Don't Get Lost On Your Employee Engagement Journey

Some practical insights for better results

Hello! **October 2014**

Engagement has been getting a lot of press in the last few years and, given that you're reading this e-book, I'm going to assume that you know something about it and that you've already bought into its benefits. But, despite this agreement about the power of (and need for) employee engagement, many people still struggle to put their finger on exactly *what it is*, let alone do something to improve it in their organisation.

I'm going to share, in an informal way, just some of my own thoughts and experiences, having successfully designed and embedded engagement solutions with thousands of employees in numerous countries.

I hope you find it useful and that it brings clarity to this important topic for you. More than that, I hope that you can *use* these insights to **take action** towards improving your employees' levels of engagement.

Whether you're just starting out, or your engagement strategy is already paying dividends, I'd love to hear about your experiences. Oh, and watch out for a special announcement at the end of the book!

All the best!

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The Lonely Life of the Engaged Employee

To start with, let's try to clarify the term "engagement" once and for all. I'm going to share our view on what engagement *isn't* before outlining our thoughts on what it actually *is*. Then I'll present some recent, and shocking, numbers.

Firstly, engagement is not the same as employee satisfaction or happiness. This is a common misunderstanding – even a Forbes reporter misunderstood the language in this article recently.
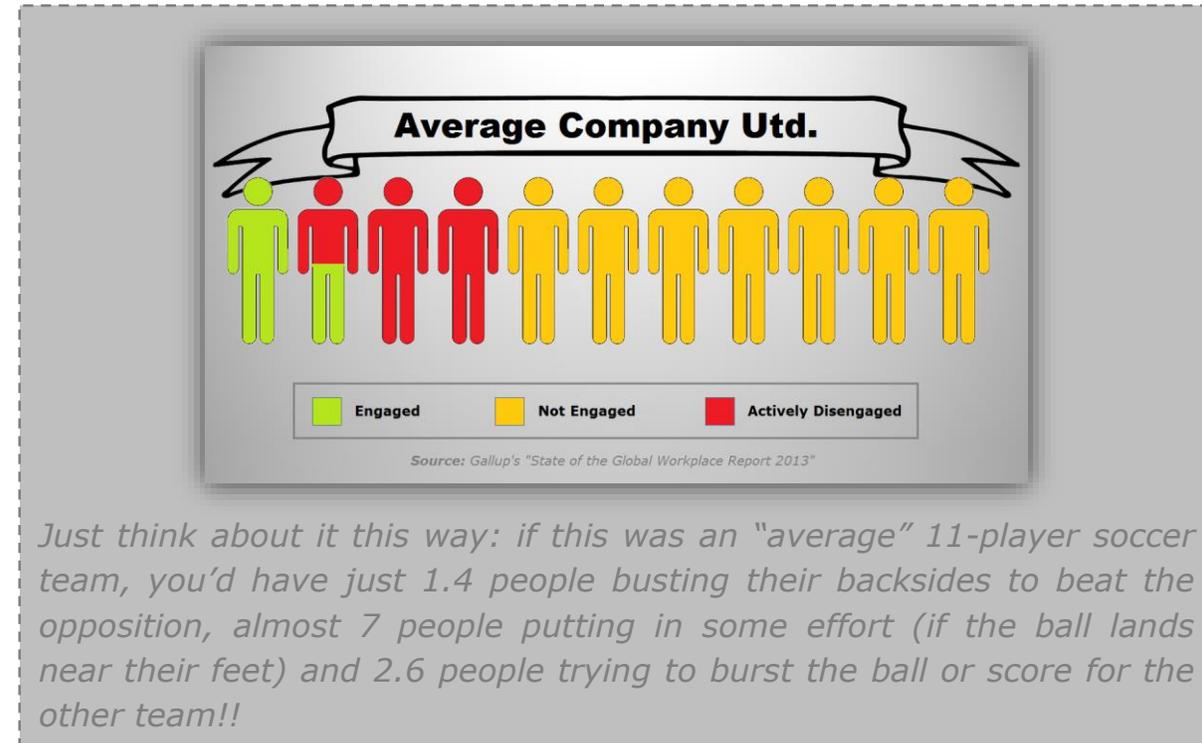
The new report she was writing about (Gallup's "State of the Global Workplace Report 2013") measures *engagement*, not *happiness* and a happy employee is not necessarily an engaged employee (you've likely known a few perfectly happy employees that still manage to do very little work or make the people around them utterly miserable!).

