Engaged Employees: Do You Know Them When You See Them?

by Caela Farren, Ph.D., MasteryWorks, Inc.

Introduction

This is Neviah. He’s two and my grandson. What words would you use to describe what you see in this picture? Write down as many as you can. My words are at the bottom of the article.

Neviah is engaged. He’s obsessed with Thomas the train and all his Sodor friends. He can bring you any of 15 trains by name—Thomas, Toby, James, Henry, etc. He lines them up. Tests them on the train tracks. Brings them in and out of their station. Usually has 4 or 5 clutched close to his heart as he walks from room to room. He says “choo choo” a million times a day. He takes care of them and puts them to bed before sleeping. He’s emotionally hooked. He cares. He’s got passion for trains. He’s a study in engagement.

What we see with Neviah and most children is what Csikszentmihalyi discovered in his original research on flow, called autotelic experience. “Children careen from one flow moment to another animated by a sense of joy, equipped with a mindset of possibility, and working with the dedication of a West Point cadet. They use their brains and their bodies to probe and draw feedback from the environment in an endless pursuit of mastery.” What happens to this childish wonder? Those that are the most successful and happiest in life maintain it. They do what they love, strive to get better at it and look for ways to contribute to the welfare of others. I call this engagement.

Other Studies in Engagement


I urge you to take a few minutes and watch several of the videos and do your own voting. And, just as importantly, observe what you see and hear that stamps HIGHLY ENGAGED on each of these great individuals. Spotting engagement and being able to articulate what you see, hear and feel is part of coaching for engagement.
Observable Measures of Engagement

Engagement is observable and palpable. You can see it, hear it, touch it, and feel it if you’re paying attention. We shouldn’t have to do engagement surveys to see if people are engaged, although they can help at the macro level. So, what are some observable measures? Print out and take the quiz below:

- scan the list
- assess yourself and two of your people on these measures by putting a ☑ when the answer is YES
- count the Yeses and determine whether each is engaged most of the time.

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<tr>
<th>ENGAGEMENT MEASURES</th>
<th>#1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Asks questions to understand – listens carefully – generates confidence in the others that they have been heard</td>
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<td>Shares ideas for improvement in order to enhance service or deliverables</td>
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<td>Stays focused on a goal or problem &amp; persists in the face of conflict or adversity</td>
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<td>Generates passion and a sense of urgency with colleagues to create energy for action</td>
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<td>Explores, follows hunches, sees new possibilities and plots a new course</td>
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<td>Stays late or comes early without being asked, to complete projects &amp; support team - not “on the clock”</td>
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<td>Produces project deliverables on time or ahead of schedule - goes the “extra mile” - beyond the desired results</td>
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<td>Talks about “we” rather than “me”</td>
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<td>Takes initiative, providing creative &amp; innovative thinking and action</td>
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<td>Total Yeses</td>
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How did you do? How do your two people show up? Mostly yeses? Some yeses? Few Yeses? What’s your intuition about their level of engagement – high, medium, low? Your own? Obviously, you can observe for the opposite behaviors and see if someone is disengaged. However, observing and rewarding engaging behavior motivates employees and shows you’re paying attention.

What Are Companies Doing to Assess Engagement?
The October 2010 issue of Harvard Business Review has an insightful article, “Competing on Talent Analytics – What the best companies know about their people and how they use that information to outperform rivals”. Many companies have identified a number of useful predictors of possible engagement or potential disengagement.

- **Jet Blue** asks employees annually if they’d recommend the company as a good place to work.
- **Netflix** has tossed out traditional absence policies.
- **Best Buy** has given up standard work schedules and provides quarterly employee engagement surveys.
- **Sprint** has identified a number of indicators to foretell which employees will leave after a relatively short time – hasn’t signed up for a retirement program – is one of them.

What is your organization doing to identify engaged and disengaged employees? What are you doing? We would love to hear from you. cfarren@masteryworks.com

Why Do People Stay Engaged?

- **Autonomy** – being self-directed. Autonomous workers decide how they do their work, when they do it and where they do it. (This, of course, needs to be adapted in the case of people who have to be on a fixed schedule). They are not micromanaged. People are treated as partners rather than human resources. They direct their own lives. And, the underlying value here is trust.

- **Mastery** – the urge to get better and better at something. “You need not see what someone is doing to know if it is his vocation, you have only to look at the eyes…” W.H. Auden. The pursuit, the work, is self-fulfilling and its own reward. Csikszentmihalyi, coined the term flow to describe people who “so deeply live in the moment and feel so utterly in control, that their sense of time, place, and even self melt away.” A study of 11,000 industrial scientists and engineers working at companies in the U.S. found that the desire for intellectual challenge – that is, the urge to master something new and engaging – was the best predictor of productivity. Scientists motivated by this intrinsic desire filed significantly more patents than those whose main motivation was money.

- **Purpose** – doing something that matters, doing it well and doing it in service of a cause greater than ourselves. More and more researchers on Boomers (those over 60) show that happiness and self-satisfaction comes from meaning rather than money. That doesn’t mean you have to work in a non-profit organization. “Every time Toms Shoes sells a pair of shoes…, it gives away another pair of new shoes to a child in a developing country.”
Engaged people want to **contribute**, like the CNN Heroes. They want to be **autonomous** and be trusted to run their own lives and deliver on their promises. And they want to master what it takes to achieve their goals and feel satisfied and fulfilled. Engagement requires a new breed of managers.

**What Can Managers Do to Foster Engagement?**

- Have conversations with employees to really get to know them.
- Observe for the engagement measures discussed above and talk about what they see.
- Assure autonomy – be clear on objectives, timelines, results and stand aside.
- Foster mastery through assuring challenging work – not too easy, not too hard but challenging so that people are learning and building a greater reservoir of skill and expertise.
- Know employees goals and aspirations and do everything you can to help them achieve them – inside or outside your work unit.
- Watch for passion or its absence and help employees find new jobs or projects if that’s missing.
- Provide resources, mentors, and training required to be successful.
- Be creative with work and life balance issues.
- Provide lots of recognition and non-monetary rewards.

**Summary**

Create a work environment that fosters engagement. Observe your people and look for the “Neviah factor.” Are they in the **flow**? What can you do together that will keep them engaged and with a sense of meaning and fulfillment in their lives. Watch performance and productivity soar!

My words to describe Neviah: present, intent, focused, fascinated, absorbed, intense, concentrated, energized, studying, paying attention, cute as a bug!

**References:**

2. Thomas H. Davenport, Jeanne Harris, and Jeremy Shapiro, “Competing on Talent Analytics –What the best companies know about their people and how they use that information to outperform rivals”, October, 2010.
3. Davenport et al, pp. 54-55.
5. Pink, page 111.
About the Author:

Caela Farren, Ph. D., President of MasteryWorks, is a leading career development authority providing solutions to large and mid-size companies, including Sprint, Lockheed-Martin, and Capitol One. MasteryWorks provides enterprise web portals, training, consulting, and an assessment framework for employees and managers. For more than 30 years, Dr. Farren has been a tireless advocate around complex issues redefining the workplace. She envisioned the current workplace climate by more than a decade, when she published the book, “Who is Running Your Career: Creating Stable Work in Unstable Times” (Bard Press, 1997). Through MasteryWorks, she oversees solutions that create the foundation for impact-filled “career conversations” - centered on increased contribution, performance, and fit. Her strategic approach consistently delivers on employee engagement and retention goals for her clients.

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