

Employee Engagement

a.k.a. “Morale”

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EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT (A.K.A. “MORALE”)

I recently finished writing a book of sea stories based on events from my Navy days. They are not for sailors only. They touch on matters of concern to us all; matters such as leadership, morale, authority, discrimination, change, innovation, performance and, yes, employee engagement.

In the course of finishing up the book it dawned on me that what we currently talk about under the heading of “employee engagement” is what I knew in my Navy days as morale; more specifically, as “high morale.”

When a military unit has high morale, its members are committed, involved, engaged and they give it their all, they go the extra mile; they contribute a great deal of what is currently referred to in employee engagement circles as “discretionary effort.”

Allow me to present a couple of short sea stories to illustrate what as I see as the links between morale and engagement.

A CASE OF DESTROYING MORALE

One of the best ships on which I ever served was a prime example of a high-performing unit. It was a destroyer and it had won all kinds of battle efficiency awards. Two were prominently displayed as E’s on the wing of the bridge and the fire control director. There was also a red “E” (for engineering excellence) on one of the stacks. Every E had hash marks underneath, indicating it had been won more than once and in succession. One of the E’s had three hash marks which meant the next time the ship qualified, the hash marks would be removed and the E would be painted in gold. In my time, a gold E was the most coveted of battle efficiency awards.

A new skipper changed all that. He began driving the crew mercilessly; cancelling liberty; extending working hours; and showing absolutely no appreciation or regard for the people who had been placed under his command and whose efforts had won those E’s. Predictably, they became angry and resentful. Morale sank to an all-time low. The next time the ship went out to participate in the qualifying exercises it failed every one of them and all the E’s were lost. The skipper was later relieved of his command.

WILLY’S QUESTION: WHY WON’T THEY CUT ME ANY SLACK?

Willy and I were instructors stationed at the Navy’s Instructor Training School in San Diego. He came to see me one day wanting to know why no one would cut him any slack. To him, it seemed I got away with murder and he got hammered the moment he stepped even the slightest bit out of line. He wanted to know why he was treated one way and I was treated in a very different way. I pointed

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out to him that I was qualified in all 23 lessons making up the course; I had re-written several of those lessons; I had written three of them from scratch; and I had written close to 100 items for the test bank. He was qualified in fewer than half the lessons and had done none of the other things. I was a contributor and he was just doing his job. I told him no one would cut him any slack because he hadn't done anything to deserve it. He nodded and went off to ponder what I had told him.

Willy came back a few days later and said he had decided to toe the line; that it wasn't in him to give anything extra. To be clear, Willy wasn't engaged or dis-engaged; he was simply going to do his job – as so many people choose to do.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

The skipper didn't seem to understand or care that his heavy-handed approach to command was destroying the morale of his crew and the resulting loss of morale would further result in the crew no longer caring about their performance or the performance of the ship. The crew had become what we now call “dis-engaged.” They weren't interested in making any contributions to its performance, let alone going the extra mile.

Willy didn't understand that what we call “slack” or “leeway” has to do with the quantity and the quality of the contributions we make to the organization. Generally speaking, if you're not contributing, you'll have to toe the line, very closely, all the time. He was just doing his job and he had to toe the line; I was contributing and I had much more leeway. I was engaged; he wasn't.

At the heart of these two sea stories is the concept of a Contributions-Inducements¹ relationship – what do you contribute and what inducements do you receive in return? At first glance this seems to be a simple, straightforward transaction, some kind of *quid pro quo*. But it's more complex than that; much more complex. Why? Generally speaking, it's because it is often the case that not all the contributions and not all the inducements can be specified or negotiated up front. Instead, they tie to and emerge from what is going on in the “here and now.”

Contributions are often figured out and made by people in the course of doing their work – that “extra mile” or “discretionary effort” that some experts point to is an integral part of how they are going about doing their job, not something agreed to beforehand or tacked on afterward. The inducements are also in the

¹ For more on the Contributions-Inducements concept or what is also known as the Barnard-Simon Theory of Organizational Equilibrium” see *The Functions of the Executive* by Chester I. Barnard and *Organizations* by James G. March and Herbert A. Simon.

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“here and now” and they take varied forms: the quality of the leadership provided; the relationships between boss, peers and subordinates; a sense of camaraderie among unit members; a feeling of pride in one’s work and one’s unit; and recognition of one’s contributions, including appreciation for them.

Most important, these contributions-inducements relationships get worked out between and among individuals (e.g., between a manager and her direct reports, between a programmer and his peers, between a regional sales manager and the members of the regional sales force, and between a CEO and his senior officers). There is no single “big deal” or enterprise-wide agreement to be established up front; there are only lots of little deals – lots and lots of them. Moreover, there is no such thing as a “done deal;” the contributions-inducements relationships are continuously changing and evolving. With that in mind, permit me to tell you one more little sea story to illustrate what I mean.

MY FIRST DEAL

When I checked in at Todd Shipyard in Seattle to help put the *USS Waddell* into commission I was greeted by the Lieutenant who would be my weapons officer. He promptly told me he wanted to make a deal. He said, “When I say, ‘Shoot,’ I want the guns to go bang and the bullets to hit the target.” Puzzled, I said, “No problem, that’s my job.” He then asked, “What do you want in return?” I was taken aback. No one had ever before asked me that question. I thought for a moment and then said, “I want the plotting room² to be off limits. No one can come in without my permission.” He laughed and said he couldn’t keep the skipper or the executive officer out but as the senior line officer aboard he could impose that restriction on everyone else. He was true to his word and, afterward, the *Waddell’s* gun system turned in one sterling performance after another. Whenever he said, “Shoot!” the guns went bang and the bullets hit the target – in peacetime exercises and in combat. The “contribution” was the performance of the gun system; the “inducement” was the plotting room being off limits and it was an inducement to all of us in the plotting room. When he left, things changed.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

If someone were to ask me to look into low levels of employee engagement (i.e., morale) in their organization, I’d go about it in a much different way than I understand to be current approaches. I’d start by looking at what people see as

² The plotting room is the space on board ship that holds the computer controlling the aiming of the ship’s guns, the fire control radar console and other fire control and gunnery system equipment.

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their individual contributions-inducements relationship and how they feel about it. I’d engage them in a discussion about it and I’d use questions like these:

- What do they give?
- What do they get in return?
- What are they asked for?
- What are they offered?
- What do they get if they deliver?
- What do they expect?
- What is expected from them?
- How do they view that exchange?
- How does all that make them feel?

I doubt whatever I might uncover would lead to any quick fixes. Instead, lots and lots of managers and lots and lots of people would have to start rethinking and redefining their relationship. I can’t fix things for them but they can – if they work at it with the right outcomes in mind.

I would also stress this point to all concerned, especially management: in the last analysis, what they’re really after when they go in search of employee engagement is nothing more – or less – than what military people know as “high morale” and what the Marines call “Esprit de Corps.” We have known for a long time how to achieve it – and how to screw it up.

REFERENCES

1. Barnard, C. I. (1938). *The Functions of the Executive*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.
2. March, J.G. and H.A. Simon (1958). *Organizations*. John Wiley & Sons: New York.

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