

## Chapter 1

# Basic Training: Employee Engagement Basics

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Defining employee engagement
  - ▶ Identifying engagement drivers
  - ▶ Hiring an engaged workforce
  - ▶ Measuring and recognizing engagement
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Something's not quite right at work. People talk about leaving as soon as the economy improves. They no longer speak well of the company to each other or to potential recruits. It's as though people are just getting through the day, the week, or the month — that they're only there for the paycheck. There's a growing sense among employees that they've become easily replaceable commodities — or, worse, that their positions could simply be eliminated to “save payroll.” Or maybe things aren't so dire — people don't seem to be complaining, but your organization or department just lacks oomph. No one seems to be putting in the extra effort. Your colleagues seem to run out the door at quitting time.

Does any of this sound familiar? If so, what you're witnessing is a lack of engagement among employees. And you're not alone. In recent years, companies all over the world have seen employees tune out. Whether due to the changing global economy, job instability, changes in the world of work, changes in society as a whole, or any number of other reasons, this lack of employee engagement is a serious problem for businesses and workers alike!

Don't believe me? A 2013 report released by Gallup, titled “State of the American Workplace Report,” concludes that only 30 percent of workers are engaged, 52 percent are disengaged, and 18 percent are actively disengaged. Author Mark Crowley of Fast Company likens the workforce to a crew team. On this team, three of the rowers are paddling like crazy, five are casually

taking in the scenery, and two are actively trying to sink the boat. Obviously, this team will not win the regatta!

It's not just Americans whose boats are sinking, so to speak. A 2013 survey on engagement by Dale Carnegie Training found that, globally, 34 percent of workers are engaged, 48 percent are disengaged, and 18 percent are actively disengaged.

Fortunately, lack of engagement is a problem that you can solve. As you'll see in this book, you can take any number of steps to engage your employees. The first of those steps is simply to read on!

## Say What? Defining Employee Engagement

So, what is employee engagement anyway? One common definition, which has become the gold standard, describes employee engagement as “the capture of discretionary effort.” *Discretionary effort* refers to employees going above and beyond. This is in contrast to the ordinary effort required to simply get the job done without attracting negative attention.

Other definitions or descriptions you're likely to hear include the following:

- ✓ The capture of an employee's head and heart
- ✓ Employees who have their hearts and minds in the business
- ✓ Intellectual understanding and emotional commitment
- ✓ Employees who go the extra mile in loyalty and ambassadorship
- ✓ Employees who say, stay, and strive
- ✓ Employees who think and act as business people

My favorite definition, though, is my own:

Employee engagement is the mutual commitment between an organization and an employee, in which the organization helps the employee meet his or her potential and the employee helps the organization meet its goals.

This mutual commitment is what truly defines employee engagement and results in discretionary effort. It's also what makes employee engagement a win-win for both the employer and the employee.



Although engagement is about capturing your employees' discretionary effort, it isn't based on workaholism!

## ***Engagement is not a “program”***

Engagement is more than a program; it entails a cultural shift — a change in how things are done and communicated from the top to the bottom of an organization. Engagement can't be shunted to the end of every meeting, where it will stand a higher chance of being given short shrift. It's no one person's job; it is an ongoing part of business. And after you embark on systemic employee engagement, there is no finish line — it's a journey without a destination.

Often, people confuse employee *engagement* with employee *satisfaction*. This is a mistake. You can always throw money around or offer perks to boost employee satisfaction. But *satisfied* and *engaged* are two very different things. Simply put, engagement boosts performance, while satisfaction does not. The last thing you as an employer want is a satisfied but underperforming employee — or worse, a whole cadre of satisfied employees in an underperforming business! Don't get me wrong: Having a bunch of happy and satisfied employees walking around is a-okay. Employee satisfaction very well may be an outcome of an excellent company culture. But unlike employee engagement, it shouldn't be your goal per se.

Engagement is not an end in and of itself. It's not about having *things* (for example, the best benefit program, the biggest workstations, or the highest bonus checks). It's not even about instituting a training program or a flexible workweek. Successful engagement is about acknowledging that a business is, in essence, like a society. When everyone pulls together with common purpose, both its citizens and its economy will thrive. Engagement is about people's heads as well as their hearts.



For engagement to exist, there must be mutual commitment between the employer and employee. The employer helps the employee reach his or her untapped potential, and the employee helps the employer meet and surpass its business goals.

