 who Gallup considered engaged*

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in their jobs averaged 32% ... while another 17.2% were actively disengaged.

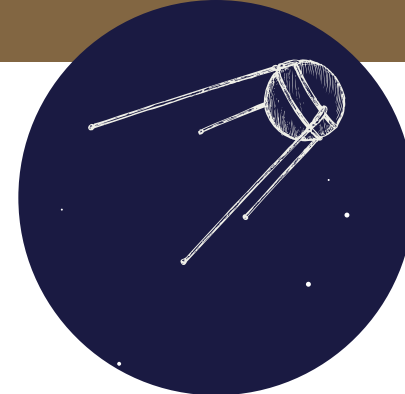
The 2015 averages are largely on par with the 2014 averages and reflect little improvement in employee engagement over the past year."

Engagement metrics are useful, but somewhat lean on the employee's psyche only. In truth, the employee engagement problem is a response to leadership uncertainty about what matters to all employees. What do we mean? In short, people are engaged when they know their work matters. And that they hear that from the leadership. And the evidence?

For some answers, we can begin by looking at the "Best Places to Work" lists. There are at least three national "Best Places" journals that annually rank companies: Fortune's "100 Best Places", Inc.'s "50 Best Places" and Forbes' "10 Best Places to Work." In the December 14, 2015 issue of Forbes, writer Kathryn Dill says this: *"Ultimately, the companies that performed exceptionally well on this list clearly demonstrated their mission, culture, and values through strong communication with employees and job seekers."*

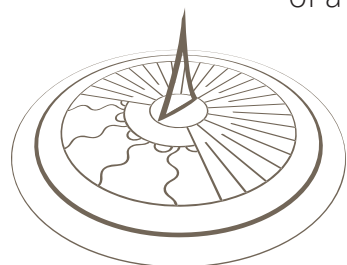


There's that mission thing again. What do you think the level of engagement was during NASA's mission to land a man on the moon by the end of the 60's decade? Let's assume that the mission



of most organizations is winning market share with an inspired team. NASA's "market share" equivalent was winning the space race against competition that already had a head start.


History reveals that the "unplugged" element is not a modern invention. Behind the contemporary curtain of engagement is a secret that has withstood the test of time. Engagement excellence surely existed in Napoleon's armies; and George Washington's conscripted civilians? How about the legions of white-shirted sales professionals under Thomas Watson, Sr.'s IBM? Or Southwest Airlines flight attendants under Herb Kelleher? Coffee baristas under Howard Schultz at Starbucks? The inspiration of employees, or followers, through authentic communication of a purpose or cause, has existed in all high performing organizations since the dawn of time.



Oh sure, you say, "But they are a select few with national notoriety and celebrity." Well, not hardly as we will see from the stories below about Brian, Max and Tom ... all sans celebrity. Except to their followers.

Contrary to the outward metrics, employees actually crave meaning. The engagement numbers don't tell the whole story. In fact, the bottom line is that the level of engagement in the workplace tracks leadership's declaration and communication of the organization's purpose. Communication that is sincere. Unplugged. And everyone knows it, including job seekers who are just being introduced to the organization. That kind of leadership is a magnet for great talent. Employees in those kinds of organizations are engaged and it shows. Their talented friends know there is something different going on at their organization, and that's attractive.

Think how much more productive, healthy, and happy the world would be if even half of us worked for an unplugged manager. It's doable, but somebody has to give these managers license to operate like that, to know that it's not only OK, but expected. I would imagine that when the first rock bands were approached about MTV's "amp-less" idea, they were more than a little skeptical. But then they

A grayscale photograph of a woman with blonde hair, seen in profile from the chest up. She is looking slightly to the right and speaking into a black microphone. Her right hand is raised, with fingers spread, as if gesturing while speaking. The background is out of focus.

saw other unplugged bands doing it, and they figured out the value. Soon, the tide turned, and bands were approaching MTV about being a part of the unplugged movement they had created.

It's time for such a movement in leadership as well. It's time for the tide to turn, and sooner rather than later.

