

THE ART *of* ENGAGEMENT

Chapter 6: I Can't Be Engaged If I'm Scared

You may have heard of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It's a model that the psychologist created in the 1940s that helps explain what motivates human beings. At the base are the indispensable physical needs: oxygen, food, and water. Ranking just above these is the most basic psychological need: the need to feel safe.

When we don't feel safe, fear drives our actions and interactions. Fear causes us to not be ourselves as individuals. In organizations, fear holds us back from performing at the level we're capable of. When we're afraid, we're guarded, cautious, and restrained, and we do everything we can to regain a feeling of security.

The Freedom of Feeling Safe

The fear of not being liked or not being accepted influences many of us. It starts at a young age in the form of peer pressure.

When I was a high school administrator, I noted the excitement and energy of the freshmen every fall. So many had aspirations to play varsity sports, to star in the play, or to be elected to student council. They couldn't wait to contribute their talents. By midyear, some had reached their goals, but many had not. Some of the kids who fell short of their goals ended up in the detention hall as their frustration led to acting out. As their hopes to fit in dimmed, they moved from occasional detention hall visitor to standing member. Some progressed down the path to probation, absolutely-the-last-chance probation, and finally to expulsion. Fear of "never making the cut" kicked in and the students felt that they weren't talented enough to be a real part of the school. When this happened, they "signed up" for the easiest group to join—those who were against everything. This was a sad process to watch.

As a result, we started an intramural program with no tryouts or elections required. The activities included an overnight canoe trip. One year, one of the "problem kids" decided to go. On the ride to

the canoe livery, he acted his part, being obstinate and mouthy. When we arrived, he continued to be disruptive.

By some strange twist of fate, he was assigned to my canoe. This is where fear-based peer pressure and the power of feeling safe converged. As we launched our canoe, he continued to show plenty of bad attitude. But then, we rounded a bend in the river and were suddenly alone. Within seconds, this high school tough guy transformed into a curious child, enchanted by the natural wonders he saw. He was no longer afraid of what others thought of him. He was fascinated as he watched trout jumping in the river and deer wandering near the shoreline. He began to ask questions—and the questions kept coming. This happy kid full of wonder was a stark contrast to the juvenile-delinquent-in-training who had boarded the canoe back at the launch. That student who behaved in the way he thought his peers expected—like a troublemaker—became who he really was when fear fell away.

So what does a 15-year-old who was cut from the basketball team, who became a detention hall resident, and then came alive as an enthusiastic naturalist on a canoe ride have to do with business? Everything.

Driven by peer pressure, adolescents frequently give up who they really are because of the fear of not fitting in and not belonging. In the same way, organizations can create a sense of "fear pressure" that has the same outcome—people avoid being who they genuinely are because they fear they won't be approved of or valued or that they'll do something wrong. Each situation is dangerous because the true talents and abilities of people are suppressed, resulting in disengagement, lack of execution, and failure to live up to their potential. At the high school, we created an opportunity for kids to interact in an environment where they could be themselves. In organizations, leaders need to create environments where people can act authentically without fear of rejection or judgment.

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In doing so, an individual's talents and abilities will be allowed to flourish.

What Are People Scared Of?

When we ask people what they are afraid of at work, here's what they tell us:

- We're afraid that our contributions aren't really valued.
- We're afraid that our personal beliefs don't align with those of the company.
- We're afraid that we won't be able to adapt to changes in the way we work.
- We're afraid that we won't have a safe place to practice new skills.
- We don't feel that it's safe to fail and learn from failures.
- We don't feel that it's safe to say what we really think.
- We don't think it's safe to suggest better ways of doing things.
- We don't know how to disagree and not become branded "a problem."



Putting on protective armor for the day ahead.

With frameworks of rules, policies, and requirements, organizations create environments where people perceive that they must behave, think, and believe in a certain way. If they don't, they fear, they won't fit in, and there will be negative repercussions.

The Safe Time of the Week

There are places where people do feel safe, where they simply do their best and let it stand for what it is rather than worry about how it will be perceived by others. This happens on weekends. Consider this: if each person's work is a series of self-portraits, most of the best pictures are painted on weekends and evenings after work.

In my experience, people want to go to work feeling as if they are making a difference. Yet, survival is often the primary objective. Shifting external forces, complexity, specialization, outsourcing, and segmentation in the workplace continue to intensify the fear of not being adequate or valuable enough for the future.

