

The 5 Levers of Employee Engagement

By Michael Cardus

An "engaged employee" is one who is fully involved in, and enthusiastic about the work, and thus will act in a way that furthers their organization's interests.
Wikipedia

The work of managers and employees has increased in complexity due to globalization, a faster work and life pace, and instability in the world's economy; the need for employees to be engaged in their work has increased. And when they handle the complexity of factors thrown at them, engaged employees by default will innovate, and improve ways of doing the work.

Managers, when asked, tell you that employee engagement is a must for the survival of their company. Employees tell you that they want to be engaged in their work, and also feel that if people are not engaged in the work, work and work-life suffers. But when you ask either party how to achieve employee engagement? The responses are lost in a sea of psychological babble and blame for incompetent management or lazy employees.

In this article I will illustrate that achieving employee engagement is a systems solution. It can arise from adjustments to how the work is assigned and monitored and the placement of the right people into the right positions, with the right accountability. Creating a system that drives needed innovation and allows people to make progress on their work, creates a reinforcing loop of innovation and progress. This leads to increased perception of competence, which leads to actual increased competence. Greater competency leads to autonomy in completing the work, and increased engagement with the work and the company.

5 Levers of Employee Engagement

There are five levers that can lead to employee engagement.

- Competent Manager
- Broad goals that are established within the proper context
- Objective measures of progress and regress
- The necessary resources to get the job done
- Sufficient Autonomy to do their best work

All of the levers need to be in place in the management system, in order for engagement to occur. If any lever is missing or under-functioning, the result will be less than engagement. Table 1 shows the outcomes when all levers are in place, as well as when each lever is absent.

Table 1
The Five Levers of Employee Engagement

Competent Manager +	Contextual Goals +	Objective Metrics +	Resources +	Autonomy =	Engaged
	Contextual Goals +	Objective Metrics +	Resources +	Autonomy =	Under-Performance
Competent Manager +		Objective Metrics +	Resources +	Autonomy =	Confused & false starts, missed deadlines
Competent Manager +	Contextual Goals +		Resources +	Autonomy =	Angry and / or Scared
Competent Manager +	Contextual Goals +	Objective Metrics +		Autonomy =	Frustrated
Competent Manager +	Contextual Goals +	Objective Metrics +	Resources +	=	Micromanaged
©2012 www.create-learning.com					

Competent Manager

Management is well understood as a necessity in any complex organization. A competent manager is one who is able to add value to your work and enhance your decision making and judgment. A competent manager is able of judging your effectiveness and allowing you to do your best work. He or she is able to illustrate understanding of the work, and let you know that ultimately she or he is accountable for your output... all that you are expected to do is your best. S/He is able to move a team along in collaboration enthusiastically engaged with each other and the work.

To be seen as competent, managers must be able to understand the goals of the organization, how those goals affect his or her manager, how those goals will affect your work, and then be able to supply you with sufficient information and resources to allow you to do your best.

Competent management happens when the organization sets the proper separation between managers and subordinates. The organization allows for a manager who is "big enough" (see *Table 2*) to fill the needed complexity and develop and delegate plans to the team. The organization develops systems for needed communication and supplies the manager with needed resources to get the work done.

Without a competent manager employee engagement will not happen and underperformance will plague the organization and team.

Table 2
Having a Competent “Big Enough” Manager

Manager “Too Small” in Competence	Manager “Big Enough” in Competence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot set adequate context of the work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sets adequate context of the work.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gets involved in too much of the details of how the work gets done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares how the managers work and the delegated tasks “fit” together into the larger goals of the organization, department, and teams.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breathes down the subordinates’ neck. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows a level of autonomy for completion of delegated tasks.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appears to be more comfortable doing the work that the subordinates should be doing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows the time-span of the subordinates work, and lets them get on with their work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adds no value to the work of subordinates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adds value to the work and decisions of others. • Offers coaching (when needed)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclined to take credit for what goes well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is self-assured enough to do their own work, while leaving subordinates to do theirs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blames subordinates for what goes wrong. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges the accomplishments of the team and gives credit where credit is due.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepts the accountability that it is the manager who is ultimately accountable for the output of the team. If things go wrong, it is the manager’s responsibility to make things right through effective coaching and use of the team’s capabilities.
<i>Inspired by Elliott Jaques ‘Executive Leadership’</i>	

Contextual Goals

Goals drive everything in an organization...without goals there is no work. In setting goals, they must be ‘just right’ for the person. They cannot be so broad in scope that the person is drifting aimlessly like a plastic bag in the wind, and it

cannot be so narrow in scope that the person feels constrained and cannot do their best work. A competent manager also knows how to set goals within the proper time frame, with the proper quality and quantity requirements. Without a contextual goal, frustration, along with false starts, and late/early finishes will disengage employees from the organization and team.

