



What Keeps Leaders Up at Night

Recognizing and Resolving Your Most Troubling Management Issues

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

No matter how successful you are, if you're like most leaders, you're occasionally plagued by the doubt that accompanies typical management questions.

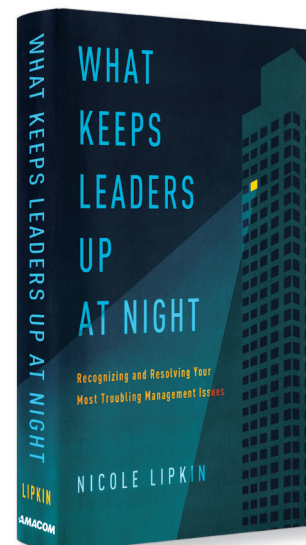
In *What Keeps Leaders Up at Night*, psychologist and business consultant Nicole Lipkin shows you how to recognize and resolve eight of the most troubling management issues leaders face today: miscommunication, stress, change, unhealthy competition, damaging group dynamics, loss of motivation and engagement, elusive success, and the typical leadership snafus that make us temporarily go from good to bad.

Explaining the mental processes that play pivotal roles in the workplace, *What Keeps Leaders Up at Night* helps you to gain greater awareness of what causes these recurring problems and to find better solutions by recognizing and addressing those causes more quickly and effectively.

Lipkin uses real-life case studies coupled with psychological and neuroscience research to demonstrate how to solve complex and fascinating problems that leaders encounter every day.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The three overarching reasons good bosses sometimes go bad.
- How confirmation bias affects our assessments of personality and leads us to terrible business decisions.
- The neurological fire alarms that blare inside your mind when experiencing the negative effects of stress.
- How to get the most from your team by understanding the mental processes inherent in group dynamics.



by Nicole Lipkin

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: WHAT KEEPS LEADERS UP AT NIGHT

by Nicole Lipkin

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I'm a Good Boss. So Why Do I Sometimes Act Like a Bad One?

When you take a close look at why good bosses go bad (temporarily versus the chronically horrible bosses that go bad every minute of the day), you usually find three overarching reasons: too busy to win, too proud to see and too afraid to lose. Once you understand why you sometimes display the symptoms of the *good boss gone bad* syndrome, you can use your newfound self-awareness to cure what ails you.

Too Busy to Win

Keeping busy may make you happy, but at some point excessive busyness can overwhelm your coping capabilities. That's when we become too busy to win. Excessive busyness can impair performance and productivity, making you increasingly forgetful, fatigued, and prone to poor decision making and problem solving.

You can deal with an increasing number of tasks and responsibilities, but at some point you begin to bend under the pressure. If you're not paying close attention, you do not feel the bend until you snap under the final addition to your workload.

The human brain simply cannot concentrate on more than one, or in rare cases, two, cognitive tasks at once. Sensory overload will cause the brain to focus on one immediate task at the expense of others, or it will prompt it to take on a set of mindless tasks that soothe it. That explains why super busy people love making lists.

Bosses who become too busy to win can easily fall into a cycle of self-sabotage. When your workload grows too heavy to bear, you get mired in the little stuff and lose sight of the big stuff. The forest (managing others) disappears as

you wander among the trees. Without enough of your skillful management, your people start making more mistakes, adding even more to your workload because you must now devote time to fixing those mistakes. It becomes a vicious cycle. The more you mess up, the more your people mess up, and the more your people mess up, the more you mess up.

You need to keep a wary eye on your workload and the appearance of any too-busy-to-win symptoms. It all boils down to gaining and maintaining self-awareness. When the symptoms appear, force yourself to take a break.

Too Proud To See

Although most of us don't like to admit it, we often all get wrapped up in our own ideas, not because we are idiots but because we are human. It's natural to think our ideas are best, especially when we're the boss. The too-proud-to-see variation on the *good boss gone bad* syndrome involves three problem-bound behaviors:

1. Letting yourself get so tied to an idea that you won't let it go.
2. Refusing to heed the advice of others.
3. Relying on your past successes at the expense of weighing different patterns, options or solutions.

All three of these behaviors not only damage performance and productivity but also can undermine your credibility as a leader. Avoiding them requires a strong dose of self-awareness.

The phenomenon called *confirmation bias* causes us to seek out information that supports our views or beliefs and to give more weight to confirming information, while discounting or not noticing information that contradicts our point of view.



