

Building Worker Engagement on Your Team

A Roadmap for Leaders and Managers

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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I commonly see leaders and managers make a flawed assumption. New managers are especially prone to this mistake. They presume that they and their people are motivated by the same values and aspirations.

Sometimes that's true. Most often it's not. Leaders who act on this mistaken assumption frequently experience a notable failure rate in their motivational efforts. Their efforts are structured around values which the leader holds dear, not necessarily the values which are important to his or her people.

Managers and leaders are far more likely to succeed as motivators if they truly know their people. This means that managers must be engaged with their workers. People are not particularly inspired or effectively motivated by leaders who seem unengaged, aloof, or disinterested in them.

Engagement between leaders and their team needs to be deep enough that leaders readily understand what values have the greatest appeal to their people, both collectively and individually. Today we are talking about how to build that kind of engagement. It's an essential skill if you are going to upsize your leadership.

For years, the Gallup Organization has conducted extensive surveys to determine the level of worker engagement around the world. Their annual statistics are shocking and have held rather steady for years on end. In their global survey, the U.S. and Canada fare better than most other

regions. But even there, fewer than one-third of the workers are genuinely engaged with their organization.

This does not mean that the other two-thirds are unproductive. They may, in fact, be performing at acceptable levels. Some may even be stellar in their performance.

Overall, however, these unengaged workers are somewhat indifferent toward their organization. They feel no particular passion for it, no great loyalty to it. It's just a place to earn a paycheck. What this translates into is workers who give organizations their time, but not necessarily the best that they have to offer.

Compared to most industrialized nations, the U.S. and Canada are ahead of the pack in terms of worker engagement. In Western Europe the engagement level is a mere 10%, and it's only slightly higher in Eastern Europe. Australia and New Zealand are at similar levels. Of the industrialized nations, only the East Asian economic stalwarts like Japan and South Korea exceed the level of engagement in North America.

For decades, business schools and management gurus in the U.S. have touted the importance of engagement. That's a primary reason, no doubt, that engagement levels in the American workplace rank favorably compared to Europe. **Many corporate entities in North America have been intentional and proactive in promoting engagement. Still, there is scant room for pride when only a third of your workforce is truly engaged.**

Disengagement is costly. Unengaged workers pull down productivity and, as a consequence, profits. Not only that, unengaged workers take a toll on morale and team spirit. *Globally, Gallup sets the price tag for disengagement at seven trillion dollars in lost productivity.* Critics may argue that this number is too high. But even if the figure is overblown by 50%, the loss is still staggering.

Interestingly, while Gallup focuses on worker engagement with the organization, **engagement is primarily a product of what happens in the interaction of leaders and managers with their teams.** Managers who are unengaged with their people elevate the likelihood that their people will be unengaged with the organization.

Therefore, I want to take up the topic of engagement today in the context of the relationship between managers and their workers, whether in the for-profit sector or in the non-profit world. And I want to begin by doing a brief word study of that word “engagement.”

Dependent on the context, the word “engagement” has a variety of connotations. For one thing, it can refer to a connection. When a locking mechanism is fully engaged, it is appropriately connected. “Engagement” can also refer to commitment and care. When a man and woman are engaged to be married, they are fully committed to one another. And their commitment demonstrates how much they each care for the other.

“Engagement” can also refer to collaborative communication. When we fully engage someone in conversation, there is thoughtful, two-way dialogue in which we each listen carefully to what the other has to say.

In addition, “engagement” can refer to captivation. When we find an idea engaging, we say that it captivates us . . . that is, that it captures our imagination.

These four terms – connection, caring commitment, collaborative communication, and captivation -- form a helpful roadmap for the process by which managers engage their people successfully.

- As a manager you must first *connect* with your people at a personal level.
- Then, through this connection, you must *demonstrate your commitment* to them and *your care* for them.
- Next you must *practice collaborative communication* in your relationship with them
- And finally, you must convey your aspirations for them and for the organization in such a way that you *captivate* their imagination.

In effect, that’s your four-part strategy for enhancing engagement in your sphere of influence. We turn next, therefore, to examining each element of this strategy.

