Five criteria are necessary to create a work system that fosters employee engagement.

The Five Levers of Employee Engagement

Michael Cardus

The work of managers and employees has increased in complexity due to globalization, a faster work and life pace, and instability in the world's economy. At the same time, the need for employees to be engaged in their work has also increased. When they handle the complexity of factors thrown at them, engaged employees, by default, will innovate and improve ways of doing the work. As described by Wikipedia, "An 'engaged employee' is one who is fully involved in, and enthusiastic about the work, and thus will act in a way that furthers their organization's interests."[1]

Managers, when asked, say that employee engagement is a must for the survival of their companies. Employees report that they want to be engaged in their work and also feel that if people are not engaged in the work, work and work-life suffer. When either managers or employees are asked how to achieve employee engagement, the responses are lost in a sea of psychological babble and blame for incompetent management or lazy employees.

This article illustrates that achieving employee engagement is a systems solution. It can arise from adjustments to how the work is assigned and monitored and the placement of the right people into the right positions, with the right accountability. Creating a system that drives needed innovation and allows people to make progress on their work generates a reinforcing loop of innovation and progress. This leads to increased perception of competence, which actually increases competence. Greater competency generates autonomy in completing the work and increased engagement with the work and the company.

Levers That Lead to Engagement

There are five levers that can increase employee engagement, as follows:

- Competent managers.
- Broad goals that are established within the proper context.
- Objective measures of progress and regress.

Table 1: The Five Levers of Employee Engagement

Competent Manager +	Contextual Goals +	Objective Metrics +	Resources +	Autonomy =	Engaged
	Contextual Goals +	Objective Metrics +	Resources +	Autonomy =	Underperformance
Competent Manager +		Objective Metrics +	Resources +	Autonomy =	Confused and false starts, missed deadlines
Competent Manager +	Contextual Goals +		Resources +	Autonomy =	Angry and/or scared
Competent Manager +	Contextual Goals +	Objective Metrics +		Autonomy =	Frustrated
Competent Manager +	Contextual Goals +	Objective Metrics +	Resources +	=	Micromanaged
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- The necessary resources to get the job done.
- Sufficient autonomy to do their best work.

All of the levers need to be in place in the management system for engagement to occur. If any lever is missing or underfunctioning, the result will be less than engagement. Table 1 shows the outcomes when all levers are in place, as well as when each lever is absent.

Competent Manager

Management is well understood as a necessity in any complex organization. A competent manager is one who is able to add value to work and enhance employees' decision making and judgment. A competent manager is capable of judging the effectiveness of employees and allowing each to do his or her best work. He/she is able to illustrate understanding of the work and let employees know that ultimately he/she is accountable for their output. All that employees are expected to do is their best. A competent manager is able to move team members along in collaboration while being enthusiastically engaged with each other and the work.

Elliot Jaques defines the role of a manager as "A person in a role in which he or she is held accountable not only for his/her personal effectiveness but also for the output of others; and is accountable for building and sustaining an effective team of subordinates capable of producing those outputs, and for exercising effecting leadership."[2]

To be seen as competent, managers must understand the goals of the organization, how those goals affect his/her manager, how those goals will affect employees' work, and then be able to supply employees with sufficient information and resources to allow them to do their best.

Competent management happens when the organization sets the proper separation between managers and subordinates. The organization allows for a manager who is "big enough" (see Table 2) to fill the needed complexity and develop and delegate plans to the team. The organization develops systems for needed communication and supplies the manager with needed resources to get the work done. Without a competent manager, employee engagement will not happen and underperformance will plague the organization and team.

Contextual Goals

Goals drive everything in an organization; without goals there is no work. Goals must be set correctly for each person. They cannot be so broad in scope that the employee is drifting aimlessly like a plastic bag in the wind and it cannot be so narrow that the person feels constrained and cannot do their best work. A competent manager also knows how to set goals within the proper timeframe, with the proper quality and quantity requirements. Without a contextual goal, frustration, along with false starts, and late/early finishes will disengage employees from the organization and team.

