

Employee Engagement White Paper

## **Managers Matter:**

# A Relationship-Centered Approach to Engagement

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In the intense scramble for customers and profits, having engaged employees can make all the difference. Employees who are both emotionally and intellectually committed deliver superior performance, help create exceptional customer experiences, and contribute to a positive workplace culture. They are less willing to leave their employer for a minor increase in salary and therefore directly boost the bottom line by reducing costs associated with turnover. Evidence of these benefits, and others, continues to emerge: engagement is a strategic objective worth pursuing.

Despite the focus, though, engagement scores have been relatively flat, even as efforts to improve them have intensified. A 2018 Dale Carnegie study of employee engagement shows that about 30% percent of U.S. employees are *Fully-Engaged*, another 51% *Partially-Engaged* and the remaining 19% *Disengaged*, a distribution that has remained essentially stagnant in recent years<sup>1</sup>.

Research continues to examine the complexities and challenges of engagement, and the results leave many business leaders feeling overwhelmed. A typical organization is a diverse mosaic of generations, personalities, backgrounds, beliefs, styles, preferences and aspirations; crafting comprehensive engagement strategies that resonate across these differences is a major undertaking that can be expensive, impractical and difficult to execute. For many organizations there is a smarter strategy.

### The Value of the Immediate Supervisor

Picture your best boss ever. How did she make you feel about your work? What did he do that made you feel valued, competent and appreciated? How much did you learn and grow professionally while working for this leader? Of course, it's not a revelation that leaders play a crucial role in motivating and energizing their teams. But an employee's immediate supervisor, regardless of level, is often the single most important – and often underutilized – resource for boosting engagement.

An employee's immediate supervisor performs a number of vital roles, and in many companies, they still serve as the primary conduit for the flow of information. Top down, company leadership announces goals and objectives, but employees continue to look to their supervisor to explain what they mean and how they may be affected. Bottom up, the immediate supervisor listens and responds to concerns, ensures that employees' voices are heard and passes feedback to senior management. Employees turn to their immediate supervisors first to provide work-related resources, remove obstacles, and for help developing their skills, networks and careers. Through all of these tasks, and others, what managers do and say – and importantly *how they say it* – profoundly affects employees' attitudes about their jobs, the organization and even themselves.

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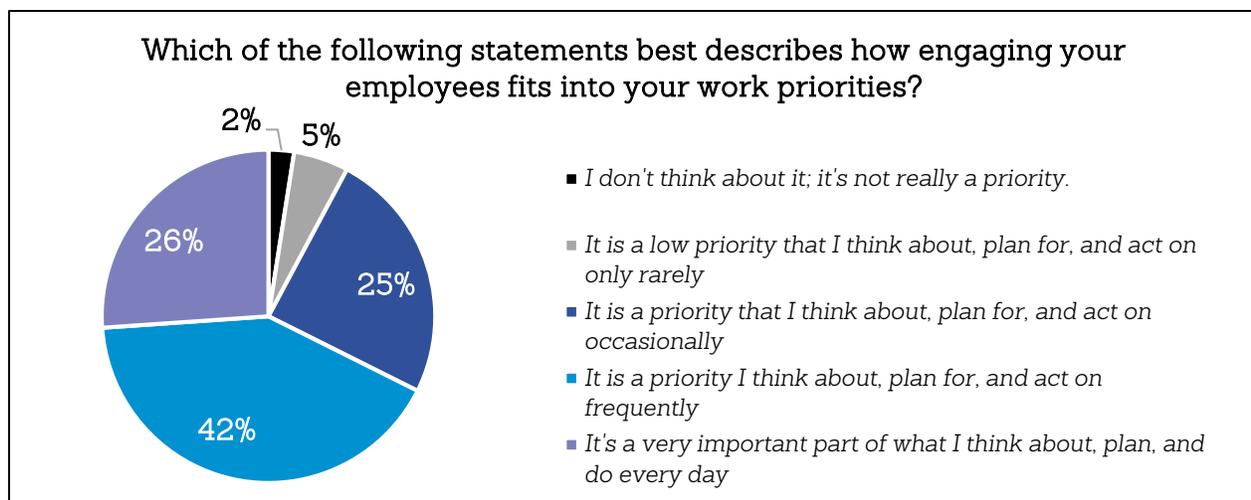
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The quality of the relationship between an individual employee and his or her immediate supervisor may be the single greatest driver of engagement. At the same time, in a manager's hectic day-to-day schedule, it's the development of those relationships that often gets short-changed when other priorities take precedence.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Carnegie Employee Engagement Research 2016-2018



The chart at right reflects responses from 500 U.S. leaders<sup>2</sup> asked about how engaging employees fits into their work priorities. Which best describes how it fits into yours? Why?

