

Getting Personal in the Workplace

Are negative relationships squelching productivity in your company?

by Steve Crabtree

In James Hynes' new novel, *Kings of Infinite Space*, the main character comes to the realization that there are zombies -- actual, soulless zombies -- lurking around his office. For many employees, at least for many of those in unhealthy workplaces, this feeling might be familiar. There are numerous workplaces in which employee relations are often characterized by utter indifference -- or, worse, jealousy, mistrust, and outright animosity.

Negative workplace relationships may be a big part of why so many American employees are not engaged with their jobs. The *Gallup Management Journal's* semi-annual Employee Engagement Index puts the current percentage of truly "engaged" employees at 29%. A slim majority, 54%, falls into the "not engaged" category, while 17% of employees are "actively disengaged." (See sidebar on "The Three Types of Employees.")

Are negative workplace relationships a big problem? Well, aside from creating the stress people feel when they spend a significant portion of their lives in essentially hostile territory, rocky workplace relationships may be detrimental to an organization's functioning.

As technology grows ever more complex, jobs become increasingly specialized. That means workers rely on each other more to generate products and services. If problems or tensions hamper these interdependent relationships, organizations become vulnerable.

The Three Types of Employees

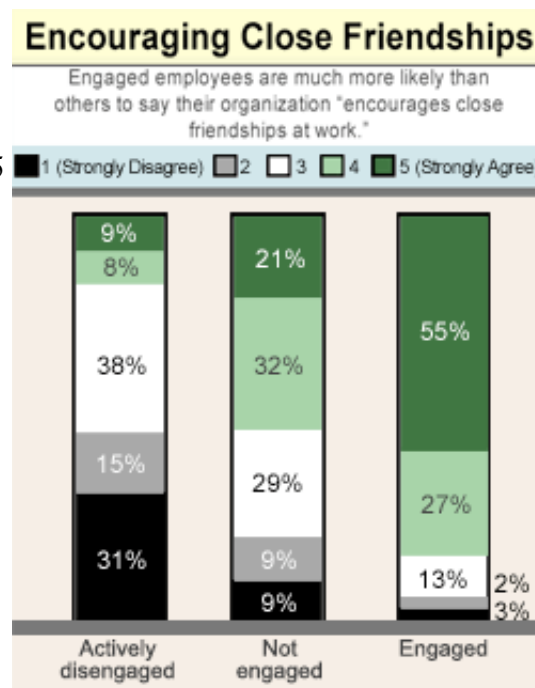
- 1 ENGAGED** employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward.
- 2 NOT-ENGAGED** employees are essentially "checked out." They're sleepwalking through their workday, putting time -- but not energy or passion -- into their work.
- 3 ACTIVELY DISENGAGED** employees aren't just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

Workplace friendships

To probe the impact of workplace relationships, the *Gallup Management Journal* surveyed 1,003 employees nationwide. Respondents were asked a variety of questions about their relationships at work. Gallup examined responses to see which questions differed most between engaged employees and those who were not engaged or actively disengaged.

Among the findings: Engaged employees are much more likely than others to say that their organization "encourages close friendships at work." Eighty-two percent of engaged employees showed agreement by rating the statement a 4 or 5 (on a 1-5 scale where 5 is "Strongly Agree"), compared to 53% of those who are not engaged and just 17% in the actively disengaged group. This connection shouldn't come as a surprise, considering several of the 12 items used to gauge engagement test for positive relationships (one statement is "I have a best friend at work.") -- but even taking that into account, the correlation is very high. (See "Item 10: I Have a Best Friend at Work" in See Also.)

Perhaps more telling is the fact that 51% of employees who *strongly agree* that their organization encourages close friendships at work (who rate this statement a 5 on the 5-point scale) are extremely satisfied with their place of employment, compared to just 19% of employees who *disagree* with that statement (by choosing a 1 or 2).



In fact, responses to all of the relationship questions in this survey differ significantly by respondents' engagement level. "Our favorite moments, jobs, groups, and teams revolve around friendships with other people," says Tom Rath, Gallup's global practice leader for strengths-based development, who is currently working on a book describing the importance of workplace friendships. "But we spend very little time identifying and developing friendships at work. In fact, our latest data suggest maxims like 'familiarity breeds contempt' may have weakened employee productivity in the 20th century."

An element of selflessness

In the latest Employee Engagement survey, *GMJ* asked respondents to answer a set of relationship questions, first regarding their manager and then regarding a colleague with whom they work a great deal. The most evident finding is that engaged employees perceive an element of selflessness in their best and closest partnerships, particularly those with their managers.

In both cases, strong agreement with the statement "This person sets me up for success" was the best differentiator of the "engaged" and the "not engaged" groups. And unlike their not-engaged counterparts, engaged employees also agree more strongly with regard to both managers *and* colleagues that "This person is always understanding of me when I make mistakes" and "This person and I complement each other's strengths." This suggests that managers who want to boost workgroup engagement levels -- and help not-engaged employees become engaged -- might benefit from developing trusting and supportive relationships with their employees.

