



### 7 questions to ask before conducting or buying engagement surveys and training

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"Engagement" has become the new answer for organizations – but what exactly is the question? Organizations are looking for some panacea to solve workforce issues that have arisen because of the stressful economy and strained resources. At a time when salary increases are next to impossible, but dissatisfied employees are unlikely to leave a secure job, it's more critical than ever to keep people motivated, committed, productive and creative.

Engagement has become the buzzword solution for getting the most out of your people. As a result, more and more consultants are eager to assess the engagement level of your workforce. And once they get those scores, they're happy to work with you to make the numbers better. What could be wrong with that?

*As Homer once said: Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.*

To assess the impact and usefulness of engagement work, let's consider the evolution of the idea. Organizations first became concerned about the emotional well-being of their workforce during the 1920s and 1930s. In the wild swing from boom to bust, a rift developed between worker and employer, and we saw the rise of unions, government labor regulations, and an increased emphasis in what is now known as employee relations.

In the 1950s, "organization man" was happy to have a job but starting to show some strain. By the 1970s, we began to study "burn-out." By the 1980s, we had developed the belief that employees would be more productive and less resentful if we established something called "work-life balance." Out of that concept employee engagement was spawned.

Recent research by groups like The Conference Board, Gallup, and Blessing White establish engagement scores as the key measure for determining organizational success. We are told that companies with the highest engagement scores are more profitable, offer better returns to shareholders, suffer less turnover, theft, absenteeism, and accidents, are more productive, and have higher levels of customer satisfaction. In one statistic, it was said that the lack of engaged workers costs US companies more than \$350 billion annually.

But if those are the results of engagement, what are the causes? To understand, we need to consider how exactly engagement is defined. There seems to be no clear and universally accepted definition of engagement. In our research, we have come across over 22 very different definitions. Even more critically, few consultants will provide the ingredients that go into their version of engagement; and fewer still will share the proprietary data they collect.

However, a survey of articles and promotional materials indicates that consultants use the word engagement as a catch all for some traditional academic concepts. Those include "affective commitment" or the sense of emotional attachment to an organization; "continuance commitment" or the desire to remain with the organization; and "extra-role behavior" or the discretionary efforts that make an organization function better. This is in addition to a grab-bag of measures (many of which are subjective) related to the "experience" of work and the organization, including job satisfaction, burn-out, work-life balance, job embeddedness, customer satisfaction, and workaholism.

In their engagement surveys, consulting firms design questions that mix references to work conditions with references to subjective experiences. Often, these questions are tailored to the leadership's own intuitive understanding of what comprises a sense of engagement, reinforcing those views. As a result, there's no clear boundary between an employee's experience at work, and the environmental conditions that support such an experience. In turn, different organizations are talking about engagement in a different ways, though they may be using the same word. We can't really determine which factors that indicate employee engagement lead to a positive score, and whether the absence of those factors lead to a negative score.

So, here are some questions I'd like to ask those who are conducting or buying engagement surveys and training:

1. If you are not engaged, i.e., not excited about the work you do, can engagement training get you more involved? Conversely, if you are excited about your work, is engagement training a waste of time?
2. What happens if the company's and the consulting firm's definitions of employee engagement do not align, but you go ahead with the consulting firm's survey anyway?
3. Is it possible to feel engaged by your work and committed to your organization in spite of a negative environment, a stressful job, or a boss you don't like?
4. If you happen to feel engaged on the day of the survey, what does it mean if you don't feel engaged a month or even an hour later?
5. Is engagement a continuous process, in which employees who receive training ultimately reach

some threshold of engagement, or is it a fluid process dependent on changing factors? Is it possible to feel engaged all the time? Should that be the goal?

6. Can the energy surge generated by engagement lead to burnout?
7. How does engagement relate to the individual employee's sense of what's right or wrong about the organization?

In fact, engagement is a multi-faceted phenomenon, as elusive as a moving target. It is true the engagement survey does provide a snapshot in time, and are focused too broadly on the organization and not the individual. Different environments, circumstances, and challenges engage different people. Rather than an absolute condition, engagement may simply be the result of a perfect match between employee, task, and circumstance. If that's true, it should be the manager's job to determine how to make each individual employee engaged.

To truly engage your employees you need to think in terms of organizational values and vision. Hire and promote according to your values and you will ensure the building blocks of engagement are in place. Demonstrate and live your values in how you execute your strategic mission and you will ensure that employees feel engaged by the work that they do. You won't need surveys to tell you your score, but you may be cited in research about the excellent performance of highly engaged companies.

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*Dr. Cohen is currently writing a White Paper on Employee Engagement where he will be examining in greater detail some of the definitions and ingredients of Employee Engagement. He hopes to address some fundamental issues with Employee Engagement and raise more questions. If you would like to receive a copy of the White Paper please email your request to [info@sagltd.com](mailto:info@sagltd.com). David is president of the Toronto-based consulting firm Strategic Action Group Ltd. Contact him at [david@sagltd.com](mailto:david@sagltd.com). David's book Inside the Box: Leading with Corporate Values to Drive Sustained Business Success is available from Wiley Books, at [www.wiley.ca](http://www.wiley.ca).*

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