



# dealing with prisoners in the workplace



**modern**survey



# Introduction

As you assess the engagement of your workforce, sooner or later you will have to deal with the “prisoners.” These are the employees who are disengaged at work but are not looking for other jobs and have little

motivation to either improve or move on. They intend to stay where they are.

These employees represent a major drag on your business. They are emotionally disconnected from their work and have little to no intrinsic motivation to bring their best. What can an employer do?

This article will look at the prevalence of “prisoners” in the workforce, who they tend to be and what employers can do to re-engage them.

# Who are they?

Engagement refers to the degree to which employees are psychologically invested in the organization and motivated to contribute to its success. Employees who are engaged will put forth extra effort to help the organization reach its goals. When employees are disengaged, they do not bring their best efforts to their work, and they do not feel motivated to improve.

In the United States, about 22 percent of the workforce is disengaged. That comes from Modern Survey’s twice-annual study of employee engagement. Of those disengaged employees, just over half (52 percent) are looking for jobs at other organizations. That means 48 percent are disengaged and not looking. Those are the “prisoners.”



These are the **PRISONERS**.

# Types of Prisoners

## The comfortable employee

These employees feel they have been at their job long enough and deserve the pay they have without earning it. They may feel entitled to the positions they hold, but they do not offer innovative ideas or feel the need to improve. Long-term employees and employees who are nearing retirement may fall into this category.



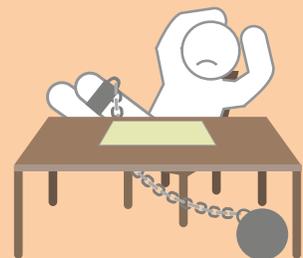
## The preoccupied employee

These employees may be dealing with a problem outside of work, such as a health issue or divorce. These types of disengagement may be temporary, but long-term issues may feed off each other and become too much for the employee to deal with without disengaging from work permanently.



## The overpaid employee

These employees may be interested in leaving, but they do not look for opportunities elsewhere because they have done the research and have found that you are paying them more than they are worth in the open market. So they sit tight.



If you have disengaged employees, chances are you or their managers know who they are. Identifying why they are disengaged, however, can be a little trickier.

Sharon Dye, an organizational consultant with [Insperty](#), says if managers notice an employee does not seem to fit in the organization the way she used to or has been letting things slip over time, finding out what is wrong can be a challenge. “Whatever is going on with an employee, being open is clearly scary for her; otherwise, she would have brought it up to her manager in the

first place,” she says. Make it clear that addressing the problem is beneficial to both of you.

Dye says that focusing on the behavior and lack of performance can help make it easier for people to talk about what the true issue is. Managers can say, for example, “You don’t have to say what’s going on in your personal life, but understand I have to manage your behavior or performance, and being late doesn’t work here; that’s not who we are. All it says to me is ‘I don’t want to work here anymore.’”

Determine whether the employee truly does not want to work there anymore and if there needs to be a graceful exit, or if there are circumstances that can be managed through a flexible schedule or other accommodations.

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“Make it clear that addressing the problem is beneficial to both of you.”

*Sharon Dye,  
Organizational Consultant with Insperty*

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## What can be done?

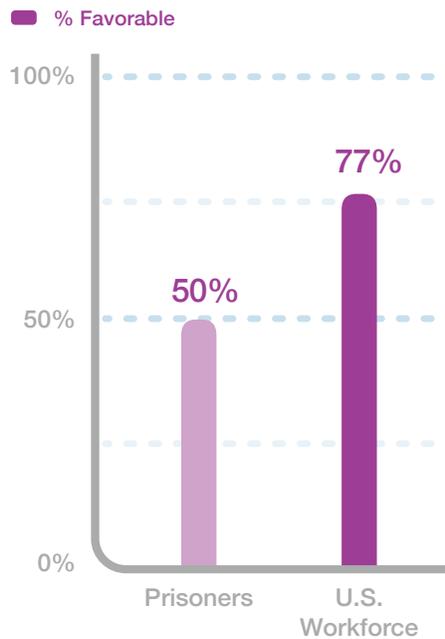
If entire departments, populations or groups feel like they are “prisoners” in their own organization, larger re-engagement efforts may be necessary. Re-engaging disengaged employees is difficult, but it can be done. If your “prisoners” have something to offer the organization, these steps can help them feel more engaged and motivated to bring their best.

### Communicate role expectations and provide clarity

Among all U.S. workers, 77 percent say, “I know how I contribute to my company’s success.” For “prisoners,” it is only 50 percent.

