

## Human Brilliance: A hypothesis | Bruce W. Fritch

We believe the human capability for further greatness lies in the untapped, ignored and repressed human brilliance innate in the spirit of hundreds-of-millions of people.

Our hypothesis is based on three fundamental facts:

- I. Human brilliance is a universal resource.
- II. The vast majority of human brilliance is disengaged and underutilized.
- III. Sustainable human advancement depends on our capacity to access human brilliance.

Human brilliance is a resource; it resides in the indomitable human spirit. It comes from the inner self and manifests in who we are, what we do, why we do it and how we do it. It has been a driving force in changing civilization for the better.

*"We humans are capable of greatness ... but we are making a mess of our planet and becoming a danger to ourselves. But we are also capable of using our passion and our intelligence, our technology and our wealth, to make an abundant and meaningful life for every inhabitant of this planet."*

- Carl Sagan (1934-1996)  
American astrophysicist

Carl Sagan was not speaking of a handful of explorers, scientists, inventors, writers and humanitarians; he was referring to all of us – billions of humans capable of greatness. In this one sentence, Sagan captures the human paradox: The potential for greatness contrasted against the mess we are making.

*In the US, 70% of employees are disengaged from, and disinterested in, their workplace. Kazakhstan is at 76%, UK 83%, Canada 84%, Germany 85%, Japan 93%, China/Hong Kong 94%, and globally the average is 87%.<sup>1</sup>*

This is a worldwide problem that has far-reaching consequences. When people's innate human brilliance is disengaged, suppressed and ignored, our organizations – indeed our nations – are severely disadvantaged.

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<sup>1</sup> *The State of the Global Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for Business Leaders Worldwide*, Gallup Inc. 2012-2013



## The access imperative

Those in authority, at every level, need to address this disengagement and our declining capacity to access human brilliance, the most universal and readily available resource, which is sitting right in front of us. Brilliance is there, people just aren't participating, they simply don't give a damn. And that is a folly of leadership.

## It's personal

Everything about great leadership is personal, and if it's not, it's not great leadership. In fact, it's not even leadership.

In order to lead the burgeoning number of disengaged people, it is imperative that those choosing to lead must first understand and commit to four *personal* prerequisites:

- a. Aspire to a higher purpose.
- b. See the potential for human brilliance in the human spirit of every person.
- c. Learn to access human brilliance and reach its maximum capacity.
- d. Understand and accept the magnitude of this problem.

From this personal foundation, a new vision, landscape and culture can be created.

## Greatness versus reality

At this point in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the size of the "mess" is self-evident. Unfortunately, we continue to herald our human exceptionalism rather than humbly address our human limitations, ignoring the reality that stretches around the globe. We are acting like adolescents whistling past the graveyard. We know that despite centuries of achievement, the fallout from our rush to progress has created disastrous problems that require wise leaders who are prepared to personally make a wrenching course correction.

**"Progress means an increase in wisdom; and an increase in wisdom is entirely compatible with a modesty about one's own progress and that of one's society."**

- Alain de Botton  
British philosopher and author

It is imperative that we begin to live up to our potential for greatness on a far broader scale. Surely, our capability for greatness is not satisfied with an excess of materialism and a mountain of "mess." Surely we can better employ the one resource that has the potential to "make an abundant and meaningful life for every inhabitant of this planet."



Let us establish what we mean by the human spirit – what is human in all of us – with three quotes that we believe capture its essence:

“Spiritual’ is used here without any religious connotation, of course, but rather just to indicate that we are dealing with a specifically human phenomenon, in contrast to the phenomena that we share with other animals. The ‘spiritual’ is what is human in man.”

- Viktor Frankl (1905-1997)

Author, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning*

“The idea flow from the human spirit is absolutely unlimited. All you have to do is tap into that well. I don’t like to use the word efficiency. It’s creativity. It’s a belief that every person counts.”

- Jack Welch

Retired CEO, General Electric

“Human spirit is the ability to face the uncertainty of the future with curiosity and optimism. It is the belief that problems can be solved, differences resolved. It is a type of confidence. And it is fragile. It can be blackened by fear and superstition.”

- Bernard Beckett

New Zealand writer, poet and playwright

## Hypothesis

In the spirit of continuous improvement, informed by the scientific method and with awareness that we are on a journey of discovery – building a new process that allows us to significantly increase our capacity for human brilliance – we have established a hypothesis.

*Human brilliance is a resource, part of the human spirit, and the root cause of our human advancement. It is widely distributed and readily available. If we are to make the world a better place, it is best accomplished by significantly deepening and expanding our capacity to access human brilliance.*

We have also defined human brilliance.

### **Human brilliance (noun):**

*The human capacity to feel, think, imagine, create, discover, synthesize and manifest ideas and action into something new; to act, behave and perform at a superior level; to be immersed in a moment of new insight and understanding; to engage collaboration of individual brilliance, transforming it into collective brilliance; to generate new energy, resourcefulness and perspective that changes the status quo. (Antonyms): Mediocrity, average, ordinary, superficial, suboptimal, apathy, lethargy, under performance, uncaring, inhumane.*



## Mediocrity abounds: 87% failure rate

As a resource, human brilliance is tangible, observable, accessible, actionable and measurable. We settled the wilderness with it, abolished slavery, achieved women's suffrage, created and mastered electricity, telephones, automobiles, computers and sent a spacecraft into interstellar space – incredible advancement! But in the pell-mell pursuit of growth we have reduced this once abundant reserve to an emaciated stockpile of indifference, disappointment and disengagement. Today, 87% of employees – our human brilliance – are inaccessible and under utilized.<sup>2</sup>

Although technology and growth have been without equal, today we find ourselves caught in a paradox: *The very thing we need the most of, we have the least of.*

Collectively, over the arc of history, humankind has made the world a better place; however, we have forged a double-edge sword: greater growth and prosperity, accompanied by life-threatening side effects. We need to address this reality.