Objective Metrics

Employees must be able to objectively, on their own, measure progress and regress on work that is meaningful to them. This is accomplished by the competent manager setting contextual goals and the employee working to determine the needed small steps, how to accomplish those small steps and how to know what progress looks like. If metrics are established based upon the "feeling of the manager" then you will achieve misery, anger and fear...which is mutually exclusive of engagement. The measurements must be co-established by employee and manager in reference to the goal set; the employee has the final say over how to complete their own work, with the knowledge of the manager's goals in context.

If the objective metric (*a standard for progress and regress*) is not known and established by the employee, anger and fear can freeze them in disengagement. Developing metrics that are based upon goals and the quality and volume of work to be completed will work to further engage employees.

Resources

To get the work done the employee must have the appropriate resources to do the work. This does not mean that a manager needs to supply the employee all the resources they desire, but it does mean that the manager has to supply the employee sufficient resources. Resources can include materials, consultants, training, staff, etc.; without the proper resources frustration will occur and this frustration leads to disengaged employees.

Some question to consider regarding resources:

- What resources does the employee currently have?
- Can the contextual goal be completed in the time frame required with the resources available?
- Does this contextual goal warrant the resources required by this employee?

Adequate resources are required in order for innovation and engagement to be able to occur.

Autonomy

Autonomy is synonymous with self directed behavior. It can be a lever that drives employee engagement into full implementation, but autonomy must be tied to the other areas mentioned; competent manager, contextual goals, objective metrics, resources... only then can autonomy happen. An autonomous employee

understands that there are choices and ultimately feels responsible for the choices made. He or she is able to do their best work, and gain wisdom on making decisions and solving problems while doing the work.

There will come a time when an autonomous, engaged employee will hit an obstacle around which cannot be navigated. This is when a manager can increase the employee's engagement by coaching and developing the employee to improve problem solving skills, therefore reinforcing both autonomy and engagement.

If employees feel that they are being micro-managed, the engagement will be sucked out like a rapidly deflating balloon. This creates an "I just do what I'm told, if anything goes wrong, it's not my fault" behavior.

For employees to be engaged in their work 5 areas must be focused on and cared for:

- Competent manager
- Contextual goals
- Objective metrics
- Resources
- Autonomy

Each builds and leverages off the others to drive innovative and successful work of organizations and staff.

Often managers are mistaken in their belief that a person's psychology or personality is what drives engagement. No, it is the work system that drives behaviors and it must be developed to keep people engaged in work that is meaningful and in which they can make progress.

By understanding that the manager controls the process and works to set the system, the behaviors will adjust to engagement. Everyone wants to do their best work, and feel connected and engaged with their organization, work, manager and coworkers. By focusing on the 5 areas above you will create a system that drives engagement and innovation.

References

Table 1: Inspired to create the '5 Levers of Employee Engagement' table from a similar chart developed by *the work of Dr. Richard A. Villa*, <http://www.ravillabayridge.com/>

Table 2: 'Having a Competent Big Enough Manager' was inspired by the work of Elliott Jaques and Stephan D. Clement "Executive Leadership" *Cason Hall & Co. Publishers, 1994*

About the Author



Michael Cardus
Principal Consultant
Create-Learning Team Building & Leadership, Inc.

Michael Cardus has a focused expertise on team building, managerial, leadership and organization development working with a variety of businesses, teams and individuals. Michael is frequently asked to create pragmatic solutions to address the development of high performance teams, retention of talent, innovation of product and profit streams, interpersonal and intergroup conflict, coaching of leaders, and developing systems to drive positive behaviors and development of skilled knowledge to increase organizational and personal effectiveness. Working primarily with teams and management within these organizations, his role has been honed to coach, counsel, facilitate and conduct focused group work.

You can find out more about Michael at www.create-learning.com and his blog at <http://create-learning.com/blog>