Employees are drowning in their own protective actions while starving for the safety that they find in the evenings and on weekends when they know that they contribute to something meaningful (families or personal lives), when they have a sense of being needed (volunteer organizations), and when they know that their decisions impact their outcomes (fantasy football teams).

In these safe situations, fear doesn't cause them to act out in defiance, hold anything back, abandon their true beliefs, or go after any of their goals halfheartedly.

Making It Safe to Discuss the Hard Issues

In practicing the art of engagement, leaders have to recognize that what they're ultimately trying to do is engage human beings. But until people

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truly feel safe, leaders can't expect them to engage and perform at a higher level. Once leaders acknowledge that most organizations create rules that prevent people from being their true selves, they must break down the barriers and make it safe for employees to discuss the hard issues.

Creating a safe way to share ideas was a recent challenge for major retailer PETCO. Once at the top of the lucrative pet industry, PETCO had lost its position due to intense, diverse competition. Its leadership initiated a companywide transformation in an effort to regain the top spot. To help in this transformation, they decided to inform employees about the changing marketplace and the plan to retake the lead. The goal was to make it safe to talk about PETCO's current failing position and then to liberate the talent in the organization to act in a much more fearless way.

Charlie Piscitello, PETCO's senior vice president of human resources, said, "We had stopped listening to people in the field. As a result, they'd stopped telling us what they really thought."

The transformation process began with addressing this reality. PETCO brought many of its people together in small groups and endorsed a candid discussion about industry trends and PETCO's plan of action. The results were gratifying. "It was a great start," said Piscitello. "The process of encouraging people to say what they really think gave our people hope when they had despair. Our employees came out of the sessions knowing the company's plan, realizing that the company was trying hard to do the right thing, understanding how much they mattered, and seeing how they could influence the outcome. They went from despair to hope, and hope to belief. Now they can use that belief to act."

Piscitello asked his people for reactions to this new approach. A typical response was, "Normally, I'm fearful that if I don't give the right answer, I'll be ostracized or I'll feel stupid. Here, I didn't have the

right answer, but I wasn't worried about speaking up because I felt like we were searching together." Through all this, we learned that people won't explore or take risks unless they feel safe. When people aren't encouraged to search together, fear grows and the chances of finding solutions to an organizational problem shrink.

Formality Reinforces Fear

Management expert Larry Bossidy tells us that "realism is at the heart of execution." He also says that to be real, you have to be candid, and that formality decreases candor.

Many of the formal aspects of our workplaces are reflections of the rules and procedures that define the culture of the business. In some companies, only certain employees are considered valuable. If the title on your business card doesn't place you at a certain level, you aren't invited into the strategy conversations. It's about the ability to play a part, not the ability to think. This forced formality perpetuates fear, uncertainty, and self-doubt.

In my first professional job, I worked in a school office with many seasoned veterans. One of my boss's first directions was, "Whatever you do, don't tell anybody that you're 21 and your bachelor's degree is in recreation." I grew a mustache simply because I was afraid that my colleagues would perceive me as inexperienced. I believed I needed to play the role and look the part.

Strangely enough, some 30 years later, after working with dozens of senior teams at Global 500 companies, I've found that most of those organizations are "growing mustaches" for their own reasons. The mustaches come in the form of stilted conversations, boring and lifeless business reviews, never-go-off-the-agenda meetings, and avoiding the elephant-in-the-room issues—all of which build an environment of anxiety.

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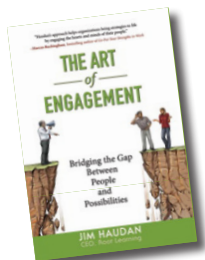
Left to their own devices, people tend to succumb to peer pressure rather than peer dialogue. They may become unwilling to say things that might be wrong or to be vulnerable in front of each other. Without a level of informality in the workplace, fear and caution take over and cause people to fall short of what they're capable of achieving.

Leaders need to remember that human beings work for them, and human beings need to feel safe.

When employees don't feel safe, all of our actions and behaviors are concentrated on finding a safe place. Unfortunately, most organizations seem to be very good at building and sustaining fear pressure. So how can anyone be surprised that disengagement is such a common outcome?

Questions for Action

1. How safe do your people feel about saying in public what they really believe?
2. How would you assess the gap between the engagement and creativity of your people on weekends versus during the week?
3. Are your people afraid of not being adequate or valuable for the future? How strong is that fear?
4. Is most of the energy of your people vested in protective actions and "growing mustaches" or in taking the risks necessary to elevate performance?
5. How well are you doing at giving permission to not be afraid and creating an informal environment?



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