

(ALMOST) EVERYTHING WE THINK ABOUT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IS WRONG

Employees and the business outcomes they generate

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For years, the business world's approach to managing employee engagement has been out to lunch.

"Out to lunch" as when executives tell managers to get their employees more engaged by taking them out to Olive Garden more often.

Survey statistics drive home our engagement ignorance. For years, employee engagement scores have declined despite the millions of dollars companies have invested to boost sagging workforce morale. Engagement experts and practitioners continue to make commendable and reasoned efforts to encourage companies to better focus on and improve their engagement. Many of these professionals have been quite thoughtful in their approaches. That being said, shouldn't we see scores improving? Unfortunately, a recent Towers Watson survey has indicated that nearly two-thirds of U.S. employees are not fully engaged in their work and are less productive as a result. In response to survey results like this, executives exhort managers to spend even more time with their employees.

What if the lunch is disingenuous, boring, cheesy or even nasty? What if the additional time employees spend with their managers is tortuous and mundane rather than constructive, collaborative and inspirational? We know all too well what happens: employee engagement keeps plummeting, as it has for years. Once again, we've been applying a "how much" solution to a "HOW" problem.

The frequency of lunches, performance

reviews, volunteer program outings and team-building exercises does not produce higher levels of employee engagement. Employee engagement is determined by the quality and meaningfulness of these interactions, and the journey managers are enlisting their employees to engage in. Thanks to a much deeper statistical analysis of more than two million workplace observations from employees around the world, we now know:

- The specific organisational qualities that must be present in high amounts and must truly animate leadership, decision-making and behaviour throughout the company to create "super-engaged" employees; and
- When employees are super-engaged, they exhibit many more specific "engagement traits" – including a willingness to put in a great deal of extra effort, increased loyalty, a greater willingness to recommend their company as an employer of choice, efforts to inspire others in the company through concrete comments and actions, and similar outcomes – compared to other employees.

This is a Eureka moment for employee engagement: we've cracked the code on what truly inspires employees. The source of engagement has nothing to do with breaking bread (or bread sticks) and everything to do with the extent to which trust, values and mission actually inspire and drive daily activities and interactions. These determinants represent much deeper and more complex levers to

pull, yet they're also quantifiable and statistically valid. My company, LRN, conducted an independent statistical analysis of how things actually work at companies, small and large. We derived the analysis from a lengthy and rigorous empirical study of observations from 36,000 employees in 18 countries, conducted by the Boston Research Group, The Center for Effective Organisations at University of Southern California and Research Data Technology, Inc. When these observations were subjected to multivariate analyses – basically, the simultaneous observation and analysis of many, many outcome variables – the same result appeared every time. When trust, values and a purpose-driven mission exist to a statistically significant degree and guide leadership, decision-making and behaviour, these “enablers” give rise to a highly inspired group of super-engaged employees.

The analysis also tells us that when trust, values and a purpose-inspired mission do not drive behaviour in a company, far fewer of these engagement traits exist. Even worse, extremely low levels of these engagement sources produce a “disconnected” group of employees who work against or even sabotage company objectives.

Every organisation has some supply of trust, values and mission; however, the research shows that the companies with super-engaged employees treat these core enablers as a reactor. When this reactor heats up, it produces truly inspired employees who want to build cathedrals rather than merely lay bricks.

Our existing approach to employee engagement only produces brick-layers: people who perform tasks for money; people who may briefly become more productive in these tasks via one-off awards, bonuses and other motivations (whose positive effects fade as quickly as



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sugar highs); and people who feel stuck in unsatisfying, dead-end jobs when they truly desire careers.

In fact, we have what I would call a full-blown, yet rarely talked about, careers crisis on our hands. Because so many workers remain dissatisfied, unproductive and – far worse – disconnected in uninspiring, task-based jobs, they are not driving the innovation and well-informed risk-taking that stimulates growth and creates additional, and more meaningful jobs that our country needs. It's time to go on a journey from task-based jobs to values-based missions.

By misunderstanding, mismanaging and mis-measuring employee engagement, we are failing to provide a signal to our nation's most valuable resource: young workers. These people do not know

where to invest their energy, talent, skills, character and creativity. They are looking for careers, but we can barely provide them with jobs.

By understanding the true source of super-engaged workers, our companies and their leaders can have their business lunches and enjoy what they eat during these collaborative, inspirational and productive sessions, too.

Further, by deploying trust, values and a purpose-driven mission as the primary drivers for all business activities, interactions and decisions, companies can transform a workforce of bricklayers into a highly coordinated and inspired team of cathedral-builders whose inspired work generates both success and significance for our companies and the world.

About the author:

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