

# Answering the Engagement Question

By Susan Fowler

Despite the estimated \$450 billion to \$550 billion annual losses due to disengaged employees, it appears top-level executives dedicated to measuring and improving employee engagement have no idea how to answer this critical question: *How do people become engaged—or disengaged—in the first place?*

When it comes to employee engagement, most executives don't understand the source of the problem they are collectively spending an estimated \$720 million to \$1.5 billion a year to fix.

There are mountains of data supporting the value of an engaged workforce. However, researchers have only recently explored *how* people come to be engaged. How can executives possibly improve engagement if they don't understand the internal process individuals go through to become engaged in the first place? Without this knowledge, most engagement efforts are too little; too late.

As a top-level executive recently confessed to me, "Our employees have become disengaged with employee engagement. We are spending a fortune to measure and implement engagement initiatives but nothing seems to be working—in fact, in many parts of the company the numbers are getting worse instead of better."

Here are three fundamental insights I share with organizations that change their approach to engagement—and begin moving the needle on those engagement scores.

**Begin with the root source of engagement.** There is a saying to the effect that you should begin with the end in mind. Unfortunately, too many organizations misrepresent that statement when it comes to engagement—they start at the end, after people have already become disengaged. Don't make the mistake of intervening too late and trying to "fix" disengagement. Begin at the source of people's engagement journey.

The root of employee engagement—and disengagement—is a phenomenon called the appraisal process. Every day, people are appraising their experience in the workplace and coming to both cognitive and emotional conclusions: I feel threatened, safe, unsure, positive, frightened, fearful, optimistic, for example.

These appraisals lead to conclusions that ultimately dictate people's sense of well-being, intentions, behavior and, ultimately, their experience of engagement. People who make positive appraisals over time go beyond engagement to become *actively engaged*—a category called employee work passion.

This leads to an important question: *What if managers could help people manage their appraisal process?* They can. Even more importantly, individuals can learn to manage their own daily appraisal process so they are more likely to experience employee work passion over time. How? Through the skill of motivation.

**Don't confuse motivation with engagement.** Motivation is the day-to-day, moment-to-moment experience that ultimately leads to active disengagement, disengagement, engagement, or employee work passion. The skill of motivation can be taught, learned, nurtured and sustained. Daily motivation fuels engagement. *Optimal* motivation fuels active engagement or employee work passion.

We believe Optimal Motivation is defined as experiencing the fulfillment of three core psychological needs while in the pursuit and achievement of meaningful goals. Optimal motivation results when people's psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are satisfied. When those three psychological needs are thwarted, people experience suboptimal motivation.

People who experience optimal motivation on a regular basis are significantly more likely to experience employee work passion over time. People who experience frequent suboptimal motivation—when the reasons for their motivation are based on power, status, rewards, guilt, shame or a fear of disappointing themselves or someone else—are likely to become disengaged.

Engagement efforts have suffered from a double whammy, in that organizations mistakenly focus on the results of their surveys instead of the appraisal process that leads to the results. But, because they have not considered the true nature of human motivation, actions created to improve engagement end up undermining day-to-day motivation. It is especially ironic that despite the overwhelming proof on the debilitating effects of traditional carrot-and-stick approaches to motivation, organizations still incentivize people to improve engagement.

**Apply the science of motivation.** The reason motivating people doesn't work is because people are already motivated—they are always motivated. Building off the compelling science of motivation, leaders have the opportunity to adapt new best practices that help individuals shift the *quality* of their motivation from suboptimal to optimal. Be sure actions to improve engagement meet these six criteria based on the science of motivation:

Encourage autonomy (perception of choice);

Deepen relatedness (quality of relationships, meaning and purpose);

Develop people's competence (sense of growing and learning);

Promote mindfulness (capacity to see new options);

Align with values (their personal values, not just the organization's); and

Connect to a noble purpose (their own and the organization's).

Remember, the quality of people's day-to-day motivation is the source for the quality of their engagement. To improve engagement scores, don't focus on engagement. The secret is to intervene earlier by teaching leaders and individuals the skill of optimal motivation so they can proactively manage the daily appraisal process.

A daily dose of optimal motivation fuels employees' work passion over time.