

A FULLYALIVE *White Paper*

Getting more of what you want and less of what you don't want

"It's all about True North"

Employee Engagement and Intellectual Laziness

You know that feeling when you're just not enthusiastic about much of anything? When you're having difficulty staying on task and your work product is just okay? Or when you're just being reactive to whatever comes your way?

That feeling is a roaring whisper in your ear that you're not fully engaged, that you're not giving your best and, in consequence, you're not getting the best, either. Even worse, those who look to you for leadership will quickly pick up on your lack of full engagement and likely will give less than their best. That has a very bad effect on results.

The key is to pay attention. You must be mindful of yourself because others will mirror your energy and engagement. As always, the trick is in the doing and a most effective way to do that is to be clear about your True North.

This is not about magnetic alignment. Rather, it's a statement of who you are at your core - what is most important. That's because your people don't follow your company; they follow you. And the clearer you can make that for them, the more effective you will be as a leader.

To put this into a business perspective, the Gallup Organization did a study several years ago¹ about the percentage of American workers that knows the goals of their organization. Arguably, that means the company's True North. Sadly, it's only 18%. What that means is that even the fully engaged employees can't do their very best because, to use a metaphor, if their job is to pull on the rope to move the wagon, they don't know which way to pull the rope. Their efforts become diluted and so does their enthusiasm and engagement.

It's the same for personal leadership. Since leadership is largely driven by the leader-follower relationship, your followers have to know where True North is in order to continue to give their A-game. The clearer you can articulate True North, the easier it is for others to align and to give their best. Here's an example.

A few years ago I facilitated the kick-off meeting for a major growth strategy of a company in Atlanta, GA. The CEO started the meeting by explaining where they were going. It was audacious and exciting and he could have stopped there, but he went one step further. He had worked with me on the issue of his True North and he told his people why they were embarking on this challenging course in that very context:

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"To be a highly functioning team where everyone is achieving at their greatest potential."

He then turned the meeting over to me and I began by asking his employees what they thought of what he had just told them. The room was quiet and soon I saw a lot of heads nodding. I asked one of the nodding heads what she was thinking. "We know that – it's just who he is."

And that's the point. They had never before heard him say those words, his True North, but they rang true in that moment. These people were there and giving their best because his message – *everyone achieving at their greatest potential* – rings true for them, too, and they were energized by hearing it. Of course, they knew that everyone would prosper as the company grew, yet that wasn't the key driver for them.

The nugget of gold in all of this is the leader being clear about his/her True North and then telling everyone about it so that they know what is most important, so that they can align with it and engage. That's how great things happen. Indeed, as ambitious as that company's growth goal was, the company has vastly outperformed it. That's just one demonstration of the power of the clarity of the leader's True North.

It takes a bit of effort to become that clear about one's True North, so here's a little guidance. Take some quiet time to reflect and then, with your best effort, write down your True North – what is most important to you. This is not about platitudes nor is it about writing what someone else told you should be most important. It is simply about what is true for you. Don't worry if this task is a bit difficult. There are sound biological reasons for that, not least of which is that your notion of your True North resides in a part of your brain that doesn't have language, so it can be difficult to articulate it.

To be confident that you've found your best clarity, I recommend the Toyota exercise of the Five Why'sⁱⁱ. Look at what you've written and ask why it's important. For example, if you wrote that what's most important is financial security for your family, ask yourself why that is important and be thoughtful in your response. Write that down and then ask why your answer to the first Why is important. Then ask again, perhaps as many as five times. You'll know you've found your True North when that feeling in your gut says, "This is it."

When you feel confident enough in your answer, try it out on someone who knows you well. Seek their feedback. They should be able to tell you without hesitation that, yes, that's who you are. Then tell more people. When you're ready, tell the people who look to you for leadership. You'll be amazed at the alignment that produces and the engagement that your clarity fosters.

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And here's the bonus: When you're clear about your True North, your own engagement will ramp up. And you'll be so clear that your intellectual laziness will disappear.

ⁱ The Gallup Organization, 2006 study

ⁱⁱ Taiichi Ohno, Toyota Production System: Beyond Large-Scale Production, Diamond, Inc., 1988