

Communities of engagement

Donald Tosti and **Fred Nickols** offer some tips for managing your organisation's employee engagement communities

Employee engagement is hot, and for good reason: the payoffs are significant. But we think there's an aspect of it that has not received the attention it deserves; namely that, in terms of engagement, employees fall into four basic communities: players, spectators, cynics and deadwood. The task, then, isn't one of embarking on a sweeping programme to move people farther along a continuum of engagement; it is, instead, a matter of moving them from the community where they currently spend most of their time to the community of players. That move requires addressing the issues that put them in the community where they now reside in the first place.

There is ample evidence suggesting that engaged employees expend a much higher percentage of discretionary energy. Moreover, they do so in ways that yield great benefits to their organisation. For example, organisations with a high ratio of actively engaged employees to unengaged or actively disengaged employees far outperform those with a lower ratio.

Much of the interest in employee engagement has been spurred on, and is sustained, by the efforts of the Gallup organisation and its Q12 survey. Gallup places employees into three communities ranging along a continuum that runs from (1) actively engaged, through (2) not engaged, to (3) actively disengaged. This makes the task of increasing employee engagement a matter of moving them up the continuum.

Four engagement communities, not three

There is some consistent evidence that there are *four* engagement communities, not three, and that what it takes to move employees into what

we call the player community and what Gallup calls the actively-engaged community depends on which of the other three categories they are in. The task, then, is not a matter of moving employees along an engagement continuum; it is a more complicated matter of getting them to leave one community for another.

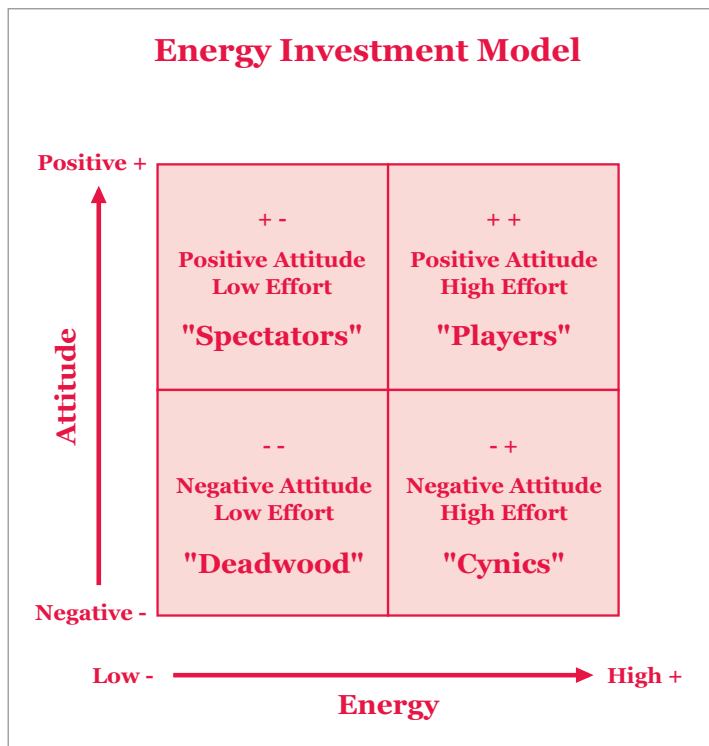
The four engagement communities are derived from the matrix shown overleaf – the Energy Investment Model – which arrays attitude against energy level.

In this article, we will review what we see as the four engagement communities – players, spectators, cynics and deadwood – including their placement in the model, and we will examine some ways of helping employees move from the spectator, cynic and deadwood communities into the player community. Along the way, we will review some evidence supporting the existence of these four communities.

Players These are the people you want. They couple a positive attitude with high levels of



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effort. They are the ones who make things happen, who take the initiative and who see things through to the finish. They are both competent and caring about their work, their company and their co-workers. The primary task in relation to this community is retaining them.

Spectators These are good souls; their heart is in the right place and so is their attitude. They, too, are competent and caring but they rarely take the initiative, choosing instead to expend minimal amounts of energy. The turnaround task here is getting them to release what are essentially large amounts of energy reserves.

