


# THE ENEMY OF ENGAGEMENT



Put an End to **Workplace Frustration**  
—and Get the Most from Your Employees

MARK ROYAL AND TOM AGNEW

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and Get the Most from Your Employees

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**AMACOM**

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# Acknowledgments

FROM THE TIME we began this process seven years ago, we have benefited from our clients' desire to learn more about their organizations. We are grateful for their willingness to partner with us to explore the ideas presented in this book when few other organizations or consulting firms were focused on workplace frustration and employee enablement. While it would be impossible to acknowledge them all here, we offer special thanks to Karin Mayhew of Health Net, Inc., Gary Short of Kimberly-Clark, Rachel Levy of Daiichi Sankyo, and Steve Denault of COUNTRY Financial, who have been particularly generous in sharing with different audiences their experiences in monitoring and managing these issues.

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# *The Enemy of Engagement*



# Introduction

WE INITIATED the research behind this book seven years ago in response to our experiences working with a number of organizations that were struggling to translate high levels of employee motivation into better individual, team, and organizational performance. A noteworthy example comes from an employee opinion survey we and our team at Hay Group conducted in 2004 for a new client in the pharmaceutical industry. While the results were highly favorable overall, and confirmed strong employee engagement throughout the organization, there were some troubling signals coming from the management layer immediately below the executive level. Given the importance of these individuals to the company for executing on current strategies and as future leaders of the business, we were asked to explore the situation further through a series of one-on-one interviews.

To a person, the managers we interviewed confirmed the high levels of motivation and commitment the survey results had indicated (“*I’ve never worked for a better company.*” “*I’m excited about our future.*”). Yet, positive statements about the company were typically coupled with a pause and a “*but . . .*”

What followed were concerns about the ability of these engaged managers to get things done in the organization because of issues involving objectives and priorities (“*Everything is urgent.*” “*Make a decision and move on, instead of rehashing old arguments.*”), interdependencies across the organization (“*Why does every decision have to go through twelve people?*” “*Everyone can’t expect to touch everything as in the past.*”), relationships with the parent organization overseas (“*Everything has to be pitched to the parent company. It’s hard to secure resources for things that don’t directly impact sales.*”), and accountabilities for performance (“*We tend to manage around performance problems. It’s very discouraging.*”).

These managers were committed to the company, aligned with its goals, and anxious to contribute. But they were *frustrated* by barriers in the work environment confronting them and their teams. After identifying similar issues in many other organizations, we knew we were tapping into a significant, but often overlooked, threat to both employee engagement and individual and organizational success.

Managers are bombarded with messages about how important it is to motivate and inspire their people. Very little attention, however, has been given to how managers can most effectively translate employee motivation into optimal levels of performance. Unfortunately, the commitment and discretionary effort offered by engaged employees can be squandered if managers are not careful to position employees in roles that fully leverage their potential and to provide them with the workplace supports they need to carry out their responsibilities. In a real sense, workplace frustration is the enemy of engagement.

This book is targeted at anyone charged with directly managing the day-to-day activities of a group of employees. We’ll be

using an example from a fictional company to illustrate both the impact of frustration on employees and the approaches managers can take to address it. While Bernette Financial and the characters we'll meet may not exist, the organizational context is very real and is based on situations we have observed in many companies. We'll follow the Bernette story through the odd-numbered chapters in the book, while in the even-numbered chapters we will provide perspectives and recommendations for managers derived from Hay Group research.

In Chapters 1 and 2, we introduce the concept of workplace frustration. We explain both what it is (a highly engaged employee's inability to succeed in a role due to organizational barriers or the inability to bring the bulk of his or her talents, skills, and abilities to the job) and what it is not (demotivation, dissatisfaction). We highlight common responses to frustration exhibited by employees and the negative consequences these reactions often have for individuals and organizations. Finally, we explore why leaders in today's organizations are frequently poorly positioned to identify and respond to workplace frustration.

