



Getting Engaged: Top Tips for an Engaged Workforce

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Abstract

This white paper discusses employee work engagement, or the dedication, energy, and absorption that employees feel at work. The authors provide an overview of this topic and explicate what managers can do to improve engagement in their workplace.

Introduction

In today's dynamic and turbulent organizations, many top management executives are becoming increasingly concerned with having a workforce that is invigorated and excited about their work on a day-to-day basis. Some may ask: "If people are not engaged, how can [managers and leaders] attain those business objectives that are critical to improving organizational performance?" (Seijets & Crim, 2006, p. 1). For these reasons, *employee engagement* is rapidly being viewed as key to improve worker attitudes and bottom-line outcomes (Macey & Schneider, 2008). The importance of work engagement for organizations means that individuals at all levels of the organization need to understand what engagement is and how to foster it daily.

Background

Although there are multiple descriptions of employee engagement, most include both attitudinal and behavioral components. One all-encompassing definition is: "employee engagement is a desirable condition, has an organizational purpose, and connotes involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, focused effort, and energy" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 4). In general, there are three key components of engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004):

Key components of work engagement

- *Dedication*: employees should be enthusiastic and feel pride towards their work.
- *Vigor*: employees should be invested in their work, and persist during challenges.
- *Absorption*: employees should be very engrossed in their work.

Employee engagement is related to other employee attitudes like job satisfaction, commitment, job involvement, and empowerment, all of which are important for fostering a positive work environment. Although there are similarities, these definitions are not synonymous; in fact, the constructs may actually be catalysts *for* engagement at work. Moreover, employees can experience engagement in a variety of ways (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

Ways Employees Experience Engagement

- *Trait engagement*: the extent to which employees have positive, proactive views of their work in general.
- *State engagement*: how much employees feel engaged on a day-to-day basis.
- *Behavioral engagement*: behaviors that go “above-and-beyond” typical performance as a result of engagement, such as personal initiative, citizenship behaviors, etc.

Trait engagement tends to be relatively stable in people and thus may be more resistant to organizational efforts to increase engagement. Behavioral engagement may be viewed as an outcome of experiencing engagement at work. However, *state engagement* is highly malleable; that is, state engagement may fluctuate substantially day-to-day and moment-to-moment.

Figure 1 reflects the daily engagement experience of an employee that is attributable to the various work events he/she may experience. Some events, like learning about a new type of work-related task, may promote high levels of engagement because the situation allows employees to master a new aspect of their job. However, attending meetings that are peripheral to task accomplishment, or venting around the water cooler, may actually detract from daily engagement experiences. Because of this variability, managers have the opportunity to craft employees’ daily work routines in order to promote the highest levels of engagement possible.

