

The First Condition Of Employee Engagement: Engagement

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

My teenage daughters have been, by far, my best teachers in understanding engagement. When I've been traveling for an extended time and disconnected from them, my tendency is to come home and see all the things they aren't doing to help around the house. When I'm tired and detached from them I'll notice how they haven't been keeping their rooms clean enough, their chores haven't been done adequately, and their responsibilities have been neglected. Then I'll proceed to lecture them and willfully try to "engage" the "disengaged." This type of approach, or management by pressure, is what Ken Blanchard used to call "seagull management," which means you ignore people and then you fly around and crap on them. The obvious result of this line of attack is resistance, disengagement, and power struggles.

What my kids continue to teach me is that if you want engagement, you first of all have to be engaged. Paradoxically, commitment and accountability for results is correlated with the time you spend with your kids when you aren't expecting anything, when you are just hanging around, listening and hearing their concerns and desires. Before you can engage people you have to be engaged *with* them. Connection – or reconnection if you have been detached - is a prerequisite to engagement. So often I see executives in their corporate offices sending out employee engagement surveys to people they don't even know and then wondering why people say they are disengaged. Sole reliance on employee engagement surveys to assess whether your employees are engaged is an indication of disengagement!

Here are five fundamental conditions for engagement:

1. **Engagement.** Give to others what you expect from others. If you want engagement, take time to get engaged in people's lives. If you want to engage people you need to know people, and they need to know you. What do you want from this career? What matters to you? What do you believe in? What are you committed to? What is your passion? Why do you get out of bed in the morning? Connections precede engagement. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.
2. **Contribution.** Self-centered people are not engaged. Leadership requires modeling,

and expecting, a servant attitude. "We have no more right to consume happiness without producing it, than to consume wealth without producing it," writes George Bernard Shaw. There appears to be two kinds of people in the world: Those who help, and those who hinder; those who give and those who take; those who lift, and those who lean; those who contribute, and those who consume. Which kind of person will you decide to be?

3. **Clear expectations.** Have high standards, and make your expectations clear with those you depend on. Challenge people, and be understandable. Nobody ever took pride in doing something easy. But don't wait until people mess up before you tell people what you expect. Model the standards you expect from others, and clarify your expectations upstream in the relationship. If there are any surprises in your annual performance review, then you haven't been communicating.
4. **Accountability.** Accountability – the ability to be counted on – means taking ownership and keeping your promises, and expecting the same from others. Model accountability by accepting responsibility, even when you aren't responsible. No one will ever think less of you for putting your hand up and saying, "I'm accountable for that." Like expectations, negotiate consequences, both negative and positive, as early in the relationship as possible, so people know what to expect. With no consequences, there can be no accountability.
5. **Trust.** Four questions assess trust: Can they deliver results? Do they stand by me under pressure? Do they tell me the truth? Do they fulfill their promises? Eventually, after you have connected with those you serve, made your expectations and guidelines clear, negotiated consequences, you have to let go, get out of their way, and trust people do their job.

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