
DETAILS

Date:	September 13-26, 2023	Conference:	Improving Engagement
Time:	Flexible	Location:	Virtual, Cornell University
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SUMMARY

I respectfully acknowledge that Cornell University in Ithaca, NY is located on the traditional homelands of the Gayogohó:nq? (the Cayuga Nation). They are members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, an alliance of six sovereign nations with a historic and contemporary presence on Ithaca lands. I also acknowledge the painful history of Gayogohó:nq? dispossession, and honour the ongoing connection of the Gayogohó:nq? people, past and present, to the lands and waters there.

This course is the second of four courses of the programming towards a certificate in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The focus of “Improving Engagement” taught by Dr. Lisa H. Nishii, Ph.D. is centered around having each individual within a company contributing to the greatest of their abilities. We looked at the foundational drivers of engagement and explored the components of successful engagement initiatives. My curiosity about this course was “What is a course on engagement doing as a part of a DEI Certificate?” The answer is that it centers around the “I” – Inclusion. Those who are included are more likely to be engaged. To improve engagement, one must improve inclusion efforts. (I’ll make reference to the worksheets used throughout. Please let me know if you’re interested in seeing them.)

Define Engagement:

What does engagement look like? People who are engaged invest their head, their heart, their hands, and their physical energy in the work they do. Their work conditions help them to feel safe about pouring themselves into their work. Work doesn’t feel like work. Engaged people pour their personal cognitive, physical, and emotional energies into their work, which manifests as effort, involvement, flow, mindfulness, and intrinsic motivation. They bring their real identity, thoughts, and feelings such that their true self and their work role merge. In other words, a job is not just a job, but is an authentic extension of one’s self.

- The investment of physical energy translates into an increased display of organizationally valued behaviours;
- The investment of cognitive energy promotes behaviour that is more focused and mindful;
- The investment of emotional energy promotes increased connections with coworkers and greater authenticity at work.

Engaged employees feel better the harder they work; conversely, workaholism is associated with poor well-being. Disengaged people are fine with “good enough”. They become apathetic, detached, burned out. The percentage of employees who are actively disengaged ranges from 10-20%. Disengaged people become defensive, they hide their true identity, thoughts, and feelings; they go through the motions of work but do not give of themselves in their work – they are driven by what they have to do and not by what they want to do. (Tool: The Checklist of Behaviors Indicating Disengagement)

Engagement needs to be separated from other employee attitudes such as organizational satisfaction, commitment, and pride. Engagement involves striving, seeking, and the energy that people invest in the form of initiative and perseverance. Satisfaction is contentment with one’s current state: the work conditions, employment arrangement, job security, employee benefits, promotion opportunities, etc. Engagement is driven by factors that impact an employee’s ability to maximize their contribution to the company – seeing a clear link between one’s work and the company’s objectives. The presenter gave an analogy of someone receiving an engagement ring from their partner vs. receiving a “satisfaction ring”. Which would you rather receive? Which relationship are you going to invest more of yourself into? (Worksheet: Is it Engagement or Satisfaction?)

There is a difference between Psychological Energy and Behavioural Energy. Psychological energy = psychological absorption and focus; flow, mental resilience, & enthusiasm. Behavioural energy = people’s actions. There may be psychological and behavioural engagement in some but not all aspects of one’s job. It’s important to distinguish between the two as the psychological can be expressed in various ways so it’s important to know if it is being translated into the kinds of behaviors that drive organizational performance. If employees are highly engaged psychologically but behavioural outcomes don’t follow, it could be because employees don’t know how to channel that energy in a way that is beneficial to the organization, or because there are constraints in the environment that make it difficult for the employee to actually engage in the behaviours desired by the organization. (Course Project: Conduct a Self-Assessment)

Examining the 3 Key Drivers of Engagement:

Psychological Meaningfulness: Do people have a reason to engage in their work? Jobs need to be structured to have high motivating potential: they are challenging, provide opportunities for autonomy and impact, are experienced as being meaningful by employees, and involve specific and difficult goals. People get feedback so they can adjust their efforts, and the job is set up so that if people do pour themselves into their work, it is a meaningful experience. The underlying principle is a social exchange: give people challenging and meaningful work, set them up for success, and people will reciprocate by pouring themselves into their work.