## Brilliance lost

First, we need to recognize that we are only scratching the surface when it comes to the potential of human brilliance. Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we generated unprecedented growth on the backs of labor and the suppression of a peoples' brilliance. Command-and-control leadership believed in mass production, economies of scale, minimum wage and work-don't-think. In this modern version of Adam Smith's capitalism, most organizations view human brilliance and the indomitable human spirit as a line-cost on a profit and loss statement, a disposable resource that is now a scarce one.

**“Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society – its world view, its basic values, its social and political structures, its arts, its key institutions – rearranges itself...We are currently living through such a time.”**

- Peter F. Drucker

In economic theory, if organizations depend on a scarce resource but continue to treat it as infinite or expendable, eventually the economic system collapses. In the Alfred Sloan plutocratic model, the labor resource is considered infinite and expendable. Therein lies the problem. Laszlo Bock, Senior Vice President of People Operations at Google, Inc. says, “Basically there's two ways to run a company: One, you can treat people pretty badly and there's enough people who need work so you can grind through them. Or you can treat people well and get more out of them.” It's a clear choice.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, *State of the Global Workplace*



## In denial

We adopted a business model more than a hundred years ago and we remain mired in it, grinding through people while ignoring their brilliance. Myopic about profits, we have repressed this plentiful resource into stagnation, inflicting a century of inhumane damage and dishonor on it. So much so that as of 2013, on average, between 70-94% of all employees are disengaged from and don't care about their place of employment.<sup>3</sup> Some in authority see the magnitude of this loss; most are in denial, content with their self-absorbed comfort and unconscious of the consequences. Or they believe technology is the panacea for all maladies, not seeing technology as an enabler of human brilliance and vice versa. Or they simply do not know how to get the most out of the human spirit. No wonder we have problems with performance, productivity, profits, innovation and engagement, not to mention sustaining much of anything.

We are performing at a level of mediocrity that clearly reflects the reasons we are in the "mess" we are in – whether we choose to admit it or not. Of course, we can continue to deny it if we don't give a damn about the long-term. It's called "Short-Term America" for a reason. It's as short as the next quarterly report.

**"Attracted by their own interests, individuals will do what serves the common good, for in that all will gain and prosper."**

- Adam Smith

*The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759)*

We have relegated human brilliance to a minor role in capitalism, thus, emulated by all who follow. Adam Smith would be aghast.

## The emulation trap

Every parent understands the power of emulation: It's not what we say but what we do that most influences a lifetime of behavior. Ironically, most of today's leaders are direct offspring of 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking and behavior, emulating a business model preached in business schools and practiced in autocratic hierarchies where the fundamental thinking hasn't changed in decades. We have assumed this "leadership" was worthy of emulation. Sure, we've tweaked our organizations through a myriad of "continuous improvement" efforts, but the outcome of 70-94% of employees being disengaged is not continuous improvement; it's continuous mediocrity. And we're trapped, emulating it over and over.

We are a decade and a half into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and yet, there is only a handful of exceptional companies tapping into their human brilliance, and only a few business models worthy of emulation. We are faced with a leadership learning curve that is both steep and deep and it requires a transformational process in order to stop the emulation of 20<sup>th</sup> century authority models.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid



## The access imperative

Accessing human brilliance has become very difficult, in many cases impossible, despite billions being spent on HR, team building, continuous improvement, organizational effectiveness, leadership, Lean, Six Sigma, et al. They are perpetuating the emulation trap. If we are to address the “mess,” it is imperative that we *deepen and expand our capacity to access the human brilliance* sitting right in front of us, stagnating in mediocrity.

Anyone who agrees with Carl Sagan – and us – and chooses to lead effectively (it *is* a choice) must first commit to the four personal prerequisites we set out earlier. They are worth restating: a) Aspire to a higher purpose; b) See the potential for human brilliance in the human spirit of every person; c) Learn to access human brilliance and reach its maximum capacity; and d) Understand and accept the magnitude of this problem.

From this personal foundation, a new vision, landscape and culture are created.

## Requisite fundamentals

A different process and a transformative culture are needed and leadership must understand, develop and embed nine principles:

1. Higher purpose
2. Core human values
3. Emotional safety
4. Mirroring brilliance
5. Empathy
6. Emulation
7. Insight
8. Wisdom
9. Community

These principles constitute the leadership baseline for any organization or business unit that expects to re-engage the disengaged, disinterested and disillusioned employees – to access the unutilized human brilliance.

Leaders must not rationalize, or worse, ignore, the high levels of disengagement; instead they must pursue and adopt these principles and personally take on the access imperative. If not, it is an indication that their performance has reached the height of mediocrity, which to all stakeholders, including customers and shareholders, should be unacceptable, unsustainable and indefensible.

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