Unplugged “Connects”

Building an engaged organization and being an unplugged leader really comes down to just one thing and one thing only: Authentic communication with two vitally important caveats. First, the expression to employees has to be authentic and heartfelt from the owner/chief executive, i.e., and in their own voice. And second, the messages they deliver has to link employee work to a cause or purpose that serves both customers and humanity.

Unplugged leaders know how to explain the mission of the organization so that everyone understands why their work matters. Suddenly, their jobs stop being work, and become something much more important. Unplugged leaders have a gift for connecting with their audience in the intimacy

of their own voice without amplification or delegation to a backup chorus. When this happens, the outcome can be, and most often is, an inspired workforce.

There are three categories of work meaning communication available to leaders that have the potential to fulfill the three most prevalent human desires innate to all of us ... ownership, belonging and meaning. All three are present in most vibrant organizational cultures.



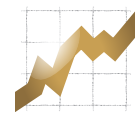
VALUES

Values lived up to
... increased work
meaning



MILESTONES

Milestone celebrations
... belonging to
traditions and history



RESULTS

Key Results honors ...
yields ownership of
excellence

A black and white photograph of a young man with short, dark hair, smiling at the camera. He is wearing a dark, collared shirt. The background is a workshop or factory floor, with shelves filled with various mechanical parts and tools visible. The lighting is soft, highlighting his face.

Unplugged Stories

The Leader's Voice at McCoy's Building Supply

McCoy's Building Supply sells building materials to independent builders, contractors and home owners. They are a \$700 million-plus business with 86 stores in five states. Each morning at 6:30 am CEO Brian McCoy personally summarizes the prior day's highlights in a voice message to all store employees that are linked to the company phone system. Here is an excerpt from a recent daily message:



"Good Wednesday morning McCoy's team, this is Brian. Hey Waylon, thank you so much for the voicemail yesterday evening about the new regional alignment effective the first of the year. I appreciate that. I know this: our Headquarters Team is working really hard to just continue to step up that support to store operations, and all that good planning goes into next year for sure.

Ron Terrell, our Store Manager in San Angelo, thank you for 24 years at McCoy's today. We're sure appreciative, Ron, of your leadership. One other person I want to shout out this morning. Jessica McPherson, who is our Senior Marketing Analyst here at headquarters, has been named along with four other individuals in our community as a San Marcos Shining Star Under 40 by the Chamber of Commerce. That's due to her effective work at McCoy's, and in our community, and with the Chamber of Commerce. That recognition is so well-deserved. That'll be tonight, Jessica, I know you'll have fun at that event.

Hey, a couple of training reminders team and store managers. We've got Retail Ops Supervisor Training next month here at headquarters, December 13th through 16th. What a great time of year that is as we are slowing down and that opportunity again to train up and equip your ROS. We've got a lot of slots available, so take a look at that.

I want to remind you all that this coming Friday is Veterans Day, and I'll tell you, it'll be a holiday for

a lot of people and we expect more floor traffic. We want to get ready for that. Make sure that all of our new cashiers and salespeople are aware of the offer to veterans on Veterans Day. That's coming up on Friday; that'll be very exciting.

Brian then gives a shout-out to the prior day's total company sales and acknowledges the top gross sales and gross margin leading stores. In each case, he calls out the store and store manager by first name. His tone is enthusiastic and appreciative. For example: "Catch this, Marisa and the Roswell team ran \$71,000, I might add at a 23.9% gross margin."

Then he wraps up with: "I'm going to leave you with a quote today that Judy Akers shared with headquarters about a week or so ago; no, just a few days ago, and I love this quote, so here it is:

"The true measure of a man ... we could say a man or a woman ... the true measure of a man is how he treats someone who can do him absolutely no good. Boy, I love that. Hey team, have a great start today. Be careful, and we'll catch you tomorrow. Good bye."

Brian just cares. His messages are heartfelt as he honors the humanity of his people and their contributions to the aggregate success of McCoy's. He gives them ownership of the firm's success ... personally ... every weekday.



