



Engaging Your Team

by Joel DiGirolamo

"Sally, I can't seem to get these kids enthused about their work. They just want to come here, sit in their chair, send text messages to their friends, talk on their cell phones, get a little bit of work done, and then collect a paycheck. I'm telling you, it's really frustrating."

"Well Fred, have you asked them what would make their job more exciting?"

"Of course not! They agreed to come work here, they knew what they were getting into. We've got a job to do, Sally. They should know that."

Sounds like we've got a little "employee engagement" problem here... with culpability on both sides.

Employee engagement is a loose term originating from William Kahn in 1990 and popularized by research firm The Gallup Organization and management consultants Towers Perrin. Both organizations claim that more engaged employees will bring larger bottom line profits, lower employee turnover, increased customer satisfaction and engagement, and many more positive business results.

Although a consistent definition of employee engagement does not exist, most definitions include elements of organizational alignment, job satisfaction, identification and loyalty to the organization, and flow, or the ability to concentrate on a task for long periods of time. I think of engagement as an umbrella idea embracing such comfortable and time-tested concepts as flow, motivation and hygiene theory, the theory of effective vs. successful

managers, Deci and Ryan's motivational orientation theory, burnout, as well as our good friend job satisfaction. All of these elements play a role in whether or not an employee is engaged or disengaged at their place of work.

Seeing how the idea of employee engagement encompasses many existing and familiar concepts in the field of industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology it becomes easy for us to understand the disdain for the idea amongst many I/O psychologists. The phrase "old wine in new bottles" can frequently be heard in this context. But let's not assume it's all turned to vinegar—the idea has valid uses. So let's explore how each of these concepts contribute to employee engagement.

Motivation and Hygiene Theory

Frederick Herzberg amassed a considerable amount of research data in the 1950s and 60s illustrating a concept he defined as hygiene and motivational factors. Hygiene factors such as company policy and administration, supervision, and work conditions will cause a worker to become disengaged. Think of it as pushing an employee away. Motivation factors such as achievement, recognition, responsibility, the work itself, advancement, and growth will engage an employee in their work and the organization.

Like all new theories, the validity of this theory was questioned early on. If you look under the hood at some of the employee engagement surveys you will find many of these factors in the survey questions. To me,



the fact that employee engagement surveys contain these elements and have been reasonably well validated confirms the validity of Herzberg's theory.

Motivation Orientation

The work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan on motivation evolved over the period of almost a quarter century. The general conclusion they arrived at is that individuals tend to fall into one of three major motivational orientation groups: intrinsically motivated, extrinsically motivated, or amotivated.

Individuals who are intrinsically motivated enjoy a challenge and will strive to achieve a goal that is reasonably outside their reach. These people are relatively easy to engage. Paint the vision, provide the resources they need, empower them to do their job, and let them go.

Extrinsically motivated individuals take a bit more care and feeding. They will strive for an external goal, such as winning a contest or getting a bonus check. While they are higher maintenance employees, they can be engaged in your organization with a bit of creativity and effort.

Amotivated individuals, on the other hand are a problem. These people will not allow themselves to be motivated to do a job no matter how hard you try. Will they ever be engaged in their job? Nope. So, even if you as a leader do all the right stuff to engage them, it won't work. This is why I feel it is so important to ensure an element of individual differences is included in an employee engagement survey.

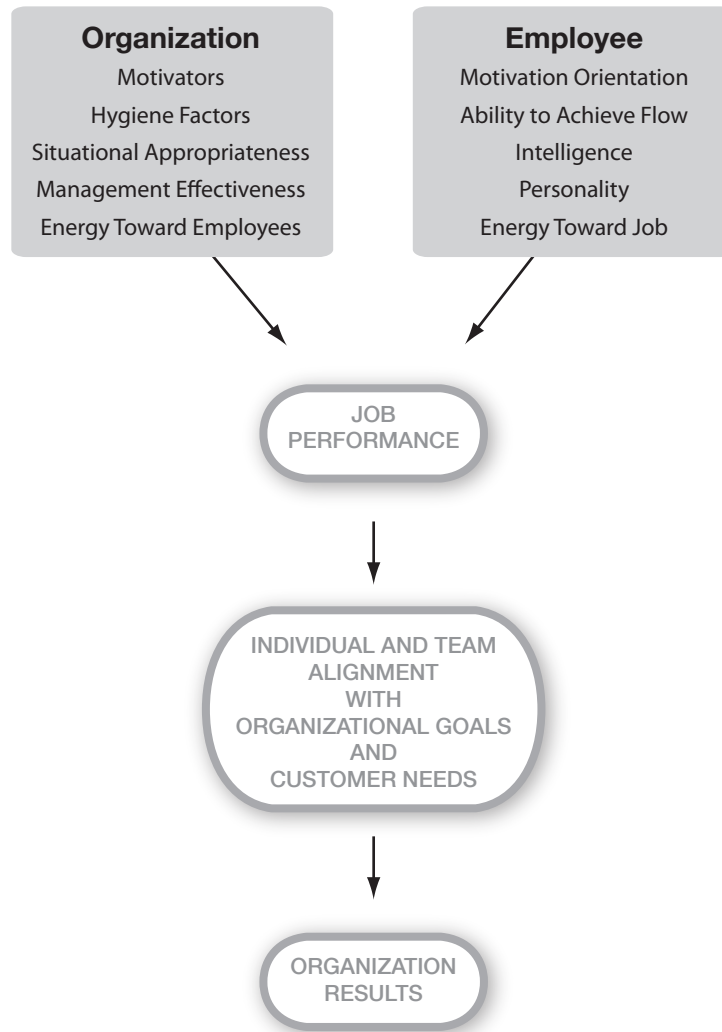
Effective vs. Successful Managers

Research has shown quite clearly that if you want high performance teams, i.e. teams of engaged workers, you must have effective leadership. This requires leaders spending time with their workers ensuring they have challenging assignments, sufficient resources, effective team processes, and so on.

