



Why most employees don't engage and what to do about it

On average, *less than* 30% of employees are engaged!

More than 52% are *disengaged*!

1 in 5 employees are *actively* disengaged!

Disengagement can impact on productivity by up to *20%*!

Forbes, July 2013

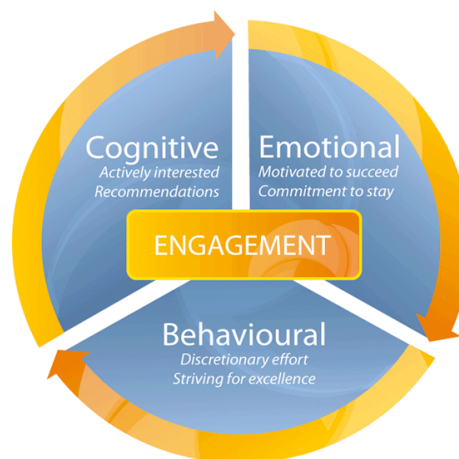


Image © changeworks.com.au

It's old news that an initiative or strategy is only as good as the people who must carry it out. So it makes sense that if the people are enthused the chances of success in any initiative are higher. That's what employee engagement is all about. Fact - it's a complex part of the human condition and psyche! It relates to self-preservation and safety. Every individual disengages for different reasons, just as every individual sees different aspects of their work or workplace as engaging.

What is engagement?

A lot is written about employee engagement and a variety of descriptors can be found in the literature (J of Applied Psychology, J of Business Psychology, J of Business & Management, Int. J of HR Management): connection, motivation, energy, resilience, demands v resources, attitudes and traits, antecedents and outcomes, satisfaction, wellbeing, job v organisation, and the list goes on. So it's clearly a more complex topic than one might think, as are the solutions for increasing engagement.

Not to be confused with workplace satisfaction or happiness, employee engagement is something more. "Satisfied employees are there to get, engaged employees are there to give" (Bob Kelleher, Aug 2013). Engagement refers to the emotional commitment we feel for the organisation and organisational goals, so much that we'll go the extra mile, give discretionary effort. It's the lever that can shift organisations towards achieving goals and realising overall purpose. (Kevin Kruse, Jan 2015).

It's not a permanent state for anyone; most people switch between different levels of engagement throughout the day and at various times in a given situation. This is impacted by a number of conditions, relating to the individual, their immediate environment, and the overall culture they work in. It's the environmental and cultural conditions that can make all the difference and encourage individuals to create and experience a workplace that is engaging.

Quite apart from the obvious problem when there's one employee who is disengaged, evidence shows that one individual's state of engagement has a direct impact on the people around them; so if you have one highly engaged individual it can spread to others. Likewise if you have someone who is disengaged, they too can cause others to disengage. An even more profound, yet often subtle reality, is that if the prevailing sentiment about an activity or project or person is negative, then the unspoken message may be that engaging with it (or them) is frowned upon by the majority resulting in those who break rank being ostracised or even penalised! This is probably the most powerful barrier to employees engaging in something that at its core is well intentioned. *Kelleher 2013 & Forbes 2015*

I have worked with teams where one strong personality holds the power to influence a whole team and a perfectly reasonable piece of work is sabotaged and resisted, or a well-meaning person is undermined and avoided. I've seen seemingly simple changes zap energy, devour time and waste resources because of negative peer pressure.

Here's a link to a short video that explains engagement and the impact of disengagement on your workforce and productivity, and how you can encourage greater employee engagement:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4nwoZ02AJM&list=PLCDJe_hdM2JzpzgawhqJm9BAk4ngvzmJ

What are the signs of disengagement?

Achieving your desire to increase engagement will be greatly assisted by the ability to recognise disengagement. The following traits are synonymous with a disengaged workforce (*Inside HR Aug 2014*):

- ✿ **Absenteeism** – frequent, unplanned leave and 'mental health' days
- ✿ **Presenteeism** – showing up to do as little as possible to get by, or to deliberately limit contribution
- ✿ **Lack of teamwork & inter-team conflict** – people can't work well together and are frustrated
- ✿ **Lack of discretionary effort** – focus on task in hand and never strive for higher standards or results
- ✿ **Poor quality work** – errors, incidents, gaps, missed deadlines, complaints

Leaders and facilitators regularly find themselves faced with a range of challenging behaviours in groups – a power dynamic, groupthink or polarisation. It takes skill to support the group to identify and transcend the barriers – but it must be addressed. Though it can be somewhat messy and uncomfortable, it is very rewarding for everyone involved. I've witnessed leaders, facilitators and groups ignore the issue and push through only to see the dynamic or resistance resurface somewhere down the track. I've seen others walk out on groups or report their bad behaviour to their manager resulting in increased resistance and reinforced disengagement. Similarly managing the situation in a hierarchical way can mean people feel micromanaged, especially if they believed that openness & honesty were supported.

Working through the messy reality is part of the process of engagement. I've seen groups who've addressed the issue openly become the most coherent, collaborative and high performing teams.

Who's responsible for engagement?

