

## Employee Engagement is all about the Emotional Connection. Period.

Every company wants an engaged workforce – but what does that mean? It certainly means more than simply having employees who give solid scores to the performance of leadership or say the salary and bennies are good. Even agreement that a company is a “good place to work” or “I enjoy my work” falls short of engagement. Those criteria are essential, but they are just a start.

Employee engagement is all about the emotional affinity employees feel for a company. Everything else is important only insofar as it translates into an emotional connection. The engaged employee feels a sense of immersion in a company, its culture, its well-being. They don't just work for the company; they are part of the company and the company is an important part of how they define themselves.



The engaged employee isn't just good at what they do; in fact, being good at a job isn't a prerequisite for engagement. (BTW, it's really tough when you have to deal with sub-par performance from an employee who is super engaged.) Conversely, high performing talent isn't necessarily engaged; they might have one foot out the door. The engaged employee feels a bond; they are committed to, believe in and are emotionally involved with the company.

Engagement is not a binary toggle switch of engaged/not engaged. The level of engagement is a spectrum, running from the disaffected, “just doing my job” people who have zero emotional connection to their employer to those who look upon switching jobs as tantamount to a divorce.

### A Dose of Reality

Engagement is a high bar, and many, many leadership teams, quite frankly, delude themselves as to the level of engagement of their employees. Ask about the “typical” worker at other companies or those with whom they interact in their daily lives outside of work, and business leaders tend to be hypercritical; ask about their employees and you get a different story.



If more than half of all employees in the country are largely disengaged (according to Gallup), what makes leaders think that “our company – my company -- is different?” It's as if corporate leaders all come from Lake Wobegon, where “all of their employees are above average.” Wake up: chances are that more than half of your employees also are disengaged.

Many leaders act as if their employees owe them their loyalty. They rail against critical employee surveys and feedback as if poor results are a reflection on the respondents. This is the ultimate expression of corporate hubris: a company, a leadership team must earn the commitment of their employees, not assume it or demand it. And if leaders are disappointed with the feedback they get, the only people to whom they should complain are themselves and their senior leadership team.

## Missing the Emotional Connection

For many leaders, the employee feedback process is a half-hearted routine. Run a survey. Ask a bunch of questions regarding what people think or are willing to say about the company, leaders, managers and peers. Create an index of some sort. Find some benchmarks to indicate you do better or at least no worse than some of your peers. Ask HR to hold a few focus groups and make some recommendations. Then go back to running the business of the business until the next survey wave.

This type of antiseptic process is like trying to get somewhere on a treadmill and doesn't typically bear much fruit. In fact, this type of pablum approach actually can make things worse, as employees readily see through insincere, half-hearted efforts.



I am not saying the basics don't matter: yes, you need to ask people about everything from salary and bennies to their work space and even the comfort of their chair and the sufficiency of lighting; you need to know what they think about leadership and corporate strategy, as well as their opinion of their direct manager and peers; sure, you also want to know if they have the resources they need and if processes and infrastructure are working well; and you might even want to know what they think of the company's products and treatment of customers, as well as the firm's commitment to sustainability and support for the community. And there's more, as the list of things about which you might want to gather input from employees can be painfully long.

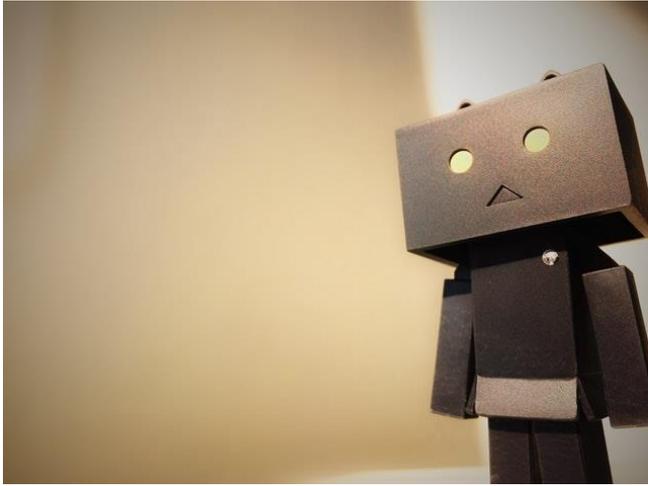
At the end of the day, however, the only thing that really matters when it comes to employee engagement is how all of the things you measure translate into the level of attachment employees feel for the company. So you can keep your 45-minute employee laundry-list type of survey if you must . . . but you need to be certain to add in the emotional measures.

## Measuring Emotions

Here's the challenge: measuring emotions isn't easy. Our conscious minds don't really know how we feel. So when we ask a question about feelings, we are pushing people to look into something that is inherently murky and obscure, even to ourselves.

That said, you still need to at least try to measure employee feelings . . . so what do you do?

The traditional approach is simply to ask people to rate or score their feelings. Given that we don't consciously know our feelings, this approach is far from perfect; but it's easy, conventional, inexpensive and practical. At the very least it tells us how we think we feel. But employees often are reluctant to give explicitly weak scores.



Another survey-based technique is to implicitly measure emotional attachment. Using implicit association tests we can gauge the strength of emotional attachment based on the speed or accuracy with which employees answer questions in response to some prompt or stimuli. This avoids asking employees directly how they feel about things.

Another approach is to take employee comments – whether in response to a question or unprompted comments they might post or offer – and analyze their words

to determine the underlying feelings. Does the person express frustration or perhaps anger? Are they surprised or maybe delighted? We now have the tools to automate this function to scale, including the availability of complex algorithms to root out the underlying emotions embedded in what someone has said or written.

Whatever approach you choose, any serious effort at assessing employee/workplace issues must include the emotional dimension, as it is the emotional bond that is the keystone in the foundation of employee engagement: absent the emotional connection the foundation crumbles.

Source: <https://tinyurl.com/yby7zswz>