



Richard Wallace
Managing Director

Employee Engagement: Operating on 1/3 Power

The statistics on workforce engagement are shocking. According to research, only 29 percent of employees are motivated and energized. What, then, is happening to the other two-thirds of the people working in organizations?

This scenario is even worse than the old joke in which a manager is asked how many people work in his company and he responds, "About half of them."

The question is what is causing all these people to lose their enthusiasm and commitment? Almost everyone joins an organization fully engaged. So, what is it that extinguishes that initial engagement after the first few years of working in an organization? Here are some possible causes:

- ▶ Little or no feedback from those in charge
- ▶ Lack of opportunity to discuss problems
- ▶ Lack of opportunity to provide ideas and input
- ▶ Lack of resources to solve problems or to do a job
- ▶ Little or no reward or recognition
- ▶ Little opportunity to develop one's potential
- ▶ Pressure to perform and achieve more with less
- ▶ Lack of opportunity to interact socially
- ▶ Unresolved interpersonal conflicts
- ▶ Little joy or humor except for office gossip or cynicism
- ▶ Lack of balance in work & home roles, energy depletion

Since 1997, the Gallup Organization has surveyed approximately 3 million employees in three hundred thousand work units within corporations. This survey consists of 12 questions—called the "Q12"—that measure employee engagement on a five-point scale indicating weak to strong agreement. The analyses of survey results show that those companies with high Q12 scores experience lower turnover, higher sales growth, better productivity, better customer loyalty and other manifestations of superior performance.



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- ▶ richard@osmconsulting.com
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The Gallup Management Journal's semi-annual Employee Engagement Index puts the current percentage of truly "engaged" employees at 29 percent. A majority of workers, 54 percent, fall into the "not engaged" category, while 17 percent are "actively disengaged." Here is how the Gallup Organization further defines these three types of employees:

- ▶ **1.** (29%) Engaged employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward.
- ▶ **2.** (54%) Not-engaged employees are essentially "checked out." They're sleepwalking through their workday, putting in time—but not energy or passion—for their work.
- ▶ **3.** (17%) Actively disengaged employees aren't just unhappy at work—they're busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

While leaders of organizations focus intense efforts on building shareholder value, they generally cannot control the stock market. What they should be worried about are the two-thirds of their workforce who are just going through the motions, putting in time at work without commitment. In fact, Gallup estimates that actively disengaged employees, the least productive, cost the American economy up to \$350 billion per year in lost productivity.

Most people have moments of disengagement and negativity. However, given an opportunity to become part of a solution, they will generally respond and step up to the plate. Those who are actively disengaged may thrive on negativity and refuse to become part of any solution, preferring to perpetuate problems. If they repeatedly refuse opportunities to re-engage, terminating their employment should be seriously considered in order to avoid further damage to staff morale and organizational progress.

Handling "Not-engaged" Employees

Efforts to raise levels of engagement are worthwhile for those in the not-engaged range. Not engaged employees concentrate on tasks rather than the actual goal they are supposed to accomplish. They want to be told what to do just so they can do it and say they have finished. They focus on process, not results. Managers who only provide tasks to an employee reinforce "not engaged" behaviors and actually move 180 degrees away from engaging the heart, mind, and soul of that person.

Employees who are not engaged tend to feel their contributions are being overlooked, and their potential is not being tapped. They often feel this way because they don't have productive relationships with their managers or with their coworkers.

The way to get people to become a part of an organization is through relationships. Employees who feel disconnected emotionally from their coworkers and supervisor do not feel committed to their work. They hang back and do the minimum because they don't believe anyone cares. These employees "lower the bar" for themselves by doing the least amount of work necessary.

First, managers need to demonstrate a sense of really caring about employees and what's important to them. Managers can help employees refocus on the demands of their roles and on the skills, knowledge, and talents they bring to their jobs. The manager who takes the time to dialogue about an employee's strengths and how they can make a difference forges essential ties and connections that lead to employee commitment.

Expectations, Clarification and Measurement

Managers must provide expectations, clarification, and measurement for their people. This is very important especially when you consider that a company typically hires someone to do three things:

- ▶ **1.** Achieve the business outcomes of their roles
- ▶ **2.** Contribute to creating a productive workplace
- ▶ **3.** Drive customer engagement

A good place to start is with conversations about expectations for the person in a given role. Encourage the employee to see how his or her work contributes to the organizational future. Ask, "What are the outcomes you are supposed to achieve? How do you contribute to making this a great place to work? Are you creating engaged customers?" The objective is to refocus employees away from steps and tasks and toward results and outcomes.

Next, managers can help employees clarify how they can achieve outcomes. Sometimes they can help employees change their roles to better fit their talents. A person who is not adept at written reports and details can collaborate with someone who is. This requires self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses on the part of both the manager and employee and a willingness to be flexible and find solutions.