In Chapters 3 and 4, we differentiate employee engagement (motivating employees to succeed) from employee enablement (giving them the ability to perform effectively). We discuss engagement and enablement as distinct concepts that are influenced by different organizational factors and managerial behaviors. And we review research confirming that both are necessary for optimum performance; that is, high levels of engagement are not sustainable without enabling work conditions.

In Chapters 5 and 6, we call attention to the "tenure effect" commonly observed in organizations. Employee opinion trends consistently show that people are never as engaged as they are in their first year on the job—and that engagement levels tend to

drop steadily with longer tenures. The common explanation is that expectations for jobs are not properly set in advance and, therefore, individuals become disillusioned as they begin to understand what their jobs actually entail. Organizations commonly respond by attempting to establish more appropriate expectations or to integrate employees into the organization and their roles more effectively (e.g., through realistic job previews or onboarding programs). However, in our view the true solution lies with employee enablement. As employees grow in experience in their roles, they begin to focus less on learning the ropes and more on achieving desired results. In the process, they are increasingly confronted with enablement constraints that limit their ability to get their jobs done effectively. Organizations need to understand that the key to keeping employees engaged over time is ensuring that they are well enabled.

With an understanding of frustration, its manifestations, and its implications, we focus in Chapters 7 and 8 on a systematic review of root causes. We explore in detail the primary determinants of employee enablement. And we drill down within these determinants to identify key aspects of the work environment that should be focus areas for managers in understanding current enablement levels within their teams.

After calling attention to work environment considerations enablement-focused managers need to monitor and address, in Chapters 9 and 10 we turn our attention to strategies for minimizing workplace frustration. We provide a self-assessment that features a series of questions managers can consider, individually or with their teams, in relation to each enablement determinant. We also offer best-practice recommendations for addressing opportunities for improvement that are identified.

While there is much managers can do on their own to posi-

tion motivated employees to succeed, they clearly need support from senior leaders in creating a focus on, and accountability for, employee enablement throughout an organization. In Chapters 11 and 12, we discuss the role of managers as organizational change agents, giving a voice to frustrated employees and elevating awareness of enablement issues as essential to sustaining high levels of individual and team performance over time.

By the end of this book, you will understand what workplace frustration is, the negative consequences it has on individuals and organizations, how to diagnose it and its root causes within your team, and how to take effective action to promote higher levels of employee enablement and unleash the full potential of your people.

C H A P T E R

1

# There's Something Happening Here



IT BEGAN with a text message from Lauren Duffy to her boss, Beth Charles. “We need to talk. Lunch today?” Beth studied the message on her cell phone and sighed. “We need to talk” seldom heralds good news.

Beth was at her desk in her small private office at Bernette-Online, the Internet division of the popular financial institution that opened its “brick and mortar” doors back in 1967 in suburban Denver, Colorado.

Bernette Financial was one of the first community banks to enter the online market. Named after its founders Bernard and Annette Ellsworth, Bernette got its start as a community bank, serving businesses and individuals with residential and commercial mortgages, small-business loans, checking and savings accounts, certificates of deposit, retirement accounts, savings clubs, and other financial products. Almost from the outset, the small bank with strong local roots became one of the region’s most popular institutions. Bernie and his wife, Annette, appeared in the bank’s television ads. The appeal was immediate: Bernie and Annette were fun-loving, homey types

who'd grown up in Denver and raised their children there. They were real people. It came across in the ads as well as at the bank. Bernie was accessible, humorous, and—according to past and present employees—the best CEO anyone could ask for. Around him was a team of highly respected VPs, personable, competent, and hardworking. The bank's mission statement: "Our products improve our customers' lives."

