

Shut Up and Listen! A Bump on the Road to Employee Engagement

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The concept of employee engagement makes all the sense in the world, as it always has for businesses that value long-term success. The commitment and involvement that employees feel toward their company has an influence on productivity. Perhaps, engagement's current high status in business is a way of providing balance to turbo-charged productivity processes, such as six sigma and lean engineering.

Logically, then, if companies have talented leaders who interact with their people in an engaging way, this will contribute significantly to achieving business goals. You are probably familiar with the Gallup Organization's Q12 index, which asks twelve questions that identify strong feelings of employee engagement. Most of them involve the manager directly. For instance, do supervisors show interest in employees' opinions or care about them as people? Is development supported?

How Well Do Business Leaders Engage?

So, with the emphasis on engagement, how is management doing? According to our research, not well. As a human resources development organization, [Psychological Associates](#) performs assessments and management coaching. We are often asked to evaluate people's interpersonal skills – the very abilities that are most likely to engage employees and gain their commitment.

While it's very difficult to research interpersonal behavior directly in the workplace, a valid alternative is a realistic simulation. This was the basis for a study our firm conducted. Eighty-four executives took part over a four-year period, representing many fields, including financial, automotive, utility, insurance, retail, manufacturing, and healthcare. Several were from Fortune 500 companies.

Each executive took part in a 20-minute role play in which his or her goal was to inform a highly skilled direct report that he was being passed over for a promotion he wanted badly. Further, the executive had to communicate to this person that although he was qualified for the promotion, the reason he was not promoted was his poor people skills. The executive was also told to try to maintain the employee's interest in continuing to work at the company. The employee still had a future there.

The direct reports were portrayed by instructional consultants experienced in playing a realistic role. Videotapes of each meeting were then scored uniformly by trained observers.

These managers, who were all talented and considered successful at their jobs, overwhelmingly chose to dominate and keep a tight rein on the simulated meeting. In a business environment that emphasizes coaching, collaboration, and gaining commitment, they chose command and control.

What Did We Measure?

Our research and experience pointed to two key areas that are vitally important for developing effective working relationships with employees and resolving conflicts. Managers need to:

- ◆ Be willing to motivate others through collaboration, showing that they are partners ready to invest time in developing people to accomplish work goals.
- ◆ Utilize open, two-way communication to involve others, in this case, for the purpose of developing a plan for improving job performance.

The first factor acknowledges that the best strategy for gaining someone's commitment to a goal is to enlist the other person's participation in formulating the goal. The second factor offers the best means of engaging the other person in a collaborative strategy — by finding out what he or she thinks, feels, and wants. In both areas, the leader focuses on the other person, not on himself.

Applying these standards, we evaluated the executives for their ability to organize and structure a meeting, foster effective communication, manage differences, and gain commitment.

The scenario we chose was made purposely challenging in order to observe the participant's choice of behavior when under the gun. At the same time, a discussion about a missed promotion is realistic and one that managers often encounter.

The Behavior We Witnessed

Almost all of the executives chose to exercise stringent control throughout the meeting. Once they stated their promotion decision, most did not involve the direct reports in dialogue. They didn't acknowledge the other's distress over learning the bad news or collaborate on a course of action for the direct reports to improve their future performance.

Specifically, less than 25 percent of the participants acknowledged the other person's feelings. Less than 33 percent developed any give-and-take in the form of a discussion. Only 17 percent even asked for the other's input for developing a plan regarding the direct report's future.

It's ironic, then, that in telling a direct report that he was deficient in people skills, the executives were not applying people skills themselves. What would account for this?

One likely explanation is that managers routinely place a high value on keeping a tight lid on encounters that may go in unpredictable directions. In order to arrive at a predictable outcome envisioned by the executives, they were willing to sacrifice open communication and working together toward a goal – both ways to engage employees.