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This can wreak havoc, however, when we are managing other people because it can prevent us from making accurate and effective judgments and decisions. Confirmation bias interferes with our ability to gather all sides of an argument, consider all possible points of view, and weigh a situation with a cool, objective mind.

Too Afraid to Lose

A leader who shies away from certain risks not only hurts himself but also hampers everyone else's ability to forge ahead and get the job done. Those suffering from the too-afraid-to-lose variation

- Worry excessively about failing to get the right results.
- Question and second-guess every step along the way.
- Avoid decisions and commitments that might cause mistakes.
- Get involved in every detail, particularly as deadlines loom.

These toxic behaviors will destroy a leader's credibility. More than the other variations, the too-afraid-to-lose form thwarts creative problem solving and impedes team progress.

Good bosses who fall into the trap often worry about appearing weak. They mistakenly associate failure and mistakes with weakness and incompetence. This false relationship causes them to behave stupidly and out of character, micromanaging details or becoming immobile. Those suffering from this common ailment are experiencing a problem with what psychologists call *self-efficacy*.

Good bosses tend to possess a strong sense of self-efficacy. However, any number of circumstances can diminish or even destroy it. When your self-efficacy gets swamped, you immediately sink into too-afraid-to-lose quicksand.

Many screw-ups result from the three variations on the *good boss gone bad* syndrome. The path back to the ranks of the good boss is paved with self-awareness. Just pausing to cast an objective eye on your maladaptive or unproductive behavior or asking a trusted ally to tell you the honest truth about how you've been acting lately can get you back on track. ●

Why Don't People Heed My Sage Advice?

Most of us cringe when we watch someone fail to influence and persuade other people. The speaker struggles earnestly to capture and hold the audience's attention, only to be met with blank looks, tilted heads, yawns and confused stares. Nothing devastates a boss more than losing the ability to persuade, influence and motivate others to get results.

When you drill down through all the research to the basic bedrock issues, you hit two simple but hard facts. You lose your influential powers when people do not buy into you and when people do not buy into your message.

Many people use the terms influence, persuasion and manipulation somewhat interchangeably. But each carries its own meaning. Influence requires winning the minds and hearts of your audience and thus inspires action. Persuasion stimulates a person to action because it makes intellectual sense. Manipulation crosses a fine line between persuasion and influence. It replaces the welfare and benefit of the group with the selfish desires of the individual.

Why Don't People Buy Into Me?

Focus, for now, on influence because influence hinges on personal buy-in. Why do some people stimulate buy-in so easily, while others find it so hard? The answer is power and its unique relationship with credibility and influence. For purposes of this discussion, we'll define *power* as the ability to exercise influence. You can't achieve influence without power. You can't exercise power without a relationship. This brings us back to the premise that influence occurs within relationships.

In 1959, psychologists John French and Bertram Raven developed a framework for understanding different types of power. Raven, Arie Kruglanski and Paul Hersey, working with Marshall Goldsmith, expanded that original framework into seven distinct types of power:

Legitimate Power. This power arises from one's title or position in the pecking order and how others perceive that title or position.

Coercive Power. This power comes from fear. Someone who uses coercive power influences others by threat and force.

Expert Power. This power comes directly from a person's skills or expertise or from perceived skills or expertise. Expert power is knowledge-based.

Informational Power. This power comes from the possession of needed or wanted information.

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Reward Power. This power motivates people to respond in order to win raises, promotions and awards.

Referent Power. This power depends on personal traits and values, such as honesty, integrity and trustworthiness.

Connection Power. This power creates influence by proxy. People employing this power build important coalitions with others.

In the workplace, these seven types of power generally fall into one of two categories: formal (legitimate, coercive and reward power) and informal (referent, expert, informational and connection power). When it comes to influencing people without creating potentially negative effects, referent, expert, informational and legitimate power tend to get the best results.

A successful leader often relies on referent power to influence people because it most effectively breeds credibility. Who will most likely heed your sage advice? Those people with whom you have built strong, positive relationships.

The effective use of referent power involves developing a number of important and not easily acquired skills, including the ability to manage boundaries, maintain strength of character, make a clear and compelling presentation, adapt communication to the listener, forge trust and display empathy.

Given our natural tendency toward trust, this shows why we respond so positively to referent power, which depends on personal traits and values we admire. Influential relationships thrive in the presence of referent power.