Simply put, while the majority of companies say engagement is a priority, most have not created an environment that enables and encourages their leaders at all levels to give it the attention it deserves.

The good news is that consistent effort does pay off: of employees who *strongly agree* that their supervisor actively works to engage them, 51% are fully-engaged. Our research also shows that leaders who make the commitment to engage their employees personally benefit from having an engaged team:

- 93% of surveyed leaders agree that employees who are fully-engaged produce better results than those who aren't.
- 86% agree that their job is *easier* when their direct reports are fully-engaged.
- 75% agree that their job is less stressful when their direct reports are fully-engaged.

### Pragmatic Engagement

Each organization and culture is unique, but our experience at Dale Carnegie suggests three core leadership capabilities that contribute to building strong, successful professional relationships that lead to engagement. Each one takes deliberate and intentional effort on the part of a leader and a commitment to integrate them into the day-to-day tasks and discussions that make up typical work days.

First, be a relationship-centered leader. This mind-set is at the heart of driving engagement. In order to help employees feel valued, confident, empowered, and connected, a leader must behave in ways that demonstrate genuine interest, care and concern. Here are six practices proven essential for relationship-centered leadership.

- *Provide growth and development opportunities* – Align goals with that of your organization or department and provide active support and encouragement.
- *Mentor and coach* – Model positive and appropriate behavior and be available for timely coaching and advice.
- *Help employees build networks* – Make introductions, create opportunities for visibility, empower them to partner with others, and seize opportunities for connections.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Carnegie Employee Engagement Research 2018

- *Remove obstacles and provide resources* – Support the agreed upon career goals, help eliminate barriers, and enable them to succeed.
- *Hold accountable to high performance* – Communicate high expectations and measure and reward efforts that go above and beyond expectations.
- *Show that you care* – Become genuinely interested in employees as people and place value on their health and well-being.

Second, conduct periodic engagement conversations with each team member. The purpose of these focused, but less formal conversations is to better know each employee, including her or his aspirations, preferences, talents, and concerns. Most employees want to know that their immediate supervisor is interested in him or her as a person and cares about her or his life outside of work. Career goals vary, and each person's motivators are different. A single parent may value stability and job security, while an ambitious recent college graduate may be focused on new experiences and opportunities to grow. Savvy leaders manage each employee in a way that corresponds to, and respects, those differences.

Together with good listening skills, here are some questions that can help leaders begin a meaningful engagement conversation:

1. What are the things you feel you do well?
2. What are you passionate about, personally and professionally?
3. What current challenges might be impacting your performance?
4. What recent accomplishments make you most proud?
5. What opportunities do you see for bringing about greater satisfaction in your job?
6. What motivates you and how do you like to be rewarded?

Third, personalize recognition to lift self-confidence and foster an individual's pride in their work. Employees perceive their own value to the organization largely through the feedback they receive from their immediate supervisor. Showing sincere appreciation should be a part of every leader's skill set and their daily commitment to engagement. Everyone wants to feel valued and appreciated; frequent, personalized and meaningful recognition is at the core of employee engagement. Leaders should learn and practice communicating appreciation effectively.

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***Treat employees as valuable people with skills, rather than as people with valuable skills.***

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Including these four elements can help make praise more meaningful:

- *Praise*: Be genuine. Praise should be based on observed behaviors, values, accomplishments, successes, qualities, attributes, etc.
- *Example*: Provide a specific example of what you're praising.
- *Context*: Explain how this behavior or quality helped you, the team, organization, project or customer.
- *Reinforce*: Top it off with a final positive statement and/or suggestion for how the employee can leverage the behavior or quality even further in the future.

**Summary**

The drivers of engagement for which leaders are responsible rely heavily on interpersonal skills that build trust, create psychologically safe working environments, demonstrate respect and communicate sincere appreciation. These skills don't often come naturally, and too many well-intentioned leaders miss daily opportunities to engage their employees, lacking either the organizational support, self-confidence, knowledge or skills to do it well. Training in proven human relations principles, whether formal or informal can help leaders effectively perform their role in building and sustaining engagement, resulting in benefits to employees, the leaders themselves and the organizations they work for.