

Where Employee Engagement Happens

Executives cannot legislate a high-performing culture with just mission statements. Engagement must grow organically, one workgroup at a time.

by John H. Fleming, Ph.D., and Jim Asplund

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“Employees: What are they good for?”

If we were to ask this question in a Gallup Poll, we would probably get an answer like this: “Companies need employees to get the job done and to meet the demands of the job with excellence.” So it follows that without “the job,” there would be no need for employees. Fair enough. Where there is an employee, there is a need for some job function that companies cannot have performed more efficiently any other way.

When it comes to understanding human behavior in the workplace, one of the most notable discoveries occurred in the mid-1990s when we discovered that no organization -- large or small -- has a single culture. Instead, it has as many cultures as it has workgroups, managers, or supervisors. The locus of culture is at the local level, where 5, 10, or more people work together every day.

Although many of you may be nodding in agreement at this notion, it was a dramatic shift in how leaders perceived corporate culture and how to manage it. Leaders have long understood that they have very little control over the culture that exists at the local level, but this discovery made it imperative that they find the best managers and supervisors to build a high-performing culture -- one employee, or one conversation, at a time. Executives cannot legislate culture with mission or vision statements or through values clarification; it must also grow organically one workgroup at a time.

Culturing culture

Having a high-performing business culture is a competitive advantage today. Most companies expect every employee to be a builder, because every employee, through his or her actions, either makes the culture stronger or weakens it. Employees, in turn, want to



be proud of their organizations and local teams. And, in many countries today, the *employer needs the employee* more than the other way around. As the world shifts from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy -- and as employees are increasingly valued for what they know as much as for what they produce -- the employer's power has diminished or evaporated.

So how do we manage people for success and high levels of productivity in the new economy? Too many organizations build management models on the assumption that managers and leaders have the power in the company/employee relationship, but that's no longer always the case. The answer is *employee engagement* or the ability to capture the heads, hearts, and souls of your employees to instill an intrinsic desire and passion for excellence. Engaged employees want their organization to succeed because they feel connected emotionally, socially, and even spiritually to its mission, vision, and purpose.

Just as engaged customers are among a company's most profitable patrons and passionate advocates, engaged employees are a company's most productive and efficient workers. Others have argued that employees join companies but leave managers. Employees may choose to work for a company for several reasons -- the high-minded and the practical. They may be attracted to its mission and purpose and its stature in the marketplace or by a belief that by working there, they can make a difference in the world. They may also be attracted by the promise of a regular income, reasonable working hours, and good benefits.

Whatever their motivation for joining the company, their local work environment either energizes and nourishes them and fosters their learning and growth or starves them and frustrates their development. When this happens, they will leave the company -- or even worse -- hang around doing the minimum needed until it's time for retirement. Engaged employees, in contrast, are involved *and* enthusiastic about what is happening in their local work environment. (See "Feedback for Real" in the "See Also" area on this page.)

Among the many variables that discriminate these two types of workplaces is the quality of the local workplace manager and his or her ability to successfully meet a core set of employees' emotional requirements. (See graphic "Four Dimensions of Employee Engagement.")

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Among the many variables that discriminate between highly productive workplaces and those that are unproductive is the quality of the local workplace manager and his or her ability to meet a core set of employees' emotional requirements. Work units that meet these conditions of engagement perform at a much higher level than work units that fail to meet them.



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Work units that meet these conditions of engagement perform at a much higher level than work units that fail to meet them. Primary within these conditions are emotional elements that reveal our basic human needs: to be recognized as individuals and to contribute. At a local level, managers can influence employees' most basic needs by setting clear expectations and providing needed resources. More than this, they can energize their employees by showing them that they care -- personally and professionally:

- Personally, managers can create meaningful relationships within workgroups and position employees so that they can do what they do best.
- Professionally, managers can provide challenging work and opportunities to learn, grow, and make significant contributions.

Some hard-core [managers] have suggested that all this talk about positivity in the workplace is nothing more than a bunch of fluff with little real application in the cutthroat world of business. Our research strongly suggests otherwise: When human needs are met, the positive emotions that result encourage employees to look beyond the work in front of them and to care about the overall welfare of the business. More importantly, it's hard to create passionate, engaged customers without passionate, engaged employees.

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Customer Encounter (Gallup Press, November 2007).

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