Why Don't People Buy Into My Message?

Even if people admire a leader's personal traits and values, they might still ignore the leader's message. In most cases, the breakdown occurs because, somehow, people did not find the message compelling. How, then, do you create compelling messages that always get through?

Nothing can help a leader become more convincing than coupling an important message with an unforgettable story.

A story provides common ground where people can share an experience with others. Although each person may interpret the story differently, everyone gets the point. As a universal connector, the story triggers different parts of our brain, including our emotional powerhouse (the amygdala), and those stimulated by a simple presentation of facts and figures (i.e., the prefrontal cortex, which controls our working memory). It helps us make sense of our world. When someone hears or reads it, that person's mind fills in the blanks until he or she can see it all happening.

Don't overdo storytelling. The best storytellers tell their stories judiciously, tailoring them to the context, personalizing and adapting them to themselves and their audience, and making sure they deliver the right message. ●

Why Do I Lose My Cool in Hot Situations?

Whether you are dealing with sudden acute stress or ongoing chronic stress, only knowledge and training will see you through it all. Psychologists know that people perform well under stress if they possess the information they need to take effective action. Under stress, they feel they can take control of or at least strongly influence what happens next.

Physiologically, your body, for the most part, reacts automatically and predictably to acute and chronic stress. Your brain does not. Our perceptions and beliefs strongly influence which situations stress us out and how we respond to the high-pressure ones.

When it comes to all the little stressors (or big ones that impact us personally), demanding deadlines, noise pollution and relationship problems, we bring a unique set of beliefs and perceptions to those situations. They cause reactions that run the gamut from a minor grimace to a full-scale meltdown.

In the late 1970s, Dr. Susan Kobasa, a clinical psychologist at the City University in New York, found that three personality traits could actually protect someone from the negative health effects of prolonged stress:

Commitment: Maintaining a purpose in life and nourishing your social and community involvement. Positive beliefs foster successful reactions to stress.

Control: Perceiving control over a situation. People can choose how they react to a stressor and thus exert some degree of control over it.

Challenge: Viewing stressful events as problems or opportunities. Those who cope successfully with stress tend to look at the silver linings as well as the clouds. ●

A 180° Shift

Tape this motto to your desk: I CANNOT STOP STRESS. Striving for success, balancing work and personal life, dealing with the intense pressure that characterizes most workplaces, and just living in this

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revved-up, high-pressure world with so many people and devices vying for our attention will create stress. Count on it. But also tape this motto beside the first one: I CAN CONTROL MY REACTIONS TO STRESS. You can minimize the adverse effects of stress, the meaning you attach to stressful situations, and your poor responses to the inevitable stressors that come your way. In other words, the stress response is negotiable.

Not surprisingly, negative self-talk can prompt our stress response because negative musings often distort reality. Those of us who cope well with stress more often listen to an inner voice that serves as a friendly inner drill sergeant, encouraging us to suck it up, push harder, stop whining. That's a good thing. But taking orders from an unfriendly inner drill sergeant — one screaming at us to crawl back into bed, bury our heads under our pillow and cry our eyes out — doesn't do us any favors.

Negative self-talk or cognitive distortions can resist even our best efforts to change them. They can become so deeply ingrained and habitual that it takes an almost superhuman effort to break their hold on our mind. You can take the following practical steps to get that unfriendly drill sergeant out of your head:

Step One: Become cognizant. What triggered the event? What negative thoughts popped into my head? What emotions did I experience? When you start analyzing your negative self-talk you should begin to appreciate how the perceptions they express instigate or further a stress response.

Step Two: Obliterate the negative thought. Once you identify the negative thought(s), you can ask another series of questions to help change them. Ask yourself,

What is my negative thought?

What evidence proves this thought true?

What evidence proves this thought false?

What advice would I give a friend who feels this way?

What conditions should I accept right now?

What won't change?

What words will express my new healthy thought?

Stress management does not mean stress obliteration. Rather, it means learning how to negotiate your own reactions to the stress that inevitably occurs every day of your life as a leader. Choosing to mind what's going on in your head and observing your body's physiological responses and how others perceive you mark the first sure steps toward coping effectively with stress. ●

Why Does a Good Fight Sometimes Go Bad?