The first element in our strategy is to connect with your people. Here are three things which you can practice as a manager to create this connection.

First is presence. People are unlikely to connect with you if you are an absentee or inaccessible manager. Make a point of regularly “managing by walking about.” This means engaging people in conversation in their own work space, not yours. Use these conversations to demonstrate your concern for them and for their work environment.

As a rule of thumb, don’t use these drop-in visits to their workspace as a time to address accountability or disciplinary issues. Those are better reserved for your office, your own space. On the other hand, these drop-in visits are a great occasion to offer commendation. All the more so if the workspace is a cubicle or open work area, where others nearby are likely to hear your commendation. After all, what worker is not uplifted when praised in the hearing of their colleagues. As a friend of mine says, “Management by walking about aims primarily at catching people in the act of doing something right.”

A second way to build connection is through personal interest in individual workers. If you have a large team, make an effort to learn everyone’s name soon after they come on board. Learn where your people live. Express interest in knowing more about their family, their children, their hobbies. If it helps you remember these details, build a tickler file containing this information. Regularly ask for updates on activities which you know that they enjoy away from work. Send them emails or even better, personal notes on birthdays, wedding anniversaries, etc.

I would offer one caution, however. In expressing personal interest in people by inquiring about their life away from work, you never want to come across as intrusive. Intrusiveness destroys the very sense of connection which you are trying to foster. Rather, ask questions which allow the other person to offer personal information voluntarily.

For example, asking a new employee to tell you about his or her family might come across as intrusive. But no one is threatened by a question such as, “Do you and your family have a big weekend planned?” Or, “Is your family traveling for the holidays this year?” In all likelihood they will answer by sharing details which introduce their family into the conversation. And now that they have done so, you can ask other questions about the family as a natural extension of the

conversation. Questions like, “So, where did you and your husband meet?” Or, “Were all of your kids born here in this area?”

If they have family pictures displayed in their workspace, you can ask, “Are these your children?” Almost inevitably, they will start telling you about their family. If instead they reply with a simple “yes,” ask a follow-on question such as, “Is this a recent picture? Or are they much older now?” I seldom need to get beyond the follow-on question before we are comparing notes on our families, but at the worker’s initiative.

And the operative phrase in this sentence is “comparing notes.” Listen for comments from the other person which reveal an overlap in your backgrounds, experiences, or travels. Then capitalize on that overlap by sharing a brief story of how you had a similar experience or traveled to that same place. The more people recognize that they share things in common, the more likely they are to feel connected.

Which brings us to a third way to build connection, namely, through casual conversation. Provide opportunities for small gatherings of people to spend time with you in relaxed settings where they can come to know you better and you can come to know them better, as well. Some managers do this by having an informal lunch of sandwiches or pizza with a handful of workers on a weekly or monthly basis. Others do it by planning occasional outings to a restaurant or a happy hour after work.

While the topics of conversation at these gatherings will often revolve around work, there will also be space for non-work-related items to come up. You and your people will learn a great deal about one another in such settings. And they are great opportunities for team bonding.

The second stratagem for building engagement is to show caring commitment to your people. Workers are most easily motivated when they feel that the organization truly cares for them. And they measure that commitment, according to a variety of studies, by how much they believe that their immediate managers care for them personally.

Workers will judge your care and commitment by your actions, not your words. Fortunately, these actions are neither difficult nor demanding. Here are some simple ways in which you can show workers your caring commitment to them.

- Do everything practical to provide every worker with a safe, attractive, comfortable, functional working area.
- Show genuine interest in each person's career and professional development.
- Look for opportunities to encourage them to take advantage of events or training activities which could enhance their development
- Regularly ask, "What can I do to help you with your job and responsibilities?"
- Be responsive to their suggestions and complaints.
- Seek their input on changes that will impact them personally, their work team, or their work environment.
- Keep surprises to a minimum.
- Give them feedback when you take action on matters that they have brought to your attention. Provide feedback even when you decide not to pursue a suggestion or a recommendation from a team member. Use the feedback to let the team member know that his or her input was given thorough consideration.

