

The Tricks to Achieving Employee Engagement

A look into the roles of the Employee, Line Manager, CEO and HR Department



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Employee Engagement

Employee engagement has been one of the hottest topics of the year for organizations with a lot of pressure falling on the HR department. As you dive deeper in to the topic and what makes it succeed the fact that everyone's involvement is absolutely crucial stands out. This includes the employees, line managers, CEO's and of course the HR department.

Starting off with making sure you're an engaged employee to looking at the bigger picture and ensuring that your team is fully engaged it's a process which requires a 360 degree view of the organization. By making everyone aware of the roles that they have to play you significantly increase the chances of engaging employees to their maximum potential.

The Employees Responsibility

What Employees can do to be Engaged

1. Do Your Homework
2. Make Yourself “Engageable”
3. Understand What Drives and Frustrates You
4. Help the Line Manager and Organization Understand What You Expect From Them
5. Help the Organization Know What They Can Expect in Return
6. Pro-Actively Resolve Issues
7. Find another job if it doesn't work

There's been a lot of fanfare surrounding employee engagement. Executives are urged to design and implement engagement programs, line managers are trained on how to engage employees and HR departments are designing engagement tools, measuring its success and ensuring that engagement plans are implemented. However, few are talking about the responsibility of the individual employee to make himself engaging or to engage himself.

Employee engagement is a two way street – it requires the employer and the employee to develop and nurture a relation in which employees are:

- Committed to their organization's goals and values
- Motivated to contribute to organizational success
- Enhancing their own sense of well-being.

Of course there's a huge responsibility for companies. But it is not just their responsibility. You also have a role to play. So what can you do to become a highly engaged employee?

1. Do Your Homework

As much as companies do their due diligence to ensure they recruit 'A-players' you have a similar obligation to yourself and the company that you do the same. I always tell candidates in career conversations that the only time they can select their line manager is when they join the company. So do your due diligence by calling friends and checking out LinkedIn Profiles to see what kind of people are working for the company and what the background is of your line manager. Connect with people in the team to understand your new manager's leadership style and the 'real values' of the organization (not the

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ones on the wall). Make sure you understand what's expected of you and that it excites you.

2. Make Yourself 'Engagable'

Being 'engagable' is a mindset and is very much in the hands of an employee. Things you'll want to focus on include:

- Being positive
- Responding to attempts of colleagues involving you with at least a "lets see" attitude, preferably a "can do" one
- Don't Complain
- Avoid being dragged into office politics

It's all about the attitude and the right one can get you opportunities that you want.

3. Understand What Drives and Frustrates You

Being engaged links your commitment to the organization purpose to your own well-being which is different than the person sitting next to you (even if you do the same job). You might be driven by the opportunity to make an impact, whilst for your colleague whom just had a twin baby might be in it for the money or the opportunity to learn for someone else. Knowing what drives you is important for you and the company to know how to engage you. If you want help in finding out what motivates you [Kevin Kruse](#) has an interesting self-assessment survey.

It's not only about understanding what drives you, it's also about knowing what frustrates you, what gets you in a bad mood (both at work and at home) and what colleagues do to make you 'go off on a tangent'.

4. Help the Line Manager and Organization Understand What You Expect From Them

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Knowing what drives you is one thing but for the engagement dance to work your partner, in this case your line manager/organization need to know and understand this. You can't assume that your line manager can mind read so don't test him. Have a genuine conversation about what is important for you. Even if you have to acknowledge that salary is not your main driver, don't worry. Your boss will probably take a jab at you for this in the next salary round, but of course he'd only be joking.

5. Help the Organization Know What They Can Expect in Return

No relation is a one way street. So be clear on what the organization expects from you, what you can't do (I know someone who can't stay late on Thursday's since he has to watch the kids when his spouse goes for her tennis lessons), where you can do more or add more value. Think about your strengths and contribute all of them with full force.

