


ENGAGEMENT IS A LIE

A dark, moody photograph of a woman with her hands covering her face, with another person's hands visible in the background, suggesting a scene of distress or a performance.

What's Actually Happening
to Your People Right Now

SESSION OVERVIEW (MARKETING BLURB):

You've done the surveys.

You've launched the initiatives.

You've added the perks, the flexibility, the well-being programs.

And still, something is off.

People are showing up but not really there. Conversations feel surface-level. The energy that used to move through your teams has gone quiet. And no matter what you try, the needle barely moves.

Here's what nobody in the engagement industry wants to say out loud: You cannot engage what has not been restored.

The model we've been working from — measure, score, incentivize, repeat — was built for a workforce that had capacity to give. That workforce no longer exists. And the gap between what we're asking of people and what people actually have left isn't a motivation problem. It's an energy problem.

In this keynote, Samm Smeltzer names what's living in the space most organizations skip right over — the three stages between fine and burned out that explain everything about why your people feel the way they feel right now.

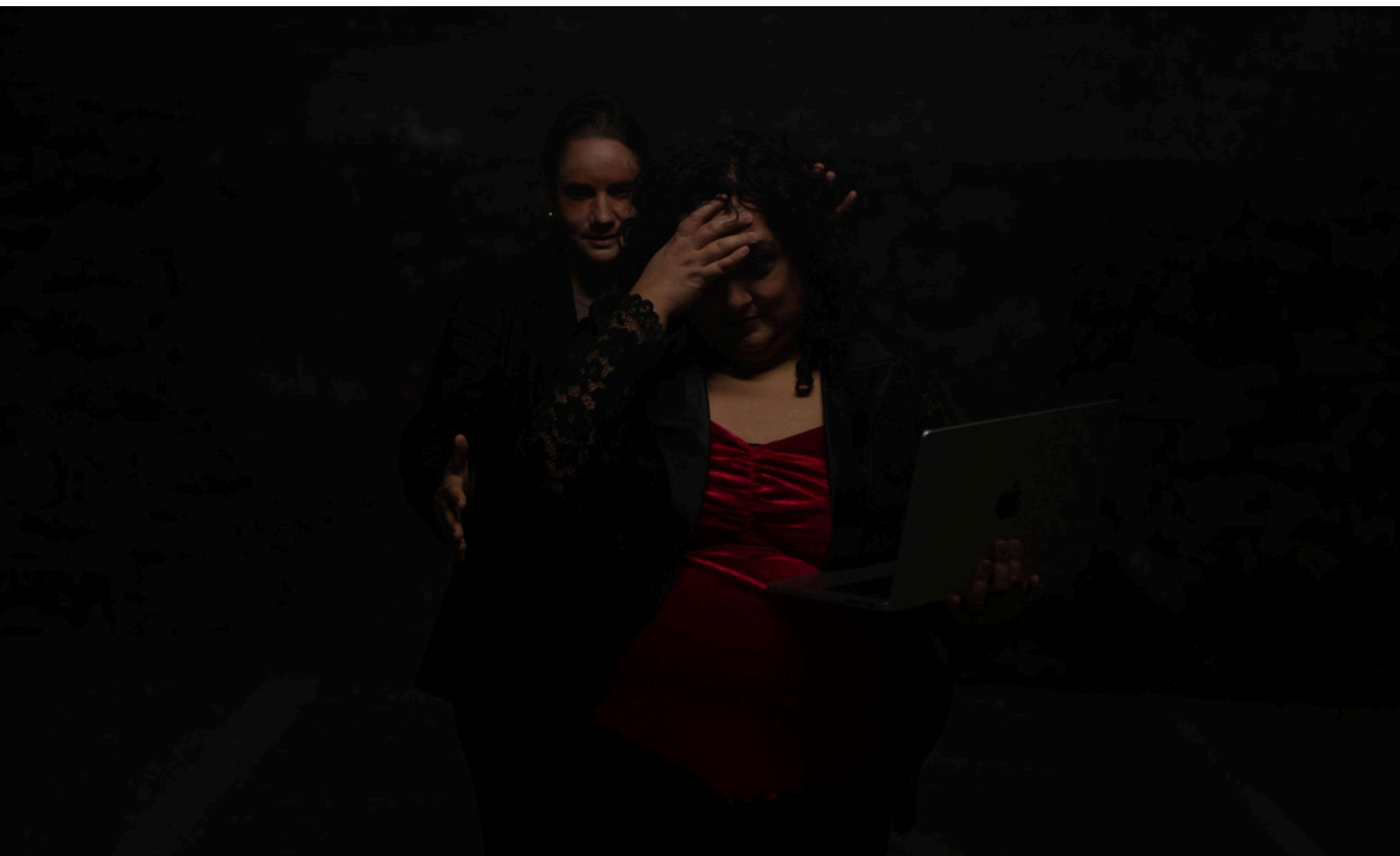
Stressed. Still trying. Still showing up. But the cost of every single day has quietly gone up.

