Building a culture of engagement
A transformational approach

It's no longer a question — research has clearly proven a direct link between *employee engagement* and *business results*. Companies with high levels of engaged employees outperform other organizations. In 2013, the Gallup organization published "State of the American Workplace"[1], which verified the strong correlation between employee engagement and key performance indicators such as absenteeism, turnover, patient safety, customer satisfaction and productivity. The bottom line: Employee engagement is a foundational competitive advantage.

The good news? Employee engagement is not "rocket science." The concept is pretty straightforward. The bad news? Research suggests that the majority of American workers (70%) are either not engaged or actively disengaged. Additionally, a study by the American Health Care Association found that annual retention rates within long-term care are only 49%.[2] With CMS adding turnover rates to the 5-Star ratings, engagement is not just a *nice to have*, it's a *must have*!

Positioning your organization as a great place to work starts with leaders fostering a culture of engagement and remaining vigilant to the workplace climate by measuring what matters to employees. It requires focus, time and energy on the part of your whole team — leaders, managers and employees.

A new understanding of employee engagement

An Internet search on "employee engagement" will produce hundreds of varying definitions. Although there is no agreement on precise terminology, descriptors of engaged employees include:

- Energized about their role in contributing to the organization's mission and goals
- Offer more of their capability and potential, putting discretionary effort into their work
- Feel their talents are being utilized, recognized and valued

These themes differentiate engagement from employee satisfaction. While *satisfaction* relates to the extent to which employees are happy or content with their jobs, *engagement* speaks to an employee's **emotional commitment** to the organization. Engaged employees actually care about their work and their company, and are willing to put their best foot forward — every day.
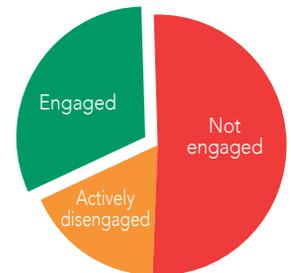
Gallup (2014):
70% of U.S. workers are not engaged or actively disengaged

Engagement speaks to an employee's emotional commitment to the organization.

... integrates employee engagement into the organization's business strategy and culture.

Employee engagement is NOT an event, program or survey

The all-too-common employee engagement approach begins with management conducting an engagement survey followed by organizational leaders reviewing the results, and identifying and implementing a few selected action steps that are checked off once completed. Engagement is viewed more like a program versus a way of doing business. This *transactional* approach is reactive and viewed as a separate, add-on activity. Because this approach is not integral to the business, engagement is often forgotten until it's time for the next survey.

Contrast this with a *transformational* approach, which integrates employee engagement into the organization's business strategy and culture. With this proactive approach, leaders build systematic engagement practices into their business model. They don't abdicate their engagement accountability to Human Resources, but rather actively lead the way. Employees have a voice and feel listened to through consistent practices that harness and utilize their opinions and ideas. Managers know how to coach their employees and help them perform at their highest level. Engagement is a part of the fabric of the organization versus a chain of activities.

Who is accountable for employee engagement?

... ultimately, every individual has responsibility for his or her own engagement.

A transformational approach to engagement starts with senior leaders visibly demonstrating their commitment to creating an engaging workforce culture. In the Leadership Category of the Baldrige Excellence Framework used by AHCA/NCAL as the structure for their National Quality Award Program, organizations are asked to respond to the question: How do **senior leaders** communicate with and engage the entire workforce? The phrase "senior leaders" refers to the head of the organization (or facility) and his/her direct reports. The tone is set at the top and is conveyed throughout the organization through what Gallup calls the "Cascade Effect."[3] The degree to which *senior leaders* are engaged largely impacts the engagement of *managers* which ultimately cascades to *employees*.

Managers play a pivotal role in creating a culture of engagement. Consider your current team of managers: Do they actively engage their teams in driving high service levels and productivity? Do they have a record of developing and retaining strong talent? Do they build relationships and hold people accountable? Organizations must have mechanisms in place to ensure that managers have the skills and ability to establish trust, build confidence and unleash the potential of their employees.

Although leaders and managers significantly influence employee engagement, ultimately, every individual has responsibility for his or her own engagement. Employees need to know how to take responsibility for getting what they need to succeed. By supporting employees in developing their self-knowledge and self-leadership skills, you promote individual accountability.