6. Pro-Actively Resolve Issues

Things will go wrong. Sometimes your boss, colleague or the HR department will demotivate you or something goes wrong at home. You can't be a flurry of engagement at all times. If it's just a 'bad day in the office' keep your head down, recognize it and don't infect others. If it's consistent and happens for a longer period of time you have a responsibility to bring it up. Ideally this is directly with the person you have the issue with but if for whatever this isn't possible find a colleague, confident, mentor or even the HR department as a willing ear to listen and help you resolve your temporary 'engagement crisis'.

7. Find another job if it doesn't work

If you do all of the above and give it your best but you still feel that the job and/or company isn't adding to your personal wellbeing, there's only one option left: Resign! The worst thing you can do to yourself and your colleagues is to moan, become a complainer and contaminate others. Its fine, it happens, it doesn't mean that you have failed or are not competent. It's simply a matter of different horses for different courses. Next time you'll do your homework better and be more engaged.

Steps Line Managers Can Take

What Line Managers Can do to Engage Employees

1. Be Clear on What You Expect and Help Understand the Bigger Picture
2. Remove Barriers
3. Encourage the Effort and Reward the Result
4. Have that Difficult Discussion Today
5. Identify What Drives Your Team:

How often have we not heard the famous Marcus Buckingham sentence: People don't leave companies they leave managers? The fact that Google spits out 330 million search results for that sentence proves that it's true. The [Corporate Leadership Council in their landmark report 'Engaging the Workforce'](#) also identified that line managers have the biggest impact on employee engagement. The reason for this is pretty straightforward:

No one can influence motivation, sense of belonging and emotional well-being as much as the boss.

1. Be Clear on What You Expect and Help Understand the Bigger Picture

The biggest complaint I hear from employees when their boss tells them that they haven't done what they were supposed to do, is either

1. Their boss was not clear on what they expected
2. He changed his expectations half-way during the assignment
3. They didn't understand why they have to do a certain task

This links perfectly with the results of the Corporate Leadership Council report which identified 3 levers that had the biggest impact on employee engagement and effort. They are:

- Employees understand how to successfully complete a task
- Employees understand the connection with their work and the strategy of the organization
- Employees understand the impact of their contribution to the success of the organization

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According to the report, if an employee was clear on these three things his commitment to make an extra effort (read performance) increased by a whopping 30%.

2. Remove Barriers

One of the key jobs of a line manager to help a team member contribute and perform is to remove all barriers that could stop him or her from delivering results. However recently [Laurie Taylor](#) in response to my blog on how you can help teams to achieve results made a wonderful suggestion to remove barriers. Laurie wrote:

“Breaking down those barriers that tend to exist between a manager and an employee takes place one on one. I encourage managers to meet weekly with their direct reports and ask three questions that help drive the conversation to be all about the employee, not task discussions or ‘what did you get done this week’ discussion. Those three questions are: 1) What did you do last week that you are proud of? 2) What would you like to learn next week that will help you be more successful in your job? 3) How can I help? It’s a powerful exercise and I think goes a long way toward that engagement issue.”

3. Encourage the Effort and Reward the Result

Achieving a result is obviously important and recognizing an employee for his delivery is not only important to the person who achieved it but also sets a standard for colleagues and creates competition (in moderation of course). However as important as it is to praise efforts and encourage people during their activities, a thank you, some words of wisdom or sharing an experience on how to do something goes a long way to engage employees and help them perform.

4. Have that Difficult Discussion Today

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Research by the [Institute for Employment Studies](#) indicated that line managers who were good at engaging their employees were also good at doing the difficult stuff. The study highlights that

“Line managers of highly engaged teams referred to the need to be firm and clear about the standards they expected, and to take action quickly but fairly – if necessary, to get tough and go to formal procedures: ‘I tackle things straight away. I explain why things aren’t right and work with people to make it better. I don’t allow things to fester.’”