Disconnected. Still present in body. But something essential has pulled back, from relationships, from purpose, from you. This is the stage nobody sees coming and nobody knows how to name.

Disengaged. The stage organizations finally notice and by then, it's been a long time coming.

This isn't a talk about what's wrong with your people. It's a talk about what's been asked of them.

Drawing on real findings from the HRart Center's ongoing Burnout Stages research, Samm brings data to what most organizations have only been able to feel, and makes the case that the path forward isn't another engagement strategy. It's the courage to tell the truth about what people are carrying.





WHAT YOU'LL LEARN:

1. Why the current employee engagement model is structurally incompatible with the workforce conditions most organizations are actually operating in
2. What is really happening in the three stages — Stressed, Disconnected, and Disengaged — and why each one makes complete sense given the conditions people are in
3. How to shift from diagnosing a motivation problem to understanding an energy problem and why that distinction changes everything about how we lead
4. What the path toward genuine, sustainable engagement actually looks like and why it begins with witnessing, not measuring



SAMM SMELTZER

Doctor of Medical Qigong · Author
Founder, The HRart Center

Samm Smeltzer knows that when leaders take care of their own energy, everyone benefits. With more than a decade of experience as an award-winning HR leader, Samm now leads The HRart (pronounced "heart") Center — where she helps individuals and organizations create workplaces where people feel valued, balanced, and energized.

Blending her background in HR and Chinese Medicine, Samm bridges the gap between well-being and performance through her work as a Doctor of Medical Qigong. She draws on the Five Element framework — a system developed over thousands of years in Chinese medical tradition — to help leaders and organizations understand how energy moves, depletes, and restores itself.

Her keynote work is informed by ongoing research through the HRart Center's Burnout Stages Assessment, a proprietary tool that has collected data across HR professionals and leaders nationwide, giving her work an empirical foundation that goes beyond theory or personal perspective.

She is the author of five books, including *Unstuck and Renewed: Healing Burnout and Finding Lasting Balance*.

Through her writing, speaking, and practice, Samm helps leaders and teams cultivate energetic awareness, recover from burnout, and reconnect with the vitality that drives sustainable growth and genuine human connection.

OVERVIEW

Employee engagement has become one of the most measured and least understood concepts in modern organizational life. We track it, score it, report on it and then watch it decline anyway.

This keynote makes the case that we have been solving the wrong problem.

Engagement is not a behavior that can be incentivized into existence. It is the natural byproduct of people who have enough capacity to bring themselves fully to their work. And in a workforce that has been operating in a state of prolonged depletion (through a global pandemic, an always-on culture, and the quiet erosion of boundaries between work and life) that capacity has been systematically exhausted.

The result is three stages most organizations have never named: Stressed, Disconnected, and Disengaged. These aren't attitude problems. They aren't performance issues. They are predictable, diagnosable energetic responses to unsustainable conditions — and they require a fundamentally different response than the one most engagement playbooks prescribe.

Drawing on findings from the HRart Center's Burnout Stages research, Samm brings both a framework and a felt experience to this conversation. Audiences don't just leave with new ideas. They leave having been genuinely seen, many for the first time, in what they have been living through.

