

APPLYING
Professional Developmental Tools
to EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



BY ELIZABETH FU

High employee engagement is connected to better customer service, higher productivity, lower turnover rates, lower absenteeism, and several performance outcomes.¹ But data on employee engagement suggest that governments have room for improvement in this area. A 2014 survey of state and local government employees found that fewer than a half of respondents had an understanding of their organization’s direction, indicating a disconnect between employees and the mission and vision of their organizations.²

In an article for the *Atlantic*, Derek Thompson writes that “any organization that focuses on improving engagement doesn’t strive to improve engagement for its own sake. The goal should be to improve engagement as a strategy to improve performance.”³ In other words, ask how an employee’s goals relate to the organization’s goals, and vice versa. Keep in mind, however, that the traditional way of doing this — giving feedback to employees as part of an annual performance review — is probably ineffective; many studies have found that feedback elicited from traditional performance reviews may bore goal-oriented individuals and discourage relatively new employees.⁴

Local government finance offices are taking on the challenge of creating more effective strategies. Below, five of these jurisdictions — the City of Fredericton, New Brunswick; Town of Gilbert, Arizona; Oakland County, Michigan; City of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; and St. Johns River Water Management District in Florida — share important lessons from their own experiences.

KNOW THE EMPLOYEE

Any personal development strategy needs to start with an assessment of the employee’s strengths and values. The local governments mentioned in this article chose to work with two self-assessment tools that are easy to use and inexpensive, with results that are supported by scientific research: Mindset and StrengthsFinder.

Mindset. Mindset is a collection of online development materials, learning curricula, webinars, and workshops that are based on research by Carol Dweck, a leading researcher of motivation. Dweck posits that people have either a “fixed” or a “growth” mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe

that their basic qualities and abilities cannot be changed, while people with a growth mindset believe the opposite — that their basic qualities and abilities can be developed over time, with the proper practice and encouragement.⁵ Dweck’s assessment identifies whether an individual tends toward a fixed or growth mindset. The materials help those with more of a fixed mindset to start working on a growth mindset, and those who tend more toward a growth mindset to discover any remaining self-limiting beliefs that might prevent them from reaching their full potential. Dweck’s research shows that a growth mindset is necessary for meaningful personal development.

StrengthsFinder. StrengthsFinder was developed in 1998 by psychologist Donald O. Clifton and researcher Tom Rath, along with a team of Gallup scientists. StrengthsFinder includes books, an online assessment program, and training sessions. The assessment helps identify a person’s natural talents, lists his or her most important strengths, and gives advice on developing professional skills that are aligned with the strengths identified.

Putting Results to Use. Generally speaking, assessments provide an opportunity for individuals to focus on themselves before getting into the details of a personal development plan, creating a newfound perspective that allows the user to get the most from the experience. For example, for staff in Oakland County’s finance office, taking the Mindset assessment allowed staff to be aware of their “inner voice.” This is important because if someone’s inner voice is telling them that their skills and abilities are fixed and they are not capable of personal growth, then a personal development plan will not get them far.

The results can be surprising. Before taking the assessment, members of the St. Johns River Water Management District budget staff expected the assessment to reflect a growth mindset. When this proved not to be the case, staff members who had fixed mindsets started orienting their personal development plans toward developing a growth mindset — choosing to be enlightened rather than defeated by the results.

Connecting the Dots. For optimal effectiveness in the workplace, self-assessments must lead to a discussion between

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Exhibit I: Leadership Competencies for Personal Development Plans