To sum up, employee engagement *is* about

- ✓ Mutual commitment between the company and employee
- ✓ People
- ✓ Relationships
- ✓ Alignment

- ✓ Shared purpose for creating the future together
- ✓ Success of the business *and* its employee
- ✓ Work environment and culture
- ✓ Continuous communication
- ✓ Opportunities for performers (and consequences for non-performers)
- ✓ Staff development

Engagement is *not* about

- ✓ Things
- ✓ Having the best of every amenity
- ✓ Avoiding making tough decisions
- ✓ Pleasing all the people all the time

## ***There is no “there”: Engagement is a journey, not a destination***

When my kids were young, my wife and I often took them for Sunday drives to look at the New England autumn foliage. We quickly discovered that children are not into scenery and suffered through their never-ending badgering: “Are we there yet?” I still remember my wife responding, “There is no *there*” (meaning there is no destination — we’re taking a drive and then returning home). This was a concept our kids could never really understand.

Engagement is a little like that. Because the rewards of an engaged culture are numerous and enduring, many leaders reading this book may be tempted to make engagement an action item to get “there” right now. There’s nothing wrong with that enthusiasm, but it needs to be tempered by the sober realization that any kind of cultural change is a multi-year process. I like to refer to engagement, in particular, as “a journey with no destination.” In other words, there is no *there*. Your engagement journey will be ongoing. You’ll never “arrive.” The journey doesn’t meander, however; it takes companies with purpose from point to point, creating a road map along the way. There is always a goal to be set, measured, and communicated, and — if your organization fosters innovation — always another stop along the road.

Think about your quality programs. Best-in-class companies are never really satisfied with the level of quality of their products or services, which is why initiatives such as total quality management (TQM) have become part of the fabric of so many businesses. The same needs to happen with your engagement efforts.

What has surprised me since I left corporate America to spread the employee engagement gospel is how often I'm asked to counsel companies who don't really need much help. Indeed, many of them have already won various "Best Place to Work" awards! These companies already have an engaged culture but hire me in to help them get even better. They understand that there is no destination in their engagement efforts, just as there is no destination in their quality efforts. No doubt, these companies will seek out this book for even more ideas. And for all the other companies, this book is for you!

## *Making It Happen: Driving Engagement*

Chapter 2 makes the business case for employee engagement. In it, you'll find out why employee engagement is such a big deal, the dangers of disengagement, as well as employee engagement's effect on employee turnover, customer satisfaction, profitability, and innovation. When you finish reading that chapter, you'll be hungry to learn what, exactly, drives employee engagement.

To whet your appetite, here are a few key strategies:

- ✓ **Driving engagement with a sense of purpose:** Companies that know their own purpose, values, vision, and strategic plan, and that believe in corporate social responsibility, are better able to win over the hearts and minds of their employees. And not surprisingly, employees who are duly won over are significantly more likely to be engaged! (See Chapter 6 for more on driving engagement with a sense of purpose.)
- ✓ **Engaging employees through leadership:** A *manager* manages process, programs, and data. *Leaders*, on the other hand, guide people, build followers, and steer organizations to success. Leaders are the ones who define and uphold an organization's principles. And it's leaders who really drive engagement in an organization. (See Chapter 7 for more on engaging employees through leadership.)
- ✓ **Driving engagement across generations:** People of different generations (Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials) have different motivational drivers — which means they become engaged in different ways. Smart managers drive engagement by adjusting their communication, leadership, oversight, recognition, and patience levels when leading a department populated by people of different generations. (See Chapter 8 for more on driving engagement across generations.)
- ✓ **Driving engagement through team development:** Working with great co-workers, helping each other out, and having great camaraderie, trust, and love for one another is engaging. In other words, a great team environment can engage a person as much as a great job! (See Chapter 9 for more on driving engagement through team development.)

- ✔ **Driving engagement through branding:** Many firms focus all their branding efforts on their product brand — “what they do.” But they invest virtually no time communicating their employment brand — “who they are.” Ideally, “what we do” and “who we are” will be like two sides of the same coin. Engagement is about capturing your employees’ heads and hearts. Firms that spend all their time branding “what they do” most likely are making an intellectual connection with their employees. But *true* engagement occurs when you make an emotional connection. This occurs only when you can define “who you are” and even “why you exist.” When that happens, engagement flourishes! (See Chapter 10 for more on driving engagement through branding.)
- ✔ **Engaging employees through gamification:** For years, neuroscientists have known that people whose lives involve fun and enjoyment are healthier. The same is true of employees. One way to introduce fun as an engagement driver is to embrace the growing trend toward *gamification* (using game mechanics and rewards in a non-game setting to increase user engagement and drive desired user behaviors). Good gamification programs reward people for behaviors they’re already inclined to perform or required to perform, increasing their engagement and enjoyment. In other words, gamification makes the things you have to do more fun. And injecting fun in the workplace goes a long way toward increasing employee engagement. (See Chapter 11 for more on gamification.)