For example, had they spent a few moments to acknowledge the anger and disappointment of the direct reports in not getting the promotion, these executives could have helped them to vent emotions that were likely to interfere with partaking in a meaningful discussion. However, many people are uncomfortable dealing with feelings, especially in a business setting.

How did the executives maintain control and keep a firm grip on their own agenda? We counted the number of questions they asked the other person in the 20-minute span and determined that their main control tactic was to do most of the talking themselves. The entire group asked an average of only eight questions. By our count, 67 executives used five probes or less, and six used none at all.

When they did ask questions, it was usually to control. To keep the meeting from becoming a give-and-take discussion, they avoided asking open-ended questions, for example, "What is your view of your qualifications for getting the promotion?" or "What do you think you might do so that you'll be chosen the next time a position is available?" Only 30 percent of the participants' questions invited other ideas or opinions in this way.

How likely is it in the real world that a skilled and strong-minded employee would actually buy into a ready-made plan handed to him with little or no input or collaboration? About as enthusiastically as being served a subpoena.

What is particularly striking is that in a debriefing session, many expressed the view that they had performed well. A frequent comment was, “I felt I got the job done.” They thought so because they controlled the meeting and sent the direct report back to his job with a plan. Never mind that, while these executives had obtained compliance, they did little to gain commitment to the plan.

This is not an indictment of these decision-makers’ abilities. They are likely judged successful in their corporate cultures for exhibiting a take-charge attitude or having excellent financial or technical acumen. However, by avoiding collaboration, they may be cutting themselves off from engaging the talent, creativity, and energy of their greatest resource — their people.

Changing Unproductive Behavior

The news is not all bad. We believe that behavior at work can be improved readily by making people aware of helpful alternatives. It isn’t necessary to delve into employees’ psyches or try to change their personalities. Productive behavior can be learned.

This is the premise of our leadership seminars, offered to executives to provide them with tools for improving their communication and influencing capabilities. We are currently conducting an ongoing appraisal of the seminar participants’ performance. After six hours of the 3-day seminar, they take part in a role play practice similar to the one described. Other seminar members are coached to play the part of the direct report.

After only a few hours of exposure to some simple techniques for better communication, the seminar participants are able to modify their behavior dramatically in comparison to the executives. While the executives averaged 8 probes in their role play, the seminar participants averaged almost 22 per person. Although only a quarter of the executives questioned the direct reports to obtain the other’s ideas in the meeting, all of the seminar’s participants asked questions to get the others’ ideas.

So, not only can the skills that foster a collaborative style be readily learned, we think they should be. Dominance and control may work in the short run, but over time in today’s business environment there’s a price to pay if managers aren’t willing to collaborate and be inclusive. Involving employees in decisions made about their own futures allows leaders to tap into their vitality and enthusiasm. There’s no downside when direct reports understand that their input really counts.

A company goal of engaging employees more effectively is not enough. Awareness of what engages them does not translate into action. However, learning and using interpersonal skills can help managers cultivate engagement in the one area that matters most to employees – how they are treated by their boss.

Controlling Vs. Engaging Behavior

Psychological Associates’ analysts uniformly scored the behavior of 84 executives in a simulated meeting with a “direct report” to evaluate their interpersonal skills. These figures

were tabulated in a variety of categories, as shown below. What emerged was a pattern of controlling, but not engaging, behavior:

Executive assisted in controlling:	Yes (%)	No (%)
Stated purpose of meeting	89	11
Kept meeting on track	69	31
Stated benefit of making a commitment	74	26
Communicated his/her rationale for action plan	87	13
 Executive assisted in engaging and collaborating:		
Checked for readiness to proceed	12	88
Got details before presenting own views	22	78
Acknowledged direct report's feelings	23	77
Allowed time for direct report to vent emotions	20	80
Solicited direct report's ideas	24	76
Questioned to understand direct report	28	72
Checked for understanding of differences in views	16	84
Developed constructive give-and-take	31	69
Asked for direct report's input first in formulating an action plan	17	83

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