	Level of Functioning Competency	Expected	Proficient	Outstanding
	Reliable and Responsive Service			
Directors	<p>1. Engagement — Mobilizing Employees, Citizens, Partners <i>Demonstrated ability to lead, motivate, empower, and mobilize individuals and groups to work toward a shared purpose in the best interests of the organization and the City of Saskatoon. Builds and maintains a high level of credibility with staff, partners, and/or citizens.</i></p>	<p>Willingly sets the direction and pace in a group. Provides clarity and focus for the group's work and motivation to achieve goals.</p>	<p>Accepts responsibility and holds others accountable. Skilled at influencing others to meet set goals. Demonstrates expected behaviors for direct reports and partners. Respects and supports others in leadership roles.</p>	<p>Faces setbacks calmly. Accepts different ideas. Keeps things moving despite obstacles. Leverages talent effectively. Manages work and leads people. Respects and supports others in leadership roles.</p>
	<p>2. Pragmatic Decision Maker <i>Recognizes priorities and changing approaches. Shows common sense and intuitive judgment. Analyzes and synthesizes a wide array of subjective and objective information to recommend appropriate short-term and long-term direction and goals for their department or division.</i></p>	<p>Knows and applies robust decision-making skills biased towards prompt and effective action. Decisions are generally sound and well thought through. Knows when and who to consult when confronted with difficult decisions.</p>	<p>Makes informed, effective decisions in a timely and consistent manner. Knows when and how to undertake the research needed to inform more complex decisions with medium term impact.</p>	<p>Makes informed, effective decisions addressing non-routine and complex situations referred by others. Focuses on the research and reflection required for decisions with longer-term impact and makes recommendations that are thoughtful and compelling.</p>
	Strong Management and Fiscal Responsibility			
	<p>3. Turning Strategy into Action <i>Analyzes and interprets the strategic direction of the organization; has a clear and firm understanding of the vision, mission, values and objectives of the workplace; and uses that information to develop responsibilities, tasks, goals, and implement initiatives that align with long-term plans and growth. Reflects on past experience and organizational practices and processes to determine the correct course of action.</i></p>	<p>Is able to analyze and comprehend operational and organizational goals and strategies developed by others. Prepares plans to implement programs and services aligned to operational and organizational goals.</p>	<p>Sees where current trends will lead and how they may influence the corporation's direction. Foresees opportunities and ways to leverage them to best effect. Analyzes options based on long-term payoffs and outcomes. Translates the vision for programs or services into clear strategies.</p>	<p>Forms and articulates a clear picture of the future the corporation should strive for. Explains why that future is important and how current decisions make or break the chance to reach it. Translates the vision for the corporation into clear strategies.</p>

	Level of Functioning Competency	Expected	Proficient	Outstanding
	Effective Communication, Openness, and Accountability			
Directors	4. Team Building <i>Understands and applies concepts and techniques to build and support effective work teams. Sets the tone and standards for team behaviors.</i>	Effective in developing team dynamics. Understands and articulates the behaviors that support and hinder team development. Uses facilitation tools and techniques to strengthen team interactions and work processes.	Leads and organizes the team. Is aware of, and responsive to, others' needs within own and from other, external teams. Pro-active problem solver. Engages the team(s). Works well with diverse teams.	Recognizes when there is a need to develop a team, and does so. Is aware of, and responsive to, other team members' needs. Sought out as a mentor. Develops and coaches team members.
	5. Political Acumen <i>Politically astute and sensitive to the city council's issues. Maintains and develops relationships inside and outside of the organization to ensure best practices and enhance general knowledge.</i>	Identifies and understands organizational implications of key issues re: potential impact on the department and the community. Makes decisions and takes action to respond to specific concerns.	Works to reconcile the needs of multiple internal and external stakeholders. Conducts risk assessments to maximize results. Knows who and when to consult.	Revises positions and commitments to demonstrate increased organizational responsiveness to community and stakeholder needs, interests and/or concerns. Undertakes ongoing consultations and adjusts decisions and actions as appropriate.
	Innovation and Creativity			
	6. Innovation Management <i>Has good judgment about which creative ideas and suggestions will work and how to operationalize them. Is deliberate in encouraging the creative process in others.</i>	Leads changes in the department, modeling adaptability. Looks beyond the data for solutions and generates varied solutions to problems. Considers others' ideas and perspectives.	Tailors procedures and processes to fit a specific situation and/or to get a job done and meet departmental goals. Adapts departmental plans, or projects in response to changing circumstances and needs. Explores new ways to deliver programs and services.	Is innovative and creative when generating solutions, and willing to change ideas or perceptions based on new information or contrary evidence. Understands and values other people's points of view. Tries new approaches and concepts in incremental steps and champions their acceptance when proven suitable. Challenges others to take fresh perspectives and educated risks.

employees and managers. The point is to identify employees' goals, what action is being taken to achieve those goals, and how goals relate to the organization's overall mission.

Self-assessments also yield insight into the type of work environment where employees thrive, making them good tools for team building. For example, St. Johns River Water

Management District participants discussed the results of their individual assessments from both Mindset and StrengthsFinder, helping them understand each other's abilities and develop teams of complimentary, rather than overlapping, skills. The exercise also provided an opportunity for staff members to see how their colleagues identified themselves instead of relying on their assumptions about their

colleague's attributes. Overall, the District's budget director concluded that the exercise helped budget staff practice the "platinum rule": Treat others the way they want to be treated, because people respond differently in different situations.⁶

The City of Saskatoon has developed categories of leadership competencies for its employees, varying by role: senior leadership ("general managers"), mid-management ("directors"), and all other employees ("first core"). (Exhibit 1 outlines the leadership competencies for directors.) Building on the results of their StrengthsFinder assessments, city employees are developing personal development plans addressing those competencies.

Like Saskatoon, St. Johns River Water Management District asked employees to outline their developmental objectives, keeping in mind their positions and their personal technical/functional competencies as well as the broader needs of the district. (See Exhibit 2.)

