



# The Real Cause of Disengagement No One Talks About

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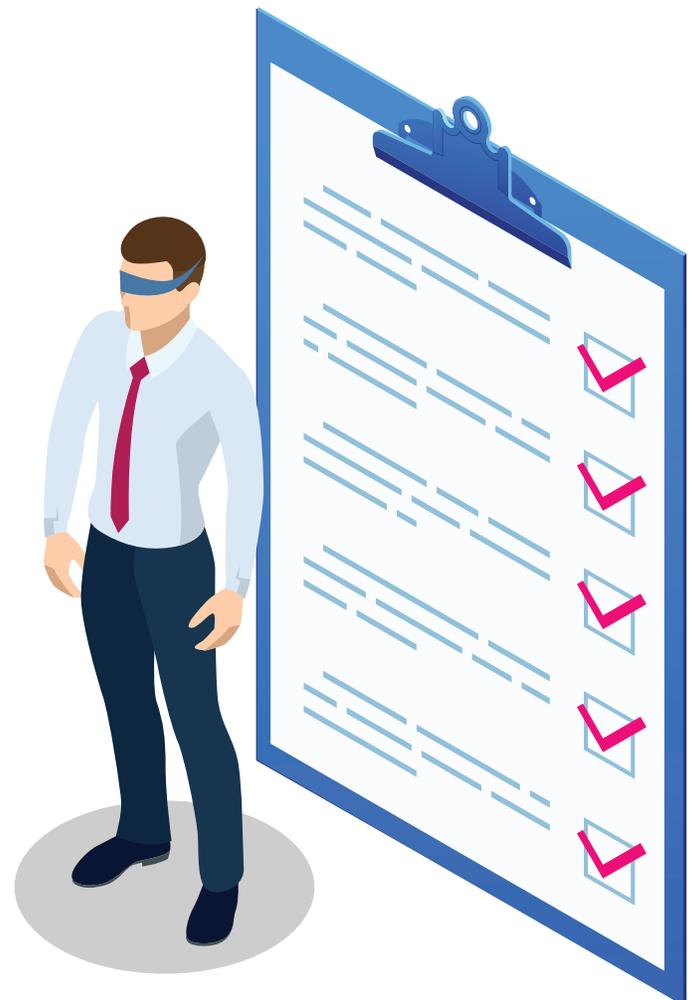
If you are like most people, standard ways of thinking and seeing engagement may have previously blinded you to something that this COVID era has brought glaringly to the surface. There is a universal disengagement trigger that is likely deeply rooted in your own organization, and it is one that has eluded many leaders today. We will explore it here, giving you a chance to consider the ball and chain that may have been unknowingly sinking your organization's engagement and the fastest way to escape it.

For example, think about the last time you or some leader in your organization complained, *"We just want people to take responsibility! Why don't they just take responsibility?"* If you're like other leaders we work with in thirty-two countries, you are often disappointed that employees and even managers wait to be told what to do, or they wait for something to change so they can be engaged and perform well. Blame, it seems, has become as contagious as the coronavirus, and is commonly used to justify sub-standard performance. More often than not, engagement surveys lead to increased focus on blame and judgment, which kills self-responsibility and diminishes engagement. As you study Figure 1 (on next page), you can see how blame impacts individual willingness to take responsibility, including for engagement.

## Seeing Beyond the Blinders

Let's begin by considering the way most leaders have been trained to evaluate engagement. When you start to look at why your managers and employees aren't bringing their best voluntary, with enthusiastic contribution to work, today's standard practice is to ask lots of questions - Everything from, *"Do you have a best friend at work?"* to *"Do you have the resources to do your job well?"* These questions and others like them (from popular engagement surveys) are great, but it's possible that they may entirely miss the heart of the problem. Below, we explain why.

Questions that focus on the environment, or manager behaviors, are good in that they remind leaders of the importance of creating positive conditions. However, Jim Collins teaches that *"good"* is the enemy of *"great"* - and if you want *great* engagement, it's not enough to conduct a periodic assessment to evaluate conditions. In fact, the mindset this has created in many organizations has often interfered with engagement and even decreased employees' willingness to take self-responsibility for creating it. It has created blinders that lead to frustration.



## Figure 1: The Impact of Blame on Self-Responsibility and Engagement

The information shown below came from a People Acuity study conducted a little over a year ago, of nearly 2,000 people across the globe. It suggests patterns that reveal why employees aren't so quick to take responsibility, and why 85% of employees across the globe today are disengaged (according to Gallup's latest numbers). We found that a moderate to high-blame environment is present for 83% of all employees. It's interesting that this statistic is so close to Gallup's 85% disengagement statistic!

