

Organizational Change: How do disengaged employees reflect your leadership?



As an organization and leadership consultant, I often hear leaders say: *“let’s communicate this out,” “message this to,” “send this out,” or “give them information.”*

All these phrases share one thing in common: they are oriented in one direction only – “at” someone. They are not designed to engage with or involve others directly; the intent is for recipients of the information to pick up the ball and run with it themselves.

At times this approach is appropriate and sufficient. But during times of change, communication that invites others to be directly involved is critical.

Effective engagement actively involves people in the change

2013 State of the Global Workplace report* reveals some surprising data. Only 13 percent of people in 142 countries reported they felt engaged in their work, and 24 percent reported they were “actively disengaged” from their work. The implications of these figures are enormous for the individuals and the businesses they work in, especially when an organization is undergoing significant change.

The impact when employees do not feel engaged

Without engagement, employees can lose interest in their work and become apathetic, disconnected, and resistant. The result is lack of creativity, innovation, initiative, productivity, efficiency, and accountability. As a leader, your role is to take responsibility for how you engage with others and for how your people engage with the range of behavior, attitudes, and perspectives they encounter in each other. Ignoring the relational aspects of work (the relationship of people to the work and to each other) during times of change comes at great cost to the organization.

Effective engagement actively involves people in a change through real discussion and dialogue; it helps them understand what is going on and why and how they will be a part of the change. Effective engagement is critical to the success of organizational change.

Yet my clients tell me they are afraid to use the word “engagement” because it has lost its meaning. Engagement has become one more item on their To Do list. People don’t take it seriously. I agree with my clients’ assessment that the word and concept have been devalued. So let me offer some ways to deepen the meaning and activities of engagement and understand their true value.

Five key components of effective engagement

Effective engagement begins with leaders owning their role and responsibility to help all employees actively engage with the change, the work, the thinking behind the change, and each other. Throughout my work with leaders of change, I have found five areas of focus that are key to effective engagement.

1. Manage information overload who works for you is bombarded with information.

They don’t have time to carefully read everything they receive. They have trouble even selecting what to pay attention to. It’s easy to get caught up in sending out information, and thus lose sight of what people are thinking, feeling, and needing. Instead of adding to their information overload, identify where sending out information is sufficient, and where discussion and dialogue are vital and preferable. Then give each the time, focus, and space it requires.

2. Make time for quality engagement

I regularly hear people say they have insufficient time for discussion and thinking together with others. Meetings are often forums in which information is conveyed in one direction only. A typical PowerPoint presentation allows just a few moments for questions at the end. The audience is expected to ingest the information and march forward in alignment. Yet without significant discussion, the presenter does not receive a realistic view of what the audience understands or their personal reactions to the message. Leaders can instead create meetings that provide an opportunity for give and take among the perspectives, responsibilities, accountabilities, and expertise represented in the attendees. The

greater the magnitude or complexity of the change, the more important it is to make time for quality engagement. This entails thinking about and planning for how effective engagement can be integrated into the fabric of leading and implementing the change.

3. Build an understanding that is shared by all

For a change effort to be successful, it is essential that people share a common understanding of the organization's goals and outcomes as well as the many aspects and even details of the work. This is even more essential if the change involves complexity or ambiguity.

People with different expertise, responsibilities, roles, accountabilities, and experiences will have a variety of perspectives and needs. There can be as many different perspectives in a room as there are people. Understanding needs to be built among and between these independent vantage points. Through active engagement of leaders, managers, and employees at every level of the organization, individuals gain insight about the reasons for the change, the intended outcomes, strategies for creating the change, and the risks of not moving forward.

People need this understanding in order to make sense of how they in their roles will be contributing to the outcomes. Investing in the time to hold meaningful discussions and engage people with ideas and/or information is critical to building this understanding.

4. Build an environment of openness and transparency

Create opportunities for meaningful discussions, and don't rush through them. Slowing down will deepen the thinking and exchange of ideas and let people know you are taking the discussions seriously. Plan these discussions but don't script them; think carefully about how each group of people can best engage with the content. Let conflicting views surface; acknowledge difficulties and emotions when they arise. Address conflict directly so it does not create issues going forward.

Encourage people to continue to talk with each other in their own meetings and work groups. This openness builds an environment in which people feel safe in speaking up. Such environments are built over time, sometimes slowly, as people engage with each other and with leaders. Openness and transparency create trust and confidence. These become woven into the fabric of the discussions, and genuine engagement develops.

5. Engage in two-way, in-person dialogues

Employees want senior leaders to reach out to them. They would like these leaders to get out of their executive offices and go into the organization frequently to directly connect with all levels of employees. Employees are hungry for leaders to listen and engage in two-way dialogues with them. They respond to a leader who shows a genuine interest in them and their work. They welcome opportunities to give their input and feedback. Real engagement is “interacting with,” not “messaging to.” These dialogues are also an excellent way for leaders to obtain candid assessments from diverse groups of employees.

Focusing on the above five areas will help leaders build communities of engaged employees. Engagement creates a network of connection between people; their ideas, perspectives, and needs; and their connection with the work itself.

Genuine engagement with employees creates interest, trust, and confidence, and builds the foundation for successful change.

Engagement builds commitment

When people work with others who care about them and the collective work, they feel a personal and meaningful involvement in the change and in their contribution to it. Their engagement in the work increases, sometimes significantly.

Employees want to hear their leaders’ perspectives, share their own points of view, and actively participate in the change. As a leader, you are building a community of employees who do not feel delegated or communicated “to.” Instead, you and other leaders are genuinely engaging with the people in your organization, thus satisfying a basic human need to be known, valued, seen, and inspired to create.

Employees feel empowered, motivated, and committed to the change effort. The organization benefits, and so does employees' quality of life. The price that leaders pay for not being people-focused and not making engagement a priority can be high. The payoff of actively taking the time to create engagement is well worth the effort.

Take a few minutes of quiet thinking

1. How do you engage With the people in your organization?
2. What do you do naturally?
3. What is the impact?
4. How engaged are people already?
5. What data do you use to assess levels of engagement?

*Gallup's 2013 State of the Global Workplace report

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