



8 COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT THAT CAN SERIOUSLY HARM YOUR COMPANY

"Employee engagement" has become a key HR catchphrase in recent years. Everyone is looking for ways to create, increase, or maximize engagement at their organizations.

By Jennifer Carsen, JD

Are you one of the many HR professionals who's hopped on the engagement bandwagon? While it's not necessarily a bad place to be, focusing on the wrong things when it comes to employee engagement can do your company more harm than good. Here are 8 common misconceptions to watch out for:

Engagement Misconception #1: It's Important to Engage Everyone

As an HR professional, you know better than almost anyone that not all employees are created equal. From Motivated Mary to Pessimis-

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tic Pete to Angry Amy, you've seen it all. The problem arises when you try to get—and keep—*everyone* engaged and happy.

It can be easy to waste a lot of time trying to get Laggard Larry engaged when what you should really be focusing on is getting Superstar Sally engaged—as well as replacing the Larrys with people who are more like Sally. Engagement initiatives are largely wasted on poor performers, so it doesn't make sense to spend a ton of your finite time and energy here.

Engagement Misconception #2: Employees Know What Will Engage Them

Don't assume that employees have an accurate read on what it will take to get—and keep—them engaged. Oftentimes, employees cite perks like flexible schedules and free coffee as being important to them, but if their work itself is not meaningful and well-managed, perks alone will not be enough to tip the scales into “engaged” territory.

Even worse, “perfecting employee circumstances drives *entitlement*, not engagement,” says Nicole Price of Cy Wakeman, Inc. “How about if we tell employees, ‘if you want something, be willing to give something.’ We should ask, ‘What are you willing to do to get that?’”

Engagement Misconception #3: Engagement Is All You Need to Worry About

This is a biggie. A number of recent studies have linked engagement with productivity, but it doesn't necessarily follow that engagement always leads to results. In fact, this is likely an example of mistaking correlation with causation, Price notes.

The basic issue, she says, is personal liability. That is, the mindset that results happen because of one's actions, not in spite of them. Accountable people believe that they choose their own destiny—what happens is up to me. That means:

- **Commitment.** The willingness to do whatever it takes to get results.
- **Resilience.** The ability to stay the course in the face of obstacles and setbacks.
- **Ownership.** The acceptance of the consequences of our actions, good or bad.
- **Continuous learning.** The perspective to see success and failure as learning experiences to fuel future success.

Engagement alone doesn't drive results, Price says. Personal accountability drives both engagement AND results.

Engagement Misconception #4: HR Is the Driver of Employee Engagement

A recent survey found that having a “caring” manager is a crucial factor in whether employees are engaged. Employers that recognize that, and take steps to educate supervisors and managers about it, can help drive employee engagement and their organization's success.

The Dale Carnegie Training survey identified employees' relationships with their supervisors as a key factor in engagement. The survey found that if employees are “dissatisfied with their immediate supervisor, there is an 80 percent chance that they are disengaged” and that “having a ‘caring’ manager is one of the key elements to a positive and successful employee engagement strategy.”

Belief in senior leadership and pride in working for their company are also key factors that drive engagement, according to the survey of 1,500 employees conducted in February and April 2012.

In light of the survey findings, Dale Carnegie Training says it is important for supervisors and managers to make their employees feel valued and to demonstrate an interest in their personal lives, health, and well-being.

“Employee engagement rates are directly tied to feelings about interaction with their immediate supervisor,” Dale Carnegie Training reports. In fact, nearly half of employees who reported being satisfied with their direct manager were engaged. Meanwhile, 80 percent of those who indicated they were very dissatisfied with their immediate supervisor were disengaged.

HR can play an important role in driving the engagement bus, in other words, but your managers are the key determinants of which employees eagerly come along for the ride—and which employees depart at (or before) the first scheduled stop.

Engagement Misconception #5: It's All About the Money

Employees are always going to want more money rather than less—who wouldn't? But when it comes to true engagement and retention, the size of an employee's paycheck plays a surprisingly small role.

According to Anne Berkowitch of SelectMinds, writing on BusinessWeek.com, “[M]ore money does not guarantee happier employees or increased employee loyalty ... Employees who feel valued and engaged with what's going on in their companies are far more likely to stay longer than disengaged, slightly higher-paid employees; the income effect wears off over months of discontent.”

A recent engagement study commissioned by HR services and staffing company Randstad also concluded that employee engagement is not all about financial compensation. “There are many nonmonetary programs employers can adopt to help improve the morale and productivity of its employee base,” says Jim Link, managing director at Randstad U.S.

Here are five top workplace considerations Randstad identified through its study:

1. **Flexible work arrangements or reduced hours:** While only one in seven employees say their employers offer a reduced schedule or flex hours during the summer months, 91 percent of those who are offered summer flex time say it improves morale and 80 percent say it increases productivity—suggesting this is one of the most effective methods of engagement.
2. **Seek employee input:** Encouraging employees to share their ideas and opinions makes them feel valued by their team and allows them to develop professionally.
3. **Stimulating workplace:** Fostering a comfortable and challenging work environment keeps employees inspired and engaged, with 22 percent of respondents ranking this as a top engagement tool.
4. **Bonuses and promotions:** Rewarding high performers with bonuses and promotions is cited as the number one tool for employee engagement (ranked as top engagement tool by 30 percent of respondents).
5. **Invest in training and skill enhancement activities:** Empower employees with opportunities to expand their abilities through training, development, and continuing education—which ultimately benefit the employer as well.

Engagement Misconception #6: The C-suite Is Very Concerned About Employee Engagement

Communication professionals in large and small organizations across diverse industries ranked employee engagement as the number one challenge in the workplace in a recent “Workplace Trends Poll” conducted by the International Association of Business Communicators and measurement partner Dulye & Co.