It was Bernie and Annette's son, Howard, who had the vision to take Bernette Financial online. Back east, a few years out of graduate school, Howard had taken an interest in e-commerce. With technical help from one of his undergraduate friends from the University of Pennsylvania, the prototype for Bernette's Internet banking system was developed. After selling Bernie and a couple of the bank's officers on the potential for online banking, where customers could complete transactions at home or through ATM machines without ever having to step into a branch, Howard returned to Denver to direct the online enterprise. "Welcome to the future of our bank," Bernie had proclaimed.

The launch of BernetteOnline was a major event in the Rocky Mountain region and across the nation as well. It got a lot of good press, and Bernie Ellsworth enjoyed being in the limelight. The bank's cutting-edge technology, combined with its fun culture, its reputation for integrity, and its commitment to the community, put BernetteOnline front and center in newscasts, newspapers, and banking industry publications. *Fast Track* magazine did a big feature that included interviews with Bernie and Howard. Other banks may have been doing what Bernette was doing online, but not with the success, the confidence, or the promise of expanding in bigger and better directions.



“*We need to talk.*” As vice president of call center operations, Beth was accustomed to a certain amount of employee turnover. This was, after all, a call center. And even though Bernette had dramatically lower turnover than most of its peers, some attrition was bound to occur. But Lauren? No, not Lauren, she hoped. “What else might she need to talk about?” Beth wondered to herself. A leave of absence? Could be. Her husband’s mother was in the process of moving from an apartment in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to an assisted living facility. Perhaps Lauren needed a couple of weeks off to help with the transition. Or, since Lauren’s stepson was taking his junior year of college abroad, maybe Lauren and her husband were planning to visit him in Amsterdam.

Over the past eight years, Lauren and Beth had become close friends as well as coworkers. On paper, Lauren, whose title was “workforce management specialist,” reported to Beth. But for years, Beth had thought of Lauren as her secret weapon. While Beth was responsible for overall operations, Lauren was a gifted problem solver whose ability to forecast future needs, staff the call center appropriately, and ensure ongoing product training was widely respected at Bernette.

Beth attributed Lauren’s skill to her earlier training in industrial design. In fact, Lauren came from a family that was well-known in design circles. Her father, Phil Brown, had led the research and development on the first electric toothbrush designed for the consumer market back in the 1960s. As a young girl, Lauren spent hundreds of hours in her dad’s workshop—building inventions, reworking old plans, and learning the fine art of creative problem solving. “My dad is a designer,” Lauren would joke, “and I got the talent from him. I guess you could call it ‘designer genes.’”

Lauren earned her bachelor's degree in industrial design and began a career in the field. But soon after she had her children, she decided to get away from the deadline-driven R&D environment, and the sixty-plus-hour workweeks that came with the job, and work part-time until her children were in school. Responding to an ad for a call center job at Bernette, she made a huge impression during her initial interview. When the interviewer from HR mentioned that the call center used an Excel spreadsheet for forecasting shifts, Lauren began to think about a better solution, software that could do a better job forecasting because it could look at exceptions faster and more accurately than an individual can eyeball them on a spreadsheet. She mentioned her idea to the interviewer, who listened with interest. "Management Potential," she wrote on Lauren's résumé. Two days later, Lauren interviewed with Beth, who was the workforce management specialist at the time. She quickly offered Lauren the part-time call center job she sought, and she hoped to retain her as a full-time manager when her children got a bit older.



Bernie Ellsworth, the bank's founder, had recently announced that he was planning to retire. But Bernie's departure wasn't cause for concern. For years he had groomed Howard to take over as CEO. Everyone knew that Howard had the credentials: a Wharton MBA and twenty years of experience in financial services, including more than a decade at Bernette. The bank was doing well and had earned a coveted spot on *Business Today's* "Best Places to Work" list in seven of the past ten years.

