

Beyond Rules of Engagement: *How Can Organizational Leaders Build a Culture that Supports High Engagement?*



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A Dale Carnegie® White Paper

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Engagement is an unusual word. The dictionary suggests that the word is synonymous with commitment. But, in everyday language, it is most often associated with marriage proposals.

Considering that more than half of all marriages in the U.S. end tragically in divorce, the word engagement is perhaps not necessarily the best way to describe workplace commitment.

What is employee engagement, and why should managers care about it? What does research tell us about it? How do organizations encourage engagement? How can an organization move beyond engaging individual employees to creating a socially cohesive corporate culture in which people are fully engaged? This Dale Carnegie® white paper addresses these important questions.

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Defining *Employee Engagement* and Making the Case for It

There is no such thing as a standard definition of employee engagement. But mostly everyone agrees that employee engagement involves a workplace in which workers:

- Feel personally and emotionally bound to the organization
- Feel pride in recommending it as a good place to work to other people
- Get more than just wage or salary from working there and are attached to the intrinsic rewards they gain from being with the organization, and
- Feel a close attachment to the values, ethics and actions embodied by the organization

In some respects, it may be easier to define the toxic workplace than to describe a *fully engaging workplace*. Perhaps the best embodiment of such a bad place and the unusual behavior it can engender was the 1853 Herman Melville story "*Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*." A scrivener in those days was akin to a legal clerk. The story is about a manager in a law office who hires an employee named Bartleby, hoping that his seemingly even temperament would bring a calming influence to his other law clerks. But the manager soon learns, to his dismay, that Bartleby has moved into the office and lives there full-time. His life lacks all meaning or purpose. He rejects a growing number of work duties with a simple "I prefer not to." Eventually he does no work at all because he prefers to do nothing. The manager finds it impossible to get rid of Bartleby, so he moves the law office. Even then Bartleby refuses to move, is eventually thrown in prison for that refusal, and finally starves to death because eating is something he "prefers not to" do.



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- *Feel a close attachment to the values, ethics and actions embodied by the organization*

The Dale Carnegie® Perspective ...

Dale Carnegie espouses the responsibility assumption. What you believe about other people affects their behavior. If you want them to change, you must change your own attitudes about them and then display that in your behavior. If managers want to encourage high engagement, they must believe it exists with their workers and act accordingly.

Why should managers and workers care about engagement? One reason is that high levels of employee engagement lead to lower turnover rates, since there is a close link between company image and individual self-image in highly engaging workplaces. Without close attachments to the workplace, people feel alienated and will usually seek greener pastures elsewhere. A second reason is that it just makes sense to conclude that workplaces in which employees have a high level of self-interest invested in the organization's success will be highly productive, a fact that research supports (*Globoforce Survey Results, 2007*). A third reason is that a high engagement workplace (HEW) is one in which people want to work and want to be highly involved because self-interest and organizational interest are closely aligned. A fourth reason is that, according to Gallup research, there is a high correlation between innovation and workplaces with high levels of engagement (*Gallup Reveals the Formula for Innovation, 2007*).



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What Research Indicates About Employee Engagement

According to Profiles International—Imagine Great People™ study, about \$350 billion per year is lost because of employee disengagement. This \$2.3 million study examined 8,000 employees in a cross-section of industries. The findings indicated that workers could really be classified into six major groups:

- **Detached Contributors**—15% (national average). These people see the value of work for its near-term economic benefit.
- **Stalled Optimists**—19% (national average). For this segment, work is a source of livelihood but not yet (or not currently) a satisfying priority in their lives.
- **Maverick Contributors**—15% (national average). For Maverick Contributors, work is one of the multiple opportunities they have for change and excitement in their lives.
- **Self-Empowered Innovators**—14% (national average). To them, work is about creating something with lasting value beyond themselves.
- **Fair & Square Traditionalists**—20% (national average). Work is about upward mobility—a predictable upward mobile path to success.
- **Accomplished Contributors**—17% (national average). For these people, work is an opportunity to be a valuable part of a winning team.

Managers play a major role in establishing and maintaining an engaging workplace. Building an engaging work climate is not something that the HR department does. Rather, managers play an active—and daily—role in the climate. If managers focus on the positive with their workers, they foster an engaging work climate. But if managers constantly criticize workers, micromanage what they do, and fail to recognize their efforts, then the managers' behaviors swell the ranks of not engaged and actively disengaged workers.



