

The Future of Work: Organizational Democracy

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All over the world people are voluntarily resigning from their jobs today. It's not because of money, the work, or even their boss (although all arguably push people out the door). It's one thing: their voices aren't being heard. Workers from the factory floors to the executive suites don't have a say in their work, their job, and their company.

I stayed in my first job out of college for four months until the environment of don't-think-just-do-what-you're-told prompted me to deliver a Jerry McGuire-like treatise of resignation. I grew up in Cedar Rapids and returned to the area after college to take a job with a Fortune 500 company with offices in Iowa City. Having excelled in college, I was ready to make a contribution to the working world. I didn't assume I'd start at the top, but I did expect the organization would solicit my views to help the company succeed. Day One, however, was a wake-up call. I quickly saw that the work environment was more authoritarian than egalitarian, more tell than ask, more monologue than dialogue. My voice was valued so little that the next morning I actually toyed with the idea of coming to work with duct tape over my mouth.



Traci Fenton, CEO, WorldBlu

That experience had such an impact on me that I decided to start a non-profit organization exploring the question of how to actively engage the voices and loyalties of workers. I focused on a little known management concept at the time called *organizational* democracy, which is based on the idea that people should have the power to shape their work lives and future both individually and collectively. This timely concept took me to every major region of the world to meet with dozens of business leaders and democratic companies. All the while, I continued to experience various workplaces first-hand, initially as an employee for a national non-profit organization and later with one of the major US stock markets. From Main Street to Wall Street my experiences were the same – authoritarian workplaces that did little to tap the reservoir of employee talent and missing countless opportunities for innovation and growth.

Perhaps the Gallup organization's recent semi-annual Employee Engagement Index sums it up best: a staggering 73 percent of American employees are disengaged from their work, costing the US over \$300 billion annually. But in a global age, problems aren't just local, and neither is this one. For example, 82 percent of Australian workers, 88 percent of Chinese workers, and 91 percent of Japanese workers are all disengaged at work.

We've reached a crisis point. Most adults spend at least a third of their day in work environments that stymie them. The lack of opportunity to engage, express oneself, and participate in key decisions is silently killing companies from the inside-out. The information age, combined with Generation X and Y entering the workforce with full-engagement attitudes have shifted the business context and changed our expectations as employees. Command-and-control structures are officially Jurassic. It's the dawning of a new age.

I guarantee many of your company's competitors get this. I've met with CEOs and employees ranging from a box manufacturing company in Maryland to the largest bank in South Africa who have accepted the realities of this new age and are now operating on democratic principles like transparency, decentralization, dialogue, and the absence of tyranny. They're growing the bottom-line, boosting productivity, and attracting and retaining high-caliber talent as a result. Companies like Southwest Airlines, Whole Foods, The Container Store, and Great Harvest Bread Company understand that freedom rather than fear, peer-to-peer attitudes rather than paternalism, are what it takes to compete in today's speed-driven marketplace.

In late 2003, after nearly a decade of research, I launched WorldBlu, Inc. a for-profit leadership and business design studio to teach companies how to implement democratic principles at work to compete in a democratic age. Last fall here in Washington, we held the world's first conference on organizational democracy, attracting business leaders from places like China and Iraq and from across Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the US. There, Bill Taylor, founding editor of *Fast Company* magazine declared, "This is the beginning of a movement."

Indeed, and even more – it's the future of work. And WorldBlu is committed to helping business leaders realize that future, *now*.

Traci Fenton is the Founder and CEO of WorldBlu, Inc., a Washington, DC-based business design studio pioneering organizational democracy and freedom-centered leadership. She is currently writing a book on the topic and can be reached at traci@worldblu.com.