

## Passion Thrillers and Passion Killers: How to Support and How to Thwart Employee Passion

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### Abstract

*In any work environment passion can be encouraged or discouraged; the authors refer to this dichotomy as passion thrillers and passion killers. An organization's productivity can be affected by its employees' passion for their job and place of employment. Studies reveal several ways to excite passion in the workplace and by doing so increase employee engagement and persistence. However, too often leaders fail to analyze what drives the passion of their employees. While there seem to be several ways for passion to be thrilled, this work also explores the proposition that passionate engagement can be killed. Leaders who focus on the negative usually fail to excite passion and the critical culture kills the fire within employees. The findings suggest that inherent employee passion can be ignited in the workplace, promoting success; or it can also be extinguished, destroying the great potential that employee passion brings to the organization.*

**Keywords:** passion, motivation, exciting passion, killing passion, employee passion

The topic of passion as an essential element of effective employee engagement and persistence is a frequent theme of late (Ho, Wong, & Lee, 2011; Perrewé, Hochwarter, Ferris, McAllister, & Harris, 2014). Vallerand (2012), a pioneer in the study of "passionate engagement," notes that in the late 1990s he and his associates were surprised to find "very little if any psychological research had been conducted on this concept (there was research on romantic passion, but not for passion for activities)" (p. 47). As a result, their research opened up this area of psychological inquiry.

As an illustration of the emerging interest in this field, a Google search of the phrase "passionate employee" revealed 11,200 webpages/articles. In addition, a Google "Safe Search" of the phrase "passion in the workplace" resulted in 311,000 results. Likewise, a search of a digital database limiting the search to peer reviewed journals with the topic passion + employees resulted in 53,717 articles related to this subject, 15,385 of which were published between 2010 and 2014 (Galileo, 2014). That there is growing interest in this topic is a fact recognized and commented on by various scholars in the social sciences (David, 2012; Ho, Wong, & Lee, 2011; Zigarmi, Houson, & Witt, 2009). With the increase of interest and research in the area of employee passion in the workplace, the definition of passion has been expressed, the impact of passion on work performance has been examined, and the potential for increasing or facilitating passion in workers has been explored. This literature review will endeavor to expand the proposition that while passion in its purest form cannot be created by one agent acting upon another agent, passion can be instigated, activated, and facilitated when certain workplace, employment, or management conditions are present, which will be referred to as *passion thrillers*. This review will also look at the possibility that while passion cannot be created, it can be effectively quelled by workplace, employment, or leadership conditions that are antithetical to personal or individual passion; these conditions will be identified as *passion killers*.

Why the recent interest in the topic of employee passion? Tucker (2014) sums up the importance of this topic well: “Simply put, passion, or its absence, isn’t just a philosophical or psychological matter – it’s a business problem, too. Far too many companies lack employees who are passionate about their work, and they flounder, or just get by” (para. 5). Yet, Tucker states, “A mere 29% of the U. S. working population is engaged” (para. 8), and argues that the lack of engagement is a result of the absence of worker passion. As such, it is good business for organizations to explore ways that worker passion can be effectively fostered, and avoid practices that may diminish worker passion.

### ***Defining Employee Passion***

One of the concerns about the preponderance of articles and research in the area of employee passion is that while the topic of the **passion** that people demonstrate at work appears to elicit considerable interest among organizational scholars and practitioners, we know almost nothing about it (Perrewé et al., 2014). However, significant work in this area of research has been conducted by Vallerand and Houliort (2003) who begin their work defining passion “as a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (p. 175). Vallerand et al. (2007) add that “passion represents the energy underlying . . . persistent involvement” (p. 506). However, Vallerand and Houliort (2003) propose a dualistic model of passion: “harmonious passion” and “obsessive passion.” Their research predicts that while both types of passion may result in higher levels of worker engagement, “harmonious passion promotes healthy adaptation whereas obsessive passion thwarts it by causing negative affect and rigid persistence” (p. 175). Therefore, an organization is best served by promoting harmonious passion.

Zigarmi, Houson, and Witt (2009) conducted a factorial analysis of employee passion identifying eight factors: meaningful work, collaboration, fairness, autonomy, recognition, growth, connectedness with leader, and connectedness with colleagues. Additional research led to the following definition:

Employee Work Passion is an individual’s persistent, emotionally positive, meaning-based state of well-being stemming from reoccurring cognitive and affective appraisals of various job and organizational situations, which result in consistent, constructive work intentions and behaviors. (Zigarmi, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2011, p. 9)

For the purposes of this work “employee work passion” will be defined as the positive emotional state of an employee that comes from engagement in work related to employment, and results in persistent and productive engagement in work related activities, and which further results in harmonious congruence with a worker’s life beyond the workplace.

