



Book The Invisible Employee

Using Carrots to See the Hidden Potential in Everyone

Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton
Wiley, 2009
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Recommendation

When staffers feel “invisible,” that is, when their work goes unrecognized by their superiors, they lose motivation and become less productive. In fact, unengaged employees cost firms billions of dollars annually in lost productivity, mistakes, turnover, retraining, and so on. Business authors Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton propose that employees who feel valued and appreciated perform better. With the aid of a basic, symbolic fable and backed up by numerous studies, Gostick and Elton offer simple, concrete techniques managers can use to reward outstanding work. You might wonder why you need to read this book since many of these tips also appear in the duo’s previous bestsellers, including *The Carrot Principle*. Yet *BooksInShort* believes that managers and supervisors who adopt this book’s valuable advice will be able to perform a transformation: Abracadabra! Unmotivated, disengaged employees suddenly will become visible – like magic.

Take-Aways

- As the economy struggles, the workplace has become more pressure-filled.
- Undervalued employees are anxious and insecure; they are afraid to take risks.
- Managers must make staffers feel valued and appreciated to keep them engaged.
- Unengaged workers cost American businesses billions of dollars every year through absenteeism and “presenteeism,” where employees attend work but are unproductive.
- Great leaders set well-defined goals, promote positive behavior and celebrate successes.
- People rarely leave jobs because of money alone. Usually they resign because they don’t gel with their immediate supervisor.
- Specific praise delivered in a heartfelt, timely manner is meaningful to employees.
- Studies show that companies that practice employee recognition enjoy triple the return on equity than firms that do not.
- Presenting awards and giving personalized rewards lets workers know you value their contributions.
- Attracting and retaining talent is a constant challenge in every type of organization. This responsibility ultimately falls to management.

Summary

“The New Landscape of Business”

In today’s bleak economic environment, where layoffs, bailouts and foreclosures are commonplace, employees fear for their jobs. As their anxieties increase, they become less productive and more risk averse. At the same time, the workplace is becoming more pressure intense and less supportive. A study printed in *The New York Times* reported that:

- One quarter of all respondents complained of “being driven to tears in the workplace.”
- Half admitted that their work environment includes “verbal abuse and yelling.”
- Almost one third habitually receive unattainable work deadlines.
- Just more than half need to work 12 hours per day to reach their goals.

“Most leaders of people have no idea about the unhealthy state of their workplaces.”

The statistics also show the bottom-line consequences of having a disengaged, frustrated workforce. “Presenteeism,” which occurs when workers show up but don’t perform their job duties particularly well, costs American companies an estimated \$150 billion every year. Studies conclude that presenteeism could result in lost productivity of anywhere between 16 and 31 days per employee per year. In addition, absenteeism accounts for an on-average loss of four days per worker. Why are presenteeism and absenteeism so prevalent? Because staffers feel that their hard work is “invisible” to their employers.

A Fable About Work, Part I

The Wurc-Ur tribe lived on a remote island in the Medeokr Sea. Even though it had coexisted with the Highlander tribe for generations, the Highlanders rarely saw the Wurc-Urs, who the Highlanders referred to as the “invisible people.” The Highlanders knew the Wurc-Urs existed because the Wurc-Urs habitually gathered plentiful jewels from the mountaintops and left them for the Highlanders. In return, the Highlanders left the Wurc-Urs baskets filled with the “Fruits of the Laborer.” But the Highlanders never thanked the invisible people for their work. Over time, the Wurc-Urs faded into the shadows, trying not to be noticed for fear of garnering criticism or, even worse, being eliminated, as had happened to their predecessors years before.

Fade Away

Allison worked hard in a corporate public relations office and she took pride in her efforts. One of her assignments was to work with the company’s economist on monthly cost-of-living reports. She met with him frequently and invested many hours in the project. Walking down the hallway one day, she heard the economist refer to her in conversation as “the girl.” She had worked with him for more than a year, and he hadn’t even bothered to learn her name. She felt diminished, unappreciated and invisible. Allison joined the ranks of the 80% of surveyed workers who responded that they felt unacknowledged at work. When employees feel ignored or undervalued, they stop putting their best effort into their work. Over time, they disengage and become indifferent. Contributing to their employers’ success ceases being a high priority. This costs the company money. Leaders can counteract this apathy by “setting a guiding vision,” deliberately noticing when employees do something that brings the company closer to meeting its objectives, and celebrating workers’ accomplishments.

