

## HOW TO DISENGAGE YOUR EMPLOYEES IN SEVEN SIMPLE LESSONS

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Engagement has lately become the “battle cry” of our field. That should come as no surprise – after all engaged employees are expected to be vigorous, enthusiastic, dedicated, and fully focused on their work<sup>i</sup>. Further, those who are fully engaged are likely to engage in activities that go “above and beyond” the call of duty. Examples might include “showing genuine concern and courtesy toward coworkers and giving up time to help others who have work or non-work problems”<sup>ii</sup>.

Recent studies on personal characteristics connected to engagement<sup>iii</sup> suggest that engagement does bear *some* connection to personality traits. In other words: Certain individuals are more likely than others to become engaged *no matter what*. The evidence so far suggests that being calm, extroverted, and focused *may* improve the odds of engagement. A simple solution, therefore, might be to “select for engagement” – all we need to do is to test for those characteristics amongst our incoming employees and bingo! You got engagement.

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Not so fast. First, personality is distributed quasi-normally<sup>iv</sup>. There are simply not enough individuals in the job market who are calm, extroverted, focused *and* have the job qualifications and experience to fill all available job slots. Secondly, not *all* jobs require these personality traits. For instance, some jobs can benefit from a “nervous edge” – a certain degree of worry and nervousness leading to empathy for others’ troubles. Other jobs need unfocused and free-flowing multitaskers. Still others are much better completed by solitary and independent introverts. Most importantly, however, the relationships identified between personality and engagement, while statistically significant, are not very strong. The search for the magical “engageable employee” is likely to remain elusive.

While the search for “automatic engagement” may be futile, however, the search for those likely to be engaged *under certain conditions* is still quite reasonable. Engagement, after all, is likely to be related to *congruence* – the “match” between *who* the person is and *what* he/she does.

## JOB AND ORGANIZATIONAL ENGAGEMENT: ARE THEY THE SAME?

There is one problem, though. The “match” you seek does not include only person and job. The organizational culture matters too.

First, there is a difference between *job* engagement and *organizational* engagement. One can love one’s job and hate one’s employer. One can be perfect for *what* one does – and still do it in the *wrong* place.

Here is an example: Imagine that you have just hired a *perfect* graphic artist: A young woman I’ll call “Sally.” Innovative and competent, Sally “thinks out of the box” and consistently creates beautiful high-quality designs. Moreover, the pieces Sally designs are exactly what your company needs – she knows how to listen to her internal clients, is assertive enough to “sell” her best ideas, and works well with her immediate team. There is only one

problem: Sally is a free spirited artist. She enjoys “expressing herself through her clothes” and has several body piercings. The place where she currently works? A serious suit-wearing no-nonsense and conservative family owned company. The human resources manager is quick to point out to Sally that there *is* a dress code. Further, Sally is asked to remove her piercings and to please, not speak *that* loud. And oh, Sally – speaking up “out of order” is frowned upon during our meetings. Make sure you wait for your turn. And that fabulous piece you’ve just created? Well... it *is* fabulous... but you really need to get the manager’s permission to present it before you show it to anyone else.

Within a few months Sally starts to feel despondent and discouraged. Gone are the days in which she couldn’t wait for Monday morning. She begins to drag tail. Here is the curious part, though: Not many people can tell how upset Sally really is – not yet. Sally’s work, you see, is still so *darn good*. She *still* goes above and beyond her call of duty. She *still* stays at her cube until the wee hours finishing something she’s excited about. There can’t possibly be any problem with Sally... until she presents you with a letter of resignation less than a year after she came on board. Good-bye Sally.

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## SEVEN DISENGAGEMENT LESSONS

If you really *want* to disengage people who start out engaged and enthusiastic there are a few simple things you can do:

### 1. Enforce *unnecessary* rules.

Every organization has rules around “the way things are done” – from dress code to punctuality to how people are expected to behave during staff meetings. It is a good idea to occasionally review those rules – *especially* the unwritten ones. Is it *really* important that people wear certain clothes? Do body piercings *really* make a difference? Does *everyone* have to participate in those monthly meetings?

