

Seven Simple Lessons to Prevent Employee Disengagement

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Executive Summary

Engagement has become the battle cry of the HR field. Engaged employees make for better workers. They are happier, more productive, impassioned and eager to do whatever it takes to make their company better.

However, nurturing and supporting engaged and enthusiastic employees requires a commitment to your workforce. Even the most passionate employees can become disengaged.

In this paper, I outline seven lessons on the types of behavior that can create an environment of disengagement in your workforce:

1. Enforce unnecessary rules.
2. Make employees fear for their jobs.
3. Make it boring.
4. Ignore contributions.
5. Pay no attention to HR problems.
6. Work employees to death.
7. Ignore the culture of the organization in your hiring process.

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Job and Organizational Engagement: Are they the Same?

We all know that employees who are fully engaged are more likely to be involved in activities that go above and beyond the call of duty. This should come as no surprise; after all, engaged employees are expected to be vigorous, enthusiastic, dedicated and fully focused on their work.ⁱ Examples of engagement might include “showing genuine concern and courtesy toward coworkers and giving up time to help others who have work or non-work problems.”ⁱⁱ

Studies on personal characteristics connected to engagementⁱⁱ suggest that engagement does bear some connection to personality traits. In other words, certain individuals are more likely than others to become engaged, *no matter what*. The evidence so far suggests that being calm, extroverted and focused *may* improve the odds of engagement. A simple solution, therefore, might be to “select for engagement;” all we need to do is to test for those characteristics among our incoming employees and bingo! You’ve got engagement.



Not so fast. First, personality is distributed quasi-normally.ⁱⁱⁱ There are simply not enough individuals in the job market who are calm, extroverted, focused *and* have the job qualifications and experience to fill all available job slots.

Second, not *all* jobs require these personality traits. For instance, some jobs can benefit from a *nervous edge* — a certain degree of worry and nervousness leading to empathy

for others’ troubles. Other jobs need unfocused and free-flowing multitaskers. Still others are much better completed by solitary and independent introverts.

“There is a difference between job engagement and organizational engagement.”

Most importantly, however, the relationships identified between

personality and engagement, while statistically significant, are not very strong. The search for the magical, *engageable* employee is likely to remain elusive.

While the search for automatic engagement may be futile, however, the search for those likely to be engaged under certain conditions is still quite reasonable. Engagement, after all, is likely to be related to congruence — the match between *who* the person is and *what* he or she does.

“The match you seek does not include only person and job. The organizational culture matters too.”

The *match* you seek does not include only person and job. The organizational culture matters, too.

First, there is a difference between job engagement and organizational engagement. A person can love her job and hate her employer. She can be perfect for *what* she does — and still do it in the wrong place.

Here is an example: Imagine that you have just hired a *perfect* graphic artist, a young woman I’ll call Sally. Innovative and competent, Sally thinks out of the box and consistently creates beautiful, high-quality designs. Moreover, the pieces Sally designs are exactly what your company needs; she knows how to listen to her internal clients, is assertive enough to sell her best ideas and works well with her immediate team.

There is only one problem: Sally is a free-spirited artist. She enjoys expressing herself through her clothes and has several body piercings. The place where she currently works? A serious, suit-wearing, no-nonsense, conservative, family-owned company. The HR manager is quick to point out to Sally that there *is* a dress code.

Further, the manager asks Sally to remove her piercings and to please not speak *that* loud. And, oh, Sally, we frown upon speaking up out of order during our meetings. Make sure you wait for your turn. And that fabulous piece you’ve just created? Well ... it *is* fabulous, but you really need to get the manager’s permission to present it before you show it to anyone else.

Within a few months, Sally starts to feel despondent and discouraged. Gone are the days when she couldn’t wait for Monday morning. She begins to drag. Here is the curious part, though: Not many people can tell how upset Sally really is — not yet. Sally’s work, you see, is still so darn good. She still goes above and beyond the call of duty. She still stays in her cubicle until the wee hours finishing something she’s excited about. There can’t possibly be any problem with Sally. Less than a year after Sally came onboard, however, she presents her letter of resignation. Good-bye, Sally.

