Turn Engagement Upside Down

by Philip Espinosa

The topic of employee engagement continues to dominate leadership and human resource channels. There are lots of vendors out there preying on our fears and trying to sell the solution du jour.

Don't buy it. Turn it upside down.

I seem to recall, a number of years ago, empowerment was the buzzword, and not a bad one at that. What ever happened to empowerment? Let's bring back empowerment. This means we give someone else the power or the authority to do something.

Just the other day I read an article that listed 101 things I can do to get my employees engaged. The tag line at the end of the article wentsomething like this — and I am paraphrasing:

"Do you need to do any of these 101 things to get your employees engaged? No, of course not. But, if you don't and if your employees are not engaged then you will have to answer for it."

Really? Is that the message we are all wanting when we look at engagement? I can speak for myself — and, for me, the answer is no — that is not the message I want regarding engagement. You know, I really liked the core message embodied in the concept of empowerment.

Let me digress. I have a dog. I learned how to train my dog while attending college level Intro to Psychology, notably from the study of Pavlov's experiments. Remember, he rang a bell whenever he fed his dog and the dog salivated when it ate. Later, he only rang the bell and the dog salivated. Classic conditioning.

Let me digress again. I spent many years working with union. A typical perception is that the union asks for stuff from management, and expects management to give to the employees. This cycle results in a culture of entitlement. The more the union asks and the more management gives the greater the entitlement.

Back to employee engagement. Do I really need to do a whole bunch of things for my employees in order for them to be engaged? Let's consider the classic conditioning loop.

If a group of employees reports they are not engaged and the manager then does something for them, do they become more engaged? Perhaps not. In fact, groups of employees are pretty smart. It might be smarter for the employees to be disengaged or moderately engaged, rather than to be fully engaged. This serves as stimulus for the manager to continue to do things for the employee group, or to do more for the employee group. The employees believe they get rewarded for not being fully engaged.

Let's look at this a bit more scientifically. Charles Duhigg, in his acclaimed book "The Power of Habit," tells us that habits can be broken down into three parts. First, there is a Cue, something that elicits a response or triggers a behavior. Second, there is a Routine, the triggered response, or behavior. Third, there is the Reward, or the satisfaction achieved from the behavior. This is a deconstruction of Pavlov's findings. A repeated stimulus elicits a conditioned response.

The Cue (trigger) is the annual employee survey. The Routine (behavior) is how the employee scores the survey. The Reward (earned satisfaction) is the manager doing/giving more to the employee group.

Whether they realize it or not, the employee group is using classic conditioning to get a conditioned response from the manager. Most employee groups are smart enough to know that managers with disengaged employees are at risk. Over the course of two or three survey cycles an employee group can ramp up what it gets from its manager, or it can eventually get rid of the manager.

Employee usage of the Cue, Routine and Reward cycle, most likely, is not completely conscious.

In engagement discussions with an executive on the West coast and another in the mid-West this past month, both shared with me that managers at their companies dread the up-coming employee engagement survey. The managers, I was told, feel the survey serves as a scorecard about the manager — and many of these managers feel helpless. These managers are concerned about company wide culture issues that they feel are out of their direct control.

If we turn the engagement proposition upside down we might have a chance. What if the results of the engagement survey were a report card about the employee group, the group's manager and the company? With an equal weight on each of these three groups? What if we actually held each group accountable?

Consider this scenario, which is based on a real life situation: A company, in the nine months prior to its employee engagement survey, conducts three layoffs, increases the cost of its benefits plan, reduces benefit offerings, cuts travel expenses, limits conference and professional development attendance, cuts over-time, reduces staffing levels across most front line units, slows down filling open jobs, gives reduced annual increases, restricts supply spending resulting in a shortage of supplies, engages in a union-free campaign, and closes offices requiring some employees to use paid time off to complete a full pay check — and rolls back manager pay by 5% on a "temporary" basis.

Please understand, I am not suggesting there is anything wrong with any of the measures this company took. In fact, it sounds like this company is attempting to get its house in order. These may all be extremely appropriate actions. How engaged do we think the employees are going to be?

The easy answer is to say employees will not be engaged at all — that these draconian measures will result in employees being highly disengaged.

The difficult answer might be that the employees are — or can be — highly engaged. That what the company spends on or gives to the employee is not what drives engagement. That engagement can transcend external environmental stimulus.

team 203x300 Turn Engagement Upside DownIf we follow what I now think of as the give/do model of engagement, you know, the 101 things to give to or do for your employees model, when things get tight engagement drops. The give/do model necessitates a continuous, and perhaps escalating, cycle to reinforce the classic conditioning in order to get the desired engaged response. The give/do model uses an incentive system that precludes high engagement. The give/do model incentivizes average to low scores.

If we consider that engagement is not about giving or doing, it is about being, it then follows that external factors must weigh much less in the overall engagement proposition — and intrinsic factors become much more important.

Gallup's Q12 survey is a good tool to study. You don't have to use it to study it. There are 12 questions. They focus not on a long laundry list of perceived/not perceived, understood/not understood, satisfied/not satisfied factors — rather the Q12 asks participants about their "place" in the organization. (I will not digress about the concept of "place".) At a very high level, this engagement survey is about "being" — who am I as a person and how do I fit into my work world? How do I relate to various intrinsic factors — factors that drive engagement?