Objective Metrics

Employees must be able to objectively, on their own, measure progress and regress on work that is

Table 2: Having a Competent "Big Enough" Manager

Manager "Too Small" in Competence	Manager "Big Enough" in Competence
Cannot set adequate context of the work.	Sets adequate context of the work.
Gets involved in too many of the details of how the work gets done.	Shares how the managers work and the delegated tasks "fit" together into the larger goals of the organization, department, and teams.
Breathes down the subordinates' necks.	Allows a level of autonomy for completion of delegated tasks.
Appears to be more comfortable doing the work that the subordinates should be doing.	Knows the time span of the subordinates' work and lets them get on with their work.
Adds no value to the work of subordinates.	Adds value to the work and decisions of others. Offers coaching (when needed)
Inclined to take credit for what goes well.	Is self-assured enough to do his/her own work, while leaving subordinates to do theirs.
Blames subordinates for what goes wrong.	Acknowledges the accomplishments of the team and gives credit where credit is due.
	Accepts the accountability that it is the manager who is ultimately accountable for the output of the team. If things go wrong, it is the manager's responsibility to make things right through effective coaching and use of the team's capabilities.
Based on previous work by Elliott Jaques and Stephan D. Clement, *Executive Leadership*, Cason Hall & Co. Publishers, 1994.	

meaningful to them. This is accomplished by the competent manager setting contextual goals and the employee working to determine the needed small steps, how to accomplish those small steps, and how to measure progress. If metrics are established based upon the "feeling of the manager" then only misery, anger, and fear are achieved, which are mutually exclusive of engagement. The measurements must be co-established by employee and manager in reference to the goal set; the employee has the final say over how to complete his/her work, with the knowledge of the manager's goals in context.

If the objective metric (a standard for progress and regress) is not known and established by the employee, anger and fear can freeze them in disengagement. Developing metrics based upon goals and the quality and volume of work will further engage employees.

Resources

To complete work, the employee must have the appropriate resources. This does not mean that a manager needs to supply all the resources that employees desire, but it does mean that the manager should supply employees with sufficient resources. Resources can include materials, consultants, training, staff, etc.; without the proper resources frustration will occur and this frustration leads to disengaged employees.

Some questions to consider regarding resources are shown below:

- What resources does the employee currently have?
- Can the contextual goal be completed in the timeframe required with the resources currently available?
- Does this contextual goal warrant the resources requested by this employee?

Adequate resources are required for innovation and engagement to occur.

Autonomy

Autonomy is synonymous with self-directed behavior. It can be a lever that drives employee engagement into full implementation, but autonomy must be tied to the other levers mentioned; only then can autonomy happen. An autonomous employee understands that there are choices and ultimately feels responsible for the choices made. He/she is able to do his/her best work and gain wisdom on making decisions and solving problems while doing the work.

There will come a time when an autonomous, engaged employee will hit an obstacle that he/she cannot navigate. This is when a manager can increase the employee's engagement by coaching and developing the employee to improve problem-solving skills, therefore reinforcing both autonomy and engagement.

If employees feel that they are being micromanaged, the engagement will be sucked out like a rapidly deflating balloon. This creates an "I just do what I'm told, if anything goes wrong, it's not my fault" behavior.

Summary

For employees to be engaged in their work, five levers must be focused on and cared for: a competent manager, contextual goals, objective metrics, resources, and autonomy. Each of these builds on and leverages off the others to drive innovative and successful work of organizations and staff.

Often managers are mistaken in their belief that a person's psychology or personality is what drives engagement. That is not the reality, however; it is the work system that drives behaviors, and that work system must be developed in a way that keeps people engaged in work that is meaningful and in which they can make progress.

By understanding that the manager controls the process and works to set the system, employee behaviors will adjust and become more engaged. Employees want to do their best work and feel connected and engaged with their organization, work, manager, and co-workers. By focusing on the five levers, a system that drives engagement and innovation can be created.

References

1. Wikipedia, "Employee Engagement," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Employee_engagement.

2. Elliott Jaques, *Requisite Organization,* Cason Hall, 1998, p. 35.

More Online

For more detailed information related to the five levers, go online to **asq.org/pub/jqp.**

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More Information on "The Five Levers of Employee Engagement"

Lever 1—Competent Manager

Jackie was recently hired as vice president of engineering, a promotion from her role as director of engineering. In her previous position, she was successful and employees noted she was "big enough" for her role. Under her management, the department had a 98 percent retention rate and a project completion on time, on budget, and within determined specifications of 83 percent—the highest among any of her peers. When she was hired for the new role, the CEO was not absolutely sure that Jackie was the right person, but she interviewed well and the CEO felt she would rise to the level of work.

