# Connect Employee engagement is dismal today because we have many managers Connect Connect





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### BY MICHAEL LEE STALLARD

any organizations implement employee engagement surveys and programs, yet see little improvement. This is consistent with Gallup's reporting that engagement levels have remained fairly static for years, at around 30 percent in the United States and 13 percent globally.

With little progress to show, organizations may wonder if they should give up on employee engagement altogether. But they shouldn't. Engagement matters.

Engaged employees are happier, healthier, and more productive. All the research shows that. And research also shows that organizations with engaged employees perform better in every way than organizations with disengaged employees.

So why does it matter whether organizations have more managers than leaders? Aren't the two terms interchangeable? When it comes to employee engagement, no. And here's why: Managers organize; leaders engage. People follow managers because these individuals have the authority to hire, fire, pay, and promote them. People follow leaders because they are inspired to.

The employee engagement metrics for managers and leaders stand in stark contrast to each other. The average manager engages three out of 10 employees, while the average leader engages six out of 10.

What can be done, then, to transform managers into leaders so that employee engagement and overall performance will improve? To answer this question, we must begin by understanding that the problem is one of perspective and approach.

### The missing link

Managers and leaders have different perspectives on how to do good work and produce results. Managers focus on achieving task excellence. Leaders focus on achieving both task excellence and connection. Thus, connection is the missing link that differentiates managers from leaders.

So what exactly is connection?

Connection is defined as a bond based on shared identity, empathy, and understanding that moves individuals toward group-centered membership. The opposite of feeling connected is feeling unsupported, left out, or lonely. Highly connected employees are highly engaged employees, whereas employees with low levels of connection will display low levels of engagement.

Leaders know that connection has many forms, such as connection to other people in the organization, connection to the identity of the organization, and connection to daily tasks. Leaders strengthen all of these types of connections by fostering a specific type of organizational or team culture, known as a connection culture (see figure below).

A connection culture can be defined as an organizational culture marked by vision, value, and voice—the three elements that managers need to implement to become true leaders.

Let's explore each of these elements further:

- Vision exists in a culture when everyone is motivated by the mission, united by the values, and proud of the organization.
- Value exists in a culture when everyone understands the needs of people, appreciates their positive, unique contributions, and helps them achieve their potential.
- Voice exists in a culture when everyone seeks the ideas of others, shares their ideas and opinions honestly, and safeguards relational connections.

When vision, value, and voice are present, a bond is created that boosts employee performance in five distinct ways. First, employees perform better because they are healthier due to having their psychological needs met through connection. Employees also are more enthusiastic, energetic, willing to exert additional effort, and willing to persevere to overcome obstacles.

# **Connection Culture**



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Additionally, they align their behavior with their leader's and organization's goals and also more fully communicate information, which allows management to improve the quality of decisions. Finally, connected employees actively contribute to innovation.

To begin transforming your organization's managers into leaders who connect, start with these three building blocks, which are derived from the 15 building blocks of a connection culture.

# Hire, develop, and promote for competence and connection skills

Most companies hire and promote for competence, but are not as intentional about assessing connection skills. Involve many individuals in your organization's hiring and promotion processes. Have them compare notes by taking into consideration your organization's values before making hiring and promotion recommendations.

New manager training also must address connection. Creating a connection culture requires developing a certain mindset in leaders. To gain the support of your management team, they must understand what a connection culture is, why it's important, and how they can create and sustain it. This information must be communicated to all current managers during leadership training sessions and incorporated into new-manager orientation.

Implement an employee engagement and connection survey to provide accountability. Most managers are mistaken in their assessment of the engagement and connection of people they lead. As a result, they don't recognize an employee engagement problem until they feel the pain from underperformance or face reality in the form of poor results from an employee engagement and connection survey. The survey should ask all employees how their team, department, and organization are doing when it comes to acting in ways that are consistent with your organization's values.

It is typical to have a mix of subcultures when organizations do not intentionally develop culture. While some outstanding senior leaders are able to rely on interactions with



people (rather than surveys) to identify pockets of disconnection throughout the organization, it is rare to find a leader who has the time to do this well. Conducting employee engagement and connection surveys on an annual basis is a best practice that provides a systematic way to assess connection and hold managers responsible for creating connection cultures.

