



Employee Engagement: Steps to Fuel the Human Rocket

To soar to the top of your industry and extend the distance between you and the competition, you need to tap into the core of what makes people go above and beyond to do their very best work.

The growing urgency to foster greater employee engagement for business success should come as no surprise. You might even be saying that's why you keep pushing people to dig deeper and work smarter. Sounds logical, but the truth is, people don't like being pushed. Truly engaging with employees gets them tuned in, turned on, and eager to go the extra mile — because they want to do it, not because management expects them to do it.

An effective leader needs to know how to inspire and engage workers, not prod and push them. Some managers try to do that with pep talks and incentives, but those are short-term solutions that only scratch the surface of what's possible with a fully engaged workforce. So what's the difference? It starts with an understanding of what engagement looks like. The

definition created by the Conference Board hits the mark pretty well: Employee engagement is “a heightened emotional connection that employees feel for their organization that influences them to exert greater discretionary effort to their work.”

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The two key phrases in that definition are “heightened emotional connection” and “greater discretionary effort”. In the end, you can't have one without the other — at least not on a sustained basis. So how do you create an effective emotional connection? Fear of losing a job is certainly an emotional trigger, but fear and anxiety eventually burn people out and rarely produce the best results. Tapping into a positive emotional response starts with a basic understanding of two qualities that make human beings different

from all other living creatures — free will and imagination.

We've all heard the phrase “free as a bird”. If you watch a bird flying around, you might think it looks like it's free to do whatever it pleases. In actuality, birds are only “free” to do what they are programmed to do. They are programmed to fly. They are programmed to eat bugs and seeds. They are programmed to build nests, lay eggs, and bring baby birds into the world. The bottom line is that all animals operate from a program without much choice about what they do.

People, on the other hand, have the human gift of free will. Not only do humans have a choice in what they do, they actually can't function at their best if they aren't allowed to use that innate gift.

The second quality that's unique to human beings is their imagination. Unlike animals, people can imagine and conceive of things that do not occur in the natural world. They can envision building magnificent structures, writing great novels, and even flying

like a bird. Imagination is the ultimate source of all innovation. People can do those things not because they are more intelligent than animals but because they can imagine — and then they can use their free will to operate outside of their “animal programming” and bring the things they imagine into existence.

What do imagination and free will have to do with creating a world-class workplace? Plenty. In the end, anything we do in the workplace to undermine those uniquely human qualities cuts at the heart of what sparks and enables people to go above and beyond and perform exceptional feats. It is crucial to understand that no amount of discipline and direction in an organization can surpass the motivation to excel that comes from the innate ability and desire that people have to imagine and create.

However, if everyone is out using their imagination and free will to do whatever they please, how do you maintain discipline and keep things from flying out of control? By themselves, imagination and free will are not enough to bring out the best in people or organizations.

Besides being driven by those special human forces, employees also want some sense of order and predictability in their lives. In the workplace, it's essential to have order and alignment if you want to get anything done successfully as a team. Employees understand that. In fact, they expect it. But how can freedom and control work together?

Let's compare a human being to a rocket. Start with the engines that propel the rocket forward and up in the air. With people, that's imagination and free will — the part that produces innovation, breakthroughs, new ideas, even the desire to excel. Then, we need stabilizers so the rocket doesn't wobble out of control. Think of that as security and self-esteem for people. Without that kind of stability, employees get “wobbly” too. The third piece is the guidance system. Just like rockets, people need a clear sense of direction if they're going to wind up

at the desired destination. For human beings, those directional requirements are responsibility and accountability. People need to be clear on what they're responsible for, and they need to be held accountable for doing it.

When all three of those dimensions come together in perfect balance — imagination and free will, security and self-esteem, and responsibility and accountability — you have a “human rocket” that can soar to great heights and produce extraordinary results.

The key to making it all come together is understanding that people need to have some say in the way the systems are designed and operated. There's a misconception that employees complain about working in an environment that's ruled by “command and control”. In truth, it's only the command part that people hate. When it's done right, control is just another word for predictability. People just don't want to work for a parent or a drill instructor and have those controls imposed on them all the time.

The principles of the “human rocket” can be applied to just about every aspect of people management. One example is how to get employees engaged in continuous improvement efforts. Most organizations say they are eager to get employee input on how to do things better. But if you ask employees why they don't come forward with those ideas, you get such typical responses as “No one really cares for my opinion” or “It won't make much difference” or “I might get in trouble” or “It's not my job” or “I'm not sure how to do it” or “The boss wants me to stick to getting the job done.”

Overcoming those barriers and getting employees to step up and offer new ideas starts with making improvement part of the day-to-day operating culture. It has to be a true system, not a one-off program. It needs to be part of what people eat, sleep, and breathe every day. It takes a whole different mindset for managers and supervisors alongside a new set of skills and expectations for

managing employees. Then they need the right tools and procedures to make it easy for people to bring those ideas to the table, not just once in a while but on a systematic continuous basis.

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Whatever way that system is designed, its power comes back to the basic principles of the “human rocket”. In particular, the system has to fuel the engines of imagination and free will — those uniquely human gifts that are just waiting to take flight when people are encouraged and supported in doing what it takes to build a winning team.

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