Everyone loved Bernie and Howard, but neither of them had the internal focus the bank needed at this stage. Bernie had

always relied on strong personal relationships, both within the organization and with customers and the community, to operate and grow the business. Informal connections among people who had worked together for years and shared common understandings of how things were done had provided an adequate operating system when the bank was small. But Bernette had merged with a competitor, Green Tree Financial, in the past year, and this, coupled with several years of strong organic growth, had made operations considerably more complex. For his part, Howard was a visionary who had brought new thinking to the bank about products and services and the potential for Bernette in a changing financial services sector; his passion and focus centered on new markets and new products.

It was clear to Beth that the call center and other parts of the organization had been experiencing more operational issues over the past few years. Costs were increasing faster than revenues, sending the organization into cost-control mode. Right after the merger, the two banks' call centers were consolidated, but there were still two different customer relationship management (CRM) systems operating, and neither one could "talk" to the other. When Lauren submitted a postmerger proposal for new CRM software to integrate Green Tree's and Bernette's products, she was told she'd have to wait and that the call center reps would have to continue using outdated tools for the time being.

Lauren took her concern to Beth. "I understand that there are a lot of competing priorities right now," she said. "But my people can't do their jobs without resources. They love their work; I don't even have to tell you how committed they are. But we need to provide them with adequate tools and support." Lauren had a point.

The reps were taking all this in stride, even though their service levels were beginning to drop. They trusted that the issue would be addressed eventually.

Beth reread Lauren's message, checked her schedule, and texted back. "Sure. Noon?"

Her text message sent, Beth looked at her calendar to see what she needed to accomplish before her mystery lunch with Lauren. "Do something about Bob" was number one on her to-do list.

Bob Joseph was one of the nicest people she'd ever met. A five-year employee, Bob was bright and disciplined, kind and easy to get along with. He worked as a rep in the call center, specializing in escalations and high-level problem solving for customers. He had achieved this senior-rep position by virtue of his unshakable patience and his product knowledge. No one was better than Bob at gaining a complete understanding of new products. Because Bob was such a good writer, he worked mostly on e-mail responses, and only occasionally on the telephone.

Just one problem: Of all the reps in the call center, Bob was the slowest. His service levels were below everyone else's when it came to the number of e-mails resolved per hour. But he had the call center's highest level of customer satisfaction. Beth studied his six-month review and the action plan his supervisor Stacy had prescribed. The entire plan was designed to get Bob to work faster and resolve more customer issues per hour.

Bob had a second career as a fiction writer. His short stories appeared in magazines, and a couple of his plays had been produced at a small Denver theater. Interestingly, after attending the opening night of one of Bob's plays a few months ago, Beth

got into a conversation with Bernette's director of marketing communications, Rich DeCurtis. "We love Bob," Beth told Rich. "He is slow and deliberate, but he gives the customers the best information. You should see his e-mails," she said.

Rich listened intently to Beth's description of Bob. It gave him an idea.

"What if he came over to marketing and worked as a technical writer?" Rich asked Beth. "We need someone to rewrite the entire customer service section of the website and draft templates of the most common customer service response e-mails." Presently, Rich said, there was no technical writer in the department. Everyone took turns working on the website, the e-mail templates, and the myriad other writing projects that came up. The result was a patchwork of communications in a variety of styles and voices, a mishmash of features and benefits. Bob could surely clean it all up. Plus, the department had ongoing needs for a writer with strong Bernette product knowledge to work on promotional e-mails, special offers, and customer education.

Beth studied Bob's last couple of reviews and concluded he was never going to pick up speed. But he had so many virtues—always on time, always willing to stay late or come in early, helpful at trainings, and a goodwill ambassador who made new reps feel right at home on their first day. Yet he was making no progress on his action plan. His service levels had not improved.

