



*Why Employee Engagement Matters
and Why Engagement Efforts Fail*

BY BOB LAVIGNA

Engaged employees are enthusiastic about their work — they and go above minimum job requirements and deliver “discretionary effort.” As a result, engaged employees enable the organization to succeed. Specifically, research shows that organizations with high levels of employee engagement are more successful and productive as a result of this higher level of employee involvement and commitment.¹

To improve employee engagement, governments must first understand what drives engagement — in other words, what they need to manage. Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all way to improve employee engagement. There are more than 85,000 government jurisdictions across the United States, each with its own mission, strategy, culture, policies, and political and budgetary situation. All these factors are relevant.

However, research has shown that specific factors can improve employee engagement. In one such study, employees’ attitudes about how the importance of their jobs and employers are more important than any other factor.² Another driver of engagement is making sure that employees clearly understand the employer’s expectations and that they have the materials and equipment they need.³

Otherwise, employees can become bored and resentful. Employers also need to offer opportunities for employees to advance in their careers, provide regular feedback and dialogue, encourage good working relationships, and communicate effectively. Equally important is a perception that the organization has values — a conviction that the organization works toward a set of defined goals and has a strong value proposition.⁴

Organizations that achieve high levels of engagement outperform organizations with low levels of engagement. In key indicators commonly used to measure organizational performance such as achievement of strategic goals, customer service, innovation, employee retention, and attendance, high-engagement organizations outperform low-engagement organizations. This holds for both the private and public sectors.

For example, in one study, high-engagement government agencies were almost twice as successful as low-engagement agencies in achieving their strategic goals.⁵ Engaged public-sector employees are four times more likely to stay in their current jobs, five times more likely to recommend their workplaces to others, and five times more likely to be very satisfied with their work.⁶ Higher levels of engagement in government also lead to improved employee performance in supporting the organization’s mission, more collaborative and innovative work environments, and lower costs of disengagement.⁷

MEASURING ENGAGEMENT

Employee engagement can — and should — be measured. Building engagement for the long term requires a culture of engagement. In other words, engagement needs to become part of the organization’s DNA, not something the human resources (HR) department tries to do unilaterally or something managers pay attention to only when they have time. While HR has an important role in measuring and improving engagement, doing so in individual units is a fundamental responsibility of managers and supervisors.

There are many different ways to improve engagement. Successful organizations measure engagement, analyze the results to identify what areas to specifically focus on, take action in these areas to improve engagement, and then measure again to determine if the needle of engagement is moving in the right direction. Although no one practice works for every government, there are basic employee engagement principles. Engagement surveys developed by various organizations share some basic principles. For example, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has identified a set of 16 questions/statements that public-sector organizations can use to assess the level of employee engagement.⁸ The statements are organized into six categories (see Exhibit 1).

Even if an organization decides not to survey its employees, managers can use these statements as a checklist. In other words, how would your employees respond — would they agree or disagree? If it’s the latter, then you probably need to take action.

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Exhibit I: Merit Systems Protection Board Employee Engagement Statements

Pride in One's Work or Workplace

1. My agency is successful at accomplishing its mission.
2. My work unit produces high-quality products and services.
3. The work I do is meaningful to me.
4. I would recommend my agency as a place to work.

Satisfaction with Leadership

5. Overall, I am satisfied with my supervisor.
6. Overall, I am satisfied with managers above my immediate supervisor.

Opportunity to Perform Well at Work

7. I know what is expected of me on the job.
8. My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.
9. I have the resources to do my job well.
10. I have sufficient opportunities (such as challenging assignments or projects) to earn a high performance rating.

Satisfaction with Recognition

11. Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit.
12. I am satisfied with the recognition and rewards I receive for my work.

Prospects for Future Personal and Professional Growth

13. I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.

Positive Work Environment with Some Focus on Teamwork

14. I am treated with respect at work.
15. My opinions count at work.
16. A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my unit.

WHY EFFORTS FAIL

Given the research on the power of an engaged workforce, one would think that organizations would be focusing on engagement and, therefore, engagement levels would be high. Unfortunately, the opposite is true. Research by the Gallup organization,⁹ for example, reveals that only 30 percent of employees across all sectors of the U.S. economy are engaged (which they defined as “deeply involved and enthusiastic about their work and actively contributing to their organization”).¹⁰ This is a bad-news/good-news story.

