WITH NEARLY A FIFTH OF THE WORKFORCE
DOING EMPLOYERS MORE HARM THAN GOOD,
THE WORLD OF WORK IS IN A WORLD OF HURT.
FIXING IT MEANS CHALLENGING SOME OF OUR
MOST INGRAINED BELIEFS.

[Reinventing

way you

By CAT THOMPSON

How's your work life these days? Are you heading off to your job each morning with a smile on your face and a spring in your step? Does your employer continually challenge and support you to contribute your best, to become more creative, more broadly competent and more skilled? Is your job site a place where you feel valued and motivated, and where your core values are respected?

Chances are, if you are one of millions of Americans who have steady employment, this is not the best description of your work situation. A Gallup study conducted in 2002 showed that only 29 percent of workers could be considered "actively engaged," meaning that they identify with and act to promote their company's objectives.

By contrast, fully 16 percent of employees are "actively disengaged," meaning that they are "fundamentally disconnected from their work" and may actually be doing their employers more harm than good, not only by negatively affecting productivity and the bottom line, but by spreading mistrust and doubt through a company's workforce.

The remaining 55 percent of employees are simply "not engaged." So what accounts for this lackluster attitude? Not surprisingly, the Gallup study showed a strong correlation between an employee's level of engagement and his or her level of trust and confidence in their corporate leaders.
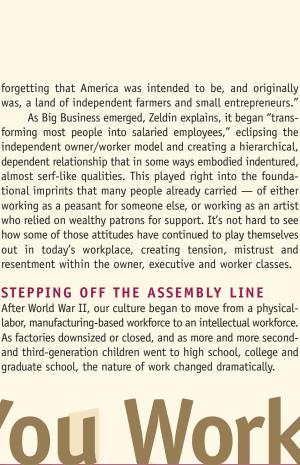
Actively engaged employees are more likely to credit their company's leaders with qualities like honesty and good ethics. Actively disengaged employees, meanwhile, are more likely to regard their company's top executives with skepticism and assume they are purely self-interested. And the regard for corporate leaders across the board isn't encouraging: Only 66 percent of employees believe company leaders are trying to do what is best for their customers, and far fewer (only 44 percent) believe corporate leaders are trying to do what is best for their employees. In the wake of corporate scandals and executive-pay debacles, the perception of high-level executives has probably never been on shakier ground, nor has employee morale.

But the Gallup research also shows an interesting correlation between employees' commitment and the nature of their personal experience. It turns out that actively disengaged employees are far more stressed and insecure about their work than their actively engaged colleagues, and far less satisfied with their personal lives.

This raises an important chicken-or-egg question: Are so-called disengaged employees just inherently more troubled, more negative-minded, easily-stressed individuals who are more vulnerable to becoming disengaged as a result? Or does the experience of disengagement — including feeling disrespected, undervalued and disconnected from the mission and values of the workplace — give rise to more personal stress and insecurity?

While there may be some evidence to support both views, and both may well be at least partially true, it seems likely to me that the second scenario is more common. Want some anecdotal evidence? Probe the matter with your most resilient, competent and passionate friends, and you will probably discover that many of them harbor a certain number of actively disengaged attitudes about their workplaces.

So why is that? How did so many of us get to a place where the pursuit that consumes so much of our lives earns so little of our enthusiasm and passion? And more important, what can we do to change our situation?

forgetting that America was intended to be, and originally was, a land of independent farmers and small entrepreneurs."

As Big Business emerged, Zeldin explains, it began "transforming most people into salaried employees," eclipsing the independent owner/worker model and creating a hierarchical, dependent relationship that in some ways embodied indentured, almost serf-like qualities. This played right into the foundational imprints that many people already carried — of either working as a peasant for someone else, or working as an artist who relied on wealthy patrons for support. It's not hard to see how some of those attitudes have continued to play themselves out in today's workplace, creating tension, mistrust and resentment within the owner, executive and worker classes.

I would argue that regardless of where the problem originates, the responsibility for resolving it lies in the hands of employers and employees alike. And what it requires is nothing short of a wholesale values-and-attitude adjustment on both parts. In fact, what it really comes down to is a re-engineering of our core beliefs about work.

STEPPING OFF THE ASSEMBLY LINE

After World War II, our culture began to move from a physical-labor, manufacturing-based workforce to an intellectual workforce. As factories downsized or closed, and as more and more second- and third-generation children went to high school, college and graduate school, the nature of work changed dramatically.

the Way You Work

SHIFTING INBORN BELIEFS

Let's look at the history of work here in the United States. The majority of people in this country are only one to three generations from their immigrant forebears — people who came to a new world hoping to create a satisfying life. An inherent belief held by many of our immigrant relatives was that one could create a good life by the sweat of one's brow, and this belief did in fact allow many immigrants to succeed in ways unimagined in their native lands. As a result, today many of us carry this "hard-work-equals-success" imprint in our bones.

I call the generational imprints we inherit from our families "foundational beliefs." They can be likened to the layer of concrete blocks on which houses are built, and they are in fact the foundation upon which we build our lives. Most foundational beliefs are unconscious, meaning we don't really *choose* to believe them. We just do.