Workers who are aware of their roles have a clearer idea of what they need to do each day. But organizations do not always do a good job clearly communicating those roles, says Kelly Riggs, of [Business Lockerroom](#). It is a process that needs to start at the interview, when the hiring manager talks about expectations and what the role looks like. Focusing on the role of the position and how it fits into the role of the organization, instead of job skills or duties, can help provide the clarity employees need.

### Knowledge of Contribution to Company Success



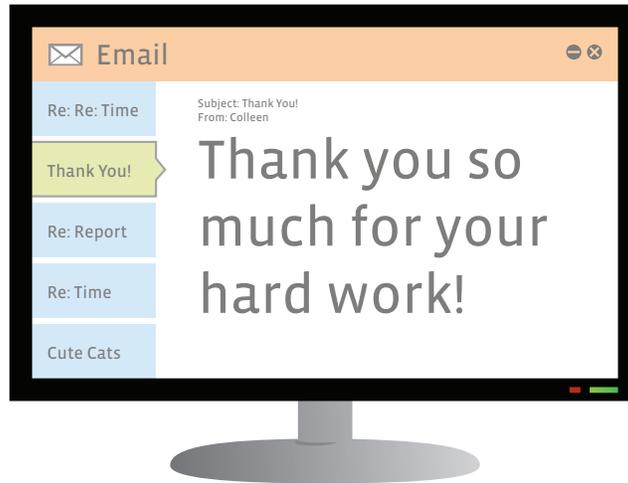
“Companies unwittingly create functionaries,” Riggs says. When employers write job descriptions full of tasks that employees complete in that role, it creates an environment in which an employee can say “that’s not my job.”

Companies are much better served by not giving lists of tasks, but by explaining the intent behind the role, Riggs says. Instead of listing dozens of tasks for a customer service position (such as “answer phone and email complaints from customers”), for example, it can be more useful to list “responsibilities” (such as “responding to customer complaints in ways that reflect our values”). When the intent of the position is clear, employees can better understand whether they are a good fit for the job, and can either find ways to make changes to be a better fit or plan to leave.

## Create a culture of recognition

When employees are recognized for going above and beyond, they will do it more often. That does not mean celebrating them for doing their jobs, but rather recognizing when they have done something outstanding that is good for the entire company.

Only 22 percent of “prisoners” say they are recognized when they do excellent work. That is compared to 59 percent of all U.S. employees. Part of the problem is that the “prisoner” may not have done anything remarkable for a long time. An effective leader can address that directly with an employee. If you are that leader,



ask the employee what you have missed. Ask for a list of his significant contributions. At a minimum, that will get a constructive conversation going.

Another effective way to build a culture of recognition that works is to not make

actions mandatory or based on quotas, says Paul White, of [Appreciation at Work](#). “We’ve found that if something is mandatory and dictated top-down, it undermines authenticity. You’re just doing it because you’re supposed to.” That attitude comes across to employees and can backfire by fostering sarcasm and a lack of trust.

You may have given “prisoners” awards in the past because of their contributions to your organization, but if the recognition was not personal or valuable to them, it may have had the opposite effect. The “prisoner” may have felt the recognition was not sincere and may have checked out from offering that level of effort again.

## Clearly communicate your values

A values-based organization will inspire emotional attachment among employees to their teams and to the mission of the organization. When a company lives its values through its actions — hiring, managing, dealing with customers — employees will know they can trust the organization and find their place in it.

Just 21 percent of “prisoners” say their company’s values actually guide how people behave. The U.S. average is 57 percent.

“Companies that state their values and live by them create constancy in the organization,” Riggs says. Employees know that an organization that sticks to its values is predictable, and that affects the level of trust in an organization.

When an organization recommit itself to living and working through its values, workers who find that their values do not line up with the organization’s may be inspired to leave. Or, the change may be just what they needed to get a fresh perspective on the business. It is also possible that disengaged employees simply did not know what the organization’s values are, and now that they do, they can rededicate themselves to their roles.

## modernsurvey Values

### Quality

The pursuit of high standards and continuous improvement is essential to our business.

### Service

Exceeding the needs and expectations of our clients is the way to reach our company goals.

### Integrity

Never compromise our values; never compromise the values of our clients.

### Innovation

The only way to stay ahead is to look ahead.

### “Thomson”

The unrelenting willingness to get the job done.

## Make role accommodations

Even if you made an excellent hire — the employee is well-qualified, a strong performer and a quick learner — she may be in the wrong role. Employees who thought they wanted a certain position but are not cut out for it will shut down, stop taking risks and turn into “prisoners.” Redefining the role or finding another place for them that is better suited to their abilities can help get them back on track. “It’s called re-casting and extraordinary organizations do it when they hire someone who is talented, but in the wrong job,” says Modern Survey President Don MacPherson.

