THE FREAK FACTORY

MAKING EMPLOYEES BETTER
BY HELPING
THEM GET WORSE

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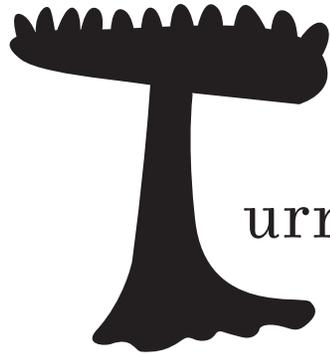
Turning your organization into a Freak Factory will help you solve two problems that plague most workplaces. The first problem is that employees are not fully engaged in their work and are not performing at a high level. The second problem is that the strategies many managers use to improve employee performance actually exacerbate the first problem.

PROBLEM #1: The Performance Problem

Frustration, cynicism and discontent are pervasive within companies today. Research into employee performance consistently indicates that employees are not especially effective in or committed to their jobs. A 2008 Blessing White study of employee engagement found that:

➤ 29% of employees are fully engaged

➤ 52% are not engaged

➤ 19% are actively disengaged.

And it gets worse. An Intuit study showed that:

➤ 72% of employees "dream of starting their own business"

➤ 67% of respondents "contemplate resigning from their job on a regular basis"

A recent Gallup survey found that only 20% of employees feel like they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day. This means that 80% feel trapped by work that relies on them to excel in their areas of weakness.

This lack of employee engagement is a critical issue for organizations because employees that are not engaged are sleepwalking through their day. They are simply existing and not giving significant attention to their job responsibilities. Furthermore, actively disengaged employees are working against organizational success and actually seek to undermine the work of their co-workers and managers.

Disengaged employees contribute to:

- high turnover

- tardiness

- absenteeism

- low morale

- low productivity

- conflict

- miscommunication

Research from the Gallup Organization indicates that disengagement costs companies up to $300 billion in lost productivity each year. Gallup also estimates that it takes five fully engaged employees to make up for the damage done by just one disengaged employee. A 2003 study by ISR found that companies with disengaged employees saw their operating margins drop by 2%, while companies with engaged employees realized a 4% increase in margins.

In contrast, engaged employees are passionate about their work and contribute discretionary time, energy and thought to achieve the organization's goals. Another Gallup study of employee engagement found that companies with engaged employees saw a 16% increase in share price while the share price for those with disengaged workers only increased 6%. Additionally, workers who are strongly engaged outperform their disengaged coworkers by 20-28%. This means that, if we could get our employees fully engaged, our companies could accomplish more work with just forty employees than our competitors could with fifty. In order to foster higher levels of employee performance, we must realize that the profound lack of engagement in most workplaces is actually the symptom of a much larger problem.

PROBLEM #2: The Perspective Problem

The way we currently manage employees does even more to harm, instead of help, their performance. We're trying to improve engagement using the same methods that created the problem in the first place:

- Rankings

- Evaluations

- Improvement plans

- Required training

The perspective of all these approaches is the same. We believe that there is something wrong with our employees and that we need to fix it. Our subsequent behavior toward our employees, based on these negative beliefs, further damages their performance. In other words, we think our employees are broken, treat them like they are broken, and then wonder why they don't work.

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The ineffectiveness of this perspective is illustrated by Nellie's experience during one of her performance evaluations. I met Nellie at a seminar for aspiring entrepreneurs and she shared the following story with me.

"One incident in particular, midway through my career, stands out. Though the years have flown by, I still remember it as if it were yesterday.

I was in my manager's office going over my annual review. I was so excited. My 360-degree feedback was excellent. On a scale of 1 to 5, I was rated 4.7. As a Senior Project Manager that was an awesome achievement. Project Managers assign people more work to their already full plate along with a tight deadline and then chase them for a status updates. So, naturally, project managers are not the most popular people in the company.

My manager and I began walking through the annual review section by section. I was elated, that is until we got to the Interpersonal Skills section. I was in shock to see that I had only been given 3 out of 5. I believe that I am the ultimate people-person.

