

Who Owns Engagement?

Executives, managers, and individual employees.



by Mary Ann Masarech

HIGH EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT drives discretionary effort, innovation, customer loyalty, quality, profitability, productivity, and retention of top talent. Yet BlessingWhite's latest global study revealed that *only one in three North American employees is fully engaged*. If you lead an organization in India, Australia, or New Zealand, you benefit from slightly higher engagement levels; but if you're in Europe, Southeast Asia, or China, you may lead a workforce where only one in five employees is fully engaged in the work of your enterprise.

A Personal Equation

While organizations are keen to maximize the contribution of each individual toward corporate imperatives and metrics, *individual employees* need to find purpose and satisfaction in their work. What makes one person tick can make another person despair. Engagement, however, is not job satisfaction alone. *Full engagement* represents an alignment of *maximum job satisfaction* ("I like my work and do it well") with *maximum job contribution* ("I help achieve the goals of my organization").

Engaged employees are not just committed. They are not just passionate or proud. They have a line-of-sight on their own future and on the organization's mission and goals. They are *enthused* and *in gear*, using their talents and discretionary effort to make a difference in their employer's quest for sustainable business success.

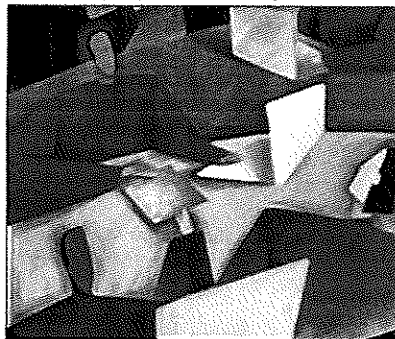
A Leadership Challenge

Engagement is a complex equation to solve. Many factors that influence engagement may feel out of your control as a leader. Your impact may feel increasingly diffused as your span of control grows.

If you lead a fast-growing start-up, for example, how do you maintain contact with all employees as the

workforce expands from 12 to 120 to 1,200? Too often the strong culture that propelled your success gets diluted or the innovative projects that created meaningful work are supplanted by maintenance activities and a routine of office bureaucracy.

In large organizations, *employee engagement* often becomes a formal initiative: surveys are run, metrics benchmarked, and task forces created. If, like many organizations, the initiative stops there, you may actually end up doing more harm than good. Our research indicated that North American employees who report that their company ran a survey but took



no visible action are *less likely to be engaged* than employees at companies that do nothing at all.

A Shared Solution

To *successfully* weave *employee engagement* into the fabric of your organization and drive competitive advantage, your workforce needs to understand three specific roles and responsibilities: individual, manager, and executive.

Individuals: Clarity and Action

Individuals must *own* their engagement. They come to work with unique motivators, interests, talents, and goals. They can't expect your organization to provide a formula tailored to fit their unique definition of meaningful, satisfying work. Employees need to be clear on their core values and goals. If they do not know what's most important to them, they will not find it in your workplace (or potentially any other).

And they must take action.

Employees can't wait for a tap on the shoulder to signal their next career move or an exciting project. They need to *take initiative* to build their skill sets, articulate their interests, and find opportunities to apply their unique talents to achieve your organization's goals.

Managers: Coaching and Relationships

Managers can't *make* employees engaged. They *can* act as coaches to facilitate their team members' engagement equations. We find that, across the board, the *top driver of job satisfaction is opportunities to use talents*.

The top drivers of contribution include regular, specific performance feedback and clarity of what the organization needs and why. So managers need to first understand each team member's unique interests, talents, and aspirations. They then need to align individual passion and proficiencies with organizational priorities and projects. And finally, managers have to keep the dialogue going, providing feedback and course corrections to ensure high performance.

We also see *high correlation* between *engagement* and *solid manager-employee relationships*. The more employees feel they know their managers as people, the more engaged they're likely to be. In some regions of the world, this factor is even more important than effectiveness of coaching and management skills. So managers must drop the veil of their position or title and become known to employees. That does *not* necessarily mean being their best friend. It does mean sharing personal motivation for work, challenges, appropriate weaknesses, the reasons they came to your organization—and stay.

An important caution: disengaged managers cannot help employees become more engaged in the same way that a dead battery cannot jump start another or a lost captain cannot guide the crew on course. Therefore, managers must fulfill the responsibilities of individual employees described above. They need to monitor and take control of their engagement every day.