The key is to have these difficult discussions whenever the issue arises and not at the next employee performance. The consequences of NOT having these conversations are significant. They may result in:

- The performance of the individual not improving.
- Causing confusion for the employee since they won’t know why they’re not growing within the company.
- Creating a situation where other team members assume they can get away with under-performing.
- Loss of respect for the line manager due to the perception that they’re not doing their job.
- Overall decline of the team’s performance.

5. Identify What Drives Your Team

Different people are driven by different things. Below is a list that I have amended from Dave Ulrich with 7 different drivers that could motivate your employees. Employees can be looking for:

1. **Vision:** Being part of creating the future, something that is important and bigger than themselves

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2. **Development:** Being given the opportunity and support to grow, learn and develop themselves
3. **Recognition:** Being recognized, rewarded and celebrated for their contribution
4. **Impact:** Being able to make an impact on something that is meaningful
5. **Sense of Belonging:** Being able to pride themselves to the organization they're part of
6. **Challenge:** Being given challenges that stretches their capacity
7. **Empowerment:** Being given the ownership and autonomy to take initiative, operate and deliver

Take ten minutes and reflect on what motivates and drives each member of your team. Pick the top 2 for each employee and based on this write down an action that you can take to drive his personal motivation.

What a CEO Should Do

CEO's Responsibility for Employee Engagement

1. Inspire Through Purpose
2. Align Employees behind Your Strategy
3. Develop Line Managers
Be Fair
4. Role Model
5. Measure and Set Engagement Goals

One of the easiest ways to improve your company's performance is to increase the number of people that are engaged with the organization and are emotional and rationally committed to the vision, strategy and the delivery of the results of that same organization. According to the [AONHewitt](#) definition, engaged employees want to:

1. Stay (intent to stay with the organization)
2. Say (speak highly of the organization to others) and
3. Strive (make a discretionary effort to deliver results)

There is tons of evidence about how companies with more engage employees are able to outperform their competitors

on:

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- Financial results
- Customer satisfaction
- Delivering better quality
- Improved productivity
- Lesser accidents
- Innovation

If despite the overwhelming evidence in the benefits and requirements of Employee Engagement, you still don't believe in the relation between the engagement level of your employees and your company performance than I suggest you implement the following 5 steps:

1. Inspire Employees through Purpose

[Alain de Vulpian in 'Listening to Ordinary People'](#) stated back in 2004:

"The primary motive of the best talent is not to make money but to procure a life that they enjoy and which gives them a sense of meaning. And if there's money in it as well, so much the better"

You have to develop, even better, co-create and communicate a vision that excites people and gives them a sense of purpose and meaning.

2. Align Employees behind Your Strategy

Having meaning and feeling good about being part of an organization that has a purpose doesn't translate words into action. To deliver results you have to work together with your team on how you will achieve this vision and cascade your strategy to the lowest level of the organization. It must be done in a way where even the receptionist and the customer service representative understand and even better are able to explain how their role contributes to the company's strategy and vision.

3. Develop Line Managers

Research has proven that line managers have the biggest impact on the engagement of their team members. As such your selection and appointment of the right line manager is

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crucial in your ability to engage your workforce. And don't fall into 'the-best-sales-representative-doesn't-per-definition-makes-the-best-sales-manager' trap

Before your appoint line managers they a look whether you think they already practice or believe in the following actions.

4. Be Fair

Being fair is not as easy as it sounds. Fairness mean different things for different people. However fairness can be divided into:

- fairness on procedures,
- fairness in how you distribute resources, and
- fairness in relations.

As a CEO it's important to create an organization that is perceived as 'fair' since perceived unfairness is probably the fastest 'engagement deflator'.

5. Role Model

One of my favorite quotes is:

We preach the gospel and if necessary use words"

- Francis of Assisi

It brings out the essence of leadership. People won't follow you for what you say but for what you do. If you can't role model the values of the company, can't act to engage employees then my advice is don't even bother to start the journey.

6. Measure and Set Engagement Goals

If you don't set a goal and measure it you won't make progress. So if you're convinced and have taken some of the above steps, start measuring. Use the right survey to

measure your current engagement level and know where your most engaged employees are and in which department, age bracket, level, function you have to focus on.

