

ENGAGEMENT: The Accountability of a Leader



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Consider this situation: Company X, striving for years to be successful, has acquired a respectable portion of market share. However, growth is slow. Despite realistic plans for 10% annual growth, the target is never met. In a fit of pique, the CEO states, “Obviously our employees are just not engaged.” In an effort to prove that, the HR group hires consultants who tell them they suffer from a disengaged workforce. The CEO is then heard to say, “How do we get an engaged workforce?” The members of the Executive team stare at one another blankly. How do you engage a workforce? Give them more perks? Make their work more meaningful? Send them on training?

At Forrest, we say no to all of these. An engaged workforce is within your grasp. It is not some search for the Holy Grail, and it is not in the realm of self-help books and psychological studies. Instead, it is common sense. Engagement is about structure that leads to role clarity, the processes that help or hinder work and, most of all, leadership in your organization.

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The Engagement Equation

Engagement = (Structure ± Processes) x Leadership

Structure

Structure is about clarifying the roles and the work of your employees, so they understand for what they are accountable and to what resources they have access in order to complete their work.

But firstly, have a closer look at your vision and strategy. Confirm what it is your organization is doing, why it's doing it and where it's going. Once you're sure of this – your vision – what is your strategy to get where you're going? To use a soccer metaphor, with a clear vision and strategy, you have chosen the field, pointed out the goal, and have an idea of how you're going to get the ball past the goalie. Now it's time to build the team. Your strategy will dictate what work needs to be done, the roles needed to do the work, and who will support whom for what and when.

Without a clear strategy, employees will work on what *they* think is important, not necessarily what the organization considers to be important. In fact, some may even be “engaged” in their work. However, this is only a misconception. The outcome will be more like soccer played by 4-year-olds: they all chase the ball, tripping over one another, none of them able to work cohesively. The good ones will break away and score on their own, leaving their peers behind; however, chances of repeating goals, especially against competition with a strategy, will be unlikely. Some of the team will be engaged, others will not. As long as the team is always winning, there may be a feeling of success. However, watch what happens when the stars tire and leave, or the competition gets tough or opportunity dwindles, and the tide turns. Suddenly, the team is no longer so happy.

On the other hand, every member of a professional soccer team is clear on the team's strategy and

their role in it, whether goalie or striker. They have a playbook on how they will work, and know not only how to pass the ball effectively, but that when they do, someone is there to handle it. In your organization, it's the same: help employees to be clear on what is their work, who helps them and who they help.

At this point, many leaders will say, “Oh no, my people know what their work is. Just ask them”. If you ask the employees if they are clear on their work, most will answer “yes”. After all, who wants to say they are not. However, try this: ask them to define why their job exists and what they are accountable to deliver. Suddenly, it is not so easy. Any hesitancy is not about a lack of engagement. It just reflects that no one has spent the time and effort to tell them for what it is exactly they are accountable.

If all this seems to be common sense, it is useful to ask ourselves why it is not more common? The answer is that it takes leadership, time and discipline. As we've seen above, at a corporate level, structure is dependent on leaders defining the organization's vision and strategy. At a managerial level, leadership entails defining and supervising accountability. This means leaders taking time from “doing” and spending it “thinking” and “planning”. After all, our society views thinking as “not doing” and not as valuable as “doing”. But, just as managers define the work of employees, managers have to realize that their own work is precisely this “not doing”: i.e., it is thinking and planning.

This is difficult, because many of us were promoted to management for the work (the “doing”) that we did, making it hard to break from old patterns. Nonetheless, as with all employees, managers need to be clear on what their work is: to think and oversee the work of their direct reports. This is a big change for many, but just imagine the impact if a manager spent more time planning and coaching their direct reports.

Imagine how engaged employees would become. However, structure and role clarity alone will not suffice.

Process

Processes, those policies, procedures and operations that lead to a goal, either help or hinder engagement. Good processes clear the field of obstacles, while bad processes add obstructions. In general, those processes which help engagement are those processes that state what employees **may** do; and those that hinder, what employees **may not** do. The former empower employees by providing clarity. The latter are worse than poor substitutions for leadership; they are substitutions for poor leadership.

The simplest way to demonstrate how process helps engagement is to flip the paradigm and see how a bad process leads to disengagement. Think of a process in your organization that impedes you in your work – a regulation or piece of technology that takes your time and does not seem relevant to what you are trying to achieve. How do you feel about it? Would your employees feel any different? Your people look at your processes and wonder who could possibly have dreamt them up. If, as an employee, you have to fight for information, spend time overcoming an obstruction, or do something that appears unrelated to your work, then there is a process which is not adding value.

Processes are related to either controlling work or controlling behaviour. The former are designed to compel someone to do something. Any process that involves compulsion begins life under a cloud of suspicion. By its nature, it does not add value to the person being compelled. Bad processes that compel work are part of the old “complete this form in triplicate” syndrome. For example, despite having an annually assigned budget, you are still required to obtain approval from the finance department for expenditures.