Jackie started her new position and, just as in her previous role, she began to make some changes. Soon the complaints started, and the human resources business partner began to see employees becoming apathetic, and stating things like "I will just do what I'm told … I'm sure she will tell me to change everything anyway." At first, this was just viewed as growing pains as Jackie and her employees adjusted to the new management and positions, but gradually it became clearer that Jackie was not handling the position as well as it first seemed. She began to complain about the staff. Two of the all-time high performers complained that they could not do their work. They reported that Jackie was always breathing down their necks and taking credit for the work when it went well, but yelling and blaming them when things did not go well. They applied and were given transfers to other parts of the company. She replaced them with two people who were below the competence needed to complete the complicated work, but she argued they could complete the work effectively with her.

The human resources business partner and Jackie chose to bring the department together and talk about why production, quality, and on-time completion of work was slipping. She became angry when, instead of blaming themselves, the staff blamed her for keeping too tight of a grip on everything. Jackie told employees that their ideas were not important, and they should worry about their own work. She failed to set adequate boundaries and share the context of how their work fit into the business plans. Her staff also believed she was creating too many policies to navigate and setting increasingly constraining procedures that were not necessary to get the work done. These policies reduced the employees' sense of responsibility, authority, and initiative to do good work. In other words, their engagement in the work dropped, and they were underperforming.

This is what happens when a manager does not have the competence to handle the level of work, add value to employees, or have the ability to set the proper context and allow employees to do their work and be fully engaged.

Jackie was "big enough" for her former role as director and the results were evident. Once she was promoted to vice president of engineering, the role was too large for her to fill, and she was "too small" in competence to handle the increased complexity and challenges of the role. She reduced those around her to a lower level, causing underperformance of the employees—and eventually the department.

The most frightening thing about having a manager who is "too small" and causes underperformance and disengagement is the gradual reduction in the level of competence of the subordinate team. This creates broad departmental underperformance and increased disengagement. The department begins to sink in scale, matching the competence of its manager.

Lever 2—Broad Goals That Are Established Within the Proper Context

Another name for contextual goals could be Goldilocks goals—they cannot be too big or too small; they have to be just right and matched to the person.

Anthony is the manager of IT and Frank is one of his employees. One day Anthony and I were talking and he stated that he had seen a rapid decline in Frank's output and the quality of his work. I asked for an example.

Anthony replied, "Two months ago I asked Frank to complete a task that I felt was simple. We are working on a 10-month project to change over our IT functions to a new government health system and we need to have it operational with all the bugs worked out in 14 months. I asked Frank to code, test, and sync an algorithm to identify repeat late payees. I told him he had two months to have the entire project complete and ready to integrate into our new systems change. Frank's part of the project was due three days ago, and he is still not done. Plus, he frequently asks me what to do and if what he is doing is right. I have to keep adjusting the order in which he does the work because he just cannot seem to understand what must get done first, second, and third. I overheard him in the break room talking about how miserable this job is making him."

I asked, "Is this unusual for Frank? Does he complete most tasks on time? Has he shown these behaviors before?"

Anthony responded, "That is why this is bugging me, he completes almost everything within the timeframe I set, and he always seemed happy. This is the first time I have heard him complain about working here and about me as a manager."

I questioned, "What is different about this goal and project as compared to the other projects?"

Anthony said, "This project is more important and because of the timeframe for completion I have extended the level of work he is doing and gave him more work and longer timeframes to complete it."

I responded, "So, these are longer timeframes and more work than you usually assign Frank?"

Anthony said, "Yes, this project is more complex, and I really need Frank to take on longer timeframe goals. Most of our previous work he had to complete in like two days to three weeks."

Next I asked, "What would happen if you shortened the context (timeframe and kind of work) of the goal and gave Frank smaller pieces to work on?"

Anthony responded, "Isn't that micromanaging?"

I replied, "Not necessarily, you said that Frank is successful when he had shorter timeframes and work that could be completed in two days to three weeks. Then you suddenly changed the context and gave him longer work with a more complex goal. How might you go back to setting the context in which Frank is successful?"

Anthony said, "Take the two-month goal and break it into smaller pieces so Frank can grasp the context. I'll try that."

