

In Search of Passion: The Personal Side of Engagement

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Marta is a young attorney from Rio de Janeiro, a recent graduate of PUC Rio de Janeiro law school. Although she has little practical experience, Marta impresses the interviewers of one of the city's best law firms, and is hired soon after graduating. Marta's boss, Ricardo, is a good leader – an experienced attorney, with good reputation in the office, appreciated by his colleagues and by subordinates alike. Ricardo has excellent expectations for Marta. Marta's future under this mentor could not be more promising – but then the problems begin. Marta begins to create ill feelings with clients and her colleagues. She is always in a bad mood and flustered. Any problem affects her – even minor situations. In a short time Marta isolates herself, refusing the help of her colleagues, answering questions and responding to her boss's suggestions curtly. One year after hiring Marta, Ricardo realizes he made a mistake and is ready to fire her.

In the other side of the city, Luis is a young messenger who works in a small consulting company. Luis only managed to finish high school, and did not have the means to attend college, his dream. In spite of this, Luis is always in a good mood and is helpful - he takes packages to the post office, goes to banks, delivers proposals to important clients, answers the phone. The work load is wearying and the two partners are sometimes tired and very distressed with the highs and lows of the new business to pay any attention to Luis. Luis does not let the routine work, fatigue, low salary, or the nervousness of the partners get to him – soon he becomes so vital for his bosses that he is promoted to administrative assistant. A few months later Luis supervises the secretary and the messenger, begins to help with contracts, and even accompanies the bosses to an overseas trip. Marcos and Eduardo, in hindsight, realize they were very lucky, in that they found a future manager in this messenger, who was ready to help them propel the young company ahead.

Passion is contagious.

How many times have you found passionate people at work – people whose shiny eyes, rhythm, enthusiasm, encourage colleagues to dream higher and to work with greater effort? Passion is contagious, and the passionate employee is worth his weight in gold. Is it possible to hire only passionate employees? This article connects passion to a very important term in human resource management: engagement.

What is engagement?

The Dutch researcher Wilmar Schaufeli¹ defined engagement as the result of the powerful combination of three factors: *Strength, Absorption, and Dedication.*

Strength has to do with energy. When we have strength, we do not feel overloaded or tired even at the end of the day. *Absorption* is a synonym of focus or concentration. When we are absorbed in a task, time goes by fast and nothing appears more important than the task at hand, which absorbs and captivates us. Finally, *Dedication* is the combination of pride, enthusiasm, and strong identification with the work. A professional with a high level of *Dedication*, does not work only because he needs to work but also because he has fallen in love with his profession a long time ago, and cannot imagine himself doing something else.

Imagine... how would your company be if all of your employees worked, from day one, with a high level of *Strength*, *Absorption*, and *Dedication*? Are there similar super men and women?

The Engaged Personality

Research *about* engagement indicates that there is a small, but significant percentage of *easily engageable* persons. For example, a recent study by researcher Saar Langelaan et al.ⁱⁱ reveals that an engaged person:

- Is calm, feels comfortable with changes, and has a healthy self-esteem.
- Feels responsible for his own actions, is proactive.
- Is assertive and communicates well.

The engaged person, therefore, is a calm, flexible, confident, independent and assertive person, capable of changing situations that are not favorable and therefore, be able to “re-engage” when necessary. In order to better explain the connection between personality and engagement I will introduce an extremely important model: the “Five Factors” Model.

The Five Factors burst into the scene

The “Five Factors” personality model has gained importance in the last 15 years (for example, see the work of Americans Paul Costa and Robert McCraeⁱⁱⁱ). This model concentrates personality traits in 5 areas: Stability Need, Extroversion, Originality, Accommodation, and Awareness.

- Stability Need is tolerance to stress.
- Extroversion is tolerance to feeling stimulus, being comfortable with group work.
- Originality is the interest on innovation, imagination, being comfortable with changes.
- Accommodation is tendency to serve, tolerance to desires and meet needs of others.
- Consolidation is the level of focus, concentration, and discipline.

