

Employee Engagement
The Berlin Wall Model
Pat Townsend and Joan Gebhardt



“We’ve got things really well organized. Besides, my people don’t really have any new or fresh ideas.” Thus said the head of the least active department in a company intent on engaging all of its people in the continual improvement of everything done in the organization. The department head – a highly-regarded and affable company vice president – was sincere. In that department, in the eyes of the department management, everything was defined so well that the lower level employees simply had to execute. Original thinking was not necessary or expected. Not only had the “right things” to do been defined, so had the way to do those “right things right.”

This is an approach which could be called the Berlin Wall Model.

In 1980, an unusual case was reported from Berlin. A resident of West Berlin (relatives later reported that the gentleman involved had some mental challenges) had attempted to escape from West Berlin into East Berlin. He had eschewed the option of simply walking through Checkpoint Charlie and introducing himself and explaining his intentions to the East German police and officials. He had decided, instead, to scale the Berlin Wall – in imitation of the thousands of East Berliners who had attempted escapes over or under the Wall since its construction in the early 1960s.

What few people realize is that the Berlin “Wall” was actually two parallel walls (both constructed by the Communists) approximately 40-50 feet apart. “Going over the Wall” was not a matter of climbing up one side of a wall, yelling “Look out below,” and dropping onto the soil of a different regime. A person wishing to make the journey from one Germany to another had to scale one wall, make it across the well-lit “dead space,” and then climb up and over a second wall – all within easy view and weapons range of the military forces of both sides.

The man’s effort to escape Capitalism and join the Workers’ Paradise ended when he was shot to death while on the second wall. By the East Berlin guards.

What happened? The explanation given was simple. The East Berlin guards had strict and clear orders: If they saw anyone climbing on the Wall, they were to shoot him or her dead.

The problem was that, in this case, the man on the Wall was trying to go from West to East – and that possibility had apparently never occurred to the high-level executives who wrote the rules. The procedures had been written with the expected behavior in mind and no exceptions had been allowed for. Thinking by lower level operatives, actually having “new or fresh ideas,” was not only

considered to be unnecessary, it was actively discouraged. Such independent thinking would, after all, have been counter to the underlying philosophical underpinnings of Communism, a system in which power is defined as being resident in the hierarchy, with individuals having little, if any, worth other than their ability to follow orders precisely.

When a manager at any level in an organization today – and the higher the level, the more damning the sin – believes that he or she has saved her or his people from the need to think by doing it all for them in advance, the image of the pitiable man bleeding to death on the Berlin Wall needs to be summoned up. After over fifteen years of “managing” activity on the Wall, the East German hierarchy was very sure that the system was very well defined. All their people had to do was execute.