In *An Intimate History of Humanity*, author Theodore Zeldin illustrates this dynamic in great detail, using portraits of contemporary individuals to show how their current lives, desires and attitudes are in many ways defined by ingrained beliefs inherited from long-forgotten origins. Essentially, he argues, our attitudes toward work are heavily shaped by the attitudes and beliefs held by our great-, or great-great-grandparents.

Zeldin explains that until relatively recently, "most ordinary people were expected to work in one of two ways — as peasants or artisans." The New World was supposed to offer an alternative model in which individuals enjoyed more autonomy and independence. But that didn't entirely pan out. Lacking a more evolved leadership model, the most successful moneymakers in this culture automatically began mimicking the attitudes of royalty and aristocracy. Rather than carving out a new leadership style, they continued to model themselves, as Zeldin puts it, "after kings, building empires,

Going to work no longer involved the sweat of one's brow. It instead called for an increased ability to sit in relative isolation, to apply oneself mentally and be a highly focused, creative, innovative problem solver. Yet most of our workplaces continue to be modeled on factory structures.

Working eight hours a day (or longer), five days a week, is a structure designed for assembly-line processes. Even though it serves neither a company nor its employees to apply this outdated model to the current work environment, the eight-hour-plus, cube-farm workday is still the rule and the law in the vast majority of corporations.

Reinventing the Way You Work

So it's not at all surprising that a large chunk of the workforce feels alienated, underappreciated and resentful. At the same time, many of us also feel vaguely betrayed, and as a result, we feel entitled to withhold our best energies.

Some part of us still holds on to a peasant-oriented, employer-as-parent model that assumes that employees are supposed to work as hard as they can, and that employers are supposed to watch out for us and take care of us when we're old. Feeling that this promise has been broken, many workers feel justified in purposefully staying separated from their employer's objectives, in withholding their creative energy, loyalty and goodwill, and in only contributing as much personal energy as needed to "get by."

When employees carry the foundational beliefs of serfs and peasants, yet are trained intellectually to actively organize, manage and creatively participate in their work, we have a near schizophrenic environment that puts tremendous stress on all involved. Disengagement is the natural result. So are the spiraling healthcare costs of stress-related conditions. As a result, a growing number of corporate employers are struggling to find new ways of coping.

Many companies are squeezing and pressuring their employees to give more and more for less and less compensation. Many others are spending millions of dollars to create programs and environments designed to bring out the very best in their workers (see "Working Well," page 42). But I suspect that neither method is likely to work long term unless some of our underlying beliefs about work and employment are challenged, and subsequently evolved for a new era.

There is no question that many companies need to rethink their basic work model and adjust it to maximize the potential of their employees. But workers also need to rethink their basic imprints and assumptions. They need to call for changes that will support their contributions and then take responsibility for participating more fully in their work.

So how can employers and employees help each other achieve their highest potential? Start with the ideas at right, then start challenging what you think you know about work. ╘

Cat Thompson writes regularly for *Experience Life* on emotional health. Learn more about her work at www.emotionaltechnologies.com.

IF YOU'RE AN EMPLOYER …

Get your employees to sit down and brainstorm new ideas. What are the primary obstacles and disincentives they face on a daily basis? What kind of situation would make their current job the job of their dreams? Flextime? Job sharing? More connection with coworkers? More input? A better work environment? You may not be able or willing to act on all of your employees' suggestions, but if you are open to considering some adjustments, you may find that it's possible to save money and create a work environment where talented employees maintain high levels of motivation.

Look at how your workplace is structured. Are you asking your best sources of brainpower to work in assembly-line structures? What beliefs do you carry that might be preventing your company from being more innovative, more empowering of employees and thus more successful? Can you challenge the current model of how business is "supposed to look" and open yourself to a more fluid and unconventional model? Are you willing to include your employees in a more equitable, collaborative, profit-sharing model? Can you develop new structures and identify authentic, shared values that engage your workers' whole selves?

IF YOU'RE AN EMPLOYEE …

Be the change you want to see. If you aren't satisfied with your job, don't just slink and stomp around feeling disengaged: Do something about it. Do you see your employers as authority figures and then reactively resent them for playing that role? Are you covertly withholding your participation and appreciation from your coworkers? Can you see any ways in which you are contributing to the very problems you are complaining about?

Build a proactive, positive community. Rather than participate in work-bashing gossip, grab two or three buddies and form a different kind of club. Agree to stop gossiping and kvetching and start actively seeking positive change. Ask the tough questions; seek out real solutions and answers. Do you know what would make you enthusiastic about your job? If not, then how can you be upset that you don't have it? If you do know what you want, and you believe you are earning it, then start asking for it. Work together to create a clear vision of how your work environment could support your long-term health and productivity, then be responsible for advocating for those changes. As anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Hold yourself to a higher standard. Either create an environment where you can really show up and do your best work, or show yourself the door. If you are just "phoning it in," stop and ask yourself why. If you believe your employer should be doing something differently, do them the service of telling it like it is. If you ask for change and can't make it happen, move on. Life is too short to spend another year fuming at the powers that be or wallowing in peasantlike despair. Live up to your own standards, and you'll find it's much easier to ask others to rise to meet you there.