The bad news is that engagement is low, but the good news is that these low levels mean there is tremendous potential to improve engagement, and therefore improve organizational performance, including in government.

Why, then, do employers' engagement efforts fail? What are the barriers that organizations face when trying to improve engagement? Following are nine issues:

- Engagement as a project rather than a core value.
- Lack of support from top leadership.
- Lack of support from front-line managers or supervisors.
- Failure to act on engagement survey results.
- Rushing to solutions without collecting and analyzing data.
- Imprecisely analyzing survey results.
- Poor communication.
- Failure to regularly survey employees.
- Inability to link improved engagement with organizational outcomes.

Engagement as a Project, not a Core Value. Employee engagement only works as a long-term strategy; it cannot be just another program that is here today and gone tomorrow. For example, the University of Wisconsin's employee engagement strategy — the goal of which is to create an environment of respect and inclusiveness through opportunities for employee engagement — flows from, and links directly to, the university's strategic priority: “Recruit and retain the best faculty and staff.”¹¹ This drives the strategic goal to “create an environment of respect and inclusiveness through opportunities for employee engagement.”

Another example is Oregon Metro, the regional government for Portland-area governments. Oregon Metro explicitly incorporated improved employee engagement into its vision, strategic plan, and value statement, and then developed a

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set of employee managerial competencies around building an engaged workforce.

HR should play an important role in designing and implementing employee engagement strategies. HR needs to champion engagement as a key organizational strategy, articulate the business case for improved engagement, provide a center of expertise for engagement efforts, facilitate the process, and lead enterprise-wide action. But if an engagement strategy is viewed solely as an HR “project,” it will likely fail. That’s because, as argued above, successful efforts to measure and improve engagement must be driven by senior leadership and supported by other stakeholders, including managers, supervisors, labor organizations, and rank-and-file employees. HR can facilitate the process, but improving employee engagement has to be an organization-wide imperative.

Lack of Support. Since improving employee engagement is a marathon, not a sprint, leaders must make a long-term commitment promoting engagement. Of course, this can be difficult in the public sector, where elected and appointed leaders come and go, and priorities can change literally

Numerous studies show that engaged employees find personal meaning in their work, go beyond the minimum, and deliver “discretionary effort.”

overnight. Jurisdictions that are able to maintain employee engagement momentum even when administrations change succeed by making a successful business case to the incoming administration.

Lack of Buy-In from Supervisors.

The commitment of front-line managers and supervisors is just as critical to improving engagement as that of senior leadership. Most people have

heard the expression that “people join organizations but they quit bosses,” which applies to engagement as well. Research shows that when managers and supervisors are engaged, it is far more likely that front-line employees will be, too.¹² Since engaged employees deliver superior results, managers and supervisors need to focus on taking action to maximize engagement, starting with a survey measuring employee engagement. However, just reviewing survey questions (like the 16 MSPB statements) can provide guidance for managers about the types of workplaces they should strive to build and maintain.

Failure to Act on Survey Results. Failing to act on survey results is a fatal error. This problem can occur across the enterprise or, more commonly, at the individual manager or work-unit level. In one large American city, for example, employees in units that took action on the city’s engagement survey were more engaged than employees in units where employees did not believe any actions were taken — by 45 percent points, according to a follow-up survey. The bottom line is that surveying employees without acting on the results is worse than not conducting a survey at all. Acting on the results is essential.

Rushing to Solutions. Here is a simple but potentially powerful five-step model for measuring and improving employee engagement:¹³

- Plan.
- Measure engagement.
- Analyze the results.
- Take action.
- Sustain engagement and re-measure.





As this model suggests, collecting data directly from employees through surveys or other tools is a critical step in gauging the current level of engagement and identifying the strengths that need to be maintained and the weaknesses that need to be shored up. Some organizations leap directly to fixes without collecting data from their employees, and while some fixes (consult more with employees, improve training, and so on) may work, organizations that adopt strategies without supporting data are shooting in the dark — and will also not be able to measure whether their actions are making a difference.