“The old adage, ‘I don’t care if they like me as long as they respect me,’ is not only wrong: It’s dangerous in the modern workplace.”

Managers must oversee systems, technology and strategy, but none of these duties is more crucial than making employees feel noticed and valued. Although offering a competitive salary and benefits package is important, letting people know that you appreciate them will garner their commitment and ignite their passion. Gallup research shows that employees who feel valued are more productive, interact better with other staff members, treat customers better and build improved safety records. These employees are less likely to leave their organizations.

A Fable About Work, Part II

Star, a Wurc-Ur, was climbing the mountain peaks in search of jewels with a fellow Wurc-Ur named Jon. As they descended, they threw the filled bags downhill to avoid carrying them. Some of the jewels broke, but since the Highlanders never bothered to supervise or comment on their efforts, it didn’t matter. As they spotted the Highlanders leaving their usual offering of fruit and vegetables, Jon said, “They really don’t care where the gems come from as long as they’re here.” Suddenly, Jon – already pale and nearly invisible – simply disappeared. He “blinked out.”

“Blink Outs”

When employees feel underappreciated, they will complain to each other, take costly shortcuts, procrastinate, do subpar work and eventually blink out, or leave the firm. Various studies conclude that people seldom quit a job because of money alone. Usually they resign because they don’t get along with their immediate supervisor. In fact, a truly unhappy employee will even take a cut in pay to get out of a bad situation. When your best people begin seeking positions elsewhere, that’s a clear indicator that management is not recognizing their efforts. What are the costs of blink-outs? Bliss & Associates, a consulting firm, found that companies accrue \$75,000 of expenditure and losses (on advertising, relocation, lost productivity and training, plus other more intangible expenses) to replace a \$50,000-per-year employee.

“If employees feel that a manager is lousy, then that manager is lousy.”

Former CEO of General Electric Jack Welch stated, “The top 20% must be loved, nurtured and rewarded in the soul and wallet because they are the ones who make magic happen.” However, most people agree with the employee who said, “When I make a mistake I’m recognized 100% of the time; when I do something great, I’m not recognized 99% of the time.” You can’t overrecognize people. In fact, praise should outpace criticism by a ratio of five to one.

A Fable About Work, Part III

Jon’s disappearance so shocked Star that she let her guard down for a moment. Ian, a Highlander, spotted her hiding among the trees. She saw him looking at her and heard the admonishments of her elders in her ears. “If you don’t want to experience failure and criticism and exhaustion, then you must perfect the art of silence. The art of invisibility.” She slipped away, but Ian wondered why the Highlanders never tried to reach out to the Wurc-Urs.

Pay Attention

Research confirms that a supervisor’s opinion and feedback means a lot to his or her employees. Alas, many managers are so focused on the job at hand or on

impressing their own superiors that they lose touch with their workers. Some managers believe that their duty is to point out errors and punish mistakes. In the worst cases, entrenched managers caution new leaders not to encourage employees, believing that the workers are manipulative, lazy or sneaky. Even though some exemplary managers invest their own money in taking employees out to dinner or providing rewards, many companies do not have systems or budgets for recognizing and rewarding outstanding effort and results.

“The picture employees get before they join a company – during the interview process – is often dramatically different from day-to-day life.”

To draw the best work from your employees, set clear and specific goals. Outline the practices and behaviors workers need to adopt to reach these goals. Then praise and recognize staffers who help your department achieve its objectives. For instance, on Barbara Ruddy’s 20th anniversary at the Arizona Department of Economic Security, her supervisor gathered her co-workers and, in front of them, listed Barbara’s many accomplishments during her tenure. He thanked her sincerely. Barbara felt honored, renewed and transformed by this public act of recognition. She was so inspired she volunteered to head the firm’s recognition program.