Cynics These are the folks who, except for their attitude, would be players. They have high energy levels and are usually competent but, for various reasons, have become disillusioned and cynical about the workplace in which they find themselves. Owing to their competence and high

energy levels, they can be especially troublesome and problematic. Yet, if their attitude could be turned around, they could make significant contributions to the organisation.

Deadwood These people have the deadly combination of a bad attitude and low energy expenditure. They often do little more than take up space and occupy slots on the organisation chart. Turning them around is the most difficult task of all because both attitude and energy expenditure must be raised.

Turning deadwood, cynics and spectators into players

The first thing to know is that no one sets out to be a cynic, a spectator or deadwood. People wind up spending most of their time in one or another of these communities based on their experiences in the workplace. In other words, organisations put people into these communities. How they got there has a lot to do with how you get them out.

Deadwood There is a tough, up-front call to be made here: is it worth it? It might well be the case that the only thing to be done with deadwood is to get rid of it. On the other hand, if you see considerable potential, the effort to turn deadwood into players might be worthwhile.

People join the deadwood community because they have repeatedly been subjected to rejection and ridicule, often in public, and made to feel as though their views – about anything – are of no value or interest to their bosses (and, by extension, their co-workers). These people were driven, or retreated, into the deadwood community and they can be drawn back out only through persistent and consistent reversal of past treatment.

As is the case with all employees, members of the deadwood community must be treated with respect; their talents identified and made use of; and, above all else, their views must be heard and taken into account. (Remember: this is the case only if you've decided there is sufficient potential to warrant the effort.)

Cynics Converting a cynic into a player is no easy task, either. Cynics are usually quite competent and so they have rarely been ridiculed but, like deadwood, they have often been rejected or, more commonly, ignored or sidelined. Some believe they were made promises that weren't kept. Being bright and competent and possessed of high energy levels, this leads to cynicism and that can spell trouble.

For whatever reason (usually the display of behaviours that are taken to signify a bad attitude), cynics are left out and the obvious thing to do is bring them back into the fold. Here's a list of things you can do to accomplish that:

- put them in charge of a project or task them to address an issue (but not an unimportant one or a no-brainer)
- when they raise an issue, don't dismiss it right off the bat; instead, give it some serious thought and, if you think it is legitimate, act on it promptly – and don't backtrack
- if they ask for more responsibility, give it to them
- reassure them that you still have confidence in them even if they fail at first
- if they badmouth the company or others, take them aside and explain how that can be destructive to the organisation – and to them
- provide public praise for any collaborative, co-operative actions they might display
- find ways of drawing them in (eg invite them to intra-unit meetings or assign them to represent the group at inter-unit meetings)
- don't make promises of support on which you fail to deliver.

Spectators Spectators are spectators primarily because they are risk-averse and often a little insecure as well. The task here is to shore up their confidence and work with them to reduce their perceptions of risk, especially the consequences of taking a risk. You don't have to mollycoddle them but, by the same token, be sure not to threaten them either.

Spectators don't feel safe. One way to provide a safer environment is to make it more open:

- Make certain that people are free to raise issues or concerns and receive a reasoned, considered response from management
- Avoid 'hammering' people for raising touchy issues
- Work to eliminate any fear of retribution
- Challenge spectators to 'step up to the plate' (don't overtax them or throw them into a daunting assignment but make sure you 'stretch' them)
- Gradually ratchet up the level of challenge
- Provide regular reassurance and seize on any forward movement as an occasion to compliment them
- Don't set expectations that are obviously low; instead, be clear about high expectations and be equally clear about your confidence in their ability to meet them.



More than 75 per cent of employees fall into the spectators and cynics categories

Players As indicated earlier, the primary objective here is to keep players in the player community. The primary avenue for doing this is to ensure that they know they are respected and that nothing is done to make them think otherwise. Avoid micro-managing them or placing them under overly strict controls; both are signals that they aren't trusted or respected.

We saved players for last for two reasons. First, the issue of respect is the main option for keeping them as players and, secondly, because the issue of respect applies to the other three communities as well; indeed, in some ways, perhaps it applies to them even more.

