

How Engaged Are You in Your Work?

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In last month's article I discussed harassment and bullying in the work environment, emphasizing that these behaviors are minimized or absent when "resonant leadership" is in place. In their impressive book *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee define "resonant" leaders as individuals with high emotional intelligence and empathy who "drive emotions positively" and bring out the best in everyone.

These authors observe, "Leaders give praise or withhold it, criticize well or destructively, offer support or turn a blind eye to people's needs. They can guide in ways that give people a sense of clarity and direction in their work and that encourage flexibility, setting people free to use their best sense of how to get the job done."

When I first read *Primal Leadership*, I recall being impressed by the image of "setting people free to use their best sense of how to get the job done." To set people free paralleled my views about creating what I call "motivating environments" that are characterized by enthusiasm, cooperation, and intrinsic motivation. I have written a number of articles about motivating environments, including a series posted on my website in February, March, and April, 2006.

I strongly believe that people will be increasingly motivated to engage in those activities in which their input is encouraged and respected. While I sense that most would agree with this statement, I have found during my consultations with different groups, including schools and business organizations, that such a practice is not always followed. Far too many students or employees do not experience a sense of being set free or a sense of ownership. Instead, they feel disrespected and alienated and that their voice is not being heard; not surprisingly, when these negative emotions prevail, learning or work performance suffers noticeably.

The Importance of "Engagement"

Closely tied to the concepts of motivating environments and intrinsic motivation is the concept of "engagement." In my professional activities I frequently hear questions that involve the issue of engagement such as: "How do I motivate students to be more

interested and engaged in learning?” or “How do I help my employees to be more engaged in their work?” or “How do I engage my clients so that they want to work with me in improving their lives?” In a chapter I co-authored with my daughter-in-law Dr. Suzanne Brooks and my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, we examined the ways in which intrinsic motivation, resilience, and engagement are interwoven threads that produce a rich fabric to enhance learning. The chapter appears in *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* edited by Sandra Christenson, Amy Reschly, and Cathy Wylie, published by Springer.

Not surprisingly, the strategies we outline for nurturing engagement in schools apply to other organizations as well. During my career people have shared with me stories of feeling disengaged from their work. A man told me that he felt “disrespected” at work and his opinion was rarely sought, leading him to be increasingly “disinterested” about his job. Similarly, a woman said, “I feel what I do at work is dictated by people who know very little about my responsibilities, but yet they won’t give me an opportunity to discuss what I think would make our work environment better.” Another man said, “I work in a place that is very negative. More time is spent telling us what we’ve done wrong than complimenting us for what we’ve done right. It’s as if my supervisors focus on what we can’t do rather than what we can do. It gets very discouraging to go to work each day.”

A 40-year-old woman I was seeing in therapy asserted with obvious emotion, “I know from reading some of your material that you emphasize the importance of making a difference in the lives of others. Most of my waking hours are spent at work, yet that is a place where I feel my ideas are quickly dismissed. I come home exhausted with little time or energy left for any other activities. I never feel that what I do makes much of a positive difference at all. It’s a very depressing feeling.”

Unsettling Findings from a Gallup Study

I was thinking about these and similar comments when I read a comprehensive study recently published by Gallup, Inc., the results of which I found somewhat unsettling (<http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163007/state-american-workplace.aspx>). The report, “State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders,” divides employees into three categories

of engagement based on findings from a questionnaire developed by Gallup. The reason I use the word “unsettling” was the percentage of employees across the United States who are disengaged from their work.

One group was subsumed under the category of “engaged employees.” They were described in the Gallup report as the “best colleagues. They cooperate to build an organization, institution, or agency, and they are behind everything good that happens there. These employees are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work. . . . They are 100% psychologically committed to their work.” They are perceived as the force that moves an organization forward.

The Gallup study found that only 30% of employees across a number of workplaces were engaged in their work. Another 52% were categorized as “not engaged.” How is their behavior manifested? According to Gallup, “They are not hostile or disruptive. They show up and kill time with little or no concern about customers, productivity, profitability, waste, safety, mission, and purpose of the teams, or developing customers. . . . They are essentially ‘checked out.’” They are also seen as “sleepwalking through their workday, putting time—but not energy or passion—into their work.”

The third group, which was labeled “actively disengaged,” comprise 18% of employees. They are described as “more or less out to damage their company. They aren’t just unhappy at work; they’re busy acting out their unhappiness. . . . Whatever the engaged do—such as solving problems, innovating, and creating new customers—the actively disengaged try to undo.” Given their negative behaviors, the actively disengaged employees are estimated to cost businesses in the United States between \$450 to \$550 billion each year in lost productivity. This figure is another reason for my use of the word “unsettling.”

The findings that less than one-third of employees meet the criteria for “engaged,” but yet engagement has been found to be associated with satisfaction, motivation, and high productivity in the workplace, leaves little question that the problem of disengagement deserves to be addressed immediately. It invites the question, “What steps must be taken to increase engagement in any organization?” The answers offered in the Gallup report parallel suggestions I have proposed in previous writings about

engagement, motivation, and resilience, including in the chapter I co-authored with Suzanne and Sam.

