

PERSPECTIVE

# The Corrosive Impact of Disengaging Leaders

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## Introduction

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Almost all organizations today realize it's important to track employee engagement. They understand its significant impact on a range of organizational performance outcomes. Senior leaders genuinely care, more than ever, about the feelings, attitudes and well-being of their employees. Especially during these challenging times, they are tracking employee engagement on an increasingly continuous basis. And rightly so: as a major recent meta-analytic study<sup>1</sup> has shown, **engagement levels have the greatest impact on business results during and in the wake of economic disruption.**

In addition to providing an overall sense of employees' engagement levels, surveys and pulsing results inevitably also identify those leaders – *by name and at all levels* – whose teams consistently show relatively low levels of engagement. Unfortunately, in our experience, too many organizations fail to leverage these findings to actually address the corrosive effects of engagement-crushing leadership wherever it is found within the organization, whatever the level. **Organizations must not turn a blind eye to disengaged and disengaging leaders.** The current pandemic requires all leaders to show up at their engaging best, focused on the dual priorities of maintaining a strong commitment to the health and well-being of their people as well as shoring up confidence in the future of the organization.



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1. James K. Harter, Frank L. Schmidt, Sangeeta Agrawal, Stephanie K. Plowman & Anthony T. Blue (2020) Increased Business Value for Positive Job Attitudes during Economic Recessions: A Meta-Analysis and SEM Analysis, *Human Performance*, 33:4, 307-330.

# Corrosive Leadership

Research has conclusively demonstrated that **leaders have a disproportionate impact on team engagement**. Kincentric research across hundreds of organizations and millions of employees has shown that, when compared to engaged leaders, disengaged leaders have, on average, nearly double the number of disengaged employees. In addition, our research has repeatedly found a strong empirical correlation between leader and team engagement scores; disengaged leaders become role models for disengaging attitudes, in part by focusing their teams on the most negative aspects of the work environment.

Our research also has shown that **disengaged leaders actually neutralize the effectiveness of HR practices that are designed to create positive experiences and favorably impact employee engagement and motivation**. Some examples:

- Even when they are formally honored in an **employee recognition program**, employees working for disengaged leaders show no subsequent bump in engagement.
- Similarly, even after a **promotion**, employees on teams led by disengaged leaders show no increase in engagement.
- Employees working for disengaged leaders show no increase in engagement, even when receiving a **full bonus award**; in contrast, employees working for engaged leaders show an increase in engagement even when getting a somewhat disappointing bonus award.

In fact, the power of managers to neutralize or offset the intended impact of HR initiatives at the team level is the subject of a major new paper by two professors at Rutgers University,<sup>2</sup> with numerous illustrations from prior research.



2. R.R. Kehoe & J.H. Hun (2020). An expanded conceptualization of line manager involvement in human resource management. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 105*, 111-129.

# What Can Be Done?

The solution is obvious and easy to implement if the will exists, and its effectiveness is simple to assess. The answer lies in **giving disengaging leaders the tools to become more engaging** – not by merely providing them with survey results, perhaps year after year, that indicate their teams are disengaged, and not by simply requiring them to submit a plan to “move the needle” on their team’s engagement scores (which some achieve by identifying and terminating their most disengaged team members, thereby producing an “improved” team average). Nor is the problem solved by simply increasing the frequency of survey pulsing without taking actions that address the many root causes of disengagement that lie within the leader’s control. Rather, the problem can be solved by helping leaders with the incentive, skills, self-confidence and determination to change how they lead and become more engaging as leaders.

Our research has identified five dimensions of leader behavior that have an empirically verified impact on team engagement, which we refer to as the SPARK model. These facets of leadership behavior must be the focus of the developmental journey that organizations should feel obligated to provide for disengaging leaders.

This transformation must start with deep reflection by participants on their own level of engagement. Often that means serious consideration of leadership purpose and of the beliefs each person brings to the leadership role. Why do they want to lead people? Why should their team follow and trust them? Why should they exert discretionary effort to achieve leader-defined goals? This process includes asking participants to reflect on their own careers, reminding themselves of those times they felt highly engaged and seeking to identify their own personal engagement drivers. It involves encouraging participants to take control and improve aspects of work life where they have some degree of influence as well as identifying, appreciating and leaning on the relationships that help to enrich experiences at work and in life.