A Fable About Work, Part IV

One day, as Ian collected the jewels left by the Wurc-Urs and replenished the fruits and vegetables, he had a thought. He left a note with the food offering that said, “I noticed 40 undamaged gems were added to the chest today, and they look incredible! I know it takes a lot of effort to treat them gently and protect them from damage. Thank you for those efforts.” Later, he sought out Star. As he thanked her, she seemed to become less invisible right in front of his eyes. During their short conversation, Ian learned more about jewel carrying than he had found out in a lifetime. Star dedicated renewed effort to finding jewels and unearthed a strain of rare emeralds. Ian held a celebration with the other Wurc-Urs and gave Star an emerald strung on a leather cord.

Step Up

Although patting people on the back and saying “Good job” is nice, it’s not an effective way to award recognition. Specific praise delivered in a heartfelt, timely manner is much more meaningful. Spend 10 minutes researching and preparing your tribute. For example, Brian works for Westfield, an insurance group based in Ohio. When Brian’s supervisor presented Brian with an award, he said: “This award is for something Brian did on his own time. We were going down to a conference in Florida and wanted to demonstrate our WestComm product. Brian went out and got the type of software that would help us demonstrate this system. He learned it and put it all together on his own. It made a huge difference in our ability to showcase that product.” Brian’s co-workers cheered, and he felt validated and acknowledged. As a manager, you can do many things to recognize an individual’s or a team’s outstanding work, including:

- Ask a staffer to accompany you to lunch with your boss.
- Provide an employee with new computer equipment or a more comfortable office chair.
- Hire a limousine to bring the staffer to and from work.
- When a worker travels to another location on a business trip, allow him or her to spend an extra day there for recreation – “on you.”
- When a staffer is getting burned out, give him or her a “sleep-in pass.”
- Arrange a table football or table tennis contest, or a lunchtime “pizza party.”
- Plan a team outing, such as ice-skating or roller-skating.
- Ask the group for suggestions on how to make the workplace more comfortable.
- Publicly recognize your high-performance workers. Present them with awards in front of the entire company.

A Fable About Work, Part V

The Wurc-Urs began to call Ian “the See-r” because he saw and acknowledged their achievements. They worked harder, and the quality and quantity of the gems they brought down from the mountain improved. When other Highlanders questioned Ian’s success, he introduced them to the Wurc-Urs, saying, “The Wurc-Urs have suffered unnoticed. But these people need to be seen...if we are all to succeed. Without them we will all disappear.” The Highlanders and Wurc-Urs began to collaborate. The Wurc-Urs were no longer invisible, life on the island improved and the people were happy.

Visibility and Results

HealthStream Research studies show that companies that practiced employee recognition enjoyed triple the return on equity than firms that did not. That’s because engaged employees care about the quality of their work and the well-being of their companies. For example, Jeff thought he had landed his dream job. When he showed up for work on his first day, the company didn’t have a desk ready. No one greeted him or knew what to do with him. He eventually received written instructions, which his manager left on his desk, but she never spoke to him. At the monthly staff meeting, Jeff’s manager finally welcomed him to the company, but it was too late. Jeff handed in his resignation.

“Great leaders...lead people – not systems, processes, technology, strategy or functions. Because, when it comes right down to it, all those things can be replicated – but your people can’t.”

Attracting and retaining talent is a constant challenge in every type of organization, and it is a vital part of keeping great talent. This responsibility ultimately falls to management. After Jeff resigned, his supervisor leapt into action. She identified his concerns and made immediate changes. Jeff responded by staying. He felt that a boss who “was really willing to continually improve, who would listen and do something about what I said and then give me the recognition I needed...was unusual. It meant a lot.”

About the Authors

Adrian Gostick and **Chester Elton** co-wrote the bestsellers *The Carrot Principle* and *The 24-Carrot Manager*. They are both vice presidents of The Carrot Culture Group consultancy.