Without looking up at me, my manager tactfully went on to ask me to *stop smiling and acting enthusiastic while I was at work.* OUCH! My mind screamed 'please pinch yourself and pray that you are having a *nightmare*.' This could not be happening. Job descriptions frequently read 'enthusiastic, result-oriented professional with…'

My manager explained that he thought I was fantastic and his best, most productive and dependable employee. However, *one of the senior executives was annoyed by my natural enthusiasm*. My boss asked me to stop smiling at this executive when I passed her in the hallways. "You can acknowledge her. Just do not smile.'

Wow! This pierced my being. I was born enthusiastic, smiling and looking at the brighter side of everything. His quote from her was 'if people want sunshine they could go outside.' The fact that I had delivered 180% of my set goals and even established a new department, which resulted in a hefty bonus for her, went by the wayside."

This manager was doing his best to improve the Nellie's performance. He thought that, by pointing out her flaws and asking her to change, he would get the desired result. However, what he actually did was diminish Nellie's self-confidence and motivation.

Their approach is all too common. Most people, 59% in a Gallup study, think that fixing weaknesses will make them successful. However, we're putting in huge amounts of effort, trying to get people to work on their faults and failing. It isn't helping and it's actually making things worse. We need a different approach.

The way we currently manage employees does even more to harm, instead of help, their performance.

Building a Freak Factory

If conventional approaches aren't working, then what should we do? Instead of attacking people's weaknesses, we need to find the strength that is hidden inside their apparently negative characteristics. It is time to stop trying to create well-rounded and balanced employees. We need employees that are unbalanced. We need employees that are freaks. It is time to build a freak factory.

There are four essential strategies for turning our teams, departments or organizations into freak factories. They are awareness, appreciation, amplification and adaptation.

STRATEGY #1: **Awareness**

We need to know what is wrong with our employees so that we will know what is right with them. Weaknesses are important clues to strengths.

My friend, Lynn, once introduced me to an audience of mothers by explaining that I was a bad kid that turned out okay. I was considered a bad kid because I had three basic problems.

➤ I couldn't sit still

➤ I couldn't be quiet

➤ I couldn't do what I was told

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My teachers, principals and parents accused me of being immature, undisciplined and rebellious. They regularly reminded me that I needed to correct these problems in order to become a successful adult. They tried to manage my behavior in the same ways that we try to manage people in the workplace. They offered rewards, threatened punishment, offered advice and suggested plans for improvement, all in an effort to fix my weaknesses. Unfortunately, or fortunately, they never succeeded.

But this bad kid turned out okay, not by fixing my weaknesses but by flaunting them. I didn't succeed in spite of my flaws, I succeeded because of them.

> Since I couldn't sit still, I started running ultra-marathons.
> Since I couldn't be quiet, I became a public speaker.
> Since I couldn't follow orders, I started my own business.

There is a clear lesson here for anyone that manages people. Instead of attacking people's weaknesses, we should find the strength that is hidden inside their apparently negative characteristics.

It is time to stop trying to create well-rounded and balanced employees. We need employees that are unbalanced. We need employees that are freaks.

Every day I get paid to do what everyone told me to stop doing. Every day I go even farther in the direction that people told me not to go in. Every day I put my weaknesses to work. In doing so, I demonstrate that there's nothing fundamentally wrong with me. I'm not broken and I don't need to be fixed.

I think this is true for our employees as well. We all have neutral characteristics that can be framed as strengths or weaknesses depending on the situation or the perspective of others.

STRATEGY #2: **Appreciation**

We need acknowledge that there is nothing wrong with our employees. What appear to be weaknesses are actually strengths in disguise.

We tend to frame people's unique qualities in a negative way. As we discussed earlier, all strengths have corresponding weaknesses. Any characteristic can be seen in either a positive or negative light, but the tendency is to see the weakness, instead of the strength. Social psychologists refer to this as the self-serving bias.

Framing characteristics in terms of strengths and weaknesses is the wrong way to think about people.

Al loves to take risks. He loves to explore and try new things. He loves to travel and rarely spends a lot of time in one place. His work experience includes a variety of short-term jobs that he works just long enough to finance his next trip. This means that he has few assets or material possessions. He's quick to try any sport that is new and dangerous. He lives for the moment and has no plans for the future. During one of his trips, he met a beautiful woman named Librarian Lucy.