Bring engagement to life in your company. Set targets and make line managers responsible and hold them accountable to deliver engagement scores. Make sure that line managers discuss employee engagement at weekly meetings and in one-on-one meetings with employees to weave engagement into daily fabric of the organization.

The Role of the HR Department

The HR Department's Roles for Employee Engagement

1. The Engagement Advocate
2. The Engagement Expert
3. The Engagement Consultant
4. The Engagement Jester
5. The Engagement Gatekeeper

If the employees are playing their role, the line managers doing their bit, and the CEO's doing what they can then the HR department better be acting in the employee engagement initiative. Here are 5 roles anyone should expect the HR department to fulfill in driving employee engagement.

1. The Engagement Advocate

If someone is going to drive employee engagement it's the HR department. They should be able to clearly articulate the benefits of employee engagement in a way that:

- The executive leadership team takes notices and wants to invest in improving employee engagement.
- Line managers understand that engaging employees will enhance their own performance.
- Employees know what's expected of them and what they can expect from the company (employee value proposition)

2. The Engagement Expert

First and foremost HR should be the subject matter expert on employee engagement and be able to answer:

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- Why it's important
- What drives employee engagement
- How it can be measured
- What can you do to improve employee engagement

Your HR team should be able to explain that employee commitment (measured by employees say, strive and stay) is driven by belonging, alignment and growth.



Employee Engagement

However in an interesting article title: **'Sack the HR department!': Why HR can be the source of disengagement, and how to avoid – or fix,** the Great Place to Work Institutes identifies that the HR department in many cases doesn't have the internal credibility to act as the engagement expert. Either because:

1. They are seen as detached from the operations and don't know what's happening 'on the floor' or

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2. HR themselves are not very engaged or
3. By having aligned themselves closer to management (as a result of implementing the HR business partner model) HR is seen as less aligned with staff.

3. The Engagement Consultant

Not surprisingly research has confirmed that the line manager plays the most important role in engaging employees. As line managers are a diverse bunch they're also the most difficult group to influence. HR has a role to train, guide and coach line managers in how to engage employees.

And although metrics are an important tool (see the Engagement Gate Keeper) HR should help line manager's point out that engagement is all about dialogue and not the score per se. As [Jon Kaufman and Rob Makey](#) pointed out that it's important to:

...signal that discussing and addressing the root causes, and seeing steady progress, matters more than any absolute score itself. Pushing the metrics to the side also sends a signal of empowerment to the supervisors.

4. The Engagement Jester

A jester is "a professional fool or clown, especially at a medieval court". And although modern organizations are certainly not equivalent to medieval courts the HR department does fulfil a role in raising and maintaining the enthusiasm for engagement activities across the organization.

This includes initiating, fostering and organizing all kind of traditional employee engagement activities, from the annual employee BBQ to the photo calendar competitions, from creating a stimulating workspace to the yearly football/cricket/basketball/skiing competitions, from organizing donation runs to employee hotlines. HR is the team to initiate and coordinate all these activities to help engage employees.

5. The Engagement Gate Keeper

The HR department plays the role of gate keeper for employee engagement. It ensures that engagement is measured through (bi-)annual surveys, pulse checks and other measurement mechanisms. Action plans are being developed and implemented by line managers and that the leadership team tables the engagement discussion regularly on their top team agenda.

The flip-side of all the focus on measurement, benchmarks, ranking and data is of course that we get submerged in the analytics and tend to lose the big picture, which is that engagement is all about the dialogue and not the metrics. We all know the little tricks to positively influence engagement levels a couple of weeks prior to the survey and of course this takes away the whole purpose of the exercise.

HR should ensure that data and measurement plays its supportive role but does not overshadow what it's all about. Engaging employees in a way that they have a sense of belonging, feel that they can make a contribution, are challenged, can grow and feel valued.

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