Purpose Begets Engagement

While you can’t create engagement, you can create meaning for every single job. If you do, engagement will follow.

By Kate Lister and Tom Harnish / Expert Insights  May 25, 2018

Everybody talks about the sad state of employee engagement but, like the weather, nobody seems to be able to do anything about it. Maybe, like witch doctors or those who unsuccessfully seed clouds with dry ice to make it rain, we need to take a different approach.

Sure, consultants use surveys to take the temperature of employee attitudes,
and pundits periodically chart the winds of engagement change. But every forecast is dreary. Poorly engaged employees continue to rain on corporate financial parades. No one has been able to fix the drought in engagement or the dried-up reservoir of productivity.

Maybe we’ve all been barking up the wrong tree, to mix metaphors. Do sliding boards, ping pong tables, and beer taps in the cafeteria really improve engagement? Does access to daylight, a choice of spaces, or a sit-stand desk do the trick? We don’t think so and here’s why.

**Engagement as an Affect**

Engagement is an affect (with an ‘a’), an emotion, not a behavior. Create a brilliant brand, install strong leaders, build a powerful culture, and offer all the pay and amenities that you can dream up, and you won’t necessarily move the needle on engagement. On the other hand, there are highly engaged people that work for organizations that offer none of the above.

*Engagement comes from within.* It’s what you get when people feel a sense of purpose, when they feel like they’re contributing to something greater than themselves. Think Steve Jobs tinkering in his garage. Business founders, startup entrepreneurs have it...but so do terrorists. In fact, it’s probably true that, across the board, employee engagement in radical or resistance groups is higher than “normal” organizations.

Engaged people have a sense of purpose, they’re attracted to something—they have a sense of belonging, they enjoy a challenge, and they have a sense of contribution and accomplishment.

**Motivation Is Not Engagement**

Motivated people are often fear-driven. They’re motivated, alright, they don’t
want to lose their job—they want to provide for their families. Is that a meaningful objective? Certainly, but that doesn’t produce the same level of performance, the “go the extra mile” style that’s characteristic of an engaged employee.

Consider the proverbial Chicken and Pig who decide to create a ham and egg breakfast. Chicken-licken is involved, but Piggy-wiggy is committed. Yet, neither, we submit, were engaged. Chicken, could have just been a dumb cluck who didn’t know what was going on, and Pig could have simply been the victim of a hamburglar—neither were intrinsically motivated.

The difference between motivation and engagement is reflected in the figure, our take on where Maslow[1], Herzberg[2], engagement, and workplace strategy come together. Herzberg categorized the stuff at the bottom of the pyramid as ‘hygiene factors.’ A good salary, a nice place to work, a good cafeteria; they all produce external or extrinsic rewards. The stuff at the top of the pyramid are internal, intrinsic motivators. Importantly, Herzberg found that while not having those extrinsic needs met can lead to dissatisfaction, having them met won’t necessarily create satisfaction. In other words, unless people can find intrinsic reward from belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, the spiffiest office in the world won’t be worth a rodent’s rump when it comes to producing engagement.
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Steve Jobs famously (and unwise) convinced John Sculley to leave Pepsi and take the reins of Apple with a challenge to his sense of purpose: “Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?”

And you probably have heard the apocryphal story about John F. Kennedy asking a janitor at the NASA Manned Spacecraft Center what he was doing. “I’m helping put a man on the moon,” was the reply. There’s a similar story about when Sir Christopher Wrenn, during the construction of St. Paul’s cathedral, asked a worker what he was doing. “Raising a tribute to the almighty,” was the answer.

Employee engagement comes from an intrinsic sense of purpose, it comes about when people are emotionally involved in doing something they feel is meaningful. You can’t create engagement, but you can create meaning for every single job. If you do, engagement will follow.

Will that be easy? Hardly. For one thing, we’re fighting several centuries of work practices designed to extract efficiency from unwilling workers. But,
today, creativity and innovation are crucial for success in a world of accelerating change. Helping people find a sense of purpose—finding a sense of purpose yourself—will generate the engagement you’ve been looking for.

How do you do that? Help the people you work with, live with, or love answer these questions:

1. What are you good at, what comes easy at work or play?
2. What do you enjoy (usually related to #1)?
3. What are you interested in?
4. What makes you experience ‘flow’ and lose all sense of time?
5. What makes you feel useful?
6. How can you combine #1 through #5 in your work?

We happened to live equally close to two grocery stores, but we always go to the same one because the people who work there are so nice. We’ve actually taken visitors there just to enjoy, well, the ambiance. At a grocery store, for crying out loud.

We asked the manager about her secret ingredient, pointing out the completely opposite experience we have at the pharmacy next door and the ho-hum atmosphere at the other grocery store. She pointed to a grocery bagger and told us how he had hated the job. But the young man seemed to genuinely enjoy talking to the customers. She suggested that his purpose was not to put groceries in bags, but to be sure that every person that came through his checkout counter remembered him and the store because it was such a nice place.

“I have lots of other stories like that here,” she said. “Everyone needs a purpose.”
On a Personal Note:

For the last ten years I’ve been actively, if not always eagerly, involved in researching emerging work practices alongside my partner, Kate. Thanks to her we’ve made a name for ourselves by one measure, if no other—we no longer send out news releases, the media calls us.

Nevertheless, when I stumbled on a tweet that mentioned that Jeff’s Bezos’ rocket company, Blue Origin, was looking for an Astronaut Experience Manager I perked up. Reading the position description, I realized I was not only perfectly qualified but also head-over-heels in love with the idea of exchanging a home-office with a 180-degree ocean view in sunny Southern California for a cubicle in rainy Seattle.

A life-long devoteé of space flight and science fiction, I’ve thought of nothing else since I saw the job posting and spent a delightful day interviewing for it. Now I impatiently wait to hear if I’ve been selected. I fall asleep at night with Sutton’s Rocket Propulsion Elements on my lap. I’ve spent hours segmenting the space tourism market as voluntary homework. I’m taking an online graduate course in customer experience management from a university in Sweden. And I danced our doggies around the living room when a test flight of their New Shepard (as in Alan Shepard) suborbital rocket flew flawlessly.

In other words, I’m thoroughly, completely engaged and I’m not even an employee yet. Why?

Someone said the larger the thing you can credibly attach yourself to, the more meaning you get out of life. Climate change, nuclear war, pandemics, solar storms, asteroid collisions, or even a nearby nova are existential threats to humanity. Some can be avoided, some can be solved here on Earth, and some are unlikely—but as Stephen Hawking pointed out, if you wait long enough the improbable is inevitable. Millions of people living and working in
space is the only way to ensure the survival of our species. That’s about as large and meaningful a thing to be involved in as I can imagine. That’s a purpose worth my total commitment. – Tom