Like most deeply rooted human behavior, competition is perfectly normal and healthy. Competition can make the office an exciting and rewarding place to work. Conventional wisdom insists that cooperation and collaboration work better than competition, but the inevitability of social comparison argues quite the contrary. Comparison is the mother of competition.

When we watch others succeed or fail, we often compare ourselves to them, and our observations can stimulate powerful emotional and behavioral responses. Many factors influence the nature of our feelings and reactions, including past experiences with similar situations, our level of self-esteem, and our judgment about whether someone deserved to succeed or fail in a particular endeavor.

What if we delight in someone's setback or despise his or her advancement? Then we can easily slide into envy, jealousy, even rage and end up disliking ourselves even more than the target of our ill will. Herein lies the psychological dilemma where the collision of social and self-expectations can shift a good fight into a bad fight.

You should keep in mind, however, that such negative emotions are part of being human. You can't avoid them; but left unchecked, they not only create turmoil; they can also damage both the target of those feelings and the one experiencing them. They do not pose serious problems or threaten a relationship unless you ignore them and let them fester into a deep psychological wound.

Promoting Good Fights

To create a healthier environment that keeps the good fight from going bad, as a leader you can cultivate certain norms:

- *Supportive, Friendly Competition:* Create friendly competition but not an ultimate "win or lose" challenge among team members.
- *Transparency:* Maintain an open-door policy that encourages people to speak candidly about their feelings. When you must do something that might cause feelings of envy or taking pleasure in the misfortunes of others (e.g., adding a teammate, promoting, demoting or rewarding someone), do it openly and make your reasons perfectly clear to all concerned.
- *Mentorship:* Mentoring opens up the line of communication and reduces preconceived notions and assumptions that can fuel the envy flame.
- *Address Conflict:* Nip problems in the bud. A good leader notices the emotional nuances that occur between people. The minute you see it, address it. ●

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Why Can Ambition Sabotage Success?

We all create what psychologists call *self-schemas*: personal stories we use to define ourselves. For many of us, our internal monologues are like comfort food. For others, our stories are like swallowing shards of glass, causing such pain and suffering that they interfere with our ability to function. Whether positive and optimistic or negative and pessimistic, our stories become so deeply ingrained, so taken for granted, they cannot be easily changed.

Only with deep self-awareness can we detect the patterns and alter them in ways that will help us get more of the success we desire.

I call a self-centered or focused schema a *myopic schema*. Myopic suggests a narrow and exclusive perspective. In contrast, a *panoramic schema* encompasses the “big picture.” If you imagine a spectrum, with myopic on the left and panoramic on the right, most of us fall somewhere in the middle. Those who live on the far left of the spectrum often find it harder to sustain long-term success than do those who operate on the far right.

What turns an ambitious leader into a bad character or even a criminal? More often than not, it’s an unbridled drive to serve oneself at the expense of all others. So how do leaders start down the path to wrack and ruin? It all comes down to the lies we tell ourselves.

Lies We Tell Ourselves

Cognitive dissonance is a concept proposed by Leon Festinger in the 1950s. Cognitive dissonance means that our schemas impel us to hold onto our existing attitudes and beliefs while avoiding disharmony (or dissonance).

To cope with cognitive dissonance, we use three different tactics to reconcile disharmony. First, we can change our beliefs (“Cheating is ok”). However, our schemas make it hard for us to alter our basic beliefs and attitudes. Second, we can change our actions (“I’ll never cheat again”). While powerful emotional motivators such as guilt or anxiety can encourage us to whip our behaviors into shape, we often tamp down feelings of guilt or anxiety over an action or decision because we can easily train ourselves not to feel that way. Guilt seldom sustains learning over the long haul. The third and most common tactic for resolving cognitive dissonance involves changing our perception or memory of an action (“Since everyone cheated on that test, why shouldn’t I?”). Reconceptualizing the behavior provides a pleasant and convenient way to

deal with disharmony, and it supports our natural human desire to see ourselves as basically good and reasonable people.

Given our imperfections as human beings, our minds have created a whole host of defense mechanisms and biases to cope with cognitive dissonance, including self-justification, rationalization and the self-serving bias. While we readily observe those behaviors in others, we find it much harder to see them in ourselves.

No matter how much bad behavior, faulty decisions, abusive leadership and unethical practices some leaders commit, they will not change their ways. They will, instead, do whatever it takes to preserve their positive view of themselves.