### ***The Source of Employee Passion***

Bobinski (2009) and others (David, 2012; O’Doherty, 2007; Tucker, 2014) argue that passion cannot be created in an individual if it does not already exist, which is why Collins (2001) insists that it is vitally important to get the right people on the bus, and in the right seats. O’Doherty (2007) claims that “you can’t ‘make’ employees passionate about work – passions cannot be imposed externally” (para. 5). Likewise, Bobinski asserts that passion cannot be “manufactured,” “demanded,” “bought,” or “faked” (p. 14). The key, therefore, for both the individual and the organization is to *discover* passion, which presupposes that passion for something is a resident potential within everyone. Tucker (2014), for example, states:

Everybody has passion. Few people have jobs that activate their passion. Everybody has talent. Few people have jobs that demand full use of their talents and strengths. Organizations ought to make passion and strengths-based management a requirement. World-class organizations already do. They look beyond a person’s resume, work experience, or education. Instead, they use sound selection instruments to discover: “Does this person have passion for excellence? Does she have strong feelings that help her to never give up? Does she love challenges? Is she easily motivated?” In sum, “what are her talents, strengths, and passions, and how can we leverage them?” (para. 11)

### ***Passion Thrillers***

The previous question indicates that while passion cannot be “created,” the inherent passion within an individual worker, or a team of workers, can be excited or activated.

O'Doherty (2007) believes that “great leadership creates environments where employees embrace the corporate purpose, and have numerous opportunities to discover how their individual passions support it” (para. 5). Therefore the question is how this can be accomplished.

Ayers and Cahill (2012) state:

A passionate employee is focused, engaged, and committed to consistently perform at his best. He feels strongly about the work he does, knowing that he is creating value, and he has a strong emotional connection with the organization he works for – he feels a sense of pride and commitment towards the organization. As a result, he delivers exceptional value to his customers, both external and internal. (p. 9)

### **What Influences Passion**

Similar to marriage, employee passion can be encouraged or discouraged in the workplace. There are both internal and external factors that influence employee passion. In a study completed at the Women in Engineering Programs and Advocates Network Conference, the top internal influences of passion identified were leadership, flexibility, and respect, while the external factors were customer satisfaction, market recognition, and excellence (Nair, 2006). Ayers and Cahill (2012) claim that “there is little doubt that passion is a significant factor differentiating between good and great companies, noting that passionate employees create winning teams” (p.12).

Ayers and Cahill (2012), in their research pertaining to employee passion, introduce two meticulous questions: Are people passionate about the actual work they do on a daily basis? Are they passionate about the organization they work for – its values, the senior leadership? Looking at the internal influence, one observes from the inside out and how these influences can promote passion within an individual, while external influences observe the outside in.

### **Leadership**

Leadership is not only knowing how to lead others, but also knowing how to serve (Greenleaf, 2002). The impact that a leader has on employees influences their passion to work harder, to strive for excellence, and to ensure goals and objectives are consistently met. Being passionate toward leadership and the workplace makes one committed to the organization, rather than only being passionate about their profession, which could be done anywhere (Ayers & Cahill, 2012). Leaders are usually the most visible influence of the organization upon the employees and how the organization is run. If the leadership does not invite “buy-in” or opportunities for employees to excel or demonstrate their talents and skills, employees may feel that they are simply there to “work” and thus will not be as passion driven for the organization due to how they are treated by leadership. This dynamic is reflective of the difference between transactional and transformational approaches to leadership, with more passion elicited from the transformational approach than can be elicited from a transactional approach.

### **Flexibility**

In addition to the influence of a good leader, work flexibility plays a great role in passion thrillers (Liu, Chen, & Yao, 2012). In 1998, International Business Machines (IBM) formed what is called the Project Office, which supported flexible work option programs around the world (Nair, 2006). This flexibility transformed how and when employees did their work. When workers are able to have flexibility with respect to how/when they work it increases their passion (Craemer, 2014). They are not governed by a strict “set of rules” that dictate to them, clock in at this time, take a lunch at that time, and leave by this time. Having flexibility motivates passion in people to ensure that work is done because they are given the freedom to work in an environment that is conducive to their needs. This is supported by the research of Gallup (2013), which found that “remote workers log more hours at their primary job than do their counterparts who work on-site” and on average, these workers will log four more hours a week on task than their on-site counterparts (p.29).

