

Best Practice Series - Engagement & Leadership

By Paul Deis

Summary:

- Engagement – the “power source” for Best Practices
- Leadership & engagement – one insight source
- Questions to test engagement
- Gallup research linking engagement & high performance.
- Action steps you can take

The 1st Essential Factor on the Path to Best Practices is Leadership and Culture. However, to understand why leadership is needed in a Best Practice culture one must first address the issue of how, and to what degree, people who comprise the company’s organization are engaged with its goals and objectives.

Here we present some research that clearly supports the close relationship between high levels of engagement and high levels of performance – an essential aspect of the Path to Best Practices.

Engagement – the Power Source

We continue to be amazed at the extent that otherwise sharp and knowledgeable managers of companies express the thought that “what does this have to do with our business?” There are a group of similar or related thoughts which we hear such as:

- “Our people are engaged of course – if they aren’t they get fired!”
- “Morale – they have a job don’t they? They should be grateful for it.”
- “Management has its prerogatives – to decide what, and how everyone’s job is to be performed. It is part of each employee’s job to follow these directions.”
- “We don’t have time for all that airy-fairy stuff. Our industry is too competitive to allow time for all that mushy junk.”
- “A real leader ‘kicks butt, takes names,’ to get important things done.”

Our favorite version of this line of thinking is “The beatings will continue until morale improves...” The amazing thing about this attitude is that it reflects the belief in some kind of military-style “discipline” that even the US Army abandoned decades ago – the idea that the leader decides everything, and that it is the job of others to simply “follow orders.” It assumes that people are so driven by fear that even if they are treated poorly, insulted, demeaned, left out of decisions that affect their lives – that these actions will have no affect on their behavior.

Effective Leadership – Modern Origins

First, let’s demolish the “military efficiency through discipline” notion. During the Korean war, US Army leadership was faced with a very challenging, difficult combat situation, in the form of terrible weather, difficult terrain, and being simply outnumbered by enemy troops. A series of studies were done during actual combat operations to try and find out how objectives were being taken, whenever they were. The discoveries were amazing and illuminating, and included these findings:

- Almost all soldiers (80+%) simply tried to not get killed, just to stay alive, by taking cover, laying low, or even hiding, rather than aggressively pursue the enemy and attain the objective.
- Small groups of dedicated, professional soldiers in each group were actually responsible for taking the objective – be it a hill, fortified installation, or other objective.
- It was abundantly clear that motivation, at an individual level, was a critical problem among the troops. The average soldier, in terms of our discussion here, was not engaged with the mission.

While it took the US Army a long, long time to fully ingest this information, revise training and thinking, it eventually did so. First, the curriculum for leadership training was changed considerably. Then, and only then, could the new thinking work its way into the actual leadership practices and culture (behavior). By the time the of the Gulf War and Iraq War, the whole way the US Army and US Marine Corp operated had changed.

At the center of this new focus is insuring that each soldier is fully engaged, strongly motivated, even inspired – the very opposite of the “blind obedience to orders” mentality of the old order.

The result of this has been the creation of the most effective, on a man-for-man basis, combat force the world has ever seen. Mission assignments are given only in general terms to field units, with local commanders and combat teams figuring out the rest as they go forward. No more micro-managing from the rear headquarters. And, in this spirit, at meals, the officers wait until the troops have eaten first.

Consider this – if effective leadership can get people to literally risk their lives for something, to risk being killed, wouldn't it be equally effective or even more so in getting people to work in organizations together for sustained high performance?

Engagement Questions

Now, having read this little story – consider the environment in the companies where you have worked during your career? A few questions to consider:

- Am I working towards expectations I understand?
- Do I have the resources I need to do a great job? Or am I handicapped by inadequacies of equipment, materials, or other support?
- Do I have a feeling of excellence?
- Am I acknowledged, recognized or praised when I do well?
- Do I have times when I feel like I just don't matter here? Do I sometimes feel like a “cog” in a machine?
- Is anyone interested in my personal and professional growth at work?
- Am I able to express my opinions – and do they contribute or count?
- Is quality work important to my coworkers?

If you are a manager, and have negative answers to these questions, consider the effect you are having on those who you are leading – by your example. However, if you do, you are not alone.

Engagement & Performance Linked - Research

In a remarkable piece of research, Markus Buckingham at the Gallup organization studied engagement, using question like these, among 8,000 managers at 400 companies, described in *First, Break All The Rules*. (Marcus Buckingham & Curt Coffman, Simon & Schuster, 1999). The findings?

- 26% - Engaged – actively working for, support, advance company's goals.
- 55% - Not engaged – Just coasting; not enrolled, don't know what is wanted of them.
- 19% - Dis-engaged – Actively working against company's goals.

What's going on here? What are all of these otherwise intelligent, experienced managers missing? What are *their* managers missing?

People working what they consider to be well run, successful companies are usually jarred by these numbers – often rejecting them outright – “we're much better than that. People here really care about their work.”

But is there a *solid, objective* basis for these thoughts, or are they wishful thinking? If no independent, anonymous study has been performed, then the correct answer is “we don't know; we have no facts on the extent of the actual engagement of our people.”

One of the companies studied was Best Buy. Its stores are virtual clones of each other, with identical procedures, processes, job descriptions, products, training and assignments. A few stores in the study dramatically outperformed others. The connection? An unusually high degrees of engagement among managers and staff-level employees. Further investigation uncovered all kinds of small innovations to notice, celebrate and acknowledge people even for small “wins.” The difference was real, personal-level leadership in every case.

Looping back to our initial observation, it would seem to be a fair statement that the managers of all of the other Best Buy stores probably *felt like* they were doing a decent job. But the facts are what they are. Most, it turns out, are mediocre – even though the organization as a whole does relatively well, thanks to its strategy, systems, training, products and other macro-factors. But what if ALL of their stores did as well as the best led ones?

Our message here is that the issue of engagement leads to the question of leadership because without effective leadership the level of engagement is low, sometimes very low, as we saw in this research. (“Leadership” here as distinct from “management.”) And if the engagement level is low, the probability of a Best Practice culture is equally low.

Action Steps

We suggest that as you return to your work situation, that you consider the research here, questions asked, as they apply to yourself, and to others, and pay attention to the insights that come to you. Think about how you, and your coworkers might, in this context, feel about making changes in how things are done that might endanger their sense of security (or yours).

If your sense is that “changes are difficult here,” then you are on the right track to understanding what to do to change this pivotal issue – where do we have to start to create a climate where improvements, i.e., Best Practices that will help your company perform better – to become something we consciously and competently pursue and successfully implement.

In other articles we will expand on the essential role that leadership plays in creating a Best Practice culture – one where innovation and continuous improvements have a permanent place, and where your people can effectively use information about how things might be done, so your company can increase its level of control over its long-term survival and generate sustained, high-levels of performance.