Leaders who work with a panoramic view of success do not operate with total selflessness, but they do define their own success within the context of the bigger picture. If “we” don’t succeed, “I” don’t succeed.

The best leaders evolve from a myopic view (conventional) to a panoramic (postconventional) view as they gain more experience. Why do so few leaders adopt a panoramic approach to success? Part of the answer lies in the fact that every leader must deal with so many competing forces and priorities, both internal and external. When you are working inside a tornado, it’s hard to step back and see yourself, your stakeholders and your situation clearly.

Shifting from a myopic to a panoramic approach to success and leadership takes a lot of willpower and an extreme commitment to counteracting the lies that we tell ourselves.

I offer this advice: Never shy away from saying, “I was wrong.” Leaders hate to admit their failings, but doing so makes people respect you more than all the rationalizations and justifications in the world. ●

Why Do People Resist Change?

Brain analysis technology has proven that change activates the prefrontal cortex. However, analysis has also shown that, because the thinking part of the brain connects to the emotional part, an assault of unfamiliar information can upset the emotional part of our brains. The mere prospect of change can ignite a firestorm of emotions (intense fear, anger, depression, fatigue, anxiety) that make us want to fight for the comfort of the status quo.

No matter how much clear writing you can see on the wall, you can easily succumb to the powerful forces of

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psychological biases that can blind you to the need for change. Many cognitive biases can immobilize us, but sometimes it simply comes down to mental exhaustion.

New and unfamiliar routines and choices challenge the comfort zone of our ingrained habits. When you effect a change, you force yourself out of that comfort zone. It takes a lot of energy, and it can wear you out. In the same way that your muscles eventually give out during a strenuous workout, your mental muscle starts to lose function at full speed, hampering your ability to care, make choices, maintain motivation, weigh decisions and ultimately take action. Psychologists call this *ego depletion*, a state of mind where you can lose critical elements of your self-control and all the other mental processes that require focus and conscious effort.

Given all the forces that conspire against a decision to paddle through unknown waters, what's a poor leader to do? Research into brain plasticity (also known as neuroplasticity or cortical remapping) has shown that the brain can change and adapt as a result of learning and experiencing new behaviors, environments and neural processes. Leaders who want to move forward can take the following steps to survive the rapids.

Challenge Biases. When change slips into town, a leader must confront it head-on. Bring together all the people who feel a sense of ownership in the status quo and encourage them to ask and answer some key questions:

- How do we define our status quo?
- What benefits have we derived from our status quo?
- How are we limited by our status quo? Would we choose to make the same investments? Which business forces require a bold response?
- What specific changes can we make to ensure a bold response?
- How will we benefit or not benefit if we make those changes?

Simply guiding yourself and your people through this process will shake up people's minds, get them thinking in a forward direction, and loosen the shackles of the status quo.

Reframe. Here's a strategy I like to use with clients who are wrestling with decisions about confronting change.

- Gather people with similar and different business interests in a room.
- Write a one-sentence summary of the business challenge on a white board.
- Invite people to offer different ways to state the challenge.
- Cross out all value-laden terminology: fair, smart, dumb, beneficial and problematic.
- Reframe the question in a neutral sentence.
- Ask different stakeholders to frame the challenge from their particular point of view.
- Help the group analyze gains and losses from each point of view.

Effective reframing shifts emphasis from symptoms to causes. It replaces a Band-Aid with the antibiotics to heal the infection.

Recoup. When facing decisions that involve shaking things up, you need to recognize that being avoidant, stuck, resistant or delaying is sometimes simply due to mental exhaustion or burnout. Despite the tremendous resilience of the human brain and body, sometimes we need to give them a rest so they can recoup their full abilities. It's easier said than done when we find ourselves up to our eyebrows in quicksand.

As always, the simplest advice applies: eat well, get enough sleep, exercise, engage in play and social activities with friends, read a book or go to the movies or theater, spend time enjoying your hobbies, meditate or do anything else that lets off steam.

Developing habits takes time. However, our brains love to form new ones, especially healthy, positive ones that will prevent exhaustion, help you switch gears, and give you the break you need to reenergize and make clear-headed decisions. ●

Why Do Good Teams Go Bad?