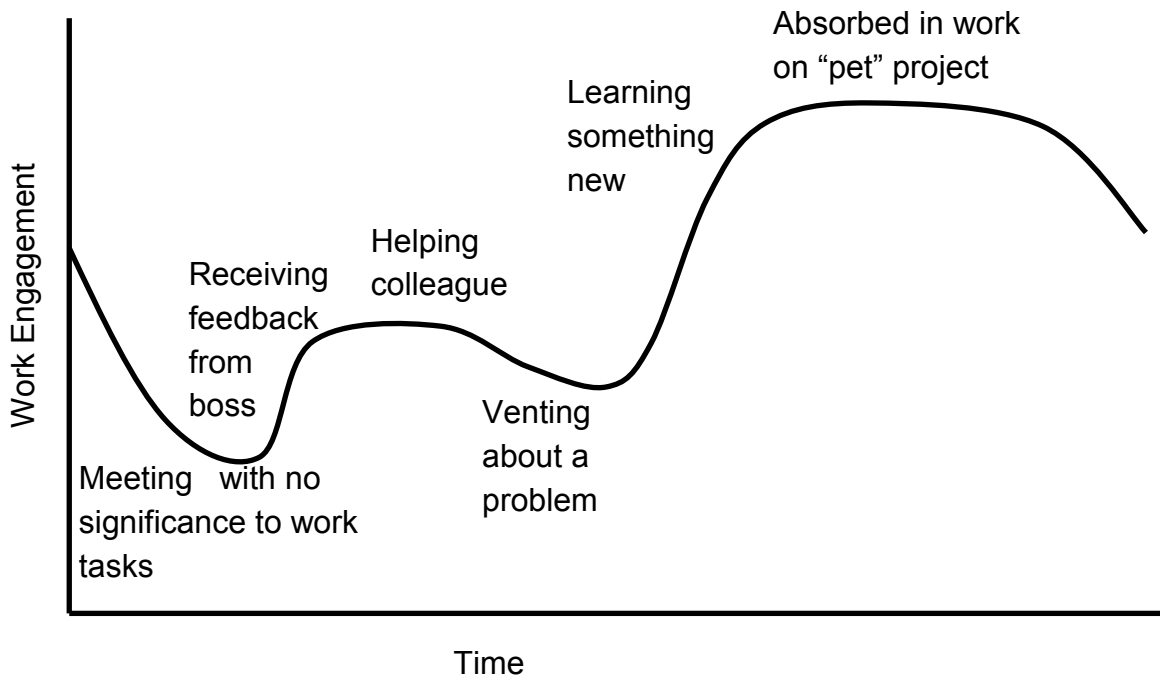


Figure 1: Example of daily variation in work engagement.

Implications for Practice

Specific aspects of the work environment can foster engagement. For instance, jobs that provide higher levels of autonomy to employees and have higher levels of task variety and significance yield increased engagement (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Employees that perceive a work task as a challenge rather than a hindrance are more likely to be engaged (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010). However, it is not just work aspects that matter but also the work environment created by management. Managers that engage in just, fair practices are more likely to improve employee engagement (Saks, 2006).

Why does employee engagement matter? Individual employees who are highly engaged are rated as better performers by their supervisors and coworkers (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008), engage in more citizenship or helping behaviors, and also have higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Saks, 2006). Recent research also shows that when employees are highly engaged, customer experiences improve (Sherwood, 2013). The main antecedents and outcomes associated with employee engagement are in Table 1.

Table 1: Antecedents and Outcomes of Employee Engagement

Antecedents of work engagement	Outcomes of work engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task variety • Employee support • Task significance • Transformational leadership • Recovery experiences & activities • Work-role fit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee task performance • Employee proactivity and helping behaviors • Employee job satisfaction and positive affect • Reduced withdraw and turnover • Service climate of team/unit • Customer experiences and loyalty

How can managers foster and cultivate engagement within their employees? Although no engagement-improving initiatives have been tested to date, the following practices are a great place to start to improve employee engagement at work:

- Increase the amount of feedback employees receive about their work
- Help employees see the significance, or importance, of the tasks they are performing
- Allow employees to have more autonomy, or control, over when tasks are completed
- Create systems for social support and mentoring
- Encourage employees to take short breaks to recover levels of engagement
- Hire individuals that fit within the work environment and job role
- Develop programs for employees to voice their opinion in a safe environment
- Examine how employees can take on tasks that are viewed as a positive challenge
- Enhance the task variety that an employee can complete
- Reduce administrative hassles and role overload
- Improve reward and recognition initiatives

As a cautionary note, when trying to improve employee engagement, we suggest utilizing a questionnaire with items focused on employee energy, dedication, and absorption, such as the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Seppälä et al., 2008). The Gallup Q12 Instrument is a frequently used tool (e.g., Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002), but it is more a measure of employee perceptions of work characteristics rather than engagement itself. This means it may miss the mark as organizations try to make targeted efforts to help get employees engaged.

Next steps

It is clear that engagement is important for practitioners. Though more work is needed to continue to enhance our understanding of engagement, given the rapid increase in focus on improved employee well-being, we predict that interest in engagement will continue to grow. After all, as Cartwright and Holmes (2006) said, all managers need to be focused on reducing employee cynicism and putting meaning back into the workplace. By fostering employee engagement, there is the potential to put fulfillment and energy back into organizations, which would create a much brighter work environment for all.

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