"One of the strongest personal relationships in my life"

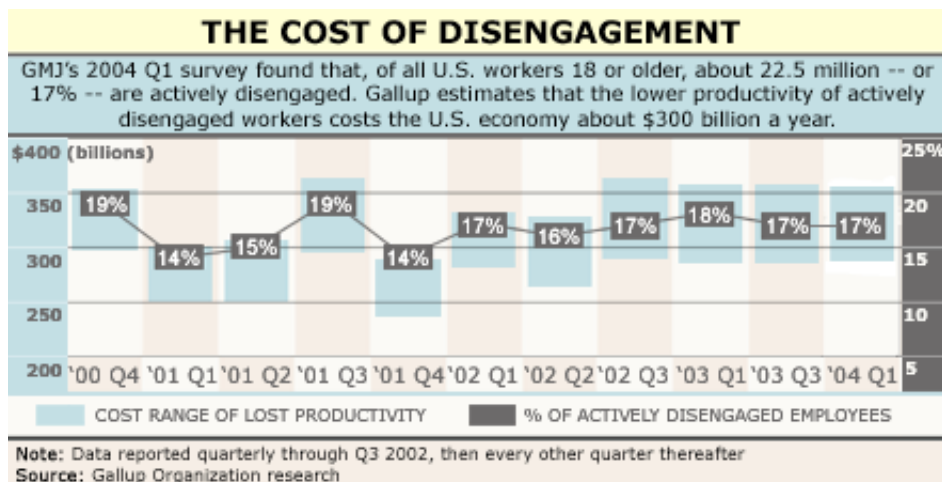
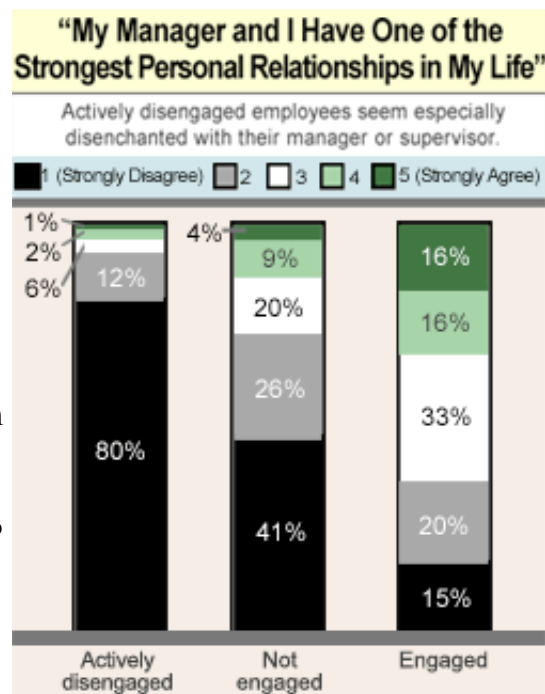
Many people may consider strong personal relationships unimportant in the workplace. But the Employee Engagement Index results suggest that these relationships hold a key to employee engagement.

When employees were asked to consider their workplace relationships with their managers, the survey results revealed sharp differences between how engaged and actively disengaged employees feel. While 16% of engaged employees strongly agree with the statement "This person and I have one of the strongest personal relationships in my life," only 4% of not-engaged employees and 1% of actively disengaged employees strongly agree.

In contrast, actively disengaged employees seem especially disenchanted with their connection with their manager: 80% *strongly disagree* that their relationship with their manager is one of their strongest personal relationships, compared to 15% of engaged employees.

Engaged employees are also much more likely to consider their relationship with their manager to be crucial to their success. Of engaged employees, 49% strongly agree that "A strong positive relationship with this person is crucial to my success at work," while just 12% of actively disengaged employees strongly agree with the same statement. In contrast, 33% of actively disengaged employees strongly disagree with this statement, compared to just 6% of engaged employees. The substantial differences between groups clearly illustrate that developing and maintaining strong relationships with employees is a key to creating a strong, productive workgroup.

Despite efforts to keep the personal and professional realms separate, it's becoming increasingly apparent that workplace relationships *are* personal and that negative relationship dynamics have far-reaching and long-term consequences for organizations. People *don't* become soulless zombies when they arrive at the workplace. And attempts to force them to act that way are likely to lead to a less engaged workforce.



Results of this survey are based on a nationally representative sample of about 1,000

employed adults aged 18 and older. Interviews were conducted by telephone October 2000 - April 2004 by The Gallup Organization. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus three percentage points. For findings based on subgroups, the sampling error would be greater.

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Steve Crabtree is Lead Editor of [The Gallup Poll Tuesday Briefing](#), a weekly online publication featuring research-driven insights in the areas of healthcare, education, religion, government, and business.

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