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The Dale Carnegie® Perspective ...

Dale Carnegie once said that "Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain, but it takes character and self control to be understanding and forgiving." He also said "act enthusiastic, and you will be enthusiastic."

Organizational Practices to Encourage Employee Engagement

Employee engagement programs are like other things: you get out of it what you put into it. If organizational leaders expect instant results from such programs, then they are pursuing a flavor of the month. True change requires long-term commitment to the effort.

The evidence suggests that workers are growing increasingly cynical because they see their leaders too often saying one thing and doing another—and too often chasing fads and expecting instant gratification from them (Lines, 2005). Rather than point their fingers at workers alone, the leaders must first “walk the walk and talk the talk.” What managers do and how they behave sets the tone for employee engagement. The first lesson is that workers model their leaders’ behavior. If leaders are not fully engaged, workers will not be either. Managers must model the level of engagement they seek. And HR’s role is to serve as coach to managers when they do otherwise.

Every element of the organization needs to be reconsidered for how much it fosters engagement. Managers and other organizational leaders should consider how workers are:

- Recruited
- Selected
- Given feedback
- Rewarded
- Promoted
- Recognized for accomplishments
- Emotionally invested in the organization’s mission
- Socially involved with peers
- Included in a highly cohesive team
- Socially involved with their immediate supervisor
- Proud to recommend the organization’s products, services or employment to others
- Proud when the organization is recognized for excellence



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Three Major Pitfalls to Avoid When Trying to Increase Employee Engagement

Do **Not** Assume:

1. *This is an issue that can be handed off to the HR department without significant line management involvement.*
2. *That higher salaries alone will increase engagement.*
3. *That employee work ethic, or lack of it, is the root cause of problems with engagement. That amounts to blaming the worker rather than having management accept accountability to do something to improve engagement.*

Building a fully engaging workplace requires a change effort—an Organizational Development (OD) intervention—that is intended to build a new corporate culture. As in most OD interventions, organizational leaders should focus on building commitment by building involvement. They must sacrifice attention on getting results that they define to getting results that they and workers jointly define (Rothwell and Sullivan, 2005). The key is a focus on interpersonal relationships—how things are done and how people work together—rather than the shorter but less effective approach of dictating the outcomes desired.



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Five Things an Organization Can Do to Ensure Success in Improving Employee Engagement

- 1. Create a corporate culture that encourages engagement*
- 2. Measure employee engagement periodically*
- 3. Develop action plans by organization, department and individual to address the root causes of problems that lead to employee disengagement*
- 4. Hold people accountable for demonstrating progress in building engagement*
- 5. Reward those who demonstrate progress in building engagement (while remembering that not all rewards need to be financial)*

Moving Beyond Individual Engagement to Create a Corporate Culture of Engagement

Individuals, coworkers, managers, HR departments, and top managers should be considered when attempting to build a climate of full engagement.

Engagement and the Individual

A common mistake that many managers make is to focus solely on what is wrong with individuals who demonstrate a lack of commitment. But, instead of doing that, they should instead ask, "Why are some people not engaged or actively disengaged?" Granted, there are occasions when lack of engagement is solely attributable to the individual. The person simply has a bad attitude or lacks awareness of what impact his or her contribution makes to other workers, the organization as a whole, customers, distributors, suppliers or the community. But the question to ask is this: *Was the person hired that way, or did something happen in the organization that prompted that attitude?* If the person was hired that way, the organization should revisit its recruitment and selection methods. Is any effort made to look for evidence of high engagement in the work history of job applicants? If the person was not hired that way, what experiences in the organization made him or her that way? How could the issues of those past experiences be addressed?

The individual who demonstrates full engagement will:

- Emphasize the positive about the organization—what is going right
- Look for occasions to say good things about the organization, manager, department or people
- Volunteer for extra duties
- Express approval about what the organization is doing and why it is doing it
- Speak highly of the organization to coworkers, friends, relatives, and members of the community



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The Dale Carnegie® Perspective ...

Dale Carnegie once said that "It isn't what you have, or who you are, or where you are, or what you are doing that makes you happy or unhappy. It is what you think about."

The Dale Carnegie® Perspective ...

The most famous Dale Carnegie® program is the "Dale Carnegie® Course: Effective Communications & Human Relations." It builds effective interpersonal skills, essential to employee engagement. The program can be offered in-house for maximum impact to address the needs of many managers or other leaders at the same time.