Executives: Trust and Communication

Executives must set the direction that your workforce aligns to, communicate that direction to ensure a clear line of sight throughout your organization, and create a culture that fuels engagement *and* business

results. They must also fulfill the roles of manager *and* individual described above. It's a tall order, one hampered by workforce distrust. In 2010, only 52 percent of employees in North America trust senior leaders (compared to 72 percent who trust their immediate managers). The recommendations that follow will help you be more effective in driving engagement through your leadership.

Leadership Tactics

Six tactics will help you be more effective in driving engagement:

1. Set a clear direction. Engaged employees align their interests with organizational goals. That can't happen if the organization's direction and definition of success are not defined. The recession forced many leaders to re-evaluate strategy to survive; if you did not, don't delay any longer. A clearly communicated strategy also builds workforce confidence in your personal competence—which reinforces your trustworthiness as a leader.

2. Inspire commitment. Engaged employees align their interests with organizational goals and care enough to apply discretionary effort. Your communications need to cover the *what* and *why* of decisions. In the same way, you had to *show the math* of your answers in algebra, you need to share your business rationale and personal motivation for critical business decisions. Your actions, too, need to *demonstrate visible personal commitment* to the success of your organization as a business leader and thriving workplace.

3. Pay attention to culture. Culture is like the tide: As the tide rises, so do all the boats. The words and actions of you and the leaders around you shape your culture. Hold yourself and colleagues accountable for *living organizational values* and *doing what you say you will do*. Hold all employees accountable for results *and* engagement. Weed out practices (e.g., rewards and recognition, vendor agreements, personnel policies) that *undermine* a culture of high performance and engagement.

4. Coach your direct reports. It is tempting to take the engagement of senior leaders for granted. After all, if they put in the hard work and dedication required to advance in the organization, they must be engaged,

right? Wrong. Only *half* of VPs or above in North America are *fully engaged*. Plus, consider the message you send, as *keeper of the culture*, if you expect managers to coach their people and you don't coach. Focus your coaching on *contribution* (clear priorities, removing challenges, providing resources) and *satisfaction* (leveraging talents and identifying interests and goals).

5. Talk about engagement with passion. Educate your people on the roles they need to play in building and sustaining engagement. Manage their expectations when they assume *engagement is something that organizations do to employees*. Help them redefine unrealistic or out-dated notions of career success to encompass lateral moves, skill development, stretch assignments and special projects—not just promotions or advancement. Encourage them to reach high. Talk about business results and engagement in the same breath.

6. Commit or quit. Assess your own engagement weekly. Be clear on what drives it. If you're not sure—or don't like your work, make some changes. *Genuine engagement is contagious; faked engagement erodes credibility and trust.*

A Daily Priority

Don't rely on task forces and special action plans. Don't separate engagement as something to address in addition to the work that must be done. If you lead with results *and* engagement top of mind daily, you'll create a *more engaged workforce*. If you educate your managers and employees on their roles and responsibilities, engagement becomes part of their daily priorities as well.

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ACTION: Engage in the engagement process.

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**EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT
 REPORT**
 please visit:
[http://www.blessingwhite.com/
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ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST FOR LEADERS

Senior leaders shoulder the responsibilities of individuals, managers, and executives. Stay on track by reflecting on the questions below.

CLARITY AND ACTION: MANAGE YOUR OWN ENGAGEMENT

- How engaged are you—really?
- What are your top 5 values? How well are those values satisfied at work?
- What are your top 3 strengths? How well are they being utilized?
- What aspects of your work do you like? What don't you like?
- What actions will you take to align your work and values, use your strengths more, and reshape your job to increase your satisfaction and contribution?

COACHING AND RELATIONSHIPS: FACILITATE YOUR TEAM'S ENGAGEMENT

- How engaged is each team member—really?
- How do you know?
- What do you know about each person's interests and aspirations?
- What can do to ensure they understand organizational priorities?
- What feedback do they need to increase their performance?
- What type of coaching and support does each team member want?
- How strong are your relationships with team members—really?
- Do they understand your personal motivation? Do you understand theirs?
- What actions will you take to clarify and confirm your understanding of each team member's engagement as well as the role they need you to play as coach?
- What actions will you take to reveal who you are as a person behind your title?

TRUST AND COMMUNICATION: CREATE A CULTURE THAT FUELS ENGAGEMENT

- How often do you do what you say you will do—really?
- How do you explain the business rationale and personal motivation behind your decisions?
- What do you do to connect employee priorities to a larger purpose?
- How do you hold other leaders accountable for engagement and results?
- If you ran a survey, what actions have you taken in response? Are these actions visible?

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