



# Finding and Empowering the Untapped Employee Potential

HIDDEN TREASURE THAT CAN SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE YOUR BOTTOM LINE

Without the efforts of your employees, working in harmony with leadership, an organisation is not likely to achieve long-term success. If employees are not aligned with the company's strategy, they may be busily working while merely spinning their wheels. In fact, rather than truly contributing to the company's performance, they may be steering it down the wrong road.

A 2017 report by Gallup, "Re-Engineering Performance Management," authored by Ben Wigert and Jim Harter, cites a discouraging estimate about employees in the US: The cost of poor management and lost productivity from employees who are not engaged or actively disengaged is between US\$960 billion and US\$1.2 trillion per year. In addition, large organisations spend tens of thousands of hours and tens of millions of dollars on activities that not only do not work, but also drive out top talent. What organisation can afford to waste such significant resources in terms of time, talent, opportunity, and money?

Leadership needs to create a clear direction for employees, encouraging their genuine engagement and providing structured guidance to willfully align with company strategy, with all parties striving toward mutually satisfying outcome. But how best to achieve this optimal state?

## Defining the Hidden Treasure

Many organisations ignore, or perhaps they do not bother to explore, two huge sources of employee potential with the ability to boost the company's profitability and sustainable growth agenda:

1) The first group is the "passively employed" population within their workforce (the forgotten talent). Such individuals are employed, as defined by traditional means, but only perform just acceptable work within the organisation. Totally capable people, they possess their own convictions, passions, values, and meaning in life. But the company does not use them to their fullest capacity, not investing in them, and blocking their growth, because



managers do not really explore these people and what they can offer. In fact, most leaders do not know how to extract the rich potential of these people in ways that could benefit all stakeholders. In effect, the “passively employed” are simply disengaged workers doing a satisfactory job.

2) The second group represents employees who perform good, adequate work, but who are not identifiable “high-potentials” in tune with the company’s strategic goals. Acknowledged by their managers as being dependable, reliable, and effective employees, nevertheless, they do not share the vision (or, perhaps even truly acknowledge) where the company is heading and what it expects long-term in exchange for paying their salary. Managers typically breathe a sigh of relief to have such good employees in their unit. But such individuals, too, are simply disengaged workers doing a decent job.

By not encouraging these employees to do what they do best in the most effective and productive way, companies neglect the welfare of these promising individuals. An unfortunate comparison is to consider such individuals as a farm field lying unused, dusty, dry, useless, and lifeless. But if fertilised

and nurtured, the field can produce ripe, healthy, and nutritious food products that will sustain others for years to come. The same concept applies to employees who merely do an adequate, maybe even excellent, job, but have nothing to show for it other than good ratings and monetary rewards.

To make a sincere effort to uncover the potential of these individuals, who hold so much possibility, managers need to ask them:

- Are you able to live by your values in our organisation and are you satisfied with your overall efforts?
- Does your job reflect your passion, desire, and need for meaningful purpose?
- Do you believe that your mission matches that of the organisation?
- Do you care?



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By identifying the individuals in these two groups, and nurturing their growth, leadership stands an excellent chance of accelerating where it needs to go in terms of profitability, sustainability, community involvement, and public image.

### Identifying and Refining the Hidden Treasure

In most organisations, naturally the leadership team is busy focusing on the overall company-wide picture and how it relates to the outside world, leaving managers to handle the day-to-day affairs of the business. Managers and supervisors shuffle mounds of administrative work, oversee employee activity, and solve daily problems, without having the quiet time to consider each individual subordinate and how that person fits into the overall organisational structure. At the bottom of the hierarchy, overworked employees complete their assigned tasks, with some more motivated than others.

With everyone concentrating on the demands of the workday, how can leadership and managers find the time to mine their employee resources and find the hidden gems – the untapped and productive employees who can help them truly move forward?

First and foremost, the leadership team must commit to caring for the welfare of all stakeholders and create a culture that will strive to align the majority of their workforce (ideally, all) with the company's short- and long-term goals. In addition, leadership must hold managers accountable for genuinely getting to know their subordinates: their pluses and minuses, skills and know-how, capabilities and utmost personal goals. But to support this extra effort, leadership must provide managers with the time and the tools to achieve this goal without overburdening them with administrative bureaucracy.

With leadership backing their efforts, managers might consider the following practical steps to make a genuine effort to know their employees:

- 1) Treat each employee as a new hire. In other words, review the individual's résumé and credentials on an ongoing basis. Consider whether the person is under- or over-qualified for what the person does every day, as well as whether there are unused skills and interests that can be brought to bear on the job.

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2) Conduct effective, efficient, practical, well-understood, and accepted performance appraisals. The Gallup report cites only 14% of employees strongly agreeing that their performance reviews inspire them to improve. Their aversion to traditional performance reviews are strongly tied to five primary psychological obstacles: infrequent feedback, lack of clarity, manager bias, adverse reactions to evaluation and feedback, and too much focus on pay incentives.

3) Hold ongoing mentor discussions. Employees today want a mentor who can talk to them, on an ongoing basis, about what the employee is doing, how well the employee is doing, how the employee fits into the company strategy, and, ultimately, what the employee wants to do. Continuous and engaging one-on-one discussions can go a long way toward inviting confidences, boosting credibility, and ensuring that employees understand their contribution.

4) Conduct focus groups to discuss overall strategy and the direction in which the organisation is headed. Ask for employee input and ideas and take note of which employees are creative and engaged.

5) Provide employees and managers with voluntary self-assessment tools. Although not all people have the time or interest in finding out more about themselves, they should be encouraged to do so. The more a person achieves self-awareness, the more they are able to contribute positively to their lives, their work unit, their employer, their family, and their community.





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### **Making the Right Choice**

In today's modern competitive world, it is too risky for leadership to ignore these two significant under-used segments of the workforce. Managers should not lightly dismiss such wasted resources of time and money when small steps – costing little in the overall scheme of things – can boost an organisation's long-term success and standing in the public eye. The choice is simple: surge forward, confident that the majority of the employee base is aligned with the corporate strategy, or shuffle along, reporting mediocre results through the efforts of a semi-engaged workforce.

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