### **Respect**

Respect, is the final of the top three internal influences. *Webster's Dictionary* defines respect as “a feeling or understanding that someone or something is important, serious, etc., and should be treated in an appropriate way.” When an employee's work is well received or even constructively corrected, this aids in their passion towards what they are doing. As a human with feelings, when a person is always criticized and not appreciated or respected, even if they enjoy their work, the passion for the job diminishes because of the lack of respect.

For example, when changes occur that affect a particular department or person, these changes should be conveyed, thereby demonstrating respect for all parties affected by the change. When there is respect, the passion increases thus creating greater productivity.

### **Customer Service**

It is commonly understood that employers and employees want to feel a sense of accomplishment for the work they perform. As Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt and Diehl (2011) note, “Work is not ‘just business’—it is personal” (p. 212). Employees want to feel appreciated not only by their employer, but consumers as well. Customer satisfaction is priority number one in most organizations. Most organizations consistently strive to be at or near the top of customer satisfaction ratings. When an employee believes (and has solid evidence to support the belief) that customers are satisfied, this fuels their passion for the work they are doing. It is rewarding for an employee to receive a nice email of thanks or appreciation, or receive a referral from another person because of the excellent customer service received. This is an external influence that feeds the internal satisfaction of the employee, thus exciting passion to do more in efforts to obtain similar responses.

### **Market Recognition**

Market recognition is so vital in keeping the passion high in employees. Recognition informs others that a job is being done well. Market recognition can be done by newsletters, emails, signs, etc. The goal of market recognition is to appreciate, in a formal communication, the work that has been or is being done. When one is recognized for their contributions this influences their passion for excellence and potentially decreases high turnover (Subramoniam, 2013).

### **Excellence**

In a recent visit to the dentist office, I (Howard) asked the hygienist a question regarding the driving force behind her passion to serve others. Her first response was “excellence.” She understood that being excellent towards customers, coworkers, her employer, and other stakeholders would result in an overall appreciation for the work that she performed on a daily basis. Often, when people are not passionate in the workplace, excellence is not a part of the vocabulary; instead work simply becomes a routine waiting for the end of the day, thus lacking passion to excel.

Zigarmi, Houson and Witt (2009) identify eight key factors influencing employee passion, many of which are similar to the factors mentioned above:

- Meaningful work—Employees perceive the organization’s larger purpose through products or services produced, consider their work to be worthwhile, and are proud of their individual actions and contributions that help the organization serve its customer.
- Collaboration—Employees perceive an organizational environment and culture that enhances collaboration, cooperation, and encouragement between all organizational members.
- Fairness—Employees perceive an environment where pay, benefits, resources and workload are fair and balanced and equitable, people treat each other with respect, and leaders act in an ethical manner.
- Autonomy—Employees perceive an environment where people have the tools, training, support, and authority to make decisions.
- Recognition—Employees perceive an environment where they are praised, recognized, and appreciated by colleagues and their leader for their accomplishments, where they receive monetary compensation for those accomplishments, and where they are contributing to positive relationships with others.
- Growth—Employees perceive an environment where people have opportunities to learn, grow professionally, and develop skills that lead to advancement and career growth.
- Connectedness with leader—Employees perceive an environment where they trust their leader and where the leader makes an effort to form an interpersonal connection with them.
- Connectedness with Colleagues—Employees perceive an environment where they trust their colleagues and where their colleagues make an effort to form an interpersonal connection with them. (pp. 4-5)

### **Passion Killers**

In addition to those things that research indicates can activate or stimulate the passion of the worker, it should be noted that there are actions, policies, and practices within organizations that can effectively kill passion.

Leaders who observe a chronic lack of passion among employees should engage in a leadership inventory, considering whether the lack of passion is related to leadership and management practices, or perhaps to the corporate culture. Khan (2008) notes the paradox of companies that hire employees for specific passions related to the organization but then systematically kill that passion, and “within months, extinguish the quality that attracted them” (p. 12). The American Management Association (2010) maintains that Passion is natural:

Capable people abound with it, at least in the areas of their talent. If passion is lacking at work, it’s because companies have become institutionalized “passion killers,” through mediocre leadership practices, dysfunctional teams, poor, and dispiriting work cultures. (para. 2)

Therefore, in addition to a consideration of the internal and external factors that facilitate the discovery and development of passion, it is imperative that an organization (from the CEO down) consider how their actions may be impeding and inhibiting the flowering and the fruit of passion along with all the potential benefits that an organization can gain from worker passion. In addition to the absence of those things that thrill the passion of employees, there are those things that can actively kill employee passion.