This is the talk that reframes the entire engagement conversation. And it is designed to be the beginning of a longer journey for the organizations ready to take it.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Articulate why the current employee engagement model fails to account for energetic capacity and why that gap is the source of most modern workforce challenges
2. Identify the three stages of the burnout continuum — Stressed, Disconnected, and Disengaged — and recognize the behavioral, relational, and cultural signatures of each
3. Distinguish between a motivation problem and an energy problem, and apply that distinction to how they lead, support, and develop their people
4. Evaluate current organizational engagement practices through an energetic health lens and identify where those practices may be accelerating depletion rather than restoring capacity
5. Describe the conditions necessary for genuine, sustainable engagement and identify one concrete shift they can make in their leadership or organizational practice

CONTENT OUTLINE FOR SHRM + HRCI ALIGNMENT

Two format options are provided on the following pages. Content is identical in structure — the 75-minute format allows additional time within each section for facilitation, participant reflection, and organic discussion. Samm's sessions breathe, the timing ranges reflect that intentionally.

60-MINUTE FORMAT

45 minutes of structured content
+ 15 minutes facilitation breathing room

10 MIN

OPENING: THE PERMISSION SLIP

- Focus: Name what's in the room (the exhaustion, the guilt, the sense that people should be more engaged, more motivated, more present) without fixing it yet. Open with Samm's personal origin story: the moment she became everything she stood against, what was actually happening energetically, and how being witnessed back by someone who refused to see her as broken became the foundation for this entire body of work
- Method: Personal storytelling, direct audience address

10 MIN

THE MYTH WE BOUGHT

- Focus: Unpack the current model of employee engagement, what it measures, what it promises, and what it structurally cannot deliver. Reference HRart Center research findings on where people are actually operating. Make the case that we have been diagnosing a capacity problem as a motivation problem
- Method: Lecture, data presentation, audience reflection



15 MIN

THE SPACE BETWEEN: STRESSED, DISCONNECTED, DISENGAGED

- Focus: Walk through each stage as a lived experience, what it feels like from the inside, what's happening energetically, and why each stage makes complete sense given the conditions people are in. This is the heart of the talk.
 - Stressed: Still showing up. Still trying. But the cost has gone up and the buffer is shrinking
 - Disconnected: The invisible stage. Present in body, withdrawn in everything that matters. Misread as attitude when it is actually self-protection
 - Disengaged: The stage organizations finally notice — and the one that took the longest to arrive
- Method: Framework presentation, storytelling, audience recognition moments

10 MIN

WHY ENGAGEMENT CANT BE THE GOAL

- Focus: Make the direct case that engagement is a lagging indicator, not a lever. Pursuing engagement without addressing energetic health is solving for the wrong variable. Reference what the research shows about the gap between engagement initiatives and actual capacity restoration
- Method: Lecture, reframe, audience challenge

CLOSE

WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS + THE WITNESS

- Focus: Offer three reframes for leaders. Close by coming back to the opening, the felt experience of being seen. Name what you hope people leave with: not a five-step plan, but a language for what they have been living through and the courage to tell the truth about it
- Method: Direct address, closing story callback

75-MINUTE FORMAT

60 minutes of structured content
+ 15 minutes facilitation breathing room

10 MIN

OPENING: THE PERMISSION SLIP

- Focus: Same as 60-minute format. Personal origin story, naming what is in the room, giving the audience permission to feel what they are feeling without shame
- Method: Personal storytelling, direct audience address

15 MIN

THE MYTH WE BOUGHT

- Focus: Extended version — more time to unpack the history of the engagement model, explore HRart Center research findings in greater depth, and invite audience reflection on their own experience with engagement initiatives that did not move the needle
- Method: Lecture, data presentation, audience reflection

20 MIN

THE SPACE BETWEEN: STRESSED, DISCONNECTED, DISENGAGED

- Focus: Same three-stage framework with extended time for each stage. Additional space for audience recognition — brief pair or table discussion at the Disconnected stage where participants identify someone they know or a version of themselves in that description
- Method: Framework presentation, storytelling, audience recognition moments

