

How To Approach Engagement To Actually Make a Difference



What you should learn from this article:

- What is engagement?
- The three engagement pillars
- Recommendations for making an action plan

INTRODUCTION

Organizations today recognize how important it is that their employees are engaged. However, the way organizations have approached engagement hasn't actually helped to facilitate employee engagement. According to Gallup (2017), only 15% employees are engaged at work. Organizations need to do a better job of measuring and acting on engagement. How? By incorporating the fundamental pillars behind employee engagement.

ENGAGEMENT PILLARS

What is engagement?

Achievers defines engagement as the extent to which individuals are advocates of, committed to, and enthusiastic about their work. How engaged employees are impacts the degree to which they thrive at work.

Engagement is not static, it's fluid.

Sonnentag (2003, also Sonnentag, Dormann, & Demerouti, 2010) suggested that feelings of engagement change due to situational factors, and that these changes can be captured by measuring engagement more often (Bakker, 2014). It is proposed that levels of engagement can change weekly, daily, or even hourly (Sonnentag, 2011). "Always-on" engagement measurement provides HR professionals with insight into the real-time factors throughout the day, week, or quarter that can affect employees in reaching (or not reaching) their full potential (Fletcher, Bailey, & Gilman, 2017). In addition, real-time engagement data helps mitigate "retrospective bias"—when employees answer survey items using selective memory and bias because of ill-timed surveys (Bakker, 2014). By measuring in real-time, organizations can ensure they have valid engagement data to inform how they support their employees.

Engagement is not generic, it's personal.

Not everyone is motivated in the same way. The effectiveness of employee engagement initiatives varies depending on the needs of the individual and team.

According to Chamorro-Premuzic (2013, p. 5), "If companies want to motivate their workforce, they need to understand what their employees really value — and the answer is bound differ for each individual. Research [Srivastava, Locke, & Bartol, 2001] shows that different values are differentially linked to engagement."

Further evidence of this is based in research by RoundPegg, where employees were asked to rank order their personal core values, based on 36 items (Baumgartner, 2014). Of 763 million one-on-one relationships, only 3 pairs identified the same exact personal core values as one another. This demonstrates how truly unique individuals are, in terms of their personal wiring. As a result, people must be engaged at work in unique ways as well.

Another example of how people need to be engaged differently comes from a case study at an international health organization. To increase engagement in one team, the organization implemented a financial reward program, which was a success. They assumed that this strategy would work across other teams. However, other teams held different core values, which in turn, impacted their engagement needs (Baumgartner, 2014). For example, other teams were more strongly motivated by personal recognition than monetary rewards. As a result, a single reward program did not work universally across the organization. These findings emphasize the importance of considering the personal wiring of the people and teams within organizations when designing an engagement strategy.

Engagement is not automatic, it requires action.

Collecting and sharing engagement data is not enough to change the direction of engagement. It is critical to translate that data into action, keeping in mind that people have unique engagement needs. Research has shown that when managers do not act on engagement data it results in lower engagement scores (Pendall, 2018). Below are some evidence-based strategies for managers that serve to improve employee engagement.

Provide Manager Support & Communication

- **Focus on developing a trusting relationship with employees**

Research shows that when employees trust their managers, it affects engagement (Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013)

- **Get to know the employee for who they are as a person (not only as a worker) (Harter & Adkins, 2015)**

Managers need to learn about the needs of their employees and use that information to build relationships with them. Employees will then feel more comfortable sharing their needs and ideas.

Develop Your People

- **Use strength-based management by leveraging employees abilities, and working around weaknesses**

This results in an increase in engagement (along with other positive outcomes, such as increase in profit and decrease in turnover) (Rigoni & Asplund, 2016)

- **Give people the recognition they deserve**

Recognition at work has been found to increase performance and engagement (Achor, 2016)

Encourage Employee Voice & Participation in Meetings

- Give genuine encouragement to employees so that they participate and voice their opinions
Provide people a safe environment where they feel encouraged to speak up, and do not fear negative responses when they share their opinions
 - Employees' participation is affected by manager support. Managers must show that they care about every employee's opinions (Yoerger, Crowe, & Allen, 2015).
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Consider Job Characteristics

- Job characteristics, such as autonomy, task variety, feedback, and task significance, are associated with engagement (Saks, 2006).
 - Employees need clarity of role and tasks (Harter & Adkins, 2015)
Employees feel engaged when managers help them set work priorities (Brim, 2018)
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Prioritize Recovery Experiences (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007)

- Organizations and managers should encourage time off
Research has shown that disconnecting from work affects performance (Friedman, 2014). When employees have had a night or weekend of leisure or detachment, they are more productive and engaged the following day.
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CONCLUSION

To create meaningful engagement initiatives, keep in mind the 3 pillars of engagement: engagement is fluid, personal, and requires action. Manager support and communication, developing people, encouraging employee voice and participation in meetings, considering job characteristics, and prioritizing recovery experiences, all affect engagement. However, the teams and individuals at an organization must always be considered when making an action plan for improving engagement.

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