To drive engagement, you must also have a firm grasp on what motivates people (see Chapter 4 for details), and commit to effectively communicating your engagement objectives (see Chapter 5). Finally, recognition (discussed in Chapter 17) is an important ingredient in your engagement stew.



Before embarking on any effort to drive employee engagement at your organization, you need to accept that tangible results may not be immediately forthcoming. The investments you’ll be making will take time to take root and grow. Many companies make the mistake of moving on to something else if they don’t see immediate results. Accept from the outset that your initiatives may take up to two years to show their desired effects. It’s a little like the grease pole at the county fair. Fairgoers eagerly climb the pole, but as they get closer to the top, they discover increasing amounts of grease. This results in a loss of grip and an embarrassing slide back down the pole. Well, your engagement efforts will likely be similar. If there is a business hiccup, a change in your market, a turnover of key staff, a change in leadership, or an economic downturn, your engagement efforts may slip down the grease pole. Don’t get discouraged. Stay the course. **Remember:** Engagement is a marathon, not a sprint!

Also, accept that you’ll never say, “Well, we’re done with engagement. Now on to quality control, customer service, and so on.” If you’re hoping to check off a box marked “employee engagement” for Year X and then move on to the

next important thing, not only will *you* be disappointed, but you'll engender cynicism about the entire process among your staff. And cynicism is corrosive to engagement.

## *Pick Me! Pick Me! Picking the Right People for Engagement*

As you'll learn in Chapter 12, a big part of cultivating an engaged workforce is choosing the right people as employees. Often, when faced with selecting employees (in other words, hiring), employers focus on candidates' education and skills. And yes, those are important. After all, if you're looking to hire a rocket scientist, you should probably make sure any candidates you consider have the necessary schooling and abilities (think: knowledge of calculus and deftness with a pocket protector) to do the job. But really, it's a candidate's traits and behaviors that will be key to his or her success in an organization.

What kinds of traits and behaviors do engaged employees display? According to Gallup, engaged employees

- ✓ Show consistent levels of high performance
- ✓ Have a natural drive for innovation and efficiency
- ✓ Intentionally build supportive relationships
- ✓ Are clear about the desired outcomes of their roles
- ✓ Are emotionally committed to what they do
- ✓ Have high levels of energy and enthusiasm
- ✓ Never run out of things to do
- ✓ Create positive things on which to act
- ✓ Broaden what they do and build on it
- ✓ Are committed to their companies, work groups, and roles



The specific behaviors and traits that you're looking for may differ from firm to firm. You'll want to pinpoint just what traits and behaviors you seek (see Chapter 12).



Of course, sussing out whether someone possesses these qualities during the course of a few interviews is no easy feat. For advice on telling interview questions and other hiring best practices, see Chapter 13.

After you've landed the perfect candidate — one whose traits and behaviors mesh with your firm — you'll want to take care to ensure that he or she gets up to speed as quickly as possible. That means using onboarding techniques that foster engagement. For details, see Chapter 14.

## *Measure Twice, Cut Once: Measuring and Recognizing Engagement*

If your goal is to improve employee engagement at your firm — and I hope that after you read this book, it will be — you first need to find out just how engaged your employees are now. In Chapter 3, you discover various ways to gauge employee engagement, both now and in the future. These include employee surveys, exit interviews, “stay” interviews, and other engagement barometers such as training investment and employee referrals.

A balanced scorecard, discussed in Chapter 15, is also helpful, not just in measuring employee engagement but also in assessing performance in general. This approach can be applied to organizations as a whole, to teams, and to individuals. Speaking of measuring individual performance, odds are, you'll want to retool the performance appraisal process at your firm to gain a more accurate read. Your new process should involve establishing goals for employees that are specific and achievable — an engagement driver in and of itself. The performance appraisal process should also help employees develop their own employee development plan — that is, their own sense of where they are in the company and where they're going. For more, see Chapter 16.

Employees who demonstrate high performance should be duly recognized and rewarded. Positive reinforcement is a key pillar of engagement. It's not enough to simply tell your employees that you want them to perform; you must also recognize that performance and perhaps even reward it. Chapter 16 discusses rewards (which usually have a cost associated with them) and recognition (which are typically free or of minimal cost), both essential components of an effective engagement strategy.

On the flip side, employees who fail to perform also need your attention. What can you do to help a struggling employee get back on track? First, you must identify the cause of the poor performance. (If you guessed “disengagement,” you're right!) Then you can take steps to address the problem. Only in very rare circumstances should this involve firing the employee. As discussed in Chapter 18, typically only bad bosses or bosses who make poor hiring decisions routinely give employees the ax. Good bosses — bosses who are engaged — have an ongoing performance-related dialogue with their employees, giving their staff the chance to improve long before their performance becomes cause for termination.