

# Staff Wisdom (Re-Purposed)

## Foundations for Enhancing Employee Engagement

Eduardo Sasso | Engagement Process Optimizer | August 2015

"TO WIN CUSTOMERS — AND A BIGGER SHARE OF THE MARKETPLACE — companies must first win the hearts and minds of their employees." Thus begins the frequently referenced 'State of the Global Workforce' 2013 report put together by Gallup after engaging with nearly 230,000 full-time and part-time employees in 142 countries.

If the study's scope was ambitious, its findings are equally intriguing: only 13% of people find themselves engaged in their work, while 24% are actively disengaged. To make matters more challenging, according to the Future Workplace "Multiple Generations @ Work" [survey](#) 91% of Millennials expect to stay in a job for less than three years. In turn, the Center for American Progress [estimates](#) that average cost of replacing an employee amounts to just over 20 % of the person's annual salary.

Engaged employees, on the other hand, work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company – two key dimensions of thriving organizations. Not surprisingly, according to Deloitte's 'Global Human Capital Trends' employee engagement received a 76% importance [index-score](#) by business leaders and HR managers in the US and Canada – second only to leadership.

Note well, however: Engagement is not the same as workplace satisfaction, or even motivation. Organizations can have the latter without the former. Instead, engaged employees are involved and enthusiastic about their work; the kind of persons who give more than is expected and are committed to their organization. They are "checked in", to use the popular language of Millennials, and drive home solutions when everyone else is simply cruising along, waiting until their next break.

How can managers and directors enhance engagement? Below is an outline of why engagement is important, what engaged companies look like, and more specifically how can companies leverage their own staff-wisdom to create engaging work environments.

## The Synergies of Engagement

According to Deloitte's HR virtuoso, Josh Bersin, the "100 best places to work" [outperformed](#) the S&P 500 by over four-fold from 1990–2009. In addition, Gallup's research shows how in 2010-2011 companies with 9.3 engaged employees for every actively disengaged employee experienced 147% higher earnings per share.

Today's twin demands of transparency and workforce mobility have pushed organization culture and employee engagement to the top of the leadership agenda. Luckily, the pay-off is well known: highly engaged companies can hire more easily, deliver superior customer experiences, have the lowest voluntary turnover rates, and are more profitable over the long run.

Gallup identified important KPI median differences between engaged companies in the top-quartile and disengaged ones in the bottom one; for instance: 25% in turnover in high-turnover organizations, 65% in

turnover in low-turnover organizations, 48% in safety incidents, 37% in absenteeism, and 41% in quality (defects). These are tangible benefits that result in more resilient financial results.

But leaving utilitarian calculations to the side, the time is ripe for recognizing people's humanity and for placing wellbeing at the core of doing business. Previous paradigms will only linger for so long now that B-corporations, social enterprises, and so-called 'higher-purpose' companies are transcending the treatment of their employees on a merely instrumental basis. The "I-it" lens common to the modern mindset is being replaced by the "I-Thou" perspective that writer Martin Buber famously argued for. (And effective employee engagement practitioners are quick to recognize this.)

## What Engaged Companies Look Like

Here's a brief on what engagement is and what it looks like.

### Five Marks of Engaged Organizations

Deloitte highlights [five elements](#) of engaged companies, identifying them as key marks of an 'irresistible' organization.



| Meaningful Work              | Hands-On Management              | Positive Work Environment           | Growth Opportunity              | Trust in Leadership             |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Autonomy                     | Clear, Transparent Goals         | Flexible Work Environment           | Training and support on the job | Mission and Purpose             |
| Select to Fit                | Coaching                         | Humanistic Workplace                | Facilitated Talent Mobility     | Continuous Investment in People |
| Small, Empowered Teams       | Invest in Management Development | Culture of Recognition              | Self-Directed, Dynamic Learning | Transparency and Honesty        |
| Time for Slack               | Modern Performance Management    | Inclusive, Diverse Work Environment | High Impact Learning Culture    | Inspiration                     |
| <b>A Focus On Simplicity</b> |                                  |                                     |                                 |                                 |

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This framework serves as a guide for a few examples self-assessment questions:

- **Meaningful Work.** Beyond ping pong tables and free lunch, engaged companies have a *raison-d'etre* which makes work exciting and energizing. Think of Seventh Generation, who creates ecologically-sensitive cleaning products that will better safeguard the soils and watersheds of future generations. They will more likely [retain](#) employees who value the ecosystem – and thus compensate, say, for what could be a lower wage with higher emotional satisfaction. Skills don't only pay the bills. *Q/ Is your company at the service of a noble purpose beyond serving itself? Is your organization hiring employees with values aligned to its own?*
- **Proactive Management.** Leaders who value people, demand reasonably, and are proactive about communication create wellbeing and trust among employees. *Q/ What communications channels are in place for your company leaders to provide one-on-one feedback, and what opportunities to develop the leadership skills of its members?*
- **Flexible & Humane Work Environment.** Going back to Buber's "I-Thou" paradigm, engaged companies recognize the full humanity of their employees. They create policies and work

spaces that work with, and not against, human nature. Fun-rooms, nap schedules, free gym facilities, job variety and rotation, flex-time schedules... these are a but a few characteristics of a great work environment. *Q/ Have you identified what are the greatest needs to make the workplace a fun and healthy place?*

- **Career & Growth Opportunity.** Studies [reveal](#) that if employees cannot grow, eventually they will leave – a condition especially true of the younger workforce. Providing, say, seminars or workshops for employee learning is often perceived as a threat. Not doing so, however, leads to disengagement. Offering training and career development opportunities will surely lead to personal fulfillment; but it can also breed a sense of familiarity and attachment towards a company. *Q/ What tailored learning opportunities does your company offer, matching people's passions with enterprise needs?*

- **Trust in Leadership.** Trust is the foundation of communication communication. Moreover, employees trust leaders that care holistically – both on personal and professional levels. *Q/ Have you carved out time for dialogue and feedback? Are you providing communication channels where employees can express their needs and funnel their opinions in a way that can be turned into action?*

For an interactive example of a process platform to involve employees in co-creating solutions responsive to these five

engagement marks, see this [collaborative decision-space](#).