Don’t get me wrong – some of those rules *matter*. Moreover, some rules are an integral part of your culture and the members of the culture *want* to keep them. You must understand, however, that engagement has to do with a close connection between person and job. Those who are engaged feel that being who they are is perfectly ok. Further, a key psychological condition preceding engagement is safety<sup>v</sup>. People need to feel that their natural behaviors will not result in negative repercussions. Logically, therefore, it is *disengaging* to tell someone that it is *not* ok to be who he/she is.

So – by all means enforce *necessary* rules – but beware the ones that truly *do not matter* for achieving your mission.

### 2. Make them fear for their jobs.

If safety impacts engagement, there are few environments less *disengaging* than one in which people live in constant fear. Each time you lay off a group of employees you give the “survivors” one more reason to believe that “they are next.”

Employees’ fear for their jobs, however, does not only impact *safety*. Fear also has a bearing on another key psychological condition preceding engagement: availability of resources<sup>vi</sup>. Reasonably, individuals need

emotional and physical resources in order to engage at work. When people's jobs are at stake, their *emotional* resources may be drained and their physical resources may be used to search for *another* job.

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*Recognition matters because it tells the employees that "their work matters."*

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### 3. Make it boring.

It's a simple matter to disengage your star employees: give them *only* routine tasks to perform, the kinds of tasks they *already* know how to perform. Ignore their need for learning and growth.

Indeed, engagement seems to be connected to challenge<sup>vii</sup>. Generally, individuals are more engaged when they feel that there is more to learn and farther to go. A recent study conducted by the consulting firm Towers Perrin found that skill acquisition opportunities (i.e., opportunities for learning new skills and competencies) correlated with engagement.<sup>viii</sup>

Of course, as with all things human, the "make it boring and disengage" rule has exceptions. Some people simply prefer routine and are *more* engaged when their job has little variety. At the very least, get to know your employees. Find out how much challenge they can tolerate... and then do your best to oblige them.

### 4. Ignore contributions.

Recognizing others' contributions is hard work. It is not something you can accomplish once a year in "award" ceremonies where either a) very few people "win" the top prize (while everyone else is ignored) or b) everyone gets some insipid generic prize for one more year at the organization. Instead, having a culture of recognition should be an *obsession* at engaging organizations. *Everyone* should be encouraged to recognize the contributions of peers, subordinates, and supervisors – and do so frequently.

Recognition matters because it tells the employees that "their work matters." As a result, employees feel valuable and valued – and such feelings tend to enhance engagement<sup>ix</sup>. In order to matter, however, recognition has to happen regularly – and for it to happen regularly it cannot be the result of a major production. No, you don't need a major award ceremony. No, it doesn't have to cost a mint. Encourage people to say thank you – truly and sincerely. Have little "congratulations" cards available for all. Talk to people about the value of recognition. Run recognition training programs for *everyone* (not only for managers). All these little tasks may, together, help you re-energize the disengaged employees and keep engaged those who have not yet "lost their spark".

### 5. Pay NO attention to human relations problems.

We are paid to work. There is no time for fluff – especially the game-playing barbecue-grilling potluck-organizing "fluff" those of us in the consulting business like to recommend.

Here's a newsflash: We are *all* in the *people* business. We can't make widgets without people. We can't sell services without people. We can't run our operations without people. And people are messy. They have conflicts, they have different styles, and they get offended at one another. It happens. And *not* paying attention to human issues at your organization will not make them go away. Instead – those pesky human relations problems will go a long way towards making everyone feel unsafe – and safety, remember, is a key engagement component.

So warm up those barbecue grills. Take the time for weekend picnics. Or, if you have the extra time and money, do organize team building sessions and collaboration programs, and anything else you can think of that will bring folks together. Relationships at work can be a major force towards engagement – or they can disengage your stars faster than a crumbling economy ever could.

## 6. Work them to death.

Ah, workaholicism. Such a beautiful word. It reminds one of late evenings at the office finishing one more proposal, weekend meetings (announced at the last minute), hurried luncheons at one's desk two seconds before the next meeting.