10 MIN

WHY ENGAGEMENT CANT BE THE GOAL

- Focus: Same as 60-minute format
- Method: Lecture, reframe, audience challenge

10 MIN

THE RESEARCH FOUNDATION

- Focus: Share what the HRart Center's ongoing Burnout Stages research is revealing at scale — what the data shows about where people are actually operating across industries and organizations. This is a living, evolving body of evidence that this talk will continue to grow with
- Method: Data presentation, brief lecture

CLOSE

WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS + THE WITNESS

- Focus: Same as 60-minute format with additional time for the three leadership reframes and a longer, more spacious closing
- Method: Direct address, closing story callback

CREDIT OPPORTUNITIES

SHRM

- Business Acumen → Business Credit
- Critical Evaluation → Business Credit
- Leadership & Navigation → Business Credit

HRCI

- Business Management & Strategy → Business Credit
- Ethics → Ethics Credit
- Workforce Planning & Employment → Business Credit

This session is designed to qualify for SHRM Business credits and HRCI Business and Ethics credits. Pre-approval recommended for organizations seeking specific credit designations. Documentation support is provided on the following pages.

RECOMMENDED COMPETENCIES

SHRM

- Primary Behavioral Competency: Business Acumen
- Qualifies for SHRM Business Credit

This keynote makes a direct business case. Disengagement costs organizations an estimated \$8.8 trillion in lost productivity globally — and yet most organizations continue investing in engagement strategies that address symptoms rather than causes. By reframing burnout and disengagement as energetic imbalances with measurable organizational consequences, this session equips HR professionals and leaders to evaluate workforce health through a strategic business lens. Participants leave with the ability to connect depletion, disengagement, and organizational performance in language that resonates in the boardroom — not just the HR department.

This session supports HR's evolving role as a strategic business partner by providing a research-informed framework for diagnosing a root-cause workforce problem that is currently costing organizations in ways they cannot fully see or measure.

- Secondary Behavioral Competency: Critical Evaluation
- Supports Business Credit

Participants are challenged to critically examine one of the most widely accepted frameworks in organizational life — the employee engagement model — and evaluate its assumptions, its measurements, and its outcomes against the reality of what the data shows. The HRart Center's ongoing Burnout Stages research provides an empirical foundation for this critical evaluation, giving participants a model for evidence-based reassessment of established HR practices.

- Tertiary Behavioral Competency: Leadership & Navigation
- Supports Business Credit

This session equips leaders to navigate the tension between organizational demands and workforce capacity with greater clarity and intentionality. Participants examine how their own leadership decisions — about expectations, culture design, and performance standards — directly influence the energetic conditions their people are operating in. The result is a more strategically aware, organizationally effective leader.

HRCI

- Primary Functional Area: Business Management & Strategy
- Qualifies for HRCI Business Credit

This keynote directly addresses the intersection of workforce health and organizational strategy. The central argument — that engagement cannot be manufactured without first restoring the energetic conditions that make it possible — has direct implications for how organizations allocate resources, design cultures, and measure the return on their people investments.

Participants examine how the current engagement model creates a strategic blind spot: organizations invest heavily in engagement initiatives while the underlying capacity problem continues to compound. This misalignment between strategy and reality carries measurable business risk — in turnover costs, productivity loss, innovation capacity, and leadership effectiveness.

By introducing an energetic health framework alongside conventional organizational strategy, this session equips HR professionals to make a more complete and accurate business case for workforce well-being investments — and to position those investments as strategic imperatives rather than culture amenities.

- Secondary Functional Area: Ethics
- Qualifies for HRCI Ethics Credit

This keynote raises a question that sits at the heart of ethical leadership: what is our moral responsibility to the people we lead when we know they are depleted — and we continue asking more of them anyway?

The session makes the case that pursuing engagement metrics while ignoring the energetic conditions that make engagement possible is not simply an ineffective strategy. It carries ethical weight. Leaders who ask people to perform at full capacity while conditions systematically erode that capacity are making decisions that affect others' well-being, livelihoods, and sense of self — often without full awareness of what they are doing.