Having the courage to address the issue is vital, says Julie Miller, of organizational

consulting firm [MillerBedford](#). She says she worked with an organization that had an employee who had been moved into a role that, it soon became clear, was not a good fit for him. As his performance fell, people started avoiding him and he could tell something was wrong.

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*Don MacPherson  
President of Modern Survey*

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“He was struggling, trying to do the job, and he just wasn’t comfortable,” she says. “Instead of anyone having the guts to talk to him, no one did.” As HR manager at the time, Miller spoke with the employee’s manager and the employee himself, who quickly agreed that he was struggling in his new role. “He accepted a downgrade to a job he had done before and was good at,” Miller says. Everyone assumed he would not want to make the switch — and had not bothered to talk with him — leaving him to struggle rather than find a place where he would succeed.

## Envision the long run

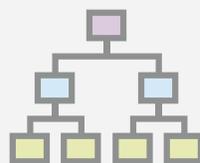
Your company likely has some long-term goals. Do your employees know what they are? Knowing those goals helps employees connect their day-to-day work and roles with something bigger.

“Employees these days want to work someplace where they feel like they can make a difference,” Miller says, rather than simply “churning away” at their tasks. Establishing long-term goals and communicating those goals clearly can show employees where they fit now and where they will fit in the future.

“Establish the long-term goals and then have them cascade throughout the business,” Miller says. “Each organization in the business has to put their goals together to support the business’s goals.”

Ray Gagnon, of management consulting firm [Gagnon Associates](#), gives the example of a plastics plant where one worker had no idea what the company’s goals were or what kind of an effect he could have on those goals. He worked on the assembly line, and told Gagnon during a process audit that his job was to crank a production setting up “five notches” when the product got to him. An employee who usually worked down the line then said, “If you didn’t crank it up when it got to you, I wouldn’t have to crank it down when it got to me!”

When employees do not understand the implications of what they do, they simply feel like cogs, Gagnon says. When employees can look at the whole, and know that the process they are involved in has a goal, they are more engaged. Someone who does understand the implications of what he does will understand the effects his actions have on colleagues, customers and the business itself.



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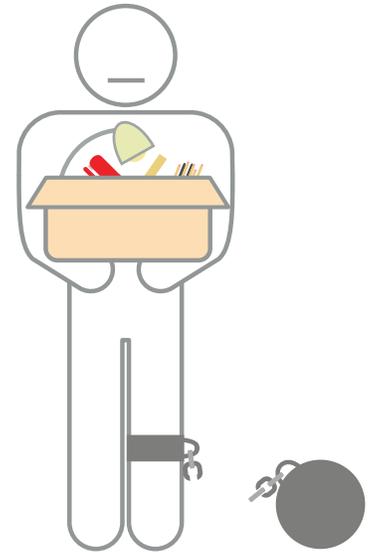
*Julie Miller of MillerBedford*

## Say goodbye

Even after all of these efforts, “prisoners” may sit tight and still not be engaged. “That’s where courage comes in,” Dye says — the courage to document and then manage employees out of the organization if they do not change.

Dye says there will be people who leave after your organization makes its values or long-term goals clear. They may believe that the company’s path is not what they signed up for, and change can be difficult. “If it’s not a fit, everybody suffers,” she says.

“You have to have the courage to make changes,” Miller says, and sometimes those changes involve getting rid of people — particularly those who are not interested in moving in a new strategic direction. Follow your organization’s policies and procedures about tracking performance and improvement plans, be willing to give honest feedback and then set them free. Ultimately, it will prove best for the employee, the manager, and the organization.



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## Conclusion

“Prisoners” – those disengaged employees who have no intention of leaving your organization – make up more than 10 percent of the U.S. workforce. They can hamper your efforts to boost engagement at your organization – and create a drag on performance. Perhaps the employee has become too comfortable in a role, is pre-occupied with things outside of work, or is overpaid compared to the external market.

Whatever the reasons are that employees have become “prisoners” within your organization, there are a number of tactics you can take to re-engage them. Communicating role expectations, inspiring through recognition, communicating and aligning the employees with organizational values, and helping the employee envision where the organization is going and how each employee can help get it there are all valid strategies for releasing “prisoners” so they can give their best again.



## about us

Modern Survey measures workforce intensity — that fire in your company's belly that makes all things possible. Our human capital measurement software combines feedback, benchmarks, and data from enterprise systems to elucidate the correlation between employee performance and company success. We analyze the stuff your talent management system can't — so that you know what to do next.

We are Modern Survey. And we are relentless.

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