Beth wrote an e-mail to George Franken, the senior VP of marketing, asking for his help with some red tape that was preventing Bob's move from the call center. She spelled out in detail how if Bob were to move to marketing and take over all Web content and customer service e-mail templates, market-

ing would not have to hire an additional associate as planned. “Since we’re all being asked to control costs,” Beth wrote to George, “this arrangement would close a big hole in our communications strategy without your having to make any new marketing hires. We will need to hire someone at the call center to replace Bob Joseph,” she wrote, “but that’s a relatively minor expense, especially if you consider the value that Bob’s writing skills would add to the bank. George, I’ve been working with Bob for five years. You won’t find a more loyal and willing employee.” *Moving Bob to marketing is a win-win*, Beth told herself as she clicked “send.”

“*We need to talk.*” Beth shuddered. “That’s how insecure men break up with their girlfriends.”



During the five-minute drive to the restaurant, Lauren and Beth didn’t actually talk much. And what they did cover was minor. Lauren drove while Beth checked her Blackberry. There was a parking space right in front of their favorite Italian restaurant. Once inside, they both ordered iced teas. In an awkward silence they waited for their drinks and a breadbasket. When the iced teas arrived, they each took a sip, then faced each other, still in silence.

Finally, Beth made the first inroad. “What do you want to talk about?” she asked.

Lauren put down her glass and reached over for a piece of bread. She studied the grain on the bread, lines etched in crust. She’d rehearsed what she was about to say, but she was still finding it difficult. *Out with it!* she told herself.

“I’m concerned,” she began, “that the growth at Bernette is going to undermine the culture, which everyone in the call center will tell you is the best thing about working there.”

“I hear you,” said Beth warily. She knew Lauren well enough to know that she was holding something back. “But drop the other shoe,” she told her friend.

Lauren took a deep breath and announced, “I’m . . . looking around.”

Beth looked up from her menu, her eyes wide. “The company isn’t going to be as much fun as it used to be, so you’re planning to leave?”

Lauren shook her head. “It’s not just the fun. Remember, I’m a forecaster and I am accustomed to thinking three or four steps ahead. Right now, people are happy. They still love working at Bernette. But with service levels dropping and a new emphasis on saving money without investing in new tools for the reps, I don’t think morale will remain high, and I’m afraid that might reflect poorly on me.”

Beth knew what Lauren was talking about. A lot had changed at Bernette over the past few years. The informal communication approach Bernette had relied on in the past was breaking down in the larger organization, and that hurt everyone. Twice in the past four months, the legal department had scheduled mandatory training for call center reps to take place over a three-day period. But no one in the call center received this information until it was too late. Instead of having two or three weeks to schedule shift changes and authorize overtime, Lauren had just two days to schedule around the training. With no overtime to offer and less than forty-eight hours’ notice, she just couldn’t get enough staff in to make up for those who were off-site for the training. Both times the results were disastrous: skeleton crews handling twice the normal volume of calls, service levels plummeting, dozens of escalations, and hundreds of complaints.

And worse yet: Three weeks earlier, Ray Pough, the bank's highly respected and long-serving COO, had quit his job for reasons that were still unclear. That was a jolt. Ray had been with Bernette for his entire twenty-five-year career; he was a friend of the Ellsworth family. His departure stung everyone.

"You know," Lauren told Beth, "what we have is unique. You go down to that call center, walk up to any rep and ask them why we do what we do, you know what you will hear? 'We're here to help people save money and improve their lives. We're here to help people afford the homes they want. We're here to help businesses grow and prosper. We're here for the community.'

"That's our brand," said Lauren. "And we've worked hard to build it. This organization shows a tremendous amount of integrity to the call center representatives, which is why they love Bernette. It's why, unlike their peers at nearly every other call center around, they aren't cynical. It's why they stay loyal. They bought the T-shirt, Beth, and wear it proudly. But now things are changing. I can feel it. Howard's a great guy. He's visionary; he gets our strategy. But I'm concerned about what happens to the call center as the bank grows. It's one thing to be engaged and loyal. But if you can't accomplish what you're supposed to, being engaged in the work just isn't enough."