The idea of empowerment suggests that I can take care of things for myself. Empowerment is very intrinsic. It also requires high trust from leaders (an intrinsic characteristic).

I know a group that self-reported they were highly disengaged. In discussion with them, they were waiting for someone to come and fix things for them. I suggested they would have a long wait.

I know another group that has almost nothing: No budget to speak of, no one buys this group coffee or water for the office. They buy their own pens and paper, or borrow from other departments. Half the team uses its own computers because company provided equipment is either too old or scarce. In short, this team has to make do with meager resources. And, this is a highly engaged team. It delivers dramatic results. It meets or beats every deadline.

Both these teams are approximately the same size and have the same skill and experience mix. One is waiting for a savior. The other is a self-directed, empowered team. One has no intrinsic value; the other has high intrinsic value. One is waiting for affirmation the other affirms. One is passive, and the other is proactive.

If we only knew what accounts for these differences.

Differences also transcended the immediate team. Overall corporate culture was significantly different. One company champions accountability and employee empowerment. The other does not. Sure, the unit level manager has an impact, but the unit level manager does not drive the overarching corporate culture.

I do like to hold individual managers accountable for the engagement results for their team. I also like to hold the team accountable. I also like to hold the company and the senior leaders accountable. However, I firmly believe any accountability must be within an appropriate context.

This is what I mean: If there are two managers who routinely have unit level scores that are at the bottom of the bell curve, separated by a deviation or two from the norm, we then might have a leadership issue with these leaders, or an issue with the team. This appropriately calls for an intervention and an action plan. If two-thirds or more of all work units are at the bottom of the bell curve, as compared to national thresholds, then we don't have an individual leadership or an individual team issue, we have an overall corporate issue.

Senior leaders must look not just at the detail scores, but also at overall scores. Action steps must be developed at the most appropriate and broadest plateau possible. If your ship has one or two leaks in it, then plug the leaks. If your ship has thousands of leaks, then pull the ship out of the water and fix the hull.

Using engagement survey results to hammer leaders will result in lower engagement survey scores.

Using a give/do approach to engage employees will result in a classic conditioning response from both managers and leaders and scores will wobble but will not rise to the level of the highly engaged.

Use empowerment. Be trusting and give authority to others. Set this as a performance expectation and manage to it. Empowered teams are more engaged and productive than passive teams.

Punishing individual leaders when overall company scores are low will not improve engagement. Fix the company culture and move all leaders as a group.

If individual leaders are outliers at the low end of the spectrum, there should be many other leaders at or above the mean who can model what works. It is easier to bring one or two laggards up to standard.

If your overall company scores are highly fragmented, then you have culture issues. Fix the culture and move groups of work areas.

Engagement is about the company. It is not about one individual unit in the company. If the company overall scores are good, then one or two outliers will not have a dramatic negative impact and can be addressed.

If the overall company scores are not good then there are no negative outliers, the majority will be low. Fix the company.

If the company uses survey participation incentives — called bribes by employees — then, without knowing it, the company is using a Cue, Routine, Reward cycle, with the reward being from the give/do family of rewards. This might set inappropriate expectations about engagement and what the company values.

Be careful what you are rewarding. Many times survey participation gets rewarded. This is a short-term reward and can set the tone for how employees perceive the value of the survey.

In addition to the company bribe, employees drive other longer-term rewards under the give/do model based on how they score the survey. Look closely at what your company is rewarding.

We must, at some level, use the Cue, Routine, Reward cycle. This cycle is as basic as the fight or flight reflex. However, insightful corporate leaders must actually choose to use the cycle appropriately, must choose to set appropriate rewards and must choose to avoid rewarding routines or behaviors that are counter productive.

Go for as many intrinsic outcomes as you can. Use these intrinsic values as Cues, as Routines and as Rewards. Some employees won't get it. That is okay. They are probably on the wrong bus. Other employees will get it. They will then model what engagement means for your company — and that is how you turn culture around.

- What if I respect you for who you are?
- What if I give you the autonomy to perform your job and supply you with workable tools?
- What if I provide opportunities for your development and offer praise and recognition?
- What if I allow you to be heard without fear of reprisal?
- What if I hold you accountable to meaningful and defined standards?
- What if I measure your progress against defined goals?
- What if I don't use blame and fear as motivators?
- What if I trust you and let you know that I trust you?

If we, as leaders can do these things, we then have an excellent foundation for a highly engaged workforce. I would want to work at that company.

Throw the list of 101 things away and sit down and talk to your employees.

Be aware, way too many surveys do not actually measure engagement. They measure what an employee likes or does not like. What an employee thinks or feels they understand. Whether an employee is happy or not. Whether the employee is satisfied or not. These are not measures of engagement.

The most engaged staff I ever worked with were the least satisfied. This staff scored well on true engagement surveys and scored low on satisfaction surveys. Their high level of engagement meant they were not satisfied with the status quo and were constantly pushing for improvements. The most satisfied employees I have ever worked with were the least engaged. This group liked low standards since it represented low challenge. They were satisfied with not being challenged. It was easy.

Being highly engaged is not easy.