Further, bad processes which control behaviour

are those designed to catch “bad” people doing “bad” things. An example is announcing that employees are not allowed to use their phones for personal calls. For a process like this, ask yourself, is this process designed for the bottom 5% of your work force who cannot be trusted? If it is, then the 95% who can be trusted have just been insulted. In both cases of controlling work or controlling behaviour, what is needed is not process. Rather, it is good, strong leadership that steps up and judges people’s activity and behaviour. Substituting a book of rules for good leadership is a very poor trade.

To be sure, there are good processes about things that restrict employee behaviour – those related to workplace health and safety, and civil and criminal law, for example. But it is amazing how, in a world without good structure and its attendant role clarity, seemingly arbitrary controls creep in. If there is insufficient clarity regarding who does what work and how it interrelates to other work, processes become merely jury-rigged and related to the last incumbent in the role. After all, when you have no real work, you will find a process to justify your role – you must add value somehow. But, when you re-examine your structure, making clear to every employee for what it is that they are accountable, and to what resources they have access, many processes simply cease to be. When structure is the first step, superfluous roles disappear and things become lean again.

The ultimate test of a process intersects with the role of the leader. A leader needs to be able to set the context as to why an employee is doing something – they need to state “the why” something is necessary. If the employee cannot say “the why” then the process will have no relevance to them. If they can say “the why”, the process is validated. If they are unable to say “the why”, then perhaps it is really the managers who are not engaged in what it means to be a manager. The role of a manager is to step up and, at times, say “this” is important, in some circumstances regardless of what others may think.

Once again, we have come back to the pivotal role of the leader in making sure employees are engaged.

Leadership

As we have seen, leadership is the multiplier of employee engagement. At the level of corporate leadership, leaders need to define their organization's structure and to establish the processes that facilitate the successful completion of work. It does not stop there, however. An employee will only be truly engaged if he or she knows that their own manager adds value to them personally. Throughout your organization's structure, your managerial leaders are the captains of your teams. They add value by pointing the way, providing work clarity and coaching.

At the same time, the context in which managerial leaders add value is as important as the value added. An employee must believe that their manager knows who they are, and is looking out for their best interests and personal welfare; in short, cares about them. An employee who has a manager who knows his or her people, promotes their welfare, and fosters a relationship of dialogue and trust will be far more engaged than one who does not. Think of your best boss. Did they remain aloof, or did they engage with you as an individual? This does not imply that managers need to be friends with their direct reports. Rather, it means that managers must make an effort to understand them. This is the crux of the matter. It means that managers are accountable to engage their employees, not, as is unfortunately widely accepted, the other way around.

Pointing the way is a leader's quickest means to engage their direct reports and align them to his or her thinking. Just as with corporate leadership, managers who point down the field to the net (or, even better, point to the end-of-season trophy) immediately gain team work, focus and momentum from their direct reports. We all want a boss who shows the way. To get this engagement,

a manager needs to articulate three things:

- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- What am I trying to build?

Having imparted a direction to their direct reports, managers must turn to coaching. Employees coached by their managers will go the extra distance with them, engaging more with their work because they are learning something. Leaders who coach are like that best teacher we all remember who imparted some new skill or knowledge and was there to make sure it stuck.

Coaching includes encouraging employees to make their own decisions within the parameters of their work. If a manager tells employees *how* to do their work, engagement will suffer. Engagement thrives when a manager articulates where the team is going (which falls out of "What am I trying to build?"), and then lets them get on with it. Closely tied to this is providing your direct reports with clarity on what exactly is their work. Think of the best times you have had as an employee. Was it when you knew exactly what was the work and had control over how you did it, or when someone told you how to do it, or worse, left you unclear as to what it was you were actually doing? Empowering people to move themselves forward does not mean letting your direct reports run free. As an extension of knowing your people, you will understand how much lead you should give each one.

So, an engaged workforce is about leaders, not about employees. Had the CEO and Executive team of Company X used the Engagement Checklist below before they had conducted their engagement survey, they would have seen that it wasn't the fault of the employees for being disengaged.

Leaders have the most crucial role in an engaged workforce. They set the conditions for employees to choose to be engaged. Leaders set the vision, strategy and, through structure, define roles. They

then determine the processes required to get the work done. Most importantly, leaders add value by engaging their direct reports. By offering a vision, providing clarity and by coaching, they help their employees get on with the work. This is how leaders become the multiplier of an engaged workforce. So the next time you wonder if you have an engaged workforce, ask yourself, “As a leader, what have I done to create the *conditions* for an engaged workforce?”

See next page for The Leader’s Engagement Checklist

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The Leader's Engagement Checklist

		Yes	No
1.	Have you recently reviewed your organization's mission and vision?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	Is your strategy seamlessly aligned to your vision and mission?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Do your organization's structure and roles provide the best means to achieve your strategy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Can each of your employees state for what it is they are accountable?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	Can each of your employees state the reason for their role?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	Can each of your employees state to whom and from whom they provide and are provided with resources?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	Does each of your managers understand their accountability with respect to their direct reports?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	Are each of your managers encouraged to think?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	Have you recently reviewed the processes of the organization?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	Are your leaders hiding behind process rule books?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11.	Are your leaders challenged to explain the "why" of their processes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12.	Do all of your employees feel that their manager is fostering an environment of trust and dialogue?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13.	Are all of your leaders accountable for outlining their vision to their direct reports?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14.	Do all of your leaders engage their direct reports?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>