Ultimately each individual chooses their own level of engagement but employers can create the right circumstances and conditions for this to occur. Understanding what motivates people helps employers to create an environment and culture that enables engagement. Researchers (Ryan & Deci 2000, Pink 2009) identify human motivators as:

- **Autonomy:** having some input to and control over one's own life and work
- **Mastery:** skills and ability to do the task or job, and opportunities to develop these skills
- **Purpose:** knowing that one is working toward something useful that will make a difference
- **Success:** knowing that one can achieve their goals and getting recognition when they achieve
- **Community:** feeling part of a social group and having others to interact with

You can use this knowledge to inform and guide your efforts to increase employee engagement. However, it requires some well thought-out strategies and avoidance of indiscriminate gestures to make an impact. Rather than applying the latest suggestions, it helps to get to know your staff and what drives them; what drives them to come to work every day? It's probably not the organisation's purpose or inspirational vision; it's more likely to link to their own purpose in life. Then work out ways with them to align the achievement of their own purpose with that of the organisation so there's mutual benefit. Work on increasing the conditions that engage them and unblocking the barriers that stop them from engaging more.

In my work with staff at all levels, from care/service interface through to managers and executives, I hear a consistent grievance: Staff at the care/service interface say "they don't support us", managers say "We fully support them"! When I question each group about what support means there's a huge chasm, often one has no idea what the other wants, and the offers and requests are never articulated!

Watch this video for more about engagement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ3wxgog4nc>

Some ideas about what you can do as a leader, manager or influential employee

1 Be a Role Model

As a leader the number one quality you can display is role-modelling engagement; 'be the change you want to see' (Ghandi). Having a disengaged leader makes it almost impossible for employees to engage. So you'll have off days and times when you have to do tasks that you find difficult to engage in. Firstly accept that you are human and off days are natural. Secondly, have contingency plans for these days; a critical friend you can talk to or alternative work you can attend to. Do something you find inspiring and engaging to get you back on track. Finally, maybe this is not the day to meet with that toxic staff member, or to make a big decision that will affect business and other people.

2 Create a sense of personal value.

Demonstrate value for your employees. Invite input and genuinely listen to people's ideas. Show interest in their personal values and purpose. Show appreciation for the work they do and identify how their input links to the organisation's purpose and how that ultimately supports their personal purpose. Do whatever is within your power to support them. Employees who feel valued are happier and are more likely to go above and beyond. Forbes Oct 2014.

3 Align people and roles with strengths and preferences.

Many people disengage because they are in a job that doesn't hold a meaningful purpose for them, that doesn't align with their values and strengths, or that doesn't interest them, but they can't see a way out. People get more done if they like what they are doing, doing what they do best; successful people love their work (Steve Jobs). By nature humans need to have a purpose for everything they do, be it for internal reasons such as enjoyment and satisfaction, or external factors such as compliance, pay, valuing an activity. Otherwise they are 'amotivated', lethargic and incompetent (Ryan & Deci

2000). If employees don't know what the organisational purpose is or don't sign up to it, they find an alternative purpose to guide them, which may lead them off course, and cost you.

4 Make work enjoyable!

Not to be misinterpreted as having a happy team who have a lot of fun but don't perform! It means turning a routine or daunting task into an experience that people can enjoy so they overcome fear and anxiety and therefore work better together. There are all sorts of whacky ideas out there but it can be as simple as finding creative ways to explore issues, using ice-breaker activities, moving to a creative space or at least a room with windows, providing food or snacks, role playing and gaming, having a fun way to recognise achievements. Just ensure it's not too distracting!

5 Make goals clear and achievable.

Make the goals of the organisation and of individual roles clear and achievable. Include goals that offer the right amount of stretch (not strain) and that are motivational rather than mundane. Blessings White (2013) Employee Engagement Research Report identifies this as the top driver of employee contribution. Look for ways to enhance employee skills so they can achieve stretch goals, through mentoring, coaching and professional development, and reward staff who show initiative and take personal responsibility for their own progression. It doesn't have to cost money; allocating time, creating networks and linking people, and drawing on the team's knowledge are all ways to support development. Want to really inspire people? Make goals with heart: goals that connect with people emotionally, that are visionary and exciting. Allow staff to set their own goals and to work on them.

6 Encourage collaboration over competition

Create networking opportunities and ways for people to share their work and achievements, as well to help each other work through challenges and difficult tasks. This doesn't mean that there can't or shouldn't be healthy competition and recognition for individuals and teams who excel. The problem with a competitive workplace is that it can disengage the less competitive thinkers and introverts who may be able to turn a good idea that comes close to the target into a great action that takes out top prize, but they never get the reward! Recognise that the whole team creates a win. The 'finisher' may be hopeless at generating ideas or planning, without which the win may not have been possible.

7 Build trusting, respectful relationships.

Be authentic and transparent about the organisation's and your intentions. People see through dishonesties; they respect integrity. Act with integrity! Stand beside staff during tough times and remember, they're human too. If expectations or roles change, tell the people it affects; don't assume they already know or that someone else has informed them. And deliver the message yourself; don't pass it over to someone else to do, especially if they don't know the employee; that lacks integrity and respect. Respect, which I believe is a birth right, is easily lost but difficult to regain! So treat everyone in ways that fit with *their* values and beliefs. Though it's often cited as the gold standard of emotional intelligence (E.I.), treating others the way *you* like to be treated may not suit others; instead treat them the way *they* like to be treated – that's the new platinum E.I. standard!

For information and support with facilitation, whole person learning, workplace engagement strategies and mentorship, or to arrange a cost and obligation free strategy meeting contact Pauline@7sensesconsulting.com.au