Measurement is crucial to an employee's feeling of success, as long as the measurement focuses on outcomes, not steps. Good measurement aligns with outcomes and matches the expectations for the role.

Expectations, clarification and measurement are the keys to helping employees stay in the engaged range, and to keeping them involved and committed. Engaged employees need strong relationships and

clear communications from their managers. They also need to be stimulated and challenged in their areas of talent and strengths to help them to continue to grow

Effective managers and leaders help the people who work with them to design and own their own goals, targets and milestones. Everyone needs support and help with focus in order to keep the goals aligned with business results. Great managers provide coaching to facilitate progress and build talents into strengths.

How to Keep an Employee Engaged

Engaged workers produce more, make more money for the company, and create emotional engagement and loyal customers. They contribute to good working environments where people are productive, ethical and accountable. They stay with the organization longer and are more committed to quality and growth than are the other two groups of not-engaged and actively disengaged workers.

Employees must have a strong relationship with their manager. Additionally,

- ▶ They must have clear communications from their manager
- ▶ They need a clear path set for concentrating on what they do best
- ▶ They need strong relationships with their coworkers
- ▶ They must feel a strong commitment with their coworkers so that they take risks and stretch for excellence

Engaged employees tend to get the least amount of focus and attention from managers, in part because they're doing what they are needed to do. They set goals, meet and exceed expectations and charge enthusiastically toward the next tough task.

“Great organizations achieve sustainable growth and profits because they do what other organizations don’t: they maximize the innate, individual talents of their employees to connect with customers. They know that tapping the resources of humans is the only remaining area where significant improvements can—and do—lead to an unlimited source of competitive advantages.”

—Curt Coffman, Gabriel Gonzalez-Molina, in *Follow this Path* (2002).

Great managers don't leave these excellent employees alone. They spend most of their time with the most productive and talented people because they have the most potential.

The challenge for managers comes when the first signs of disengaging appear from an engaged worker. The symptoms need to be addressed immediately or else the disconnection is most likely to continue. Most of the time this disengagement process can be interrupted by having meaningful conversations that strengthen commitment through relationship.

What Employees Want a Manager to Do

For great managers, the path toward engaging employees and keeping them engaged begins with asking them what they want and what is important in order to be effective in their roles. Here is a summary of what workers responding to the Gallup Q12 survey say they want from their managers:

- ▶ Provide focus for me
- ▶ Know me
- ▶ Care about me
- ▶ Hear me
- ▶ Help me feel proud
- ▶ Help me review my contributions
- ▶ Equip me
- ▶ Help me see my value
- ▶ Help me grow
- ▶ Help me see my importance
- ▶ Help me build mutual trust
- ▶ Challenge me



Is your business giving you the results you've always dreamed about?

Unengaged Employees are Expensive

A frequent character of science fiction novels and movies is the zombie – a soulless being with vacant eyes who wanders around purposelessly. Sometimes zombies are depicted as evil aliens intent upon destroying or inhabiting the bodies and minds of humans.

For people working in unhealthy work cultures, this scenario is all too familiar. Too often employees have to work with others who have become disenchanted and actively disengaged. These people represent 17 percent of the workforce, according to the latest Gallup Management Journal semi-annual Employee Engagement Index.

Actively disengaged employees are more than just unhappy at work. They act out their discontent and sow seeds of negativity at every opportunity. They undermine the work of others. They are not just indifferent to company goals and mission; they express mistrust and outright animosity.

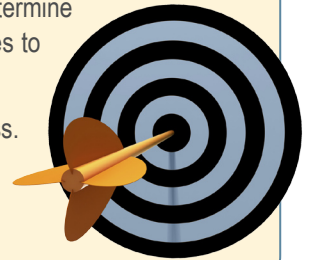
Where productivity is concerned, organizations would be better off if people who are overly negative stayed at home. When they do show up for work, they are counterproductive. We all know these types of people. They walk around the office with glazed looks or move from cubicle to cubicle stirring up trouble with whining, complaining, and even paranoia.

The Gallup Organization estimates that there are 22 million actively disengaged employees that cost the American economy up to \$350 billion per year in lost productivity, including absence, illness and other problems that result when workers are unhappy at work.

As workers increasingly rely on each other to generate products and services, the problems and tensions that are fostered by actively disengaged workers can cause great damage to an organization's functioning.

A good manager will identify those who are disengaged and explore the reasons behind the disconnect to determine if coaching or other interventions are appropriate. In some cases, people will respond favorably to opportunities to reconnect and rekindle their interest and enthusiasm for their jobs.

Most people search for ways to make their lives and work meaningful and only disengage when they feel hopeless. However, for those people who are irreversibly immersed in negativity, the wise manager will look at termination as the final option.



- » P.O. Box 382494
- » Birmingham, AL 35238
- » www.osmconsulting.com

