

Mediocrity makes a folly of leadership, at every level | Bruce W. Fritch

Let's not merely have another conversation about another attempt at another initiative for leadership effectiveness and organizational change. We need a conversation about sustainable, long-term profits and ROI that goes well beyond the short-term primacy of shareholder value. And I only want to talk about all of that in the context of strategic planning and cultural transformation when the CEO will sustain the consequential conversation.

There is a systemic intolerance for depth, and apathy towards superficiality.

Mediocrity is staring us in the face, it's unrelenting, and yet most conversations continue, ad nauseam, to perpetuate mediocrity – compounding it with a systemic intolerance for depth. It makes a folly of leadership, at every level.

It's all a distraction from the comprehensive conversations we need to have

We need deep, meaningful conversations at the top of the house among Board Members, Chairs, CEOs and executive teams. Conversations that advance the vision, values and purpose, which, in turn, lead to organization-wide transformation. We must rise above the malaise of mediocrity and build organizations on core human values that further profitability, growth and sustainability. And I am not interested in paying lip service to core human values; they need to be embraced and respected culture-wide. Nor am I interested in the widely held assumption that fear and apprehension in organizational hierarchy is “just par for the course.” Apprehension inhibits insight.

87% of employees don't care about their companies.

At the crux of the right conversation is an almost unfathomable fact (if it weren't anchored in research, we wouldn't believe it): Globally, 87% of employees do not feel engaged or appreciated in their jobs and they don't care about their companies.¹ 87%! This is a travesty of leadership, at every level.

¹ *State of the Global Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for Business Leaders Worldwide*, 2013, Gallup, Inc.



This is what I want to have a conversation about

These numbers prove, unequivocally, that no matter how good leaders think they are, how hard they try, how great the profits, and how much progress they think they're making, their organization's performance probably is, at best, mediocre.

The numbers don't lie

The research exposes the disastrously low levels of employee engagement. We know, deep down, that without the majority of employees performing at their best, an organization grossly under-performs, every day – limiting medium and long-term profits and shareholder value.

We need to talk about why we're stuck in a broken paradigm that continues to metastasize mediocrity, convincing almost everyone that if we just keep doing what we're doing and do it better we will get better and it will be okay.

"Grant that I may not so much seek to be understood, as to understand."

- From the Prayer of
St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Einstein defined that as insanity

What could we achieve if we broke free of mediocrity?

It is insanity. And it is not okay. Because generations keep emulating it. We have been propagating the cause and effect of mediocrity for so long that we actually rationalize it with the evidence of profitability, claiming, "If our organizations are profitable, what's the problem?" The problem is not about what we are accomplishing; it's about what we are not accomplishing. The right question is: What could we achieve if our organizations were not operating at the height of mediocrity?

Now, before you huff off declaring your organization is not mediocre, check out some of the facts (see our commentary #3: The Numbers Don't Lie), but first, give me another couple of minutes of your time.

"Good to Great" ain't so great! If we are mediocre does that mean profits are mediocre too? Yes. And many don't even realize it. Or acknowledge it. Even the numbers of the "Good-to-Great" and S&P 500 companies aren't great; they're mediocre.

"Everything becomes and recurs eternally."

- Friedrich Nietzsche
The Will to Power, 1053-1060,
Walter Kaufmann translation

The current paradigm has created a culture of eternal recurrence (everything repeating itself), which we refuse to see. We see this glass half full, when, in fact, it's half empty, cracked and leaking badly.



US is at 70%, Kazakhstan at 76%, Canada 84%

Some companies may be number one in market share or stock performance or Baldrige Awards but that doesn't mean they aren't still running half empty. In fact, even the best organizations, particularly in the United States, still have, on average, 70% of employees disengaged, disconnected and disappointed. By the way, Kazakhstan is 76%, Canada is 84% and India is 91%. Imagine what could be achieved – in performance, productivity, innovation, competitiveness, profitability, shareholder value, social values and public good – if even 50% of the employees were engaged and cared?

This is what I want to talk about

“It’s déjà vu all over again.”

- Yogi Berra

We need to have a conversation about how to create a seismic shift in performance if we are to avoid five more decades of what now makes Yogi Berra's memorable quote seem prescient: "It's déjà vu all over again." We need to begin talking about building organizations anchored in the one thing, the only thing, that can generate transformational change – the people. I'm not talking about another employment recognition program or cultural shaping or leadership workshops or strategic HR, or another leadership conference day jammed full of inspirational speakers. I'm talking about a process that disrupts the mind, settles in the gut, emboldens the heart and deepens understanding – of everyone. Leadership builds leadership, at every level, by creating deep understanding and generative empathy.

That's when human brilliance flourishes

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing”

- Edmund Burke

We need to talk about the source of all transformation: human values, higher purpose and the human spirit.

I would paraphrase Edmund Burke and say, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of mediocrity is for good women and men to do nothing.”

Why are we mediocre and yet think we're “good to great”? Why have a parade of CEOs, consultants, analysts, professors, PhDs and authors, all “in search of excellence,” failed to understand – deeply and comprehensively – what the countless studies on employee engagement and human behavior tell us? Why do we continue to fail at tapping into and capturing the wealth of human brilliance?

“Culture eats strategy for breakfast”

- Peter Drucker



This is what I want to talk about

How can we build organizations that are truly rooted in the collective brilliance of the people?
How can we transform organizational cultures – the cause and effect of all performance – so that they are generative, insightful, innovative, emulative ... brilliant, every day?

How can we create cultures that lift, expand, improve and perform beyond all expectations?

This is what I want to talk about

"... in our daily lives, we often face problems that appear to admit two equally unsatisfactory solutions. Using our opposable minds to move past unappetizing alternatives, we can find solutions that once appeared beyond the reach of our imaginations."

- Roger Martin, author, *The Opposable Mind*

Leaders cannot get out of the old paradigm until they hear the cognitive dissonance in their heads and allow it to stir their guts, move their hearts and touch the human spirit. This is when the inner voice is saying: OK ... enough! – this isn't working as well as it could ... Something's very wrong ... Am I asking the right questions? ... Surely there's a higher purpose, more worthy goals? ... How do I want to be emulated? ... How wise is my discernment? ... How do I get to wisdom, here ... now?

This is when the deeper conversation begins

I have found that such a conversation is far more necessary than leaders may first acknowledge, but when they explore it, they discover a transformative process that deepens their understanding and capacity to tap into the power of human brilliance, at every level.

It starts at the top of the house.

This is one of the conversations I am passionate about, one in which the executive team advances the vision, value and purpose at the top of the house, which is the only place, and only way, organization-wide transformation happens and is sustainable.

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