The research done by Saar Langelaan et al. reveals that more “engageable” persons:

- Have lower *Stability need*, which makes them calmer, self confident, and flexible.

- Have greater *Extroversion*, a trait that is related with communication skill, energy, and assertiveness.

Furthermore, the work of American researcher Pierce Howard^{iv} adds the following:

- Persons with high *Originality* feel more comfortable in change situations.
- Persons with low *Accommodation* are more assertive.
- Persons with high *Consolidation* have more focus and are more concentrated.

The “Five Factors” model, therefore, allows the identification of potentially engageable employees: low stability need, high extroversion, high originality, low accommodation, and high consolidation. Then, all we need to do is include a good personality test in our selection processes and search for persons with these traits... is that right?

The Dilemma of Engagement

Unfortunately, no. First of all, it is statistically impossible for most companies to recruit a sufficient number of employees with the above mentioned characteristics– the “naturally engageable” constitute the minority of the population.

Additionally, even if the selection of “easily engageable” persons were possible, it would hardly be desirable. After all, not all professions require calm, assertive or original employees. Imagine the following situations:

- A calm and optimist profession... and a profession that requires extreme caution, the capacity of anticipating problems before they occur.
- An assertive professional with extremely high self esteem... in a service profession that involves work that requires compassion and little interest on personal visibility.
- An original professional, interested in changes... and a profession that includes a large quantity of routine tasks.

The examples above demonstrate that even if certain personality features make a person “easily engageable” this does not mean that such features will always be desirable. The diversity of personalities, on the other hand, allow a more efficient allocation of tasks.

Fortunately, the connection between personality and engagement is not absolute. The personality facilitates the engagement, but does not determine it. There seems to be a connection between a person’s passions and that person’s personality. For example:

- Persons with *low originality* tend to prefer environments that emphasize tradition, minimize changes, and observance of internal rules and policies.

- Persons with *high accommodation* tend to prefer service oriented careers and team collaboration.
- Persons with *low consolidation* probably feel happier in flexible environments, with multiple tasks and without much perfection requirement.

The usefulness of personality study, therefore, is much greater than the identification of the less “engageable.” Instead, the personality study allows the human resources professional to be a better “matchmaker,” better positioning the company’s talents to maximum engagement.

Implications of Practice: Engagement Champions

In order to realize the potential of the professionals under our care, engagement is fundamental. Take into consideration the following:

- *Passion is a democratic concept.* The engagement does not depend on the specific personality, but rather the passion for the work. Everybody can become *passionate* although not everybody is already *passionate*. Instead of searching for naturally engageable persons (which is neither possible or desirable) select persons who have personality features that better match the work they do.
- *Facilitate internal transfers.* Employees with weak evaluations are unlikely to have the necessary support to search for other opportunities in the same company. However, the failure in one area does not determine the failure in the other – in the contrary, it is perfectly possible that the disengaged and unhappy employee has the necessary characteristics to do brilliant work in another department.
- *Do not worry if you cannot immediately reach all employees.* Recent research on engagement reveal that engagement is contagious - engaged employees tend to engage the others. Engaged leaders tend to lead engaged employees. Do what can be done, even if you do not get have a budget or time to reach all employees in the company immediately.

Lastly, engagement is a concept that is worth celebrating, sharing, and reinforcing in all training processes. The study of engagement must be incorporated to all leadership, team development programs and even orientation programs. Invest in the engagement of all your employees. Passion is worthwhile.

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ⁱ Schaufeli, W., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: the two-sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3, 71-92.

ⁱⁱ Langelaan, S., Bakker, A., Van Doornen, L., & Schaufeli, W. (2006). Burnout and work engagement: of the individual differences make the difference? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 40, 521-532.

ⁱⁱⁱ McCrae, R., & Costa, P. (1997). Personality trait structure as a human universal. *American Psychologist*, 52 (5), 509-516.

^{iv} Howard, P. J., & Howard, J. M. (2001). *The owner's manual for personality at work*. Marietta: Bard Press.