Well then, what is engagement? At **thrive**, we define engagement in an organisation as "**the level of motivation and commitment demonstrated by its employees to their work and their stakeholders**" – in other words how much of their discretionary effort are they spending to make life better for their customers / patients, clients and colleagues, even when it's difficult to do so.

With that definition in mind, why the title of this blog post?

Well, you may already know that Gallup (through the use of its Q12 survey) categories people as either "engaged", "not engaged" or "actively disengaged". What you may not yet know is the average breakdown of these ratings were presented in their 2013 report as 13% engaged, 63% not engaged and 24% actively disengaged.

Only 13% are engaged in the average workplace!? That's a pretty lonely place alright.

Just think about it this way: if this was an "average" 11-player soccer team, you'd have just 1.4 people busting their backsides to beat the opposition, almost 7 people putting in some effort (if the ball lands near their feet) and 2.6 people trying to burst the ball or score for the other team!!

In 3 Words: Why Organisations Fall Short With Employee Engagement Efforts

We consultants love a good bell-curve, so please indulge me for a minute while I reinforce the cliché! When I think about the organisations I've dealt with in the last few years, it's pretty easy to identify where they fall on the employee engagement bell curve.

One group is that small minority for whom engagement doesn't show up on their radar at all. In fairness, this is a very small minority these days, but awareness is growing amongst this group, now that their people are starting to exercise career options or chase their own business dreams.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the curve, we see the other minority who are doing everything right and enjoying the impressive results that an engaged and enabled workforce brings (it's hugely important to engage AND enable – this will be covered shortly).

And finally, as you might expect, the majority of businesses out there fall somewhere in the middle of the curve. They know that engagement is important, they have taken SOME steps to measure and improve it, but still they struggle to get the results they want.

My "Let's talk about engagement" bell-curve.
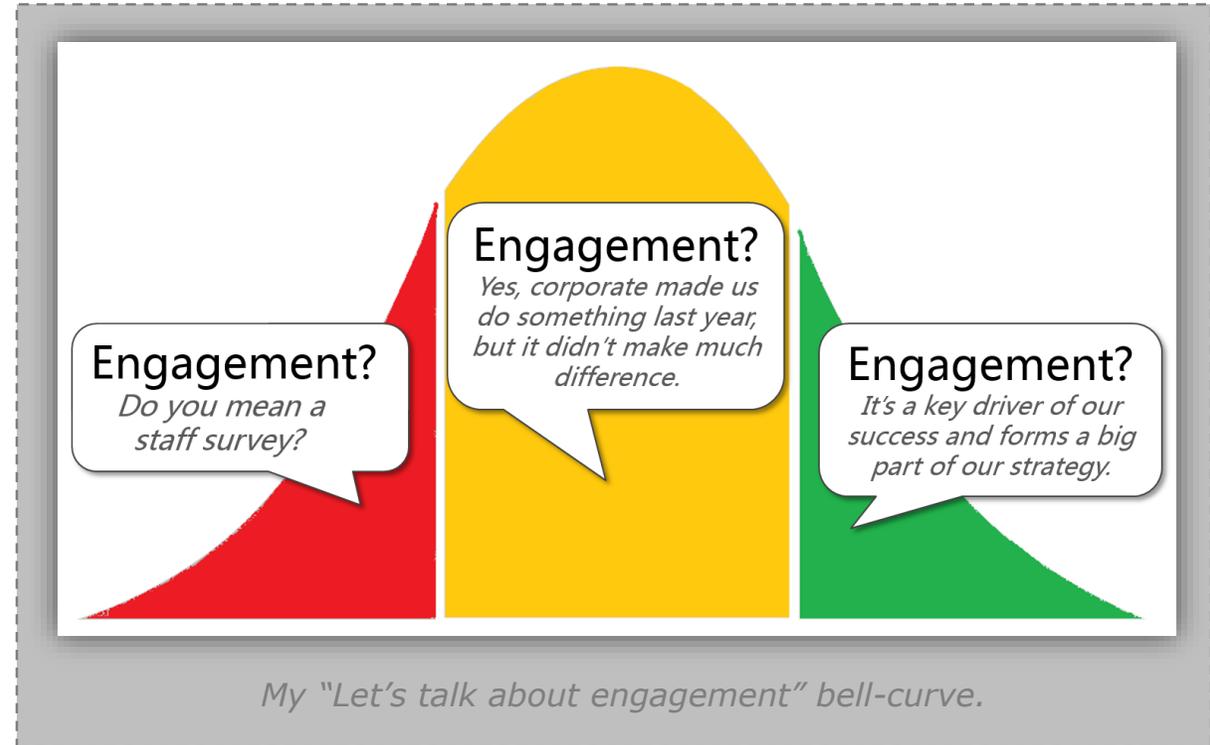
Let's stick with our mid-curve friends a moment longer...