However, when asked to identify what company executives see as the top workplace challenge, poll respondents answered “business

development.” In fact, engagement failed to register among the top five challenges that communicators see consuming leaders.

Whether this C-suite disengagement with engagement, so to speak, holds true at your company, there are two important lessons for HR professionals here.

The first is that no engagement initiative will succeed without commitment from the highest levels of your organization—so in order to get employees on board, you need to get your executives on board first.

Second, and even more importantly, is the fact that engagement alone does not move the bottom line, and executives know this better than anyone. Don’t get so caught up in engagement that you overlook other measures of corporate success.

As noted above, engagement is often correlated with performance, but it’s not a perfect match. Price says that when one of her client companies implemented an engagement program, performance and engagement both improved the first year. The second year, however, engagement fell but performance continued to improve. Ultimately, your executives are most concerned with your company’s overall performance, and that’s where you should be focusing your efforts, too.

Engagement Misconception #7: Satisfied Employees Are Engaged Employees

For effective strategic talent management, forget satisfaction, says consultant Allan Benowitz. Satisfaction is about giving things to employees, he adds, while engagement is about employees giving back.

Benowitz, who is the vice president of Growth and Development at The Employee Engagement Group, says engagement is about mutual commitment. Companies help employees reach their potential and

employees help their companies perform better. This combination results in engagement—“the capture of discretionary effort.”

That’s in contrast with employees who do just enough to escape attention for negative performance.

These days, engagement is the cornerstone for many organizations. However, many don’t understand it very well. Benowitz offers the following to help clear it up:

Engagement IS about:

- People
- Relationships
- Alignment
- Shared responsibility for creating the future together
- Business success
- Work environment
- Continuous communication
- Opportunities for performers
- Staff development

Engagement IS NOT about:

- Things
- Having the best of every amenity
- Avoiding making tough decisions
- Pleasing all the people all the time
- A “catchphrase” for all HR programs

Engagement Misconception #8: Asking Is Enough

While engagement surveys can be incredibly valuable, it’s important to do them right. Otherwise, you’re just wasting a lot of time and money.

Benowitz cites six good reasons to conduct an employee engagement survey:

1. Demonstrate your concern about employee issues.
2. Find out what’s stressing your workforce (gives you an opportunity to act).
3. Involve employees in getting the company through the recession. (How do we save? Process improvements, customer service improvements, etc.)

4. Retain your best employees.
5. Develop your future strategy. (Learn useful things to help introduce changes and gain new ideas.)
6. Better your bottom line. (Surveying, involving, and engaging your employees are much cheaper than replacing your best people.)

Here are the do's and don'ts that Benowitz has learned over years of engagement surveying:

- Don't conduct a survey unless you're convinced leaders are committed to listening to and acting on feedback. (Impetus must come from the top, and you must follow through.)
- Do partner with a third-party consulting firm—Gallup, Mercer, or Aon Hewitt, for example. Surveying is a big job and very time-consuming. Partnering gives you the ability to benchmark your results, allay concerns about confidentiality, and save time.
- Do promote specific actions, successes, and progress since the last survey.
- Do communicate your results and your "next steps," and frequently share progress. (Consider sharing internal benchmarks.)
- Do establish a cross-sectional committee to review overall company results and to make recommendations to management.
- Do establish local cross-sectional subcommittees to review local results (e.g., department, business unit, functional), and appoint local senior champions.
- Do develop a common Action Plan Template and consider posting all plans on your intranet.
- Do remember to focus on both "development areas" and "strengths."
- Do keep it simple with flawless execution.
- Do plan for follow-up feedback mechanisms. (Consider

keeping your committee active for 12 months—your "check and balance.")

- Don't conduct another survey for 18 to 24 months. It takes time to analyze, share, act on findings, and show results. Also, there's "survey fatigue" to consider.
- Do invest less in your technology vendor and more in postsurvey results:
 - > Interpretation
 - > Action planning
 - > Follow-up
 - > Follow-through
 - > Communication and branding

Many organizations fall down on that last item, says Benowitz. An Aon Hewitt 2011 survey revealed that in companies that administered an employee engagement survey, 27% of managers never reviewed the results at all, and 52% reviewed the results but took no action.

This has not been the case with his clients, Benowitz says, but it points to a disturbing trend.

Got Engagement Problems? Here's How to Fix Them

Here are Price's tips for kicking your engagement program into high gear:

1. **Stop surveying the victims.** Yes, you have to give the survey to everybody, but get that top 20 percent focus group's opinion. What should the company do? What do you think about this?
2. **Fix the right stuff.** Be careful about focusing on the perks and thinking that that is the path to greater engagement.
3. **Plan action differently.** Personally accountable people will tell you what they will do; entitlement people will be silent. Flex is what you do to make sure this will work.
4. **Work with the willing.** With any given change, Price estimates, there is about a 3% chance of

avoiding the resistance of the disengaged group. On the other end of the spectrum, your visionaries, the high performers, have the option of leaving if they don't like what's happening.

5. **Engage or leave.** The biggest complaint of top performers is that there is no differentiation between them and the disengaged. The message for the disengaged crowd? Engage or leave. Tell them, "You think there's a third option, but there's not."
6. **Ask questions.** When people complain, ask, "Why does that bother you so much?" When people tattle, ask, "What did you do to help?"
7. **Engage the silent people.** Those are the ones who come up to you after the meeting and say, "I agreed with what you said in the meeting."
8. **Find common ground.** With adversaries, start with a common interest. If the company goes down, we all lose. **HR**

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