Effective Leadership and Engagement

The Gallup report recommends three “approaches for leaders to adopt to maximize the role human behavior plays in the workplace.” These approaches to reinforce engagement include:

1. Select the right people. The report contends, “Though many organizations focus on strengthening their current employees’ engagement, few have realized the potential effect the selection of managers and employees can have on engagement and organizational performance.” Gallup notes that their researchers have spent decades identifying the talents of exemplary leaders and “have discovered that these talents are powerful predictors of organizational engagement and performance.” They also have developed instruments to measure these talents in leaders, which include displaying genuine care and concern for their people, having clear guidelines for performance, and positioning people in “areas or tasks that will use their greatest strengths.”

Some may argue that it is easier said than done to predict which applicants, especially for supervisory positions, are most likely to display the qualities associated with resonant leaders. However, Gallup claims that the assessment tool they developed, Engagement Creation Index (ECI), is a reliable measure. “The ECI does more than measure a candidate’s own likelihood to be engaged, which can fluctuate over time. More importantly, it captures a candidate’s ability to act as a catalyst to build engaged work teams.”

The report continues, “With each new hire or promotion, employers have the opportunity to maximize employee engagement in the workplace. People want to feel supported, have a sense of belonging, and understand the contribution they can make towards organizational goals.”

2. Develop employees’ strengths. For more than 30 years I have used the metaphor “islands of competence” to capture the notion that we all possess different strengths and talents. I have advocated that in our schools, homes, and workplaces we must identify and reinforce the strengths of others rather than focus on remediating their weaknesses. Gallup asserts that their scientists have “established a compelling

connection between strengths and employee engagement in the workplace. . . . The research shows that people who use their strengths every day are six times more likely to be engaged on the job.”

Effective leaders, according to the Gallup report “identify the ways in which people most naturally think, feel, and behave, and then build on those talents to create strengths. . . . Building employees’ strengths is a far more effective approach than trying to improve weaknesses. . . . Managers have unique opportunities in their daily interactions with employees to empower them to discover and develop their strengths, and they have the ability to position employees in roles where they can do what they do best every day.”

The report offers an interesting perspective about strengths. “The more hours per day people believe they use their strengths, the more likely they are to report having ample energy, feeling well-rested, being happy, smiling or laughing a lot, learning something interesting, and being treated with respect.”

In the discussion of strengths, the Gallup report concludes, “A strength-based management approach is the best way to improve the employee-manager relationship.”

I would add that a strength-based approach is relevant and advantageous in any setting and in any relationship, including those that transpire in a school between administrators and teachers as well as between teachers and students. During my consultations I frequently ask individuals in leadership roles to describe the strengths of their employees or I ask teachers to describe the strengths of their students. I also request that leaders consider how the strengths of their employees (or students) are being used or displayed on a regular basis. As I have often expressed in my consultations, “What good are strengths if they remain dormant and are not appreciated or recognized?”

3. Enhance employees’ wellbeing. The Gallup report notes that one of their more “intriguing findings while studying engagement outcomes was the correlation between employees’ engagement levels and their physical health. . . . Engaged employees have lower incidences of chronic health problems such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, diagnosed depression, and heart attacks than actively disengaged employees. They also eat healthier, exercise more frequently, consume more fruits and vegetables than their not engaged or actively disengaged counterparts.” Gallup

also found that engaged workers were more prone to participate in employer-sponsored wellness programs.

The Gallup researchers assert, “Employers who make an effort to improve their employees’ engagement levels will help their workers improve the quality of their lives, minimizing the cost of decreased productivity resulting from chronic illness.”

One might raise the “what came first, the chicken or the egg?” question when reflecting on these results. That is, are people who are healthier to begin with more likely to become engaged in work, or does being engaged at work contribute to a healthier lifestyle?

To move beyond the chicken or egg debate, the researchers found that the greatest benefit occurs when companies focus on improving both engagement and wellbeing simultaneously. “When employees are engaged *and* thriving in their wellbeing—as are 22% of American workers overall—they are more likely to be agile and resilient.” They note another benefit for companies and organizations, namely, “engaged, thriving employees have fewer health problems and therefore lower healthcare costs to their employers.”

The report recommends several steps that leaders can assume in reinforcing wellbeing in their staff. They include: (a) defining wellbeing as an organizational strategy so that healthy behaviors become contagious with all employees being in the same boat; (b) communicating a commitment to a healthier lifestyle by having, when possible, employee benefits that include “health risk assessments, exercise machines, employee assistance programs, and nutrition programs”; (c) holding the organization responsible by evaluating the effectiveness of current wellbeing programs; and (d) considering different ways of incorporating wellness strategies in each employee’s individual plans and goals so that employees are encouraged to “document their goals and track their individual wellbeing.”

Assessment and Strategies

A major point of the Gallup report is that instruments exist for measuring engagement in the workplace and that these assessment tools offer specific, realistic guidelines for those in leadership positions to create work environments that nurture engagement, motivation, resilience, and physical and emotional wellbeing.

My hope in summarizing some of the findings of the Gallup study is to prompt those reading this article, especially in supervisory or leadership positions, to reflect upon their current practices and to consider what they do or don't do to foster engagement in their staff. To have approximately 70% of employees within the "not engaged" or "actively disengaged" categories represents a major problem in our workplace that I believe must be addressed without delay.

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