They, like so many other organisations are emerging from a few years of greatly reduced or no investment in their people. Instead, they have spent their money and time trying to hit financial and efficiency targets.

These numbers are tangible and progress is easily measured. They're familiar. They make the CFO and the bank manager feel more in-control and able to predict the future.

But these are all LAGGING indicators. Yes, these results confirm the past and provide a stable platform to go forward from, but they don't necessarily flag anything about future patterns or cause anything to be different for the next month / quarter / year.

Even if a company is one of those rare breeds that, after creating their glossy, high-flying strategy, actually FOLLOWS THROUGH ON IT, they often fall short on delivering the tangible changes they want. Why?

The answer lies in those 3 words I promised you:

Culture beats strategy.

Every. Time.

A strategy is most often decided at the top and cascaded down through the ranks. It usually consists of some new ideas or insights, identifies priority areas of focus, some important and urgent actions and, of course, some targets to be hit. All normal, predictable, sensible stuff.

So, what's missing? The strategy usually misses the "why?" behind the targets. This means that people can't see a reason to change, they can't identify the overall purpose of their role, or the difference they are making in the world.

Culture takes time and energy to change (or as I usually prefer to say; to evolve), but it CAN be done.

A more people-focused strategy, in addition to the all-important numbers, causes a real shift in the mind-set, behaviours and actions of employees, and drives:

- *a change in employees' beliefs (and sometimes their underlying values),*
- *a fair bit of new learning (and usually a healthy amount of un-learning),*
- *a change in what everyone talks about and how they talk about it,*
- *a new understanding of how to succeed / be a top performer,*
- *a commitment from everybody (or at least a critical mass of people) to execute the strategy, and, critically,*
- *a new set of behaviours and tools focused on engagement and enablement (explained in the next chapter).*

Executive teams and HR leaders in top performing organisations don't leave culture to chance. They don't trust or blindly hope that it will be a winning culture that delivers the strategy. They know that organisational culture is something to be consciously managed, using a powerful set of beliefs, tools and behaviours.

Used in a systematic way, these deliver the **efficiency**, **effectiveness** and **engagement** results that are needed to really deliver on strategic promises. Yes, this takes consistent effort, but these "3 E's" can be delivered more quickly than you might think. In fact, you can secure some very quick wins if you introduce some simple tools in the right way…

Are you holding back your most engaged employees?

