

Beyond Hearts and Minds: What Really Lies Behind Sustained Employee Engagement – Michael Lewis

It is adage that we all manage to bring our physical selves “hands and feet” to work every day but more and more it seems fewer of us are also managing to bring our emotional and intellectual selves as in our “hearts and minds”. The reality is there are fewer and fewer people in today’s workforce that would describe themselves as extremely satisfied or satisfied and engaged in how they view their current line of work.

I think its fair to say that for many employees that work will always just be that...work. But I strongly believe that one of the many obligations of leaders within organizations is to constantly strive to create an engaged, collaborative and connected culture ...where people feel part of something in which they can discover and celebrate the positives in their careers and lead meaningful and worthwhile work lives.

Just for a moment, I want you to imagine any one of your employees getting up in the morning with an anticipation of another day at work and instead of looking forward to a productive and satisfying day, they arise with a sense of dread and feeling that this is just another day to get through and another day closer to the weekend. Such are feelings of those who feel disengaged, disconnected, and disinterested with their current careers. Their job or career isn’t inspiring them or allowing them to pursue and demonstrate their potential.

The visible signs of disengagement or “career disenchantment” seem to show up in every workplace across Canada and that collective disengagement is costing us all in diminished productivity, lower organizational morale, reduced quality of customer service, inattentiveness to detail and quality of work, a lack of team connectivity and support, increased incidents of conflicts and disputes, higher levels of absenteeism and ultimately, in employee turnover.

Furthermore, those with a very positive and favourable view of their career are often frustrated to work along side those who are clearly disengaged, unproductive and harbor negative or indifferent attitudes. In the end, good people leave organizations for many reasons and a growing disengaged culture leading to negative workplace environment is one of them.

The signs of disengagement can be observed in people’s eyes, in their body language and felt and experienced by those they interact with such as colleagues and through to the general public. There is no doubt that disengaged employees and their behaviours are quite visible in today’s workplace. Even worse, disengagement and its behaviour can become a viral issue and unchecked and unaddressed can spread and worsen. It can drive down productivity, impact employee attitudes and outlooks.

The most insidious thing about disengagement is that it has a viral nature to it and that disengagement breeds and grows more disengagement. In other words, employees can be influenced and shaped by the prevailing environment. And if they see unhappy, unsatisfied, disenchanting, and frustrated co-workers and higher ups, those behaviours and attitudes run the risk of influence over the entire department. A team or department with disengaged employees and their prevailing and influential attitudes is THE challenge to anyone charged with the responsibility of supervising or leading in today’s workplace and ensuring productivity and collaborative environment. Great leaders are relentless in challenging workplace disengagement.

Our Three Possible Career Paths Forward

I have determined really that a person will arrive only at three possible career realities or paths in life when it comes to how we view our productive lives. Many (most) people arrive at something they view as a **job**, a means to earn a living. And for many it's really nothing more than that. Others arrive daily inside a **career**, a far more meaningful path, and a vocation that they have often worked long to attain through education or career training. Then finally, there are the lucky few that arrive at work to continue contributing and growing and succeeding inside a **“calling”** – a vocational concept that means you've arrived in a career that the person finds fulfilling on many levels. Those who describe their work as a calling cannot imagine a more rewarding line of work.

When you have a “calling” your work is engaging, meaningful, rewarding, inspiring, and more noticeably ...it propels you forward. Those fortunate to find a “calling” will always see good and reap the benefits of their career. Their productive and often inspiring behaviours show up daily in the way they conduct themselves and interact with others and their colleagues and importantly, the public in which they serve are also beneficiaries.

Emotion and Intellect

As I see it there are clearly two significant components to true employee engagement.

The first is **emotional engagement** where someone feels an emotional connection or bond and some cases even a passion for one's work. An easy way to think about is that at the heart of engagement is the heart, emotionally rewarding work that we can also feel good about or that it generates moments of satisfaction. That's not to say that engagement can only occur with positive outcomes as every career is rife with emotional ups and downs but in general, the engaged employee feels a positive connection to their work and it is often enhanced by having positive and productive relationships with others within a team or department.

The second component of engagement is an **intellectual connection or intellectual fulfilment**. The opportunity within one's career to engage in work that is stimulating and challenging and has the capacity to maintain and sustain interest. Ultimately it is work that we find invigorating or that from time to time, we enjoy moments individually and / or part of a team in which we realize and enjoy the full value of thinking, creating, working together and implementing solutions. We are intellectually stimulated and through that we are compelled to stay focused on our work and contribution we make to a team or department.

People who can see and realize results by making a difference with their intelligence, through problem solving capacity and creativity are by and far more engaged at work and likely to remain that way. Conversely, when the work we do starts to become routine and that intellectual satisfaction has become mitigated, the lack of challenge leads to feelings of boredom and disinterest.

So, what needs to happen and what do those in positions of leadership need to do to improve and nurture engagement levels amongst employees?

It's a good question and as one might imagine the answer is rather complex.

To understand "engagement" as a workplace cultural goal, I think you have to start by looking at what stimulates and supports a higher degree of engagement in the individual. There are **many** ways to encourage and grow employee engagement so here are just a few areas for leaders should consider and introduce inside their teams.

The Feeling That Rewarding and Fulfilling Work Creates

One could argue having work that is rewarding and / or that generates outcomes that one could take some pride is really at the heart of feeling and being engaged in one's work. I have always argued that the right person in the right job at the right time makes all the difference and leaders should strive to create "career alchemy" by aligning employees so they can bring the best to their roles and thus enjoy the results. Re-engaging employees begins by discussions with an employee and discovering how they can be better utilized in their role or even within a department so they can enjoy a better fit within their career. A change in responsibilities can often re-spark interest in one's career.

The Power of Self-Determination, Competence in One's Role and Confidence to Act

When we are empowered to take action, to move forward and work to make a difference, there comes a feeling and sense that we can take charge with confidence built on the skills, knowledge and wisdom and be if you will ... the captain of our destiny. As an example, self-employed people often describe the best part of running and operating a small business is having both the ability and power to make decisions and then to see the results they generate. For engagement, leaders should look to develop ability and capacity often through training and skills development in employees so they can make confidently and independently make daily decisions, take action, implement solutions and enjoy the feeling that sense of autonomy brings.

It Starts with Leadership!

Engaged and inspired leaders who by their own personal example have a tremendous influence over the prevailing team environment. Surveys consistently show that the employees with high levels of career satisfaction attribute some of that to having a manager who by example is engaged, positive, supportive, and situationally aware of inter-team or inter-departmentally relationships. In other words, engaged employees are most likely to happen if those in higher up positions are leading by example and exhibiting obvious engagement in their own roles. If it's to be, it starts with thee!

It's Also About Appreciation

Leaders not only need to be situationally aware of what's happening in their departments and stay on top of the employee's effort and work. Leaders should ensure that the employee and to a greater extent, their team or department is genuinely appreciated. Ultimately and not surprisingly engaged leaders are critical to workplace engagement and the first link in the engagement chain and they do that by ensuring people are valued.

These are just a **few** ways as leaders that we can grow and nurture greater job satisfaction and engagement in our workplaces. The short- and long-term rewards of working towards a positive and supportive culture outweigh the time and effort it takes to shape a more positive, productive, and yes ...happier workplace culture. Today's leaders know that disengagement is one of the biggest challenges in today's workplace and sustainably winning hearts and minds and reshaping attitudes is worth every effort.

Bottom line...addressing and improving employee engagement is worthy of any organizational effort and can begin the journey to shape a more positive, welcoming, encouraging workplace culture.

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