The important thing to recognise is that managers often do not realise the nature of the signals they are sending – but, even though

Spectators 38%	Players 14%
Deadwood 9%	Cynics 39%

unintentional, they can be quite damaging. So be sure you're sending positive signals and be sure to avoid the negative ones. To help you in that regard, there are some examples opposite of unvoiced messages that send negative signals and some ways of sending positive signals instead.

The payoffs

A reasonable person might be saying at this point: "Okay, I get the message but tell me again why I should want to do what you're suggesting? What exactly are the payoffs?"

Over a period of several years, one of the authors and his colleagues at Vanguard Consulting accumulated data from more than 2,000 managers, who were asked to estimate the numbers and percentages of their people in each of the four communities. That data is displayed above.

There are two big surprises: (1) the small percentage of players and (2) the consistency of the estimates over time. Fortunately, the deadwood category is in a marked minority but more than 75 per cent of employees fall into the spectators and cynics categories. Clearly, there is a tremendous benefit to be realised from moving as many of those people as you can into the player category.

Let's be pessimistic for just a moment. Suppose you worked hard at moving people into the player category. Suppose also that you met with absolutely no success with the deadwood category and you got only half of the spectators and cynics into the player category. Suppose your effort was less than perfect with the players and you lost 20 per cent of them.

Well, that means you moved 38 per cent of your employees into the player category, where



they joined the 11 per cent of the players who were still there. Your company now has 49 per cent of its employees in the player category, which is more than three times what you had initially. Whatever performance your organisation was previously turning in owed mainly to the 14 per cent who were players. So we ask you: what is the value of tripling that population?

Comments and conclusions

It's the practices, stupid! Together, we have almost 100 years of experience in the workplace, much of that time spent on efforts to improve individual, group, process and organisational performance.

If we have learned anything in that time, it is that human performance rarely owes anything to the innate qualities or characteristics of the individual. Instead, more times than not, performance ties to management practices, especially to the way people are treated.

People don't put themselves into those engagement communities; management does and it falls to management to improve the situation. Or, to paraphrase former US president Bill

Clinton, "it's the practices, stupid!" The employee engagement monkey is on management's back.

All employee effort is discretionary Much ado is made about getting employees to expend more of their so-called 'discretionary effort'. But, as we have known for a long time now, *all* employee effort is discretionary.

To be sure, management controls the minimum acceptable level of effort – or at least it seems that way. Fail to meet that over an extended period of time and an employee will soon be gone. And few would argue the point that employees control the maximum level of effort they will expend – they can't be worked any harder than they're willing to work.

What few seem to realise is that all expenditures of employee energy that exceed management's minimum acceptable level is at the discretion of the employee. All you can ever get from an employee is what he will give you. And that includes whether or not he chooses to meet management's minimum expectation. If he doesn't, he won't wait around to be fired; he'll leave of his own accord and go somewhere where he can be the player he has always wanted to be. **TJ**

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Negative, unvoiced message	Positive and negative signals
Value: It's not worth my time to deal with you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seldom interacting with them - Not inviting them to planning meetings - Ignoring their suggestions or ideas + Agreeing up-front how both can benefit, and what time/effort you'll commit + Listening; asking questions about ideas they may have, particularly ones that differ from yours + Asking them for help and advice
Honesty: You may try to deceive me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extremely close monitoring of their behaviour, overly tight controls - Withholding information for 'security' purposes + Periodic joint reviews of progress and performance + Freely sharing of any information they may find helpful
Ability: You may deliver poor results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extremely close monitoring, tight controls + Joint reviews; 'let's work together' + Mutual clarity of expectations
Judgment: Your decisions are likely to lead us down the wrong path or cause us to waste resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requiring approval for every decision they make + Delegating decision-making authority; just asking to be kept informed
Sincerity: You have hidden motives – you'll try to get a better deal out of this than I will, or you'll abandon me as soon as something better comes along	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tying people to overly-tight 'contracts' - Withholding information to maintain an 'edge' + Mutual, up-front agreements + Agreeing on how we'll terminate an assignment, if necessary