A Lack of Respect in the Work Environment
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

I have received many comments in response to my last two articles. In my December piece I discussed bullying in the workplace, advocating for the emergence of what Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee call "resonant leaders," that is, individuals with high emotional intelligence and empathy who "drive emotions positively" and bring out the best in everyone.

Last month I examined the concept of "engagement," citing a comprehensive report released by Gallup, Inc. that was titled "State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders." The Gallup researchers found that only 30% of American employees across a number of settings felt engaged in their work, displaying enthusiasm and commitment and helping to move their organization forward. Another 52% were categorized as "not engaged." They were described as "sleepwalking through their workday, putting time—but not energy or passion—into their work."

A third group, which comprised 18% of employees, were labeled "actively disengaged," characterized as "more or less out to damage their company. They aren't just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. . . . Whatever the engaged do—such as solving problems, innovating, and creating new customers—the actively disengaged try to undo."   These negative behaviors, displayed by such a large number of employees, are estimated to cost businesses in the United States between $450 to $550 billion each year in productivity. Without doubt, actively disengaged employees represent a major burden on any business and on the overall economy of a nation.

The Gallup staff recommended several actions that leadership should assume to address this significant problem, including, (a) selecting the right people to join the organization, (b) identifying and utilizing the strength of employees instead of focusing on remediating their weaknesses, and (c) enhancing the well-being of employees, especially their overall physical health.

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Feedback from My Readers

A number of my readers wrote to describe the positive or negative conditions they face at work. In addition, many others approached me at lectures and workshops. A man said to me that at his former job he had a boss whom he described as a "tyrant or the exact opposite of a resonant leader." He said, "I hated work. I loved when this boss went on vacation, which wasn't often enough. I knew that when I was having headaches and stomachaches on a regular basis, I had to get out. I began looking for another position and was fortunate that a friend told me about an opening in his company. I applied for the job and got it. What a difference! My new boss is supportive, a real people person who goes out of his way to compliment his staff. My headaches and stomachaches have completely disappeared. I have definitely joined the engaged group."

He added, "I just wish more people in leadership positions would make certain that the work environment was supportive rather than hostile."

A woman at one of my presentations reported, "I wish you could come and speak at where I work. I wish my supervisor could hear you. The way she speaks to many of us is nothing short of rude. It's so draining working there that our energy is constantly drained so that we can't be as available to our clients as we would like."

In hearing the word "client," I inquired where she worked. She replied, "If you can believe it, I work at a mental health clinic and the supervisor I just mentioned has a doctorate in clinical psychology! Ironic, huh? She's supposedly trained to help people, to lessen their stress, but all I know is that she increases everyone's stress at work. A few of my colleagues as well as myself often wonder how she interacts with her clients if she treats us the way she does."

This woman concluded, "It's evident from your articles that this kind of harassment is pervasive. I hope you devote future articles to this theme so more people become aware that it's a major problem that needs to be addressed." She even suggested that I invite my readers to submit vignettes that capture experiences they have had either with resonant leaders or with what she called "bullying" leaders and that I share these vignettes in a future article. I am open to receiving such vignettes if any of my readers would like to send them to me.

The Impact on Patient Care

I can understand this woman's use of the word "ironic" to describe the bullying behavior of a clinical psychologist, but unfortunately, what this woman reported is not an isolated example. In consultations I have conducted at mental health agencies and educational settings that ostensibly have supervisors trained in interpersonal relationships, I have heard of examples of bosses/supervisors who are abusive, who seem to use their training in interpersonal relations not to support others but sadly to manipulate and/or harass them.

I was reminded of this occurrence while reading a thoughtful and thought-provoking blog recently published in scientificamerican.com by Ilana Yurkiewicz, a third-year student at Harvard Medical School. The blog, titled "Disrespect in hospitals isn't just unpleasant. It's unsafe," is a summary of a longer essay by Yurkiewicz that appeared in *Aeon Magazine*.

Yurkiewicz observes, "Hospital bullies: they're a minority, but they're sizable enough that they can unfortunately set the tone for everyone else. Most health care providers have in their arsenal some juicy tales of mistreatment to tell, but most is far less glamorous. It's micro-aggressions; and this is what creates a culture."

Yurkiewicz highlights the impact of this negative culture on the health care employee. "There are many reasons why disrespect is not ideal. Perhaps most obviously, it's unpleasant for the recipient. No one likes to be yelled at. No one feels good when told she is incompetent. It's at best mildly discomfiting and at worst can be a nagging source of misery, discouragement, and low self-esteem."

Not surprisingly, the bullying directed toward staff impacts significantly on patient care. Yurkiewicz asserts:

> The results are in, and they paint a bleaker, eye-opening picture: When staff are disrespected, medical errors increase. When a team exchanges harsh words, patient care suffers. Suddenly, this isn't just about staff satisfaction. How your caregivers interact with one another outside your hospital room door has a significant effect on whether an error is going to be made inside it—with your care, with your body.