The Leader's Voice at Herman Miller

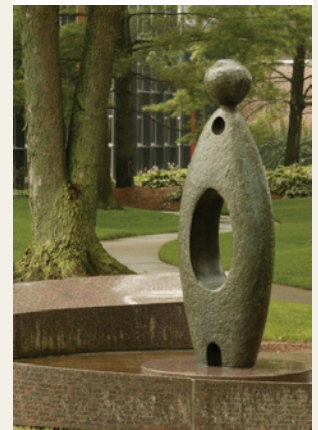
At Herman Miller, beginning in the 1980's and early 90's, employees knew Max DePree's heart and not just from his leadership observations and platitudes in his book, *The Art of Leadership*, where he wrote: "What is it most of us really want from work? We would like to find the most effective, most productive, most rewarding way of working together. We would like to know that our work process use all of the appropriate and pertinent resources: human, physical, financial we would like to work process and relationships and meet our personal needs for belonging, for contributing, for meaning for work, for the opportunity to make a commitment, for the opportunity to grow and be at least reasonably in control of our own destinies. Finally, we like someone to say thank you!"

Another way he inspired followers was to communicate how he felt about the daily tasks and actions of his employees. He decided, I believe, to communicate that all tasks were essential for the success of the company as a whole. To make that visible and evident he envisioned and created a "purpose context" that no task was unimportant. Rather, he saw dedication to all work to be like the tribal tasks of village watercarriers.

Here, from my interview with 32-year employee, Jim Hardaway, is how Max combined the power of story, symbol and ritual. Hardaway: "The idea of the watercarrier was Max DePree's, son of the founder of Herman Miller who was CEO is in the 80's and early 90's. The idea was based on a village and that the watercarriers were the lifeblood of that village. Without water the village would die. Max and his father saw the value of people that have been with the company long-term and believe that these individuals are the "lifeblood" of a corporation and are important to keeping the stories, culture, and heritage alive.



HermanMiller



In the early 90's Max wanted to recognize long-term employees and had this sculpture commissioned. Every year new members are inducted and a celebration takes place in Zeeland and all Watercarriers are invited to participate. All of the HMI executive leadership team participates as well. Each watercarrier receives a letter from the current CEO and a framed image of the sculpture. It's a fun event and a nice recognition."

Today there are more than 1500 Watercarrier members. When communicated authentically, people are a reflection of the leader's heart. At Herman Miller the day you begin work your task has watercarrier significance from day 1 until, at year 20, you are inducted. You "belong" to a tribe of essential employees.

The Leader's Voice at Zachry Industrial, Inc.

This example of unplugged communication evolved from our collaboration in 1999 with Tom Hannigan, president of Zachry Industrial's Industrial Maintenance Division, headquartered in San Antonio, Texas. As a privately-held multi-billion dollar industrial construction company, their Ideologies are the glue that keeps thousands of employees, principally hourly craftworkers, linked to leadership through the declaration and commemoration of their values. At Zachry their #1 value is workplace safety. Hannigan, a West Point grad, wanted to honor annual safety excellence and include all craftworker participants. The collaboration has been a great partnership success. Hannigan was receptive to the idea that safety, ultimately, was about the preservation of life. He approved a graphic rendering of safety as a heart in the palm of a welder's glove and the program theme as *The Heart of Zachry*. And his voice? Read the "unplugged" heartfelt respect for Zachry craftworkers. He respects them for their work ... which is dangerous, highly skill oriented, and always on the clock as hourly employees.

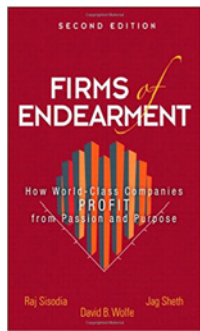


The program is still in effect today; Zachry's safety leadership excellence puts them into a preferred position to bid or negotiate major industrial projects, today under the leadership of John Zachry, the founder's grandson.

At safety celebrations, individual craftsmen are given caps, sometimes shirts or jackets, but the most valued mementos are the non-precious metal coins or medallions that show the Hannigan "lyrics." Over the years, recipients have shared with me their collections ... retained as badges of honor for excellence. Work that supports an organization's values fulfills meaning.