According to *social identity theory* (SIT), a term coined by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, people derive a sense of their self not only from their personal identity (unique personal characteristics) but also from their association and identification with one or more social groups (male, female, black, white, brunette, blonde, workgroup A, workgroup B, etc.). Social identity allows us to identify with each other and act together by reaching consensus on what matters, on what rules/norms will govern behavior, and on how to define and work toward shared goals. Group membership provides people with a sense of belonging, a basic and universal human need to know who we are and how we fit into the world. No wonder we gravitate toward groups of all kinds. Once we join a group, however, some truly fascinating dynamics kick in.

In a world of constant choice, our selections, from friends and lovers to computers and cars, define who we are and separate us from other groups. Once you ally yourself with a group, you begin to enjoy wonderful benefits, such as cooperation and cohesiveness, but you also begin to fall prey to some disturbing liabilities, such as prejudice and corruption. "We" can accomplish anything; "we" are good. "They" are incompetent; "they" are bad.

While cohesive groups can accomplish amazing results, extreme group conformity can stifle creativity,

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innovation, critical thinking, decision making and problem solving. On a large scale, social conformity can breed a productive and supportive culture, but taken to the extreme, it can cause people to turn a blind eye to wrongdoing, the equivalent of jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge with your friends.

Leaders who see a good team going bad must intervene immediately. Quite often a leader can't see it happening because he or she has also conformed to the group. In that case, a trusted adviser or a coach can provide objective advice on getting the team back on track.

Psychologists have postulated three main theories to explain why people participating in group decision making increasingly polarize and strengthen their initial preferences and why those people who hold dissimilar preferences at the outset often end up changing their minds and accepting the majority opinion:

1. *Persuasion*. People change their minds when they pay attention to what they deem rational arguments offered by other group members.

2. *Comparison*. People change their minds to conform to the group, especially when they accept those norms as socially desirable.

3. *Differentiation*. People change their minds to accommodate a decision they think the group should make.

Not all groups polarize. In fact, in well-established groups, especially under time pressure, people will more likely compromise and reach a middle ground in their decision making.

Counteracting the Traps

Setting up and managing good groups require careful thinking about the team's composition, size, objectives and protocols. To counteract some of the common problems that can make a good team go bad, establish group diversity, define expectations, emphasize collective awareness, provide the right training, stress freedom of thought, insist on information sharing and promote innovation.

Every group, from a mixed-doubles tennis team to a 250-person sales force, comes under the influence of group dynamics. Understanding those dynamics helps leaders to create and manage teams more effectively and to keep them from falling prey to negative group behaviors that can make a good team go bad. ●

What Causes a Star to Fade?

In psychological terms, engagement is a state of mind driven by behavioral, cognitive and emotional factors. Regardless of why and how engagement occurs, research and surveys have consistently shown that engagement applies to every type of work environment and figures prominently in business outcomes.

You must build engagement into the very fabric of the organization. Busy with the business of busyness, we lose sight of what really matters to our people and unintentionally disengage the very people on whom the success of our organization depends.

High levels of engagement cushion the effects of a poor work environment, and that can influence people's motivation to cope with challenging deadlines, limited resources, or even nasty bosses.

In a positive culture of engagement, people naturally go the extra mile for your team, for your customers and for your company. That's why you need to watch for organizational decisions, environments, attitudes and behaviors that interfere with engagement.

Engagement is not a luxury these days; it's a necessity. Companies that have begun to believe in this concept have gained a competitive advantage. What exactly, can you do to engage your people and keep them engaged?

Our basic and powerful need for social connection figures prominently in our work lives. Engagement, retention, performance, productivity, cultural commitment, wellness and stress reduction depend on it. That's why a leader must concentrate on fostering relationships. Stronger social connections lead to higher levels of engagement.

Here are the three simple rules to get back on track as a good boss: seek self-awareness, help others gain self-awareness, and remember we're only human after all. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *What Keeps Leaders Up At Night*, you'll also like:

1. ***360 Degrees of Influence by Harrison Monarth***. Monarth provides advice on how to gain the trust and respect of those around you and how to expand your influence well beyond your immediate environment.
2. ***Just Listen* by Mark Goulston**. A veteran psychiatrist and business coach, Goulston reveals the secret of how to get through to anyone, even when productive communication seems impossible.
3. ***The 360 Leader* by John C. Maxwell**. According to Maxwell, you can learn to develop your influence from wherever you are in the organization by becoming a 360-degree leader.