One survey of public-sector HR managers and professionals asked respondents to estimate the levels of employee engagement in their organizations, and some responded that their engagement levels were 85 percent or even higher.¹⁴ Numbers like these are in stark contrast to what actual engagement survey data show — that engagement levels are much lower in both the private and public sectors. Instead of guessing about the level of engagement and how to improve it, organizations need to measure engagement and then act on what the data show.

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Imprecise Analysis. Successful efforts to improve engagement involve collecting and analyzing data at the lowest organizational unit possible. That’s because determining how to act on enterprise-wide data can be difficult, as results can reflect the views of hundreds or even thousands of employees. For example, in the Partners for Public Service’s 2013 “Best Places to Work in the Federal Government” rankings, two subcomponents of the same federal department were first and last among the 300 agency subcomponents ranked. The top-ranked subcomponent scored 84.4 (on a scale of 0 to 100), while the lowest-ranked subcomponent scored less than 25. Such extreme variability suggests that these two groups have different engagement issues, and this illustrates why planning should include reporting and analyzing data at the most discrete level possible, whether that is at the work unit or individual manager/supervisor level. This strategy also helps create accountability for actions — and improvements.

Poor Communication. Communication holds engagement efforts together from beginning to end, starting with an explanation of why and how the engagement strategy will be implemented. Then, after surveying employees, the organization needs to communicate the results. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board recommends reporting survey results to all staff within a month. Delaying or failing to report results sends a message that the organization is not serious about acting on the survey data or, even worse, has something to hide. For similar reasons, the organization must share its action strategies and plans. Many jurisdictions that conduct surveys post the results and action plans electronically so all employees have access. This kind of transparency also creates accountability.

Failure to Monitor Engagement Regularly. Because improving employee engagement is a long-term strategy, organizations should measure engagement regularly to find out how its strategies are working. “One and done” approaches can yield some short-term results, but they don’t provide feedback on whether the needle of engagement is moving in the right direction in the long run. Organizations that are committed to improving engagement typically survey their employees annually, or at least every two years. For example, several years ago, the feder-

al government started conducting the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey annually instead of biennially.

Failure to Link Improved Engagement with Organizational Outcomes. Any organization that focuses on improving engagement don't strive to improve engagement for its own sake. The goal should be to improve engagement as a strategy to improve performance. In the private sector, research has shown that high-engagement firms outperform low-engagement firms in key financial indicators such as income and earnings per share.¹⁵ These kinds of standard and easy-to-benchmark metrics don't usually work for governments, which are typically not-for-profit enterprises. Instead, public-sector organizations need to link engagement with outcomes/metrics such as customer satisfaction, timeliness, response time, productivity, and achievement of strategic goals. (Employee retention and attendance can also be useful metrics, even though they are not truly outcome measures.) For example, research links high levels of employee engagement in both U.K. and U.S. hospitals with better patient outcomes, lower mortality rates, higher patient satisfaction, better service quality, improved financial performance, higher levels of employee health and well-being, and lower employee absenteeism.¹⁶

CONCLUSIONS

One of the great challenges public-sector organizations face is attracting, engaging, developing, and retaining talent. In government, success depends largely on having the right people with the right skills in the right places at the right times. Focusing on employee engagement can be a powerful way to attract and retain talent, and improve individual and organizational performance — if it's done right. |

Notes

1. Examples include "State of the American Workplace, Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders," Gallup Consulting, 2013; and "The Power of Employee Engagement," U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2008.

Successful efforts to measure and improve engagement must be driven by senior leadership and supported by other stakeholders, including managers, supervisors, labor organizations, and rank-and-file employees.

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4. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist*, January 2000.
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6. 2014 IPMA-HR Employee Engagement Survey, International Public Management Association for Human Resources.
7. "Engaged Performance," Deloitte Development, 2011.
8. Federal Employee Engagement: From the Motivating Potential of Job Characteristics and Rewards, a report to the president and the Congress of the United States, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, December 2012.
9. Gallup Consulting.
10. Bob Lavigna, *Engaging Government Employees: Motivate and Inspire Your People to Achieve Superior Performance* (AMACOM, 2013).
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