The waitress came to take their orders—vegetarian ravioli for Beth, Italian wedding soup and Caesar salad for Lauren. After eating in silence for a minute, Beth put down her fork, wiped her lips with her napkin, cleared her throat, and addressed Lauren. "Are you giving your notice?"

Lauren gritted her teeth. "No."

"Well, that's a relief," said Beth.



“Not yet, anyway,” added Lauren. She could see the hurt on Beth’s face.

Beth sipped from her glass of water and took a couple bites of a breadstick. “Losing you would be worse for call center morale than losing Ray Pough last month,” she said. “What do you think you’d be looking for if you decide to leave?”

Lauren thought for a moment. “I like the feeling of accomplishment. You know? You set out to do something. You have a goal in mind. I like when I accomplish the goal. It makes me feel good. So I’d look for a job where I would get that feeling, where I could help to improve things, not watch something great slip away and not be able to help.”

The call center was in desperate need of new CRM tools. The tools Beth wanted would cut each call by a minute or two because the new technology would put products and solutions right on the rep’s monitor, instead of requiring the rep to key in a code. Last year at the Call Center Expo both Beth and Lauren had tried the tool—and it blew them away. They couldn’t wait to write the proposal, develop a working prototype, and get the reps trained on it. Lauren created a forecast that showed how the new tool would handle calls so much faster that Bernette would be able to scale back on its fourth-quarter hiring, all the while improving service levels even as call volume grew! Yet the purchase wasn’t approved. Shortly after that, the bank merger went through, capital improvements were put on hold indefinitely, and Ray Pough resigned.

Beth blew on a forkful of ravioli and nibbled at the shell. “Okay,” she said, “right now getting resources is a challenge, and getting information so we can schedule our people—that’s a challenge too. But Howard’s heart is in the right place, and he loves this bank.”

After a brief pause, Beth continued. “So, have you interviewed?”

Lauren sipped her iced tea. “I sent out a couple résumés. That’s as far as I’ve gotten.”

Beth looked Lauren in the eye. “Is this a definite thing? Or just a possibility, you know, if things don’t get better?”

“You know me,” said Lauren. “I don’t make rash moves. I am not making any decisions right now except that I will get some résumés out there, and I’ll interview anywhere that calls. And you should know, it’s not like I’m ready for a career change. My daughters are too young for me to spend so much time at work.” She took a couple more spoonfuls of her soup, then picked up a fork and dabbed at her salad.

Both women knew that things at Bernette were changing. Both had recently become aware that Stacy Robbins, the day-time shift supervisor, was burning out. And why wouldn’t she? “Look at it from Stacy’s point of view,” said Lauren. “She’s the one who has to face the sixty reps who arrive for a shift only to learn that the other sixty were pulled out for an off-site. And she’s the one who is most affected by having two CRM systems. We have to integrate those systems. No one can keep pace. If this keeps up, you know as well as I do that we’ll be losing reps like nobody’s business.”

Beth put down her knife and fork. She looked at Lauren. She respected her—as a friend and as a colleague. She didn’t want to lose her. She didn’t want to lose Stacy either. And she didn’t want to lose call center reps, not at the rate that other organizations lost them. Bernette’s call center had the lowest turnover rate in the industry. But would it continue?

“Of course I can’t stop you from interviewing, from finding a new job, or from turning in your resignation. I under-

stand what you are telling me. Now, will you give me a chance to address what's going on here?"

Lauren nodded. She had sent out only two résumés, and no one from those employers had called her yet. In truth, she was ambivalent about leaving. There was so much to like about Bernette. It was a great institution founded by great people. Perhaps it was simply experiencing growing pains. It was a good place to work. But these days, Lauren and employees like her, while feeling engaged, loyal, and ready to work, were finding themselves unable to achieve their goals. Lauren, because of her nature, couldn't help being concerned about the long-term prospects.

"Sure," she told Beth. "If you can figure out what's going on around here, and if you can turn it around so that it will continue to be a great place to work, you can count on me to stick around."



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