Lucy loves stability and security. She carries a planner with a detailed list of things to do. Her goals are aligned with long-term objectives. Lucy's career is steadily moving forward. Even though she is still in her 20's, she has money in her retirement plan and has already purchased a home. Her wedding is already planned, despite the fact that she is not even dating, and she has picked out the names of all her potential children. Lucy loves the routine and consistency of her life.

When Lucy and Al first met, they were instantly attracted to each other. We've all heard that opposites attract, but why does that happen? It seems like we are drawn to those characteristics that we don't have. We admire those qualities in the other person and wish we could be more like them. Additionally, we've been told our whole life that we should have those characteristics. Al has been told that he needs to settle down and grow up. Lucy has been told that she needs to loosen up and take it easy.

So Al and Lucy got married and looked forward to a wonderful life together. Five years after their wedding, how are Al and Lucy doing? Do they still admire the other person's unique qualities? Are they still in love?

No! They can't stand to be together and they are on the brink of divorce. How did this happen? To answer that, consider two other questions. Has Lucy changed? Is Al a different person? No.

Their love didn't die because they didn't get what they bargained for. Al is still adventurous. Lucy is still conservative. The difference is that they no longer see the other person in a positive light. They've taken the very characteristics that created the initial attraction and have turned them into negative qualities.

Lucy sees Al as irresponsible, unreliable, immature and undisciplined. Al sees Lucy as boring, inflexible, stubborn and stifling. These critical descriptions are simply the opposite of the very strengths that brought them together. Al and Lucy had hoped the other person's positive qualities would rub off on them; instead they ended up rubbing them the wrong way.

This is human nature. We tend to see the down side, the dark side, of other people's good qualities. The difficulty is that both descriptions are true. Al is irresponsible AND adventurous. Lucy is inflexible AND responsible. They are two sides of the same coin. Since both descriptions are accurate, we can choose how we decide to evaluate ourselves and others.

I believe that we look at our employees in exactly the same way that Al and Lucy looked at each other. When we hire them, we see their characteristics as overwhelmingly positive. A year later, when it's time for the performance appraisal, and the workplace honeymoon is over, those same positives qualities are now negative traits.

➤ Initiative has become insubordination

➤ Imagination has become disorganization

➤ Creativity has become an inability to get things done

➤ Commitment has become stubbornness

What happened? Have our employees tricked us? No, they are not different. We got what we wanted but the problem is that we don't like what we have. Why is this? It is because we are framing unique qualities in a negative way. We don't need to fix or remediate those qualities. That doesn't work. It's a waste of our energy, and it leads to unhappy employees who don't work hard.

What we have to do is acknowledge that our employees aren't broken and we don't need to fix them. In most cases there is nothing wrong, except for the way we look at them.

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STRATEGY #3: Amplification

Since our employees' apparent weaknesses are actually valuable assets, we should help employees to flaunt their flaws, instead of trying to fix them. We should exaggerate weaknesses instead of eliminating them.

I found this letter from Andy Puzder, President of Hardee's, on the back of the bag for my Philly Cheesesteak Thickburger.

"A few years ago when I became president of Hardee's Restaurants, we were selling so many things that we had truly become a 'jack of all trades and master of none.' Unfortunately, in today's competitive fast food world, that wasn't cutting it.

The chain needed to become known for doing something really well again . . . So I challenged my menu development folks to come up with a new line of burgers that would make people say 'Wow! I can't believe I can get burgers that good at a fast-food place.' And they did. They came up with 'Thickburgers.'"

It is important to note that Hardee's was going out of business and closing many of their stores before developing this new line of burgers. Even more importantly, most other fast food companies were furiously adding healthy options to their menu. In response to criticism about the negative health effects of their offerings, burger joints were offering water, fruit and salads. Hardee's moved in the opposite direction.

In essence, they were saying, "our food is fat and nasty and will make you fat and nasty." And it worked. They succeeded by amplifying the weaknesses of fast food while everyone else was busy trying to fix those same weaknesses. They took fast food, which was already tremendously unhealthy and made it unhealthier. They took fatty foods and made them fatter. They took nasty food and made it nastier. And it worked.