District employees are encouraged to align their own developmental objectives with the organization's values: trust, partnership, accountability, and results. From there, individual action planning proceeds according to four principles:

1. Employees and managers are both involved from creation to completion of a plan and are candid about the purpose of developmental planning and needs.

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2. The employee's unique developmental needs and career aspirations are reflected in the plan.
3. The development plan will address current and future organizational needs by focusing on knowledge, skills, and abilities that are important to achieving the organization's strategic priorities.
4. Development plans incorporate as much on-the-job learning as possible because most effective development occurs through experiences.

Unlike Saskatoon and St. Johns River Water Management District, Oakland County Fiscal Services did not have a formal employee development system in place. Instead, it developed its own template based on what was learned from the self-assessments. Fiscal Services provided its 15 employees, who were volunteering in the trial, with a copy of *StrengthsFinder 2.0*.⁷ They took the self-assessment to determine their top five strengths and then completed a professional development plan template. The employees have responded favorably to the initiative, especially to the insight gained from their self-assessments. The Fiscal Services Department's goal is to share StrengthsFinder, along with a professional development plan template, to all of its 100-some employees.

Developed by Fiscal Services staff during the trial, the professional development plan template (see Exhibit 3) asks some basic questions to get staff thinking about the purpose

Exhibit 2: Form for Outlining Developmental Objectives

Development Objectives	Aligned with Current Position	Aligned with Career Aspirations
Technical/Functional Competency Needs		
The District's Core Competency Needs (Professional Excellence, Leadership Excellence)		

Exhibit 3: Oakland County Fiscal Services Department’s Professional Development Plan Template

Developmental Questions

Items to Consider	Responses
Purpose of my job	
Professional interests	
Personal interests	
Favorite job tasks	
Least favorite job tasks	
Motivators that actively engage me in my job	
Top five strengths	
Skills/environmental/technical factors that cause difficulty in my job and suggestions for improvement	
Training opportunities to enhance skills	
Growth mindset assessment — initial results and how the assessment affected the way I will think about things in the future	
Future career aspirations	

Developmental Goals

Prioritized Goal List	Action Plan to Achieve Goal	Target Date	Progress Tracking

of their jobs, their personal and professional interests, their favorite and least favorite job tasks, and what motivates them. The template also asks staff to identify strengths, skills/environmental/technical factors that cause difficulty in their jobs (including suggestions to address these factors), and career aspirations. After completing the template, employees meet with managers to collaboratively set goals for the coming year. The department plans to modify the template as needed over time.

Professional competency standards can also come from external resources. One example is ICMA’s 18 core competencies, which focus on areas identified as essential to local government management.⁸ For example, the Town of Gilbert, Arizona, asked a management intern to compare the results

of his StrengthsFinder self-assessment against a listing of core competencies by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Building on those two sources, they developed overarching professional development goals for the employee and identified assignments to help build upon those goals. They communicate about progress at weekly one-on-one meetings.

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CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Employee engagement is a continuous process, not limited to an annual review. After goals have been established, managers should identify opportunities and tasks to help employees continue meeting their objectives and developing their interests and skills. The local governments

discussed in this article are finding ways to help employees develop skills while also building a greater understanding of how the goals of individual employees work with the organization's overall mission.

Continuous feedback eliminates surprises for employees who are not performing as well as expected, and it helps managers become more effective coaches. Managers can adopt regular meetings (e.g., weekly or monthly) to discuss progress toward goals, brainstorm issues, or simply check in.⁹

For optimal effectiveness in the workplace, self-assessments must lead to a discussion between employees and managers.

CONCLUSIONS

Developing a culture of engaged employees is a slow process that involves a great deal of trust between employees and managers. Collaboration is a central ingredient, made possible by the organization's efforts at showing that it is vested in its employees.

The challenge for any organization is that engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Employees have unique strengths, developmental needs, and career goals. As such, it is important to talk to them, use engagement tools, and regularly seek feedback. Developing an environment that fosters employee engagement will help finance offices overcome the barriers that all organizations face when trying to improve employee engagement. ■

Notes

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2. "2014 State and Local Government Employee Engagement," International Public Management Association for Human Resources, November 2014.
3. Bob Lavigna, "Why Employee Engagement Matters and Why Engagement Efforts Fail," *Government Finance Review*, February 2015.
4. Derek Thompson, "The Case against Performance Reviews," *The Atlantic*, January 29, 2014.
5. "What is Mindset," mindsetonline.com.
6. Dr. Tony Alessandra, "The Platinum Rule," www.alessandra.com.
7. Tom Rath, *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (Gallup Press, 2007).
8. "Practices for Effective Local Government Leadership," available at icma.org.
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