### **Critical Feedback without Insights for Achievement**

It is a role of leaders to evaluate, assess, appraise, and calculate the success or failure of a project, or the effectiveness of an employee, and seeing the weaknesses and merits of ideas are skills that are needed (Dundon, 2002), yet too often it seems the scales tip to side of the equation where only the deficiencies are noted (Kahn, 2009). This can become a negative culture within an organization that effectively becomes a passion killer, especially when an employee is not shown that he or she has the tools or resources to succeed. The continual drip of criticism, even when subtle, without offering constructive feedback and a roadmap for future improvement leads to feelings of futility and hopelessness (Ratiu & Suci, 2013). When an organization leaves workers confused about expectations, outcomes, opportunities for advancement, or potential for achievement, it has the effect of diminishing employee passion and engagement. Collins (2001) argues that top leaders confront the brutal facts, they deal with problems and problem employees, but they never lose hope. Instead, they instill hope and confidence in the employees, even in the face of extreme challenges.

### **Vague Vision/Purpose**

The lack of a clearly articulated vision that is compelling and inspiring has a way of diminishing passion. There is a biblical proverb that states, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18a, KJV), and this certainly appears to be the case in relationship between vision and passion. Where there is no clear and compelling vision the people have no anchor upon which to fix their passion. In part, worker passion comes from being able to connect their personal interests and goals with a job that is meaningful (Zigarmi, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2011). However, passion is sustained by the sense that the organization for which an individual works has a purpose worthy of continued commitment, engagement, and energy. The absence of a vision will inevitably obscure what may, in fact, be a worthy purpose and eventually rob the job of meaning and the worker of passion (Zigarmi, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2011).

### **Micromanaging**

Wojick (2008) notes that micromanaging is a well-known passion killer, a sentiment echoed by Slamowitz (2013) and Bobinski (2009). An employee who comes to the organization with passion has the potential to add value to the organization through insights and innovation coupled with engagement and energy. Micromanaging is controlling behavior employed by insecure managers and leaders of an organization. Often instituted under the moniker of “accountability,” it effectively stifles the creativity of passionate employees and suggests a lack of trust or confidence in the employee to effectively engage in his or her role or task on the job. Passion is ignited in an organization where the individual is given the opportunity to explore and engage his or her talent in the performance of work related tasks, but micromanaging has the opposite effect. Micromanagement, in the form of constant reports, a dismissive view of employee ideas, or consistently telling employees what to do rather than engaging them in meaningful dialog, will slowly but surely kill employee passion and rob the organization of all the potential that was seen in the employee when he or she was hired.

### **Conclusion**

The recent preponderance of research on the topic of employee and/or worker passion suggests that many employers are recognizing the importance of employee passion for the long-term success of their organizations.

However, if passion merely becomes a buzzword that is thrown around without a basic understanding of the factors that can either *thrill* or *kill* passion, then the word itself loses meaning and becomes anathema to the employees who repeatedly hear the word, but who see no evidence in the culture of the organization that passion is genuinely prized. Instead a disconnect between what employees intuitively know will facilitate their passion and what employers are defining as passion sets in and poisons the concept altogether.

When the evidence of passion for the employer boils down to more work for less money, while the employee's concept of passion is opportunity for expression and creativity in an area of interest, then the quest for employee passion grinds to a halt in the face of a roadblock of micromanaged expectations in an organization of a vague or ill-defined vision, plagued by the constant drip of criticism.

However, passion can be ignited and the fires of creativity released when employees are respected for the talents they bring to the table, are given meaningful positive feedback, and are afforded the opportunity to excel at what they love. The key is, in part, about creating a culture that feeds the passion of employees, rather than feeding *on* the passion of employees. The former is synergistic while the latter is parasitic. Employees who are encouraged to discover, explore, and expand their talents and abilities will yield high returns for the organization and they will experience a harmony between their work life and their personal life. This then, truly becomes a win-win work environment for employee and employer.

Finally, as Vallerand (2012) notes, there is a close affinity between the concepts of "motivation" and "passion." The difference, as Vallerand sees it, is subtle but significant:

Both passion and motivation are important. Motivation may matter more for nonpassionate activities that we still need to perform in our lives (*e.g.*, to go to school, clean up our room or office!), while passion may be especially important for the relatively few activities that make us thrive in our lives (*e.g.*, play basketball; although some may be lucky enough to be passionate about their work). (p. 49)

It seems that the key for leaders and organizations is to hire people with passions that are aligned with the area of their work responsibilities. By marrying passion with occupation both the organization and the individual benefit. Hiring the right people and then igniting their passion through passion thrillers, while avoiding unintentional thwarting of passion through passion killers, is an ongoing and important consideration for human resource departments as well as managers and leader throughout an organization.

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