### Three Overlooked Engagement Insights

On an overlapping note, Gallup's global workforce [report](#) identifies 3 key insights for elevating employee engagement.

- **Select the Right People (From the Get-go).** "When employees work from strengths, nothing motivates them to achieve more — not money, not love, not vacations, not good benefits, not company volleyball games, not motivational speakers." It's key to hire and position people in areas where they can work from their core passions and skills. People also want to feel supported, have a sense of belonging, and understand the contribution they can make toward organizational goals.
- **Develop Peoples' Strengths (not their Weaknesses).** People who use their strengths are 3 times more engaged: they are thinking, feeling and behaving in a way that naturally honors who they are. Responsibilities must be assigned and training programs designed based on people's fortes, while allowing team-members to tap into each other's inclinations.
- **Enhance Employees' Well-Being.** Many factors determine organizational cultures: health programs, ambience, lighting, schedules, benefits, exercise... the list is endless. Organizations wanting to improve their employees' engagement levels will also enable their workers to become co-participants in improving the conditions of their workspace. It is also important to look for easy

ways to incorporate well-being activities into the day-to-day routine at work.

Better working conditions come with a price, no doubt. There is always a set budget and many alternatives to choose from, each one with different tradeoffs. The challenge then becomes to allow employees to select options that will satisfy most of their expectations. This will maximize happiness, and guarantee implementation buy-in.

In *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky outlined the importance for employees themselves to have a say in what determines their wellbeing. What would it look like to foster transparent spaces for complex problem-solving, under the recognition that employee engagement should be its own means of success?

### Harvesting Staff Wisdom to Enhance Engagement

Traditionally this process has been carried out through survey or focus group consultations, allowing sub-sections or entire populations of team-members to brainstorm ideas of what they want and need to thrive at work. But the barriers are clear: the large and dispersed nature of organizations is such that the consultation process often can be costly, opaque, slow or disjointed. "At a time when corporate cultures are being continuously debated, shaped, and redefined on social networks, the once-a-year survey is perilously obsolete", [adds](#) a Gallup analyst.

In his latest book, *Sustainable Frontiers*, CSR virtuoso Wayne Visser aptly recognizes that the Internet continues to bring in a new 'age of light'. Today it is almost impossible to speak of engagement without realizing the role of the web. Like a gigantic prism, the Internet allows for multiplicity of interactions and new modes of simultaneous communication. This has created a new constellation of possibilities for streamlining and enabling more customized and fluid modes of engagement.

One of the metrics of success in Gallup's Q12 employee engagement questionnaire is 'At work, my opinion seems to count.' This is increasingly important with the influx of Millennials who expect their opinion to be considered as much as any other. "The change we need to make is to redefine engagement beyond an 'annual HR measure' to a continuous, holistic part of an entire business strategy," [says](#) Bersin. "And with the influx of younger workers and the proliferation of technology at work, the whole environment has to be more flexible and transparent."

This calls for a new breed of pulse surveys, employee sentiment gauging tools, and real-time employee engagement platforms to help managers rapidly assess when engagement is high and when problems are arising. Regular, multi-channel communication between leaders and peers will become the norm in highly engaged workplaces. Corporate communication tools have come a long way since intranets and the likes of Yammer have filled a void.

The challenges of collaborative problem-solving are being addressed by a new breed of tools for real-time engagement. However, to overcome the survey fatigue that contributes to [employees feeling overwhelmed](#), there is a need for the "consumerization" of corporate systems. It's paramount to make

the best of a company's team-members time now that the frenzy of interruption is the norm. Simplicity, transparency, and brevity are crucial to avoid survey fatigue and hold participants' attention. (Needless to say, employee engagement platforms need to be — well... — engaging.)

On a similar line, engagement professor and KPMG collaborator [Han Gerrits](#) affirms that "it is not just about gathering ideas, it is about discussing them. This ensures engagement and buy-in." In addition, he notes the importance of having structured and well-defined questions. "We try to get questions that are converging to a limited number of ideas." Once the funnel widens, it must narrow. Fluidity of opinions *and convergence* are both key to streamline participation, but also to turn multiple insights into actionable solutions.

Consider these steps to harvest staff-wisdom and enhance engagement:

1. *Create a few focus groups for open-ended ideation and brainstorming.*
2. *Consolidate possibilities around common topics.*
3. *Create a structured space that allows for online voting, social sharing and dialogue.*
4. *Identify a few engagement champions to implement changes.*
5. *Prototype solutions, implement, and reassess.*

\* \* \*

When he wrote *The Wisdom of the Crowds* in 2005, James Surowiecki claimed that large groups of people are smarter than the elite few (no matter how brilliant!) Space forbids assessing such claim; but it might be worth considering in a day and age where the Internet continues to flatten rigid organizational pyramids. "Attempting to run an entire company by command and control is a futile task. It's too costly in terms of time", Surowiecki affirmed, ". . . and it saps the initiative of workers and managers." (Today's 87% of disengaged employees is an indication that he was right.)

Top-down approaches do not lead to engagement; only engagement does. So perhaps the time is now ripe for repurposing staff wisdom to solve problems and create company cultures and policies that will work — if not for everyone — at least for most.



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