The vast majority of managers who don't take the time to connect with the people they are responsible for leading do so because they don't see a clear link between behaviors that connect and superior performance results. One way to demonstrate that link is to integrate employee engagement and connection survey data with operational and financial metrics to show managers how greater connection leads to superior performance and results. This gets their attention and encourages them to improve employee engagement and connection by creating connection cultures.

# Provide mentors and mentor training to support development

Do you ever wonder why all world-class athletes have coaches? It's because no one becomes great at anything that requires skill unless they undergo training and have coaches or mentors who help them grow. We all have blind spots—actions that are disconnecting—and we need coaches and mentors to help us see them and then advise, encourage, and hold us accountable so that we grow to become intentional connectors.

To support managers' leadership development, provide training and mentors or coaches. It would be beneficial to provide mentor training to all supervisors. Make peer mentors available for any manager who wants to improve in a specific area of competence or character, and select a mentor who is strong in the given area.

Larger organizations should implement integrated leader training and development. For example, as reported in the June 2013 issue of T+D, Yale New Haven Health System (YNHHS) develops leaders using a combination

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of high-quality classroom instruction, coaching, mentoring, workplace application, and senior leadership involvement. YNHHS creates cohorts of high-potential directors and vice presidents from across its system of hospitals (for example, six nurses, three physicians, and six administrators) who complete the sixmonth program together.

The program uses a 70-20-10 model: 70 percent of the learning comes from workplace application and working in teams on systemwide projects that apply new skills, 20 percent comes from coaching and mentoring, and 10 percent comes from classroom instruction. It also includes an assessment of each participant's leadership competencies and character values.

Results have been impressive: The program developed interpersonal, interdepartmental, and intersystem relationships (connections) across YNHHS hospitals. Out of a recent cohort of 15 participants, 10 (67 percent) were promoted and all were given expanded responsibilities.

# Help managers develop connection skills

It is not unusual for managers who are good at organizing tasks to require help developing the personal leadership skills necessary to better connect with people. The following sampling of attitudes, language, and behaviors help to facilitate connection and are great starting points for managers seeking to become leaders.

Recognize varying connection needs. People have different predispositions when it comes to their sensitivities to feeling connection or lack thereof. People also respond differently to actions in terms of whether it makes them feel connected. Learn about the people you lead, and tailor your behaviors to connect based on what you've learned about each individual.

Develop the ability to empathize. Mutual empathy is a powerful connector that is made possible by mirror neurons in our brains. When

pathy is a powerful connector that is made possible by mirror neurons in our brains. When we feel the emotions of others, it makes them feel connected to us. When we feel their positive emotion, it enhances the positive emotion they feel. When we feel their pain, it diminishes the pain they feel. If someone expresses emo-

tion, it's OK, and natural, for you to feel it too. **Develop the habit of emphasizing positives.** 

Psychologist John Gottman first observed that marriages were less likely to survive when the positive-to-negative ratio of interactions dipped below five-to-one (or five positive interactions to every negative interaction). More recently, psychologist Barbara Fredrickson found that a positivity ratio also applied in the workplace.

People need affirmation and recognition, so get in the habit of looking for ways to affirm and serve others. Do this by looking for task strengths and character strengths, which reflect the excellence of a person's work and the way that person goes about her work, respectively.

For example, you might affirm a colleague by saying, "Nancy, that was an outstanding website you created. The navigation design was easy to use, the writing was easy to understand, and the color scheme was beautiful." You might affirm her character strengths by saying, "Nancy, I appreciate the way you persevered to make our new website happen. You showed wisdom and humility in seeking the ideas of others and applying the best ideas to the design of our new website. Very nicely done."

### Commit to connection

These three building blocks will help you begin to develop more managers into leaders. But to systematically develop strong leaders and sustain high levels of employee engagement, connection needs to become a way of life for your organization. Consider establishing a culture committee, office, or center to signal your organization's commitment to connection.

Taking the first steps to transform managers into leaders by teaching the importance of connection may be challenging, but the rewards are tremendous. With each step, you will gain momentum and gradually build the competitive advantage of a highly engaged workforce.

Partners, a leadership consulting and training firm based in Greenwich, Connecticut. He is the author of Connection Culture: The Competitive Advantage of Shared Identity, Empathy and Understanding at Work, to be published this month; mstallard@epluribuspartners.com.



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