Engagement and Coworkers

Peers play an important role in influencing the attitudes of their peers. Human beings do sometimes exercise a herd instinct, and that instinct can be seen in the influence of peers.

The stories that workers tell about their supervisors, the organization, the customers, and important issues affecting the work setting (such as how pay raises are allocated, work is done, or the value of the work itself) can influence people from the first day on the job. If a new hire is paired up with an actively disengaged worker, it should come as no surprise if the new hire comes to have a jaundiced view of the organization. For that reason, great care should be taken in how new hires are introduced to the workplace—and by whom.

Coworkers who demonstrate the right example of engagement will:

- Ask questions about the person each day to show he or she cares
- Listen for feelings as well as facts—and follow up to show a willingness to help
- Invite coworkers out for social occasions
- Work for the inclusiveness of everyone rather than encouraging “cliques”
- Stress the positive
- Refuse to listen to self-deprecation and focus on what a new hire or other workers do right
- Refuse to pass bad gossip about others



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Engagement and the Manager

How managers behave impacts what employees feel. An employee's attitude about the workplace and the organization is influenced dramatically by what his or her boss says and does.

If the immediate supervisor takes joy in workers' accomplishments, emphasizes what is right, makes an effort to catch people doing something right and praise them for it, and regularly takes steps to recognize and fairly reward achievement, then workers will feel that their efforts do matter. But if managers are distant, seldom straying from their offices or from meetings, and provide feedback only when it is negative, then the manager's behavior is creating a toxic workplace rather than an engaged workplace.

Managers who build the right climate will:

- Recruit and select people in part based on their track record of engagement with past employers
- Ask questions about what people feel about the organization, work, customers and other key issues, and then take steps to remove barriers to results
- Focus on identifying individual strengths and leveraging those to the advantage of the individual, team, and organization
- Recognize achievement rather than envying it or trying to steal the credit for it
- Develop people for engagement as well as for knowledge and skills
- Provide encouragement when people seem to be unhappy or disappointed



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Engagement and the HR Department

In a fully engaging workplace, the HR department will fully support engagement and will downplay or try to find ways to avoid those actions that appear to show a punitive or toxic climate. The ways to do that are to:

- Recruit and prescreen for behaviors associated with full engagement
- Survey the organization periodically to find strengths and areas for improvement
- Encourage people to focus on the positive
- Encourage people to identify their own strengths and leverage them
- Encourage people to identify the strengths of their supervisors and learn from them
- Encourage managers and others to be positive role models
- Coach individuals when their behavior demonstrates something other than full engagement
- Role model what full engagement should look like in word and deed
- Establish planned engagement programs and help to coordinate them
- Conduct exit interviews to find out the real root causes for individuals to leave



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Engagement and Top Managers

In a fully engaging workplace, top managers will fully support engagement. They will:

- Role model what full engagement looks like
- Find occasions to praise people for what they do right
- Encourage individual and organizational development
- Recognize achievements publicly
- Discuss problems privately
- Emphasize the positive
- Provide the resources to make a planned engagement program happen
- Personally devote time and attention to encouraging engagement
- Coach individuals who do not demonstrate behaviors that encourage engagement

A real goal of employee engagement should be to establish a joint organizational vision, excite people to realize that vision, explore practical ways to make that vision a reality, and work toward implementing that vision. This approach to organizational change is called appreciative inquiry or positive change theory. Applying it to organizational and individual change is a way to move employee engagement from a dream to a reality.

Engagement and the Organization

Concerted action is required by the whole organization—not just individuals or isolated groups—to address engagement issues. It must be approached systematically as part of a “whole systems transformation effort” that tries to unleash individual, group and organizational engagement. Management’s role is to discover what disengages people and try to knock down those barriers—or perceptions of barriers. HR can facilitate the process, and individuals can accept responsibility to do soul-searching, find what will engage them more, and work to realize those goals.



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Conclusion

Engagement is not the latest fad. But it can become a fad if it is undertaken without role modeling what full engagement looks like and expecting instant results. Building a climate of engagement should be the focus. Individuals should not be held to blame; rather, an organization's leaders should re-examine everything that the organization does to support full engagement and what has happened that may have contributed to alienation. By doing so, leaders will show their genuine commitment to engagement and will be effective role models for it.

Dale Carnegie Training® has vast experience in increasing employee engagement and transforming companies into high performance organizations. For more information, contact your local Dale Carnegie® office at www.dalecarnegie.com.



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