Hardee's is not ashamed of the nutritional content of their food. They have embraced everything that is wrong with fast food because it is inseparable from everything that is right with fast food.

STRATEGY #4: Adaptation

We need to help employees freak out instead of trying to force them to fit in.

I met Kelly when she was an undergraduate student in my management class. She was a great sales-person. Selling seemed like the ideal fit for her skills and personality. She was a natural.

She was so good at her job that she sold insurance to me during the class. She didn't wait for a break. When I was complaining about the lack of service from my current insurance agent, she raised her hand and suggested that I switch to her agency. I filled out the forms the next week and was a customer before the course was over.

Kelly sounds like the perfect employee but there was a problem. She wasn't very organized and wasn't efficient with all of the small tasks that she needed to complete. This is a classic problem with salespeople. She was terrible at paperwork but wonderful with people work.

Kelly's manager realized that Kelly's talent for sales was a rare and valuable gift. Instead of criticizing Kelly for poor performance or sending her to training, Kelly's boss simply hired another person to handle the paperwork. This freed Kelly to do more of what she did so well and made Kelly much happier and more fulfilled in her work. In return, her boss got better performance and increased sales and revenue.

Kelly's story illustrates one method of adapting to employee weaknesses. There are six other ways for managers to improve employee engagement and performance.

Fail: **Allow employees to be the worst, so they can be the best.**

Shaquille O'Neal, who is more than seven-feet tall and weighs more than 300 pounds, has missed more free throws than any other player in the history of the NBA. Because of this weakness, he has spent endless hours working with coaches to improve his skills. And he is still terrible.

He's so bad at free throws that other teams developed a strategy for capitalizing on his weakness. They call it Hack-A-Shaq. They foul him before he has the opportunity to shoot so that he will have to score his points from the free throw line.

Since other teams implemented this strategy, O'Neal has led two different teams to four NBA championships and has been an All-Star in each year of his career. In other words, Shaquille is one of the best basketball players of all-time, even though he is the worst free-throw shooter of all time. Actually, another player holds the record for the lowest free-throw percentage. His name is Wilt Chamberlain and he's widely considered to be the greatest player in NBA history.

Shaquille's gigantic hands make it very difficult for him to shoot effectively. He is so good at basketball because he is so big and he is so bad at free throws because he is so big. He is the best and the worst. Similarly, if we want employees to be the best in one area, we need to allow them to be the worst in other areas.

We need to help employees freak out instead of trying to force them to fit in.

Fabulous: The rewards for being the best are outrageous.

It is worth the effort to help employees become the best because there are outrageous rewards for being the best. For example, the minimum salary for a major league baseball player was $380,000 in 2007. However, the highest paid player in 2007 earned just over $27,000,000. A player earning the league minimum would need to play for more than 70 years in order to earn that same amount. This is unlikely since the average player's career lasts less than three years. Would you like it if your employees' productivity was 70 times higher than workers in other departments or organizations?

Find: Select the right people for the job.

Since people don't change that much, we need to get the right people in the first place.

We won't have to do a lot of adaptation if we find people who fit the requirements of the job. Unfortunately, we spend far more money on training people to fit in, than we do on selecting people for a particular job.

Farm: Create the right conditions.

Farmers cannot make their crops grow. They can only create the conditions that foster growth. Similarly, managers cannot make people behave in a certain way and we can't force them to grow. However, like a good farmer, we can create the right conditions for growth.

Instead of trying to change a person to fit a particular position, transfer them. Help them find the right climate. This option is especially feasible in large corporations where there are a wide variety of positions.

If a transfer is not possible, we should consider changing the person's job description. Could we assign them more of the work that they do well? Can we eliminate aspects of the work that they do poorly? Think of this like pruning a tree. Eliminating the unproductive aspects of the person's job can give them more time and energy to invest in the areas in which they are productive.

Another option is to give people time to work on their own projects. Even if their job description remains the same, having the freedom to work on projects that are interesting can benefit both the employee and the company. Google and 3M have had tremendous success with this approach, allowing employees to use between 10% and 15% of their work time on projects of their own choosing.