Seven Disengagement Lessons

If you really *want* to disengage people who start out engaged and enthusiastic, there are a few simple things you can do:

Enforce Unnecessary Rules

Every organization has rules for “the way things are done” — from dress code to punctuality to how people are expected to behave during staff meetings. It is a good idea to occasionally review those rules, especially the unwritten ones. Is it really important that people wear certain clothes? Do body piercings really make a difference? Does everyone have to participate in those monthly meetings?



Don't get me wrong; some of those rules matter. Moreover, some rules are an integral part of your culture, and the members of the culture want to keep them. You must understand,

however, that engagement has to do with a close connection between person and job. Those who are engaged feel that being who they are is perfectly OK.

Further, a key psychological condition preceding engagement is safety.^{iv} People need to feel that their natural behaviors will not result in negative repercussions. Logically, therefore, telling someone that it is not OK to be who he or she is fosters disengagement.

So, by all means enforce *necessary* rules, but beware the ones that truly do not matter for achieving your mission.

Make Employees Fear for their Jobs

If safety has an impact on engagement, there are few environments less disengaging than one in which people live in constant fear. Each time you lay off a group of employees, you give survivors one more reason to believe that they are next.

Employees' fear for their jobs, however, does not only affect safety. Fear also has a bearing on another key psychological condition preceding engagement: availability of resources.^v Reasonably, individuals need emotional and physical resources in order to engage at work. When people's jobs are at stake, their emotional resources may be drained and they may use their physical resources to search for another job.

Make it Boring

Disengaging your star employees is a simple matter: Give them only routine tasks to perform, the kinds of tasks they already know how to do. Ignore their need for learning and growth.

Indeed, engagement seems to be connected to challenge. Generally, individuals are more engaged when they feel that there is more to learn and further to go. The consulting firm Towers Perrin found in a study that skill acquisition opportunities (that is, opportunities for learning new skills and competencies) are correlated with engagement.^{vi}

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Of course, as with all things human, the “make it boring and disengage” rule has exceptions. Some people simply prefer routine and are more engaged when their jobs have little variety. At the very least, get to know your employees. Find out how much challenge they can tolerate and then do your best to oblige them.

Ignore Contributions

Recognizing others' contributions is hard work and not something you can accomplish once a year in award ceremonies where either (a) very few people win the top prize (while everyone else is ignored) or (b) everyone gets some insipid generic prize for one more year at the organization.

Instead, an engaging organization should be obsessed about having a culture of recognition. It should encourage everyone to recognize the contributions of peers, subordinates and supervisors, and do so frequently.

Recognition matters because it tells the employees that their work matters. As a result, they feel valuable and valued, and such feelings tend to enhance engagement.^{vii} In order to matter, however, recognition needs to happen regularly; it cannot be the result of a major production.

No, you don't need a major award ceremony. No, it doesn't have to cost a mint. Encourage people to say thank you — truly and sincerely. Make little congratulations cards available for all. Talk to people about the value of recognition. Run recognition training programs for everyone (not only for managers). All these small tasks may, together, help you reenergize the disengaged employees and keep engaged those who have not yet lost their spark.

Pay No Attention to HR Problems

We are paid to work. There is no time for fluff, especially the game-playing, barbecue-grilling, potluck-organizing *fluff* those of us in the consulting business like to recommend.

Here's a newsflash: We are all in the people business. We can't make widgets without people. We can't sell services without people. We can't run our operations without people. And people are messy. They have conflicts, they have different styles, and they get offended by one another. It happens, and *not* paying attention to human issues at your organization will not make them go away. Instead, those pesky HR problems will go a long way toward making everyone feel unsafe. Safety, remember, is a key engagement component.

The conclusion: Warm up those barbecue grills. Take the time for weekend picnics. If you have the extra time and money, organize team-building sessions, collaboration programs and anything else you can think of that will bring folks together. Relationships at work can either be a major force toward engagement or disengage your stars faster than a crumbling economy ever could.

