

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: LESSONS FROM A FATHER

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

My father, Harlie, was one of the first leaders in my life. While far from perfect, one of the things he did well was get me engaged. Here's some of the lessons I learned from him and I hope you can relate them to your work as a leader.

1. **Give what you expect from others.** Harlie engaged me by first being engaged. Leadership is about energy, and if you want energy *on* your team, you must bring energy *to* your team. Energy – whether it's positive or negative – is contagious. He was passionate about so many things. He was passionate about learning, about growing, and about life. As a former national gymnastics champion, he kept himself in great shape. He lived what he led. If you want engagement from others, you better *be* engaged.* We cannot give what we do not have.
2. **Be motivated by love.** Great leadership is largely a matter of love. If you are uncomfortable with that word, call it caring, because leadership involves caring about people, not manipulating them. Dad was tough on me when I needed it, but I never doubted his motive: he genuinely cared. He cared more about me than about the results that were expected. The results were a means to a higher end. Harlie was motivated by love. You can't fabricate love; people will see right through you. What you can do is decide to care about people. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.
3. **Live your passion.** Our basement was filled with evidence of Dad's passion: exercise equipment, a tumbling mat, weights. Every morning Dad would be up exercising at the crack of dawn. Although he couldn't get me engaged, he lived his passion. He preached the importance of exercise without saying a word. When I was in junior high school, Dad took me to the YMCA and attempted to teach me how to exercise on the parallel bars. I didn't have the strength to lift myself up, much less do any maneuvers on them. After several disappointing attempts, Dad soon got the message: I was just not meant to be gymnast. Even though I have memories of him being disappointed that he couldn't engage me in gymnastics, he kept his own passion alive.
4. **Tune in to what drives people.** Soon after I got my learner's permit at the age of fourteen, Dad and I were out on the country roads as I learned to manage a stick shift on our old 1954 Chev truck. I pulled over on an approach into a farm yard a mile from our home. Sensing that something was wrong, Dad gently motioned me to take a break from driving. We sat in silence for a few moments and I started to open up about an incident in a recent physical education class. "We ran a mile and I couldn't finish it without walking... I came in last, and I left with a goal to be the best miler in our zone track meet next year." While Dad knew little about running, we went to the library and found

every book we could on running. Dad became my coach, and the next spring I won the mile race in our zone track meet. Everyone has a passion. Everyone is engaged about something. The key is to create the space to listen and tune in to what matters to people. When you are committed to helping people find and express their voice – their unique gifts and passion, you'll get engagement.

5. **Have a vision of greatness.** Greatness wasn't an external thing for my father. His life was about making a difference, not making a buck. He didn't ever have a personal mission statement. But he had a mission that was expressed by how he lived his life. When you have a vision, whether it's expressed explicitly or implicitly by your actions, it inspires people. In his "I have dream speech," Martin Luther King did not proclaim, "I have a strategic plan." While plans may be necessary, it is dreams that inspire, uplift, and engage us. "If you want to build a ship," writes Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, don't herd people together to collect wood, and don't assign them to tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." Whatever your vision, live it well and you will inspire others to engage with you.
6. **Be a good gardener.** Dad was a good gardener and he taught me a lot about leadership by the way he gardened. No plants ever grow better because you demand that they do so or because you threaten them. Plants grow only when they have the right conditions and are given proper care. Creating the space and providing the proper nourishment for plants - and people as well - is a matter of continual investigation and vigilance. But another reality about gardening is that you really don't have much control over the harvest. Despite your best efforts, for a myriad of reasons, some plants simply won't make it. You can't engage everyone. It's a reality we all live with.

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David Irvine is sought after internationally as a speaker, author, and mentor. His work has contributed to the building of accountable, vital, and engaged organizations across North America. He is the co-founder of the Newport Institute for Authentic Living whose focus is to build authentic organizational cultures that attract and retain great people. David is the best selling author of five books. His most recent book is *Bridges Of Trust: Making Accountability Authentic*. These are available in bookstores or can be ordered at www.davidirvine.com

For information on how David can bring value to your organization or community, contact david@davidirvine.com or call 1-866-621-7008 (toll free).

* For more information on engagement, see David's book, *Becoming Real: Journey To Authenticity* or read his article entitled, *Getting In*