This session supports HRCI's Ethics functional area by helping participants examine their own leadership decisions through an ethical lens — developing the awareness and language to lead with greater transparency, fairness, and genuine accountability to the people in their care. It addresses the ethical obligation of HR professionals and leaders to advocate for workforce conditions that are not just productive but humane — and to challenge organizational practices that knowingly or unknowingly cause harm through chronic depletion.

- Tertiary Functional Area: Workforce Planning & Employment
- Supports Business Credit

The three-stage burnout continuum — Stressed, Disconnected, Disengaged — has direct implications for workforce planning. Organizations that cannot accurately assess where their people are operating on this continuum are making workforce decisions — about capacity, headcount, performance management, and development — on incomplete information.

This session introduces the HRart Center's Burnout Stages research as a workforce planning tool: a way of understanding the actual capacity landscape of an organization and designing workforce strategies that account for the reality of where people are, not the assumption of where leadership hopes they are.

SETUP REQUIREMENTS



PREFERRED ROOM SETUP

- Vibe: Comfortable and engaging — ideal for conversation and reflection
- Room Type: Flexible setup preferred (rounds for 5-6)
- Lighting: Soft, dimmable lighting preferred
- Extras: Space for participants to stand/move during practice examples

AV + TECH REQUIREMENTS

- Wireless lavalier microphone — required for this format
- Slide clicker + projector/screen (standard 16:9 format)
- HDMI connection
- Audio connection for any video or sound elements
- Access to play light music before the session opens — helps set the tone for what the audience is about to experience

FINAL NOTES

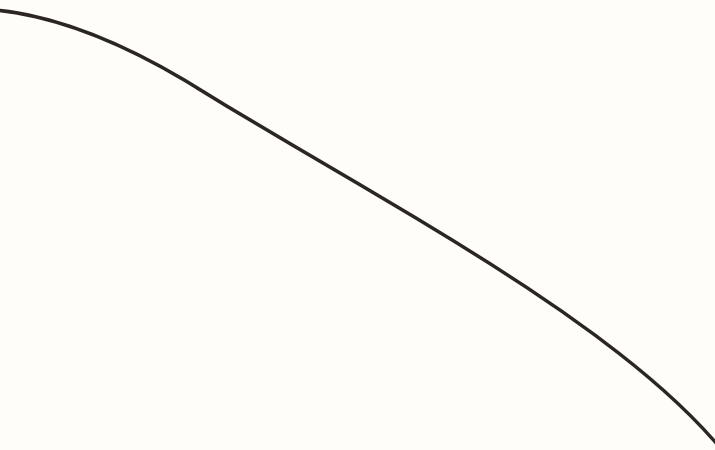
This keynote is designed to do something most HR content does not: make people feel genuinely seen before it tries to teach them anything. The content is rigorous and research-informed. The experience is deeply human. Those two things are not in tension — they are the point.

Samm's facilitation style is warm, direct, and unhurried. She does not rush through material to hit a clock. The timing formats provided in this packet are designed with breathing room built in — so that what lands in the room actually lands.

This session is available as a standalone keynote and pairs naturally with [The Pathology of Burnout](#) and [The Self-Aware Leader](#) for organizations ready to build a fuller learning experience around energetic health and workforce capacity.

Samm makes her books available for purchase at events and is happy to sign copies following the session. Unlike many speakers, Samm remains fully accessible to participants after her keynote — the book signing is an open, unhurried conversation, not a brief handshake. If connecting with your audience matters to you as much as the content does, that commitment comes standard.

Please let Samm know in advance if you'd like to incorporate book sales so she can plan accordingly.