Work Employees to Death

Ah, workaholism. Such a beautiful word. It reminds us of late evenings at the office finishing one more proposal, weekend meetings (announced at the last minute), hurried luncheons at our desks two seconds before the next meeting.

The problem is that engagement requires some level of moderation.^{viii} After all, engagement requires considerable energy, and energy gets depleted, even when a person loves what he or she does, even when the other conditions are just right.

Take the time to smell the roses. Encourage people to stop.

Ignore the Culture of the Organization in Your Hiring Process

A certain degree of fit is necessary for engagement. Organizational cultures may change, but they are likely to change very slowly. Your brilliant new hire may have a short

career at your organization if he or she is totally opposite to everyone else. In other words: Brilliant graphic designer Sally may simply have been a poor hiring decision.

Now, don't get me wrong. Some diversity — in particular, the type of diversity that comes from multiple backgrounds, personality styles and ideas — is desirable. Otherwise, your company is unlikely to be able to adapt to changing circumstances.

“Take the time to understand what your culture really is. Consider written and unwritten rules and norms, people praised as heroes, practices taken for granted.”

Moreover, your culture will never change if you only hire people who think and act like those already at the organization. Innovation is impossible if would-be innovators are kept out.

To summarize: Hire Sally and she is likely to leave. Keep Sally out and your organization can stagnate and die. So what do you do?

For starters, take the time to understand what your culture really is. Consider written and unwritten rules and norms, people praised as heroes, practices taken for granted. Look around and describe the typical employee. In particular, ask yourself who is successful — who makes the high-potential list, who climbs faster than others, who is constantly praised by the powers that be.

Next, contrast your current culture with your prospective new hire. Will he or she fit in? If the answer is no, at the very least you owe it to the new hire to be honest. Talk about the barriers he or she will face. Also, you must come up with ways to help this person succeed. Finally, consider whether a change of culture is imminent. If so, how will you support the change?

There are no easy answers here. Sometimes you may decide that the new hire may be brilliant and competent but will simply not fit. Other times you will bite the bullet and hire the person anyway. Just don't do it blindly. Plan for it. Otherwise you're wasting time, wasting money and wasting talent.

Toward an Engaged Workforce

Now you know what *not* to do and possibly have a few new ideas. Too many ideas, however, can paralyze you. Do yourself (and your employees) a favor and keep it simple. What is one thing — one thing only — that you can do today after reading this article?

Pick that one thing and run with it. Your employees will thank you. So will your organization.

ⁱ Langelaan, S., Bakker, A. B., Van Doornen, L. J., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2005). Burnout and work engagement: Do individual differences make a difference?

Personality and Individual Differences, 40, 521–532.

ⁱⁱ Rich, B. (2006). Job engagement: Construct validation and relationships with job satisfaction, job involvement, and intrinsic motivation. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Florida, p. 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Langelaan et al., 2004; Rich, 2006; also Wildermuth, C. (2008). Engaged to serve: The relationship between employee engagement and the personality of human services professionals and paraprofessionals. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Bowling Green State University.

^{iv} McCrae, R. (2006). Psychopathology from the perspective of the five-factor model. In S. Strack (Ed.), Differentiating normal and abnormal psychology (pp. 53–64). New York: Springer Publishing Company.

^v Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. Academy of Management Journal, 33, 692–724.

^{vi} Also from Kahn, W.A. (1990).

^{vii} Towers Perrin. (2008). Towers Perrin global workforce study executive report. Retrieved from www.towersperrin.com.

^{viii} Kahn (1990) suggested that meaningfulness is vital to engagement. Meaningfulness means the sense that one's work matters. Recognition is likely to affect meaningfulness.

^{ix} Sonnentag, S. (2003). Recovery, work engagement, and proactive behavior: A new look at the interface between nonwork and work. Journal of Applied Psychology, 88 (3), 518–528.

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