We live in a world where people are part of fewer and fewer circles where they regularly experience caring concern. Families today are far-flung geographically. Neighborhoods are merely collections of isolated households. Weekly engagement in church or synagogue activities is nearing historic lows. People can increasingly count on one hand the number of people whom they perceive as truly caring for them.

In that kind of world, **a manager's caring concern leaves a marked impression. Worker's respond with appreciation and loyalty.** And in most cases, they up their game in order to meet their manager's expectations.

Our third stratagem for engaging workers is to practice collaborative conversation. Your goal as a leader or manager should be to foster an

atmosphere in which collaborative conversations between you and your team are commonplace. Here are some ways to nurture this kind of atmosphere.

First, be accessible and available. Make it as easy for your people to start a conversation with you as it is for you to start a conversation with them. You may not be in a position to make yourself available at all times. There may be times of the day or week that you need to be free of interruptions so you can focus on a key task.

Nevertheless, your people need to know that you want to be available to them and that you have provided easily accessible opportunities for them to gain access to you. Then continually encourage your people to use this means of access when they need to discuss something with you.

Second, ask questions. When you ask a question, you automatically signal an interest in reciprocal conversation. Your questions, moreover, should invite more than a simple “yes” or “no” answer. Ask questions which draw the other person into the conversation with substantive comments. Questions are also excellent mechanisms for identifying the values which motivate someone. Here are some examples of questions which uncover values:

- In recent months, what part of your job has given you the greatest satisfaction? How could it have been even more satisfying?
- If you were defining your ideal job, how would you describe it?
- What has been the proudest moment in your career?
- How do you determine that you are doing a good job?
- What part of your job do you find most enjoyable?
- If you could change one thing about your job, what would it be?
- What’s the most important thing for you in a job?
- As a team contributor, what kinds of contributions give you the greatest satisfaction?

Third, build collaborative conversation by listening more than you talk. People love to talk about themselves. And they are drawn to individuals who let them talk about their life, their interests, or their viewpoints. It is far easier to impress people by listening than by talking.

Fourth, be singularly focused during conversations with your people. Avoid talking to them while doing something else, even toying with a pen in your hand. Let them know that they have your undivided attention.

And fifth, be sure to seek feedback on lessons learned. Within hours or days of a project's completion (whether the project succeeded or not) conduct a "lessons learned" exercise to uncover ways for the organization to do things in a smarter way in the future. These should be exercises in which "stripes are parked at the door" (to use a military term) so that everyone in the room is on an even footing and all participants are free to offer their views and insights openly, with no fear of censure or adverse treatment because of their input.

In our four-part strategy for building engagement, our fourth stratagem is to captivate your people with your aspirations. One goal of motivation is to inspire people to give their best. They will do so only after they have something to aspire to. *There is no inspiration without aspiration.*

Therefore, you need to help people grasp your aspirations for the organization as a whole and for your team members both individually and as a group. This means that you must first gain clarity yourself regarding these outcomes. Until you yourself are clear about your aspirations for your people, you cannot translate these aspirations into language which will engage your team.

Beyond clarity, here are some additional keys to helping others become excited about your desired outcomes.

- Be enthusiastic and passionate about your aspirations. Let your enthusiasm show through in both your verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Show people the benefit which they derive if your goals are achieved. To this end, find every possible opportunity to speak of "our goals" instead of "my goals." You want everyone to have a sense of ownership in the aspirations which you lay out.
- Communicate using appropriate stories to capture their imagination. Stories are one of the most powerful engagement tools. An inspiring story will have far more impact on helping people see the importance of your aspirations than any set of slogans or some list of benefits.

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- Seek your team's input on the best ways for the organization to go about achieving your aspirations. People have far more excitement about what they help design than for things simply thrust upon them.

And finally, **by their very nature, people look to the future in hope that it holds some achievement which makes the sacrifices of the present both meaningful and worthwhile. When you captivate them with your aspirations, you help them find the promise of that achievement.** And in doing so, you infuse the present moment for them with a depth of meaning which leads naturally to greater engagement.

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