Anthony did shorten the context and timeframe of the goal. Once that happened, Anthony told me that Frank was completing all the work within the timeframe and quality expectations. Plus, his behavior changed rapidly; Frank was engaged. He was happy and back to saying how great it was to work for Anthony.

Setting contextual goals requires the manager to find what works quickly and do more of it, leading to engaged employees.

Lever 3—Objective Measures of Progress and Regress

Rhea, a new hire, recently earned her MBA and had a passion to do great work. She was ready to be engaged in her work and flourish with the company! She arranged a meeting with her manager to determine her goals and how she would be evaluated throughout the year. The first meeting did not go as expected. When Rhea asked, "Can you share some of my key result areas, and what is expected of me on a monthly basis?" her manager said, "Rhea, I would never dream of telling you how to do your work. I hired you because you know what to do and telling you your key result areas and what I expect from you monthly would be undermining your intelligence."

Rhea left this meeting a little confused but mostly angry. She really wanted to do great work, but wasn't sure what to do. She decided to set her own goals and do what she felt was right, after all that was what her manager told her to do.

The following week Rhea's manager asked her to meet him in his office immediately. As soon as Rhea sat down her manager started screaming at her, asking why she did not finish her work on time. The manager said the department would have to work overtime and would be over budget for the month. Rhea explained that had she known the goal, she would have done it. The manager screamed that he could not micromanage everyone.

The following week in a staff meeting the manager publically thanked Rhea for being a team player and continually rising to the challenge—although Rhea was still not too sure what she did or how she rose to the challenge. If Rhea's manager stated the expectations of her work initially and shared a goal for that month, Rhea had a chance of staying engaged. That would have looked like the following:

Manager to Rhea: Rhea's manager stated that her major key result areas for measurement and evaluation were completing audit forms in a timely and accurate manner each month, resolving customer service questions to the set quality standards within 15 business days, informing the other staff of product changes at monthly staff meetings, and maintaining a quality rating of 90 percent based upon customer surveys. This would have provided Rhea with some objective goals for her work that could be accomplished whether her manager is happy or sad or absent.

Lever 4—The Necessary Resources to Get the Job Done

The team at the loading dock loads 30 trailers per day with product for shipment. They are under tight timeframes, and the trucks must leave the warehouse at specific times to get the product to customers. The team is also constantly striving to create a system that works with production to complete the orders and send them to the shipping dock with sufficient time to check, organize, and load.

The loading dock supervisor Lesa, is an experienced veteran who has consistently met the objective goals delegated by her manager. She understands the context of her work and the contextual needs of her employees—her department rates the highest on the employee engagement surveys every year.

She just received the following notice: "Due to budget cuts we are going to have remove three of the loading dock forklifts. We apologize for having to do this and we see no other options at this time." Lesa meets with the operations manager and asks him about this and how losing three forklifts will change her and her team's goals both contextually and objectively. The operations manager says that it won't change anything; he still expects 30 trucks loaded per day.

The loading dock team and Lesa are frustrated! Although Lesa has done all she can to keep her team engaged and productive, when the resources that are needed to complete the work are removed people quickly become disengaged.

Lever 5—Sufficient Autonomy to Do Their Best Work

Mike, an experienced licensed practical nurse (LPN), was just notified that the hospital he works for is changing his work location from the hospital that is 10 minutes from his house to the new rural location that is 30 minutes from his home. Mike met with his manager and asked if there is any way he could stay at his current location. The manager, while being empathetic, stated that they are moving the entire team to the new location, and he hopes that Mike chooses to move with the team.

Mike has a choice to make. He understands that he can say no, and he will lose his job. He can say no and look for another job. He can say yes and go to the new location and make the best of it or he can say yes and move to the new location and be miserable. Mike knows he has options and understands that whatever he chooses, he is accountable for the decision.

He meets with his manager again. Mike's manager is "Big Enough" and has been able to work with Mike and really support him in growing and thriving in his role, matching the context and objective goals to his work and doing his best to supply the needed resources. By all measurements Mike is an engaged employee. The manager states, "Mike I know this is not ideal for you and you have always been a top employee here. I cannot tell you what to do, you have to decide."

This is an example of remaining autonomous or self-directed. Mike and the manager understand there are choices and with the choices that are made, the individual making them is accountable for the output. Engaged employees thrive with choices and the respect of being able to choose.