Time Does Not Change People

In the book *Firms of Endearment* (FoE), the authors, Raj Sisodia, David Wolfe and Jag Sheth, trace business management evolution through three epochs of history. They describe the Age of Empowerment as established by our *Declaration of Independence* and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* which permitted freedom of destiny and markets. The next epoch, the *Age of Knowledge*,



they wrote, was defined by the transitioning of the US from an agrarian to an industrial society. One significant outcome of this period was a preoccupation with productivity and cost cutting which improved bottom lines but began to take a toll on communities, workers, their families and the environment. Today, the authors argue, the *Age of Transcendence* is upon us and is characterized by people looking for more meaning in their lives than simply adding to the store of things they own.

The FoE authors summarize this latter age in this way: *“During the 1990s the phrase “share of wallet” became popular among marketers. FoE’s have bought into a different idea: they strive for share of heart. Earn a place in the customer’s heart and he and she will gladly offer you a bigger share of her wallet. Do the same for an employee and the employee will give back with a quantum leap in productivity and work quality.”*

The Bottom Line: History Does Not Change People

Yes, as these authors have documented much has changed since the Middle Ages. On the other hand, some things are constant as illustrated by this story:

A traveler came upon three individuals working with stone.

Curious as to what these workers were doing, the traveler approached the first worker and asked, "What are you doing?" Without the slightest hesitation, the worker replied, "I am a stone cutter and I am cutting stones."

Still unclear of the stone cutter's objective, the traveler approached the second worker and asked the same question. To this, the second worker thought for a moment, gazed briefly at the traveler and explained, "I am a stone cutter and I am cutting stones to earn money to support my family."

Perplexed by the two different responses, the sojourner approached the third worker and asked, "What are you doing?" Stopping for a moment, the worker stared at the stone in his hand, slowly turned to the traveler, and said, "I am a stone cutter and I am building a cathedral!" He continued, "I have journeyed many miles to be part of the team that is constructing this magnificent cathedral. I have spent many months away from my family and I miss them dearly. However, I know how important Salisbury Cathedral will be one day and I know how many people will find sanctuary and solace here. I know this because the Bishop once told me his vision for this great place. He described how people would come from all parts to worship here. He also told that the Cathedral would not be completed in our days but that the future depends on our hard work."



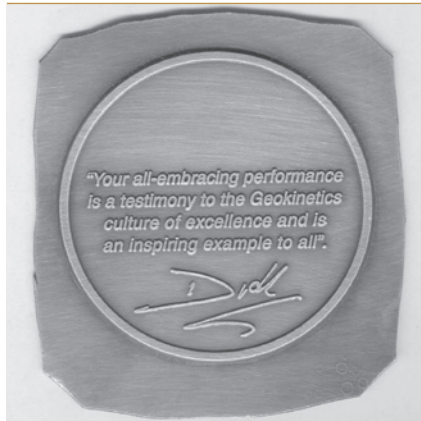
At Work: Cutting Stones ... or Cathedral Building?

Three men – all working at the same site, performing the same task – each had three very different perspectives, hence three levels of engagement. It seems that not much has changed since The Middle Ages.

Here's what's new: our understanding of human motivation and desires. Today, what the chief executive declares and believes, in his or her own voice, has the potential to elevate work that employees perform beyond their job description, title and pay grade. When people understand firsthand what the organization stands for, work has meaning beyond their job description as well ... whether stone cutters or knowledge workers of today.

From the stories in the previous three categories of meaning above, each leader ... Bruce, Max and Tom ... declared and reinforced their personal beliefs, values, or cause. Remember, organizations qualify for "Best Places" based on employee assessment surveys. And here's the stealthy and timeless secret: engagement comes from people performing meaningful work.

When leaders define and communicate the organization's purpose and credit work that contributes to that cause, we can make a case for self-actualization, that is... fulfillment at work.



Work That Matters ... A Timeless Connection



Engagement does not trickle up from the bottom.

Unplugged leadership is an idea whose time has come. It is an invitation that attracts connection from employees to leaders. It is a transformational notion, one that guides employees over the bridge and lets them know that they are not just cutting stones; they are building a cathedral.

Meaningful work. It's bestowed by unplugged leaders; inspired performance then, is the response.



Visible Applause® is dedicated to reminding executives about the power of “unplugged” communication. We design one-of-a-kind tributes directed at Results, Milestones and Ideologies that impart elevated meaning to work ... and life.

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