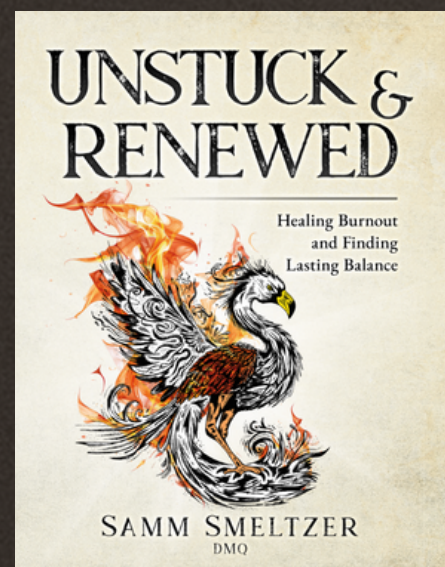
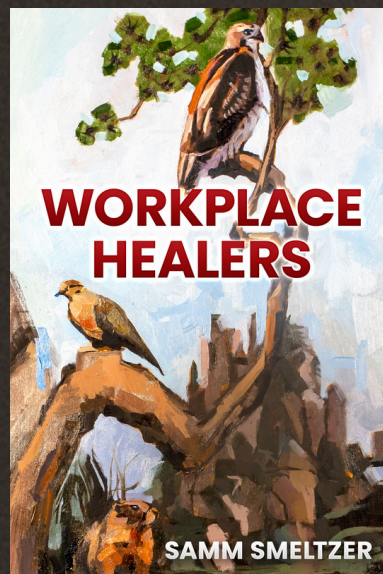
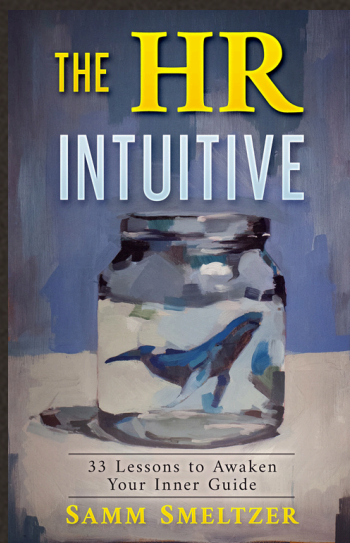


BOOKS BY SAMM

In addition to her work as a speaker and organizational development practitioner, Samm Smeltzer is the author of five books exploring burnout, workplace healing, leadership, and personal renewal. Her books give attendees the opportunity to continue the conversation started in her sessions — deepening their understanding of energy, engagement, and what it actually takes to sustain well-being at work.

Unstuck and Renewed: Healing Burnout and Finding Lasting Balance is the title most directly connected to the themes explored in this session and is available for purchase at the event.

Select titles may be made available depending on the event format and available space.



BOOK SALES + SIGNING

ON-SITE SALES

Samm can provide books for sale at the event. A small table near the session room or registration area is typically sufficient.

PRE-PURCHASED BOOKS FOR ATTENDEES

Organizations may choose to purchase copies in advance as part of the event experience — a meaningful takeaway that extends the learning beyond the room.

BOOK SIGNING + OPEN CONVERSATION

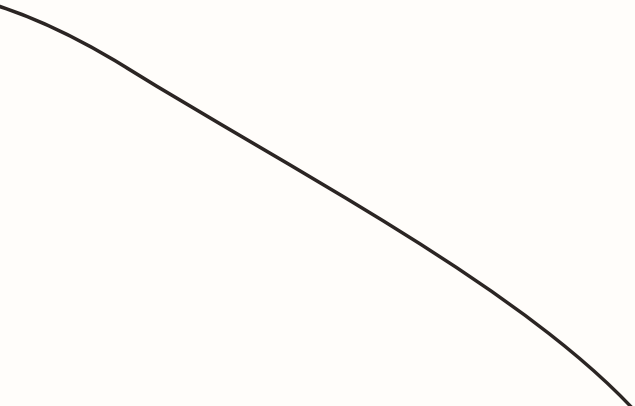
Samm signs books following the session and remains fully available to participants during that time. This is an open, unhurried conversation — not a brief handshake. Attendees are welcome to ask questions, share reactions, or simply connect. Please allow approximately 15–20 minutes after the session for this.

EVENT PLANNING NOTES

If book sales are planned, please consider:

- A small table for book display near the speaking area or registration desk
- 15–20 minutes following the session for book signing and open participant conversation
- Advance notice if bulk copies are requested for attendees

Additional ordering details can be coordinated prior to the event.



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