**Specifically, the data suggests that when blame was high:**

- The likelihood of seeing Self-Leadership, initiative, or self-responsibility is only 5%.
- The likelihood of employees experiencing high engagement (Work Joy) is only 4%.

We also discovered that individuals often get stuck because they are uncertain about what to do when they are unhappy, and they lack the knowledge or skills to create a positive shift. This is one reason why so many people blame others, sit back, and then wait for something to change.



## The Universal Trigger

Blame is often a response to what might be called "the universal trigger," which creates negative feelings and frustration, and leads to disengagement. After all, it is logical that you would feel disengaged if you are consistently feeling negative and frustrated all or most of the time.

The universal trigger we are referring to is uncertainty or lack of knowledge, skill, or experience needed for the present relationships or situations. The greater the uncertainty or lack thereof, the stronger the negative emotion. The more frequent the negative emotion, the more pervasive the disengagement.

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When you think about it, you realize that every human has been conditioned during childhood - and even adulthood - to have a negative response to uncertainty and lack. If you were to total up all the times you have been punished, shamed, or received painful consequences because of your uncertainty, or your lack of knowledge or skill, there would be thousands of encounters to include by now. This means that when you face these things today, negative feelings that were previously paired with uncertainty or lack, are automatically triggered even before the associated adverse consequences show up. That's how conditioning works, at least according to top behavioral psychologists.

All you have to do to confirm that this pre-conditioned universal trigger is alive and well for you is to think back to the first month of the global pandemic. How did you feel? What was it like for you? How did your uncertainty, or lack of relevant knowledge or skill, impact you then? If you're like most people, you had feelings of fear or anxiety, and even some inadequacy about how to respond to what was happening. Worries about protecting yourself and your loved ones, or facing changes to your job, business, or the economy may have even kept you up at night. It no doubt affected your energy, performance, and even engagement at work and in your personal life.

Think about this in comparison to your moments of high engagement, where you were energized and performing well. You likely didn't feel uncertain at all then, nor were you worried about getting it wrong, being judged, or not being enough. If you're like most people, you felt quiet confidence and clarity about the situation, what was needed, and your ability to deliver it. You may have encountered bumps along the way, but when you did, you recovered quickly, came back and anchored in your strengths, and got back on track.

## The Universal Trigger and Disengagement

The universal trigger has an impact on disengagement every day. First, because there has traditionally been so much emphasis on looking outside of self for the perfect work environment, employees have grown accustomed to looking beyond themselves for answers. This means they get stuck waiting and blaming, in part because they have been trained to expect someone else to fix things - and they don't know how to do so themselves.

Second, managers often lack knowledge or skill about how to empower others to access their own resources and respond effectively when things go south. Co-creating a successful work environment with employees, including guiding them to create their own unique conditions for effectiveness, has likely not been a focal point of their role. As you have no doubt experienced, managers are so often stuck in the thick of thin things, putting out fires, that they don't stop to proactively empower those closest to them to become Self-Leaders - nor do they know how to do this well.

Third, when you consider the increasing uncertainty of navigating our new world, complete with its increased demand for the Self-Leadership needed to cope, it's easy to see how blame-trained individuals could be constantly triggered. Sometimes they are stuck in a state of dependence, waiting for someone

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to solve their problems or just take responsibility. Other times, they may escape to a lonely silo of independent work where they feel disconnected, burned out and stressed, and where it's easier to tell people what to do than take time for co-creating growth-producing solutions.

Interestingly, the American Institute of Stress indicates that as of May 2020, 88% of all workers felt stressed out or burned out all or most of the time. This is the highest rate of stress at work ever recorded. It's no wonder we're facing not just a global COVID pandemic, but also a global disengagement pandemic!



## Self-Leadership: The Fastest Way to Recover

There is good news in all of this, though it may be hard to believe. The good news is that Self-Leaders create their own conditions for engagement and take self-responsibility. Self-Leaders ignite themselves and contagiously activate other's engaged high performance as well. What's amazing is that Self-Leaders can do this even if they don't have a best friend at work. Imagine that! They are resourceful in their ability to recover from negativity and imperfect conditions, and find ways to enthusiastically engage even when the environment isn't all they hope for.

Today, more than any other time, we need employees and leaders who are Self-Leaders. We need people who know how to take responsibility for creating their own conditions for effectiveness. We need leaders and employees who know how to engage themselves and consistently create high energy and performance every day. This is what engagement is all about. When you think about it, can you really have engagement without Self-Leadership?

Looking at your own people and their needs, you will likely find yourself discovering that sustainable engagement can't happen without it. Truly, Self-Leadership is the hope of tomorrow and the key to winning in today's new economy.

### Check out this video

to better understand the universal trigger, and one or two ideas about how to manage it.