In this chapter, you'll see why engagement, alone, it's not enough to create a winning culture and deliver outstanding results. I'll explain the "3 E's" and finally, I'll share some simple ways to lay the building blocks for a high performing team or organisation.

But first, meet Tim...

Tim joined a new company about 7 months ago. He knows his stuff and was a major loss to his previous company, who had to downsize drastically and let him go. He's easy to get along with, self-driven, very capable, willing to learn and, by anyone's standards, would be described as a very engaged employee. As you might expect, his new employer is delighted to have him on board. Tim, though, is less delighted. He's doing good work and the people are nice – there are even plenty of perks like free lunch, a games room and gym membership – but something's not right. He wants to do his best work, but the company doesn't seem to want *anyone's* best work. Everything seems to default to a kind of mediocre middle-ground. There's no real joined-up thinking, and the resources needed to do the job are patchy at best. He's starting to feel frustrated.

Ok, I'm sure you've guessed that Tim's not real – he's just a character, but the things that happen to him and the place he now finds himself are very real indeed. I've met and worked with dozens of "Tim"s who feel frustrated. And when capable, engaged people start to feel frustrated, the chances of hitting high performance (let alone TOP performance) are greatly reduced.

Frustration is a performance-killer

So, what's going on for Tim? I used the word "frustrated" very deliberately. Not only because that's the emotion he's feeling (and let's face it, this is a pretty debilitating emotion for someone who's used to doing great work), but it's also what the company has been doing to Tim: frustrating his performance.

He's ENGAGED, but he's not being ENABLED. His best work is remaining untapped because the company is not removing the barriers in front of him.

Going back to our friends in "Average Company Utd.", it'd be like making those precious 1.4 engaged players wear uncomfortable boots, or train at awkward hours, or practice with basketballs instead of soccer balls. These examples may sound far-fetched, but how often do companies end up with workarounds or situations where people have to make-do with poor (or no) resources, support, direction, tools or structures?

Put simply: **engagement without enablement leads to frustration.**

And what happens then? Well, people like Tim only have four options:

1. **They can break through:** Hi-Potential employees, in particular, want to exceed expectations and stretch themselves. They usually have a high internal locus of control, so their first response will be to try to improve things for themselves and others. When they eventually decide that they can't change things because they're so ingrained in habit, culture, or bureaucracy, they move on to one of the remaining three options …

2. **They can break down:** People like Tim don't give up easily; they're used to being listened to and to being successful. But, there's only so much mental and physical energy available to them and, through the exertion (both mental and physical) of pushing against the system, frustrated employees can end up overwhelmed and unable to cope.

3. **They can hit the brakes:** To avoid breakdown, or sometimes as a result of having suffered it, another option for the frustrated employee is to reduce their level of discretionary effort to match that of their less engaged colleagues – most of whom are being treated just as well as, if not better than, them anyway. This can either be a conscious or unconscious "decision", but either way, this is not a place that our engaged friends want to be.

4. **They can make a clean break:** Some employees will jump straight to this step, after they realise their efforts to "break through" were in vain. Others may go through option 2 or 3 as well, but at the end of the day, this group, more than most, will have other employment options and will be more likely to exercise them and go where they feel they can make an impact. Needless to say, with this option, everyone loses out.

This "frustration" section is an evolved version of the content in the brilliant book "[The Enemy of Engagement](#)".

Engagement AND Enablement … got it … but what IS enablement and where do these "3 E's" come in?

Enablement, for me, is made up of two separate, but equally important parts: efficiency and effectiveness. So, now the solution has three elements, whereby organisations must play their part in improving all 3 E's for Tim and everyone else.

These are defined by us as follows:

Engagement:
Increasing peoples' levels of motivation and commitment to their work and their stakeholders.

Efficiency:
Getting maximum value for minimum time, energy and resources, with minimum errors and waste.

Effectiveness:
Ensuring that all activity drives progress towards goals and makes a positive impact.

It's important to note a couple of things about this …

Firstly, it's not a linear solution; you don't have to spend a year on engagement before moving onto efficiency and then effectiveness.

