

Knowledge Worker

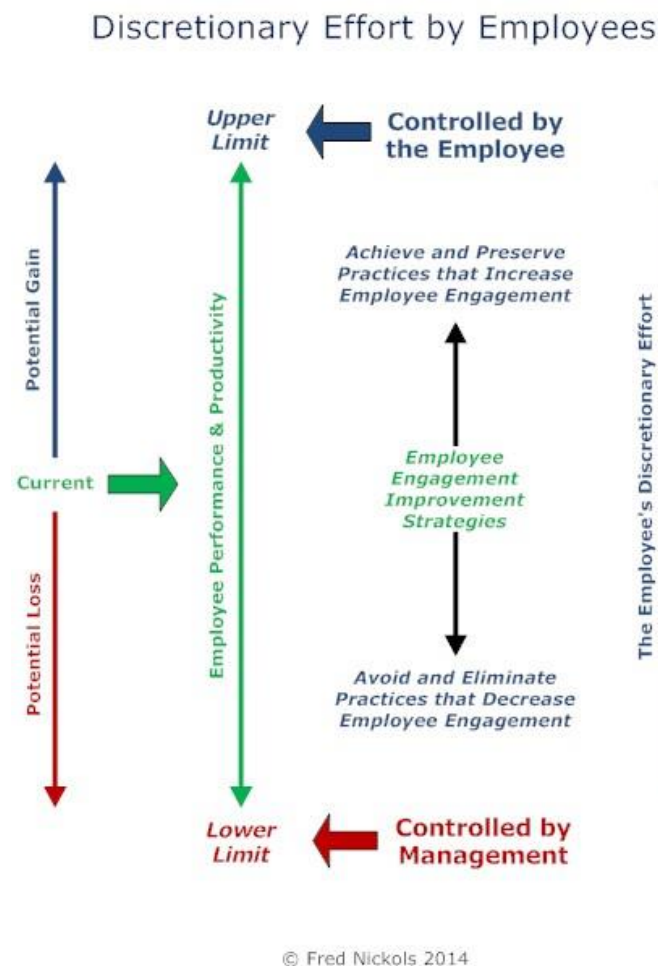
Employee Engagement: Enticing but Elusive

(October 2014)

Employee engagement is a hot topic – and a big ticket item.

A recent report from Deloitte suggests that organizations have spent \$720 million in pursuit of this enticing but elusive goal and will more than double their spending to \$1.5 billion (see the link at the end of this column). The same report also suggests that most if not all of that money has been wasted. It seems employee engagement eludes us still. In this brief column I will speculate as to why employee engagement is wanted and why it remains beyond our grasp. First, what it is and why it is wanted.

Employee engagement means many things to many people but most will agree that it refers to situations in which employees “go the extra mile,” to situations in which they go beyond the call of duty or do more than merely meet expectations. In slightly more technical terms, employee engagement refers to the expenditure of discretionary energy on the part of an employee. Engaged employees work harder, they work smarter, they do more, they get more done and they do it better – and they do it because they choose to. The benefits to the organization of having engaged employees should be obvious and hence their pursuit of it.



But, despite the massive amounts of money spent on trying to improve employee engagement there appears to be little progress. I believe the reason is this: Employee engagement is not something you can come at directly. It is a by-product or side effect of the way an organization’s managers and executives manage work, people and their performance. Moreover, although management controls the lower limits of employee performance and productivity, the employees control the upper limits, hence the significance of “discretionary effort.”

People are engaged when factors like the following are present. They feel valued. Their work is appreciated and so are they. Their work is meaningful and the value it adds is clear. What they do ties to important organizational outcomes and they are clear about those connections. In a word, their work is aligned. Their work is also interesting, challenging and they find not just meaning but also enjoyment in doing it. It is rewarding

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and satisfying. They are involved. They have a say in what they are to do and how it is to get done. The context in which they do it is marked by support from management and cooperation from others. As a result, they are committed to doing their best and they give it their all.

Managers and executives, then, need not waste precious resources on polls or interviews or obvious efforts to manipulate employee attitudes; instead, they need to focus on clarifying expectations, linking the work of their employees to important organizational results, making those linkages clear, providing support, encouraging collaboration and discouraging competition, ensuring necessary resources are available, and ensuring employees have a say in what they do and how they do it. In short, managers and executives need to focus on helping their employees succeed. Organizations that don't do this will be marked by low levels of employee engagement – in other words, they aren't doing any more than they have to. This is *prima facie* evidence of ineffective management practices.

Remember this basic truth: Organizations don't do anything, people do. An organization can succeed only to the extent its people succeed. Success must be shared by the organization and its people or it won't exist at all.

NOTES:

1. The report referred to at the beginning of this column can be found at this link: <http://www.bersin.com/engagement-market-review>
2. For more about the graphic in this column see "Visualizing the Payoffs of Employee Engagement" at <http://www.nickols.us/EngagementPayoffs.pdf>
3. For more about the balance of power between management and employees with respect to employee productivity or what the late F. Kenneth Berrien called "Formal Achievement," see Chapter VII in Berrien's 1968 book, *General and Social Systems*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick NJ. Despite its age it is far from outdated.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available [here](#).