Fusion: Find the right mix.

We're too busy trying to make everyone the same. We use cross-training and other methods to make everyone capable of doing any job at any time or we assemble homogenous teams of people with the same strengths and the same weaknesses.

Very few employees are completely effective on their own but they can still be a valuable part of the team. We need to find team members with complementary skills and help them work together to accomplish the work that needs to be done. By combining people instead of fixing them, we can improve the performance of each individual and the entire team.

Teamwork doesn't mean that everybody does the same thing. It means that everyone contributes what they do best.

If none of the previous approaches are effective, you may need to try the next strategy.

Fire: If you love them, set them free.

Lest this seem like some kind of touchy- feely employee-centric nonsense, another important action step is to fire people. In the words of Marcus Buckingham, "Never stop caring for your people. You will rarely fire a person too early. Tough love is built on love." We waste far too much time trying to turn people into the person that we need. If an employee doesn't fit, we shouldn't try to make them fit. We should set them free.

Embracing Your Own Freak Factor

George is a manager at a publishing company but he doesn't like to accompany his clients to the myriad formal events in his industry. He dislikes the event itself and the finds the people boring and uninteresting. So he doesn't go. He told his employees that these banquets drain him of his energy and that he doesn't perform well in those situations.

In contrast, Brad, one of George's employees, truly enjoys getting dressed up and interacting with customers at formal gatherings. Because of this, George now delegates these activities to Brad. This allows George to focus on other areas in which he is more interested and more skilled. It also allows Brad to grow in his career and to build relationships with key players in the publishing industry.

It isn't enough to help our employees to flaunt their weaknesses. As managers, we have to become freaks as well.

We fail when we try to please everyone by becoming perfect, by fixing all our weaknesses. We fail when we believe it is possible for everyone to like us, respect us and appreciate us. Because of this, we should go farther and actually choose who we will offend.

We also need to find the right employees for us. If we want employees who take initiative, then we shouldn't hire folks who require a lot of direction. If an employee doesn't fit, we need to help them find a better position inside or outside the company.

We should acknowledge that we are not the right manager for everyone, we have weaknesses too. We need to find employees who complement our weaknesses and find mentors and allies who will create conditions that make our weaknesses irrelevant.

We can't please everyone but we can help them understand and accept our apparent weaknesses. It's important to be honest with our employees, managers and co-workers about our strengths and weaknesses.

What happened to Nellie?

Nellie's story has a happy ending but her eventual success was not facilitated by her manager or her organization. She succeeded because she used the four freak factory strategies to manage herself and her career.

"I have a love and passion for life and people. I knew immediately that I could not change this about me because it is deeply ingrained."

Nellie had a strong awareness of, and appreciation for, her unique characteristics.

"Fast forward to today. I run a business and am a successful business consultant, change manager, and coach; all of which requires that a person be enthusiastic, encouraging, and genuinely caring. I am so glad that my enthusiasm was not easily turned off; otherwise this high-level executive, who I highly respected, would have killed the precise trait that propels me."

In order to increase her effectiveness, she didn't try to fix her supposed weaknesses. Instead, she amplified them and adapted by finding a situation that rewarded her for who she was.

If we can apply the four strategies in The Freak Factory we can harness our employees' tremendous potential, instead of inadvertently damaging the traits that propel them. ▤

info

MORE INFO
You can keep up with David on his blog and take his Freak Factor quiz online.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Rendall started working as a paperboy when he was eleven years old. Since then he has been a stock boy, lawn boy, painter, janitor, tutor, resident assistant, job coach, supervisor, nonprofit manager and senior executive. During the last ten years he has provided leadership training and keynote presentations throughout the United States, Canada, India, Australia and the UK. He is also a management professor at Mount Olive College in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina, where he was nominated for Teacher of the Year, and has taught leadership courses for the University of Phoenix and Keller Graduate School of Management. His first book was *The Four Factors of Effective Leadership*. He is currently working on his new book, *The Freak Factory: Making Employees Better by Helping Them Get Worse*.

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