

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2016 Edition

Feature

Caught in the Engagement Paradox

Move your workplace beyond traditional engagement

Are your employee engagement efforts actually causing disengagement in the workplace?

Fact: it's possible for employees and managers to be engaged — but not energized. When they're not energized, it's only a matter of time before they become disengaged. That's the "Engagement Paradox."

However well-intentioned leaders may be, managing engagement often relies on grim determination, guilt, shame, fear and control. Traditional strategies do not focus on ways to drive passion, innovation, intuition and "extra mile" helpfulness in employees.

In a previous article, we looked beyond traditional engagement efforts, instead focusing on how to create a culture that energizes employees. Today, we look at three more ways leaders can take their workforce *beyond* engagement — by finding ways to harmonize competing interests and identify solutions that achieve a balance between what managers want, with what employees need to do their best work.

Seek tension, not harmony

Workplace tension — between departments, people and tasks, and budgets and deadlines — is inevitable. Tension makes leaders uncomfortable. And so, managers often slip into behaviours that make the problem worse.

But tension is actually good for business. This is because the tension between the *current* way of doing things and the *desired* way of doing things can spark innovative thinking.

Yes, tension can be destructive, but when harnessed correctly, it can be the source of creative energy. In other words, there is *treasure* in tension.

By skillfully stepping into tension-filled moments, leaders can transform that tension into a driver of opportunity, innovation and personal connection. This can be achieved by "partner mode" — using emotional intelligence skills to stand amid the tension.

When employees see managers bravely stepping into tension, they begin to model that same behaviour. The result: a tension-less work environment where people can focus more on the business and less time on "sweating the small stuff."

Meet needs, not scores

Perhaps not surprisingly, workplace tension is often the result of competing needs. Those competing needs are driven by emotion. We know this because over 20 years of science shows that the brain makes decisions for emotional reasons first and then justifies them with rational ones.

Removing tension begins when leaders understand what matters most to individual employees. Generally speaking, employees are driven by five needs, each of varying importance to them:

- *Belonging*: feeling accepted, included and on the "inside," as well as a connection or "fit" with others
- *Security*: feeling safe and protected in their role, being able to predict things and therefore have some control over them, having consistency and clarity, order and structure



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- *Freedom*: having autonomy and independence, mind-space and psychological "space" as well as decision latitude and support, variety and change
- *Significance*: feeling respected and valued, affirmed and acknowledged by others to feel success and achievement, challenge and growth, and to experience efficiency, productivity, power and status
- *Meaning*: understanding and feeling purpose in one's role and knowing they are making a difference, feeling they are in a just and fair environment.

Every score on your employee engagement survey is simply an indication of whether your employees feel their needs are being met. When leaders discover what propels their employees and find ways to get those driving needs met, this generates a cycle of healthy decisions, reduced interference and sustainable energy that powers up performance.

Think sticks, not carrots

When it comes to engagement techniques, leaders often gravitate to offering "carrots"—that is, recognition, cheerleading and inspiration. But the human brain is shown to better respond when managers remove psychological forms of interference from the system — things affecting employees' ability to do their best work.

Negative events at work have far more impact on people's performance than positive events. Therefore, things like bullying, unfair judgements or evaluations, unresolved conflict and team tensions lead employees to work below capacity.

No amount of cheerleading is going to balance out the depletion of an employee's personal energy caused by interference. By identifying and removing that interference, leaders can return employees to their ability to operate at capacity — equal to the task. This means functioning at their actual ability to perform and able to access all of their knowledge, experience, skills and strengths.

In other words, manager should always be "thinking sticks" instead of carrots.

Release energy, go beyond capacity

An engaged employee working "at capacity" is cause for celebration. But imagine the potential of energizing them *beyond* capacity — that almost magical state that taps into a person's unrealized, latent, inherent abilities.

By moving toward tension, finding out what drives employees and then seeing through solutions to meet any unmet needs, leaders can inspire their employees to reach heights they never knew they could — thereby saving precious time, reducing friction and improving productivity.

Moreover, energized employee experiences are the key to sustainable, high-quality customer experiences — and amazing business results.

Brady Wilson is a co-founder of Juice Inc, as well as a respected trainer speaker and author. This article includes content from his most recent book, "Beyond Engagement: A Brain-Based Approach That Blends The Engagement Managers Want with the Energy Employees Need". www.bradywilson.com