Unfortunately, as the work of Fred Luthans has shown, the successful managers, that is, the ones promoted frequently, are not often the effective managers. And so, what you may have in an organization is effective lower level managers who spend time ensuring they have productive teams. You also have managers who have been promoted frequently because they spend time networking with their superiors and peers. Of course this is not a universal truth as the research described by Jim Collins illustrates. His Level 5 leaders described in *Good to Great* are most likely those few managers Luthans describes as both effective and successful.

The result is many organizations with mediocre upper and middle management muddling their way through business cycles attempting to keep their organization afloat. Is it any wonder we have an epidemic of organizations with disengaged workers?

Most employee engagement surveys include many of the positive managerial elements Luthans discovered in his research. Once again, the employee engagement work has validated a familiar concept.



Burnout

Research has shown that employees will become disengaged if overloaded. Take an intrinsically motivated individual who loves a challenge, mix in a layoff or two, and you have the perfect recipe for a burned out and disengaged employee.

Job Satisfaction

Many of the employee engagement research efforts claim that increased engagement reduces turnover. Most of these efforts include elements of job satisfaction, thus reinforcing the well-validated theory that job satisfaction is related to turnover, in a negative fashion of course.

Flow

Some engagement models do not consider the individual employee's ability to engage. This seems unreasonable to me. If an employee is unable to engage, any actions by the organization will have no effect on the employee's job performance. So the effect, or output, we are looking for requires organizational action and individual action.

Flow is the ability to focus on a single task so intently that the sense of the passage of time is lost. To better grasp this idea think of athletes when they talk about being in "the zone." Flow often takes place when we can work without interruption on a task which is an appropriate challenge to our skills and abilities.

Note that this concept of challenge has arisen once again. You as a leader can facilitate flow by providing your team members with appropriately challenging assignments with sufficient resources.

Engagement From Other Angles

We can look at the idea of employee engagement from two other angles. The first angle is a perspective that involves roles and time.

The roles are many: the organization, immediate supervisor, individual employee, co-workers, and customers. At a minimum, the employee must have values that are congruent with those of the organization. If the organization's values do not mesh with the employee's it will be very difficult for the employee to become passionate about their job. The only reasons I can understand an individual would work for a company with dissonant values is for a paycheck or to learn about the inner workings of a suspected nefarious organization in order to expose them to the outside world. Alternatively, research

has shown that employee engagement is high in the non-profit sector. Presumably this is because employees are excited and impassioned about the organization's mission.

An employee's immediate supervisor has been shown to have a large effect on the employee's job satisfaction and turnover. The adage we frequently hear is that employees join organizations because they want to be involved in their mission and that they quit bad bosses.

The employee has a role in engagement based upon their ability or inability to achieve a state of flow and become highly productive. How much an individual enjoys the company of his or her peers will have an effect on their commitment to the organization as well. Finally, how well the employee can relate to the customers will have an incremental effect on overall engagement.

The level of trust across all of these roles—in both directions—will play a part in the employees level of engagement in the organization. Time is a consideration in employee engagement. How well does the organization balance the need for tactical results with working toward individual and organizational strategic goals?

The second additional angle I would like to view employee engagement from is quite simple—that of three elements—the organization, the individual, and the energy that both put forth toward goals. This simple model can be used to ask fundamental questions. How much energy is the organization expending toward the employees? How much energy is the employee expending toward the organization? If the answer to at least one of these questions is "not very much" then it's time to dig deeper and start asking why and determine what can be done to improve the situation.



Fundamental Concepts

And so, with this backdrop of employee engagement I'd like to come back to three fundamentals that I like to reinforce:

- Leader behavior in terms of building teams and focusing their effort toward the team goals will affect group and organizational performance
- Leader behavior will affect employee job satisfaction which will affect turnover
- An employee's intrinsic or extrinsic motivation will affect their individual performance.

Reap the Benefits

It is not enough to simply review the results of an assessment and notice if you are improving or declining. Having seen the elements of employee engagement I hope you understand how crucial it is to your organization's health to utilize the diagnostic strength of this type of assessment. We have seen that some elements require work on the part of the management team while other elements require an effort by the employee.

The beauty of this situation is that it gives a leader in any part of the organization something to talk about with employees individually as well as in groups. You can stress the importance of each party's contribution as well as explore strengths and areas for improvement.

Used appropriately, an employee engagement assessment can become a powerful tool for positive change in your organization.

Joel DiGirolamo heads the firm Turbocharged Leadership and can be found on the web at www.turbochargedleadership.com.



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