Problem is – engagement requires some level of *moderation*.<sup>x</sup> After all, engagement requires considerable energy – and energy *does* get depleted, even when the person loves what he/she does, even when the other conditions are just right.

Take the time to smell the roses. Encourage people to *stop*.

## 7. Ignore the *culture* of the organization in your hiring process.

A certain degree of “fit” is necessary for engagement. Organizational cultures may change – but they are likely to change *very* slowly. Your brilliant new hire may have a short career at your organization if he/she is totally opposite to everyone else around. In other words: Brilliant graphic designer Sally may simply have been a poor hiring decision.

Now, don't get me wrong. Some diversity – in particular the type of diversity that comes from multiple backgrounds, personality styles, and ideas – is desirable. Otherwise your company is unlikely to be able to adapt to changing circumstances. Moreover, your culture will *never* change if you *only* hire people who think and act like the ones who already are at the organization. Innovation is *not* possible if would be innovators are kept out.

To summarize: Hire Sally and she is likely to leave. Keep Sally out and your organization can stagnate and die. So what do you do?

For starters, take the time to understand what your culture really is. Consider written and unwritten rules and norms, people praised as heroes, practices taken for granted. Look around and describe the typical employee. In particular, ask yourself who is successful – who makes the high-potential list, who climbs up faster than others, who is constantly praised by the powers that be.

Next, contrast your current culture with your prospective new hire. Will he/she fit in? If the answer is *no*, at the *very least* you owe it to the new hire to be honest. Talk about the barriers he/she will face. Also, you must come up with ways to help him/her out. And most importantly – if you *are* hiring that person anyway – even though he/she *does not conform to the rules* – could it be that a change of culture is in the cards? And if so... how will you achieve that? How long will it take? What support do you need?

There are no easy answers here. Sometimes you may decide that the new hire may be brilliant and competent but will simply *not fit*. Other times you will bite the bullet and hire the person anyway. Just... don't do it blindly. Plan for it. Otherwise you're wasting time, wasting money, and wasting *talent*.

## TOWARDS AN ENGAGED WORKFORCE

Now you know what *not* to do – and possibly have a few ideas on things you *can* do and that may help engage your workforce. Here's a final piece of advice: Pick *one* of these ideas and run with it. So often we get paralyzed by too much to do, too many items in our list. Engagement is the birth right of your employees. It is also the life blood of your organization. It *matters*.

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<sup>i</sup> Langelaan, S., Bakker, A. B., Van Doornen, L. J., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2004). Burnout and work engagement: Do individual differences make a difference? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 40 (2006), 521-532.

<sup>ii</sup> Rich, B. (2006). Job engagement: Construct validation and relationships with job satisfaction, job involvement, and intrinsic motivation. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation*. University of Florida, p. 52.

<sup>iii</sup> Langelaan et al., 2004; Rich, 2006; also Wildermuth, C. (2008). Engaged to serve: The relationship between employee engagement and the personality of human services professionals and paraprofessionals. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation*. Bowling Green State University.

<sup>iv</sup> McCrae, R. (2006). Psychopathology from the perspective of the five-factor model. In S. Strack (Ed.), *Differentiating normal and abnormal psychology* (pp. 53-64). New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.

<sup>v</sup> Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33, 692-724.

<sup>vi</sup> Also from Kahn, W. A. (1990 – reference above).

<sup>vii</sup> I am currently conducting a pilot study of engagement in the HR profession. So far, 150 individuals have answered a survey on engagement and answered additional personality and work environment questions. I found a significant positive correlation between the question "I am challenged by my work" and engagement ( $r = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

<sup>viii</sup> Towers Perrin. (2008). *Towers perrin global workforce study executive report*. Retrieved April 30, 2008, from [www.towersperrin.com](http://www.towersperrin.com).

<sup>ix</sup> William Kahn (in Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work) suggested that *meaningfulness* is vital to engagement. Meaningfulness means the sense that one's work *matters*. Recognition is likely to impact meaningfulness.

<sup>x</sup> Sonnentag, S. (2003). Recovery, work engagement, and proactive behavior: A new look at the interface between nonwork and work. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88 (3), 518-528.