Where to start?

Given the link between engaged employees and business outcomes, commitment to a transformational approach to employee engagement will give you solid, sustainable results. This approach is supported by **five attributes** that are fundamental to attain and sustain a culture of engagement.

CLEAR SENSE OF PURPOSE: This attribute provides a compelling picture and clear line of sight to what matters most in the organization. Employees can clearly see where the organization has come from and where it is going. They recognize how their role impacts results and how their work contributes to advancing organizational goals. Communication from leaders is consistent and evokes a sense of ownership and passion. Compared to other industries, long-term and post-acute care organizations have an advantage. In retail, the mission is to sell more stuff. In manufacturing, it's about efficiently producing widgets. In our world, we are improving the quality of life for vulnerable human beings. This is an opportunity to speak from the heart in language that resonates with staff.

... we are improving the quality of life for vulnerable human beings.

PEOPLE-FOCUSED MANAGERS: The old saying "People don't leave jobs, they leave managers" is true. According to Gallup's "State of the American Manager,"[3] the role of the manager has the most significant impact on employee engagement, citing that managers account for 70% of the variance across business units. Engagement largely comes down to whether people have a manager who cares about them, grows them and appreciates them. The key message is: Invest in your managers! Continually develop and optimize their coaching skills.

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ACTIVE VOICE OF EMPLOYEE: This attribute requires the organization to have mechanisms in place that enable employees to express ideas, share concerns and provide input on improvement opportunities. These mechanisms may include employee forums, surveys, focus groups, and suggestion input to name a few. The true test of the presence of an active employee voice is when employees feel that their voice is heard and their feedback is taken into account when decisions are made.

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MEANINGFUL CONNECTEDNESS: A meaningful connection with other people is a core human need. When the workplace supports a sense of belonging and strong social connections, individuals are more trusting and cooperative with each other. This feeling of camaraderie creates a common sense of purpose, group loyalty, and the sense that "we're all in this together." Productivity increases and employees tend to feel more passionate about their work and less likely to quit their jobs!

We're all in this together.

VISIBLE INTEGRITY: This attribute simply means that organizational values are reflected in day-to-day behavior. People share information, maintain an open mind, deal with conflict directly and follow-through on promises. Organizational integrity must be role modeled by senior leaders and managers.

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Leadership commitment is sustained by continuously measuring, monitoring and improving your engagement culture.

Measure what matters

The transformational approach is fortified when an engagement metric is included as one of your key performance indicators. It's important to measure what matters. A valid, reliable engagement survey provides you with a quantifiable gauge to monitor engagement and gives employees an opportunity to give their feedback on the company, their job and their manager. This assessment should utilize verified questions that relate to proven engagement elements and offer space for employees to comment on these factors.

Ideally, your survey results will be segmented into various groups so you can analyze data by job category, generation and length of service. In addition to a quantitative summary of the ratings, the narrative comments provide important insights to employee perspectives, and a deeper level of understanding about gaps and opportunities. Comments should be incorporated into your report so you can efficiently glean valuable, actionable information.

Your survey provides insight into the current state of employee engagement and, when used recurrently, enables you to monitor engagement over time. Although some organizations conduct their survey on an annual basis, consider more frequent surveys which allow you to track progress on new initiatives and/or follow-up on challenges uncovered in the last survey.

Conclusion

While employee engagement is a relatively simple concept, building and sustaining an engaged workforce seems to elude many organizations.
If leaders don't own and integrate employee engagement as a core business strategy, engagement efforts become an uncoordinated bunch of activities. Leadership commitment starts by embracing the five cultural attributes of engagement, and is sustained by continuously measuring, monitoring and improving your engagement culture.

Sources:

[1] Gallup, Inc. (2013). State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders.

[2] American Health Care Association Department of Research. (2010). Report of findings 2008 nursing facility staff vacancy, retention and turnover Survey, retrieved from <http://www.ahcancal.org/research_data/staffing/Documents/Retention_Vacancy_Turnover_Survey2008.pdf> October, 2010.

[3] Gallup, Inc. (2015). State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders.

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that are fundamental to employee engagement at:

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