In her longer essay, Yurkiewicz not only provides additional insights for what she perceives to be several key roots of disrespect but also suggestions for remedying this problem. She advances the position that "many in medicine actively protect the culture of disrespect because they hold a fundamentally flawed idea: that harshness creates competence. That fear is good for doctors-in-training and, by extension, good for patients."

Reading this statement triggered memories of a consultation I conducted at a mental health agency, in which several staff and trainees reported the belittling behavior of a supervisor. When I interviewed him I was astonished to hear his interpretation of his behavior and his theory of motivation. "Young staff and trainees are going to face tough situations. My comments are intended to toughen them up, to point out their mistakes in a no nonsense way so they will be motivated to correct these mistakes."

Facing similar kinds of rationale, Yurkiewicz asserts, "Brutality doesn't make better doctors; it just makes crankier doctors. And shame doesn't foster improvement; it fosters more mistakes and more near-misses. We know now that clinicians working in a culture of blame and punishment report their errors less often, pointing to fear of repercussion. Meanwhile when blame is abolished, reporting of all types of errors increases."

Yurkiewicz argues that staff must be active in responding when they witness harassment of others or when it is directed at them. "This is easier said than done. But cultures change because people within commit to changing them; it won't come by decree. A culture that shames bullying makes the bully look like the bad guy, rather than making the recipient look weak. . . . When working in a system that treats us all humanely, we're more likely to be humane to each other, and to our patients."

Four Lessons to Follow

I was thinking about these observations when reading a blog published in *Harvard Business Review* by Deborah Mills-Scofield, a well-known consultant to business organizations and a mentor to entrepreneurs. The blog, which was titled "Four Lessons from the Best Bosses I Every Had," identifies four lessons. I believe these lessons capture the practices of a resonant leader and counteract the negative behaviors observed by Yurkiewicz. They are:

1. Let your people go. Mills-Scofield contends that when you have talented employees "do what you need in order to encourage and support them. Treat them justly and do what's right for them and the organization over what's right for you personally. Give them opportunities to excel and succeed and air cover if they fail." This lesson is very much in accord with one of the approaches advocated in the Gallup report that I discussed last month, namely, to develop employees' strengths. Gallup found a noticeable correlation between people being able to use their strengths at work and how engaged and productive they were in the workplace.

2. Light the fire and clear the path. In many of my articles I have described that when people are invited to offer opinions and make decisions related to their work, their motivation to engage in this work with purpose and excellence is noticeably reinforced. While this statement may seem obvious, I continue to hear of examples in which employees have little input into their day-to-day activities. It is difficult to be engaged when one feels disenfranchised or disrespected. Mills-Scofield eloquently echoes this position when she writes, "Guide your people's passion and get out of the way: the autonomy and freedom I was given to create and do my job exponentially increased my passion, excitement, and success."

She adds, "They (manager-mentors) removed obstacles, showed me how to handle challenges, provided opportunities, and took the blame while giving me the credit." Who would not want to work diligently for someone who acted in this way!

3. Remember, they're human. Mills-Scofield provides some intriguing observations for this third lesson, noting that many organizations "treat their employees as employees—nice and kindly, even generously—but not as humans. My manager-mentors made it clear that I mattered not just for what I could do, but also for who I was. It wasn't just about the generous maternity leave or the work-from-home flexibility, although I was grateful for both. For instance, one boss required that I take two consecutive weeks of vacation to fully relax."

This third recommendation coincided with the Gallup recommendation that when companies enhance employees' wellbeing such as encouraging healthier behaviors and diets and participating in employer-sponsored wellness programs, they also reinforce motivation and engagement.

4. Trust trumps everything. Mills-Scofield highlights a dimension that is critical in any relationship and in any workplace, namely, that of trust. "Everything flows from trust—learning, credibility, accountability, a sense of purpose and a mission that makes 'work' bigger than oneself." In another blog for *Harvard Business Review* titled "Let's Bring Back Accountability," Mills-Scofield hones in on the ways in which trust nurtures accountability. She offers advice to managers about the ways in which they should deal with setbacks in the work environment, recommending:

> Create ways to eliminate the stigma of failure. Focus on what's been learned and how that applies; watch how you react to and treat the person, how you discuss it with others affected by the result, and how you let it impact that person's future success in the organization. Even if you can't change the organization's management process, your own personal demeanor and handling has an enormous impact.

> What sage advice! The last sentence resonates with my belief that we are the "authors of our own lives," that while we may not have control over various events in our lives, what we do have control over is our attitude and reaction to these events.

Transforming Negative into Positive Energy

It is unfortunate that given all of the research and information we now possess about "resonant leaders" and the ways in which they nurture such attributes as trust, intrinsic motivation, purpose, and passion in their staff, that far too many organizations continue to have people in leadership positions who micromanage, who focus on negative rather than positive feedback, who give only lip service to promoting the well-being of their employees, and who become so obsessed with business statistics that they lose sight of attending to the strengths, needs, and interests of the employees who are responsible for producing these statistics. In such an environment, almost all staff at whatever level are likely to suffer as will the organization and those that the organization serves. More effort must be expended to introduce resonant leaders who can transform negative into positive energy.

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