

Falling asleep on the job. An occupational hazard?

by Rosie Steeves

Maybe you saw the picture? You likely heard about it. You know, the one of the Toronto Transit Commission ticket collector so clearly asleep on the job. If you missed it, just Google sleeping TTC worker and you'll find it on numerous websites.

The reaction to this has been predictable. I heard it from my friends and read it on innumerable blogs. "Well, he'll lose his job for sure." "No need to show up for work buddy - you're in big trouble." "How dare the TTC raise fares and allow this type of activity to happen?" The Union weighed in. "A simple knock on the glass might have determined if the Collector was, in fact, asleep, or whether he was unconscious as a result of some medical problem." And then there's the official line from the TTC. "We've launched an investigation to ascertain what happened and will take any appropriate action based on the information we gather."

Give me a break! I'm pretty sure we know what the problem was. He was bored stupid. And who wouldn't be? I'm willing to bet if you or I were placed in a small cubby hole, had nothing to do that was even remotely interesting and had our interactions with others limited to a few transactional exchanges, we'd rapidly be heading down the snooze path - even if we were totally healthy and rested.

The response to this photo is a sad indictment of our understanding of the workplace. We're quick to point fingers at this unfortunate employee, but we fail to consider the circumstances that led to his nap. We're asking the wrong questions and directing our attention to the wrong places. Certainly, falling asleep on the job isn't appropriate, but blaming the worker as distinct from those that put him in this situation is all backwards.

Engagement. We hear it again and again, but organizations still fail to create an engaging workplace. The TTC worker has illustrated for all who are willing to see what the problem is. Dehumanizing and alienating work. Or put simply, work that is desperately boring and certainly not meaningful. We strive to create an engaged workplace but then dehumanize job, fail to give people the environment in which any person could be engaged and then wonder what the problem is.

Can you imagine what this guy (and thousands like him) think of as they head to work every day. Do they enthusiastically rush into work, eager to contribute to society and make good in the world? Of course not. Likely he drags himself in, thinking of any how many more days he has to work until he gets a break. For sure that's what I would do.

Work presents a meaningful opportunity to fulfill the human needs of another person, yet for many it offers simply nothing more than a pay cheque. We distance our workforce from the entire work process and in so doing disconnect them from anything that might engage them. How can this ticket collector take pride in his work given the unnatural workplace structures in which TTC has placed him?

The solution to the disengagement problem lies not in firing those who fall asleep on the job but firing those that put that in that position in the first place. Good leaders understand the systems that are at play in their organizations. They are willing to redesign the organization in a way that creates meaningful

work which allows all employees to connect with how their contribution fits into the bigger picture - regardless of the nature of their work.

While the reality is that there are some jobs that are repetitive and boring, those who understand the people side of the equation could easily shake things up. They could redesign systems and processes to allow those who currently feel they are unappreciated parts of the organizational machine to instead feel valued and connected.

This starts by identifying opportunities for interaction and contribution. This ticket collector should be connected with other tickets collectors (even if they are physically removed from each other). Perhaps management could engage this group in some information gathering activities that would prove invaluable to monitoring the pulse of the travelling public. Perhaps they could rotate them so they could contribute to some other parts of the organization. Perhaps (heaven forbid) they could go have a real conversation with this guy about ways they could change the job to make it more meaningful.

I'd like to thank the person that took this photo. It certainly does require a wakeup call. But not for who you might think.