In fact, gaining some efficiencies can be one of the quickest wins when driving engagement and enablement, so we don't want to worry *too much* about the "chicken or egg" conundrum. If you pay enough attention to all three areas, it will come good in the end.

Secondly, most managers will have a preference for, and probably a greater level of skill in, just one of the three areas (and it's usually NOT engagement – after all they probably became a manager by delivering on the numbers and being a good problem-solver).

So, with these points in mind, managers and leaders need to be trained (and form the habits required) to look at the world through all three of these powerful lenses **simultaneously**, and to measure and manage them **proactively** and **consistently** for best results. Let's look at a few ways they can do this.

How to manage the 3 E's at individual employee level

Great results can be achieved in a short time by keeping things practical and focused. On the next page are some simple and LOW COST actions I've used previously to great effect.

These ideas cost little or no money, take very little time to do and can be implemented without any big project plan. It's not an exhaustive list, nor is it a perfect list, but, in my experience, the biggest success factor is not the ideas themselves but the enthusiasm of the manager using them.

	Engagement	Enablement	
		Efficiency	Effectiveness
Definition	Increasing peoples' levels of motivation and commitment to their work and their stakeholders.	Getting maximum value for minimum time, energy and resources, with minimum errors and waste.	Ensuring that all activity drives progress towards goals and makes a positive impact.
Actions	Notice, look for, capture, share and celebrate the good stuff (people going out of their way for others, rave reviews from customers, etc.). Thank people for their effort and commitment – especially when they go beyond expectations. Provide occasional, unexpected, meaningful recognition (and, sometimes, though not necessarily, reward). Share the numbers (and responsibility for delivering them) with your people. For important issues, explain the "what" & "why" and invite input into the "how". Ask questions and listen to the answers. Do what you say you'll do – ensure follow-up on the important things.	Identify the "workarounds" that are in place and find a solution for them. Seek out ways to do things better – proactively ask everyone: • what could be working better about the way we do our work? • do you have everything you need to do your best work? Capture the ideas and make sure they are followed through – including feedback on what's happening. Give credit / recognise (and maybe reward) when someone helps thing to run better.	Ensure objectives and targets are aligned with the company and department's reason for being there – make it clear what they are contributing to and what difference they are making. Challenge the status quo by (appropriately, respectfully and consistently) questioning why things are the way they are, and whether the current course of action will bring you closer to your shared goals. Openly encourage your people to do the same. Allow – even encourage – mistakes, and ensure learning takes place and gets shared afterwards.

(Click here to view and save this as a separate PDF)

What if you want to make a difference at company level?

It's a lot of the same stuff! Except it's done in a really joined-up, **systematic** way. Yes, in a large organisation, it requires a lot of planning, commitment and effort… BUT… it doesn't have to (and ought not) be complicated.

As I said earlier, I've embedded these tools and practices into organisations across Europe, with staff numbering in the thousands, but have also achieved success with small, local teams, by using the same set of tools and behaviours, in a consistent, focused way.

Want more?

- Here's a webinar video from Canadian Management Centre with the authors of The Enemy of Engagement.

- A lovely, and short, TED talk on the power of thanks and showing people the difference they make in the world.

- You've probably seen this one before, but it's worth another watch to remind you how motivation really works: RSA Animate's video on Dan Pink's "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us".

Free Video Series!

Hopefully you've found this e-book both interesting and useful. If that's the case, please share it with someone you know that would feel the same!

You may still have questions, but don't worry – we're not done with this topic!

We've recorded a series of short videos that go into more depth on this important topic. The videos are presented in 4 groups: Get the Basics, Get Ready, Get Started and Get Results. Think of it as getting free consulting without ever leaving your desk! Just click the engagement link below to watch them and, please let me know what you think in the comments section.

Some links for you…

derek@thrive.ie

Derek's LinkedIn Profile

www.thrive.ie/engagement

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