**However, changing the behavior of disengaging leaders from corrosive to constructive is a journey, not an event, and realistically will not succeed with every disengaging leader.**

## The SPARK Model

S	P	A	R	K
<b>STIMULATE.</b>	<b>PROPEL.</b>	<b>ANCHOR.</b>	<b>RELATE.</b>	<b>KINDLE.</b>
Share inspirational leadership, passion and purpose with others; tap into others’ passion; define their purpose as a leader to enable them to effectively convey that purpose to their teams.	Initiate structure; act as an owner in the face of ambiguity; step up to drive a solution/ direction for the team.	Practice authenticity, candor and humility; say what needs to be said, but constructively; create stability during times of change and disruption.	Create stronger emotional connectedness on a personal level with each individual on the team; be present for the team, even when things go wrong.	Practice servant leadership and grow talent; strengthen the belief that being a leader is about the accomplishments of the team as a whole rather than about personal accomplishment as an individual, and about growing and stretching team capabilities.

## The Engaging Leader journey

There are several key elements that organizations must build into the Engaging Leadership developmental journey in order to build the capacity of leaders to materially enhance their team's experience at work.

**Focused.** The program must be clearly positioned as part and parcel of an organization's engagement strategy, very narrowly concentrated on providing employees the leadership that will create for them a more positive work experience. Project planning for engagement surveys and/or pulsing programs should include leader development as an integral follow-up element. This is an initiative with a clearly defined ultimate success metric: better team engagement. Assessing the improvement in participant team engagement scores will create the business case for broader rollout. All learning elements must be singularly focused on helping leaders deliver on this outcome.

**Practical.** Addressing the corrosive effects of disengaging leadership is not about building leader potential for some future, as-yet-undefined role. It is about *right now*, with an understanding of the urgency of the need to acquire engaging leader mind-sets and skill sets to lead differently starting immediately. All learning needs to be applicable in concrete and actionable ways to specific situations, from how the leader interacts with each individual employee to the overt and implicit messages the leader conveys – intentionally or unintentionally – in each and every interaction with his or her team.

**Fact-based.** This starts with building the self-awareness of leaders regarding where they stand on the behaviors that organizational science has conclusively demonstrated can promote or destroy team engagement, which maps the impact of engagement-corrosive behavior on teams and more broadly on the organization. Disengaging leaders need to confront their record of low team engagement scores. This should be complemented by ratings gathered from direct reports using a 180-degree or 360-degree survey to assess their leadership against SPARK or some similar Engaging Leader model. In that way, they can understand precisely what behaviors—in the eyes of their team—are negatively impacting engagement. Leader self-awareness can also be enhanced by providing participants with fact-based insight

into their own personalities through a valid personality assessment to help navigate behavior change with better understanding of potential personality derailers.



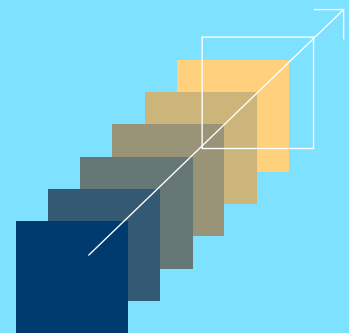
**Interactive.** Behavioral change does not happen by listening to some “talking head” discussing the perils of disengaging leadership. It requires discussion, internalization and, perhaps of greatest value, peer learning. Consider pairing participants with peer mentors who are known to have strong team engagement scores. Peer participants will also learn much from sharing their successes and failures when implementing new approaches with their teams. Peer experience-sharing is more easily fostered today, as the pandemic has moved much development to virtual delivery. In many ways, short virtual sessions spread out over three or four months allow for a more interactive learning experience while between-session intervals allow for cycles of application, experimentation and reflection. This in turn becomes the focus of sharing and learning in peer discussions during more formal sessions.

**Curated.** Another advantage of virtual learning is that cohorts can easily be broken into subgroups at different points on the learning journey to allow for concentration on skill areas most in need of work. Equipped with solid assessment data, organizations can break down larger cohorts into smaller subgroups of participants who share common areas of concern. Similarly, learning platforms can include self-directed modules designed to address specific areas, creating a highly individualized learning journey most likely to build engaging leadership skills.

## Call to Action

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Everyone understands that engagement matters and that leaders can have a tremendous impact – positively or negatively – on team engagement. Organizations must identify their most *disengaging* leaders, those who have a corrosive effect on their team’s engagement and, in turn, weaken overall engagement across the enterprise. Once these leaders are identified, organizations must provide them with intentional, concentrated and impactful developmental experience to build engagement-enhancing skills. The time for organizations to stop ignoring the corrosive impact of disengaging leaders and take action is **now**.



## Contacts

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**Contact us** to talk about how we can help.

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### About Kincentric

Kincentric, a Spencer Stuart company, approaches human capital differently – we help you identify what drives your people, so they can drive your business. Our decades of expertise in culture and engagement, leadership assessment and development, and HR and talent advisory services enable us to help organizations change from the inside. Our global network, proven insights and intuitive technologies give us new ways to help organizations unlock the power of people and teams. For more information, visit [kincentric.com](https://kincentric.com).

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