Two key sets of factors:

1. The motivating potential of one’s job, as determined by job characteristics: Challenge and variety, significance, autonomy and control, clarity, feedback and rewards, fit and identification.
2. Meaningful work interactions: Rewarding and meaningful interpersonal connections, being seen as a person, not merely as a job incumbent, coworker coordination and support.

Psychological Safety: Do people experience freedom and the safety to engage in their work rather than feeling like they have to protect themselves in some way. People need to experience trust (high trusting relationships). Employees who feel they're treated fairly by management tend to experience higher levels of psychological safety. They feel supported and not vulnerable in the face of management. It needs to feel safe to bring one's full self – one's true self so there aren't risks associated with doing so.

Employees look for clues about whether it's safer to be silent or whether they can really speak up. Is management actually listening to understand what employees have to say, recognizing the possibility they might learn something? They are less likely to be distracted by fear of punishment. Managers can also influence psychological safety by seeking feedback from employees about how they – the managers – are doing. This communicates trust and shows value for employee input. When leaders admit to their own mistakes, they promote a climate of psychological safety for employees.

Diversity and inclusion issues are particularly relevant here. Members of historically marginalized groups often feel pressure to assimilate. If they also lack role models in senior levels of the organization, they may conclude there is a liability associated with membership in a minority group and feel more guarded about fully expressing and engaging themselves at work.

Psychological Availability: Do people have the capacity to engage fully in their job? Do they have the opportunity to renew their physical energy or resources outside of work? Are they experiencing too much strain on the job, leading to burnout? But also, do they have confidence in their own ability to do their job? Do they feel confident that if they invest themselves in their work that they're likely to succeed? It highlights the importance of providing continual training, reskilling, developmental opportunities, and feedback so that employees can feel confident in their ability to do their job. Insecurity creates anxiety which consumes energy that could otherwise be used for engagement.

Identity Threat: When people experience a threat to their identity, they don't experience full psychological safety which means there are obstacles to engagement at work.

When there are engagement questions, look to the team managers. A highly engaged team likely has a team leader who is setting clear goals, empowering employees, providing them with honest feedback, and treating employees fairly and with respect. Employees are engaged when managers help them meet their basic needs, including: being emotionally connected to others, perceiving that they are part of something significant with coworkers that they trust, being cognitively engaged with their work, knowing what is expected of them and having what they need to do their work, having opportunities to feel an impact and fulfillment in their work, and having chances to improve and develop. (Task: Interview an Effective Leader)

(Tool: The Drivers of Engagement Checklist) (Tool: Examine Trust and Fairness) (Course Project: Conduct a Needs Assessment)

The last part of the course was to identify helpful management strategies for implementation in one's own workplace. Data show how engagement has a positive impact on a company's bottom line (this course is written for businesses of all kinds). While we aren't profit driven at MTS, it is notable to see that companies are more successful when: "employees are more dedicated to creating value for the

company, employees are more consistent in their interactions with customers and other stakeholders, and employees are less likely to leave the organization.”

When looking at the engagement data in the workplace, one needs to ask why the results are the way they are. There is a caution not to rush into creating solutions without spending enough time diagnosing what the root problem is. Ask questions, such as “What’s the problem?”, “For which employee sub-group is there a problem?”, “What evidence do you have that there might be a problem with one of the drivers of engagement?”, and “Do you need more evidence to confirm this?” What hypotheses do you have about the root causes, and what formal or informal evidence do you need to test the hypothesis?

A six-step process on changing culture: Don’t try to change the culture all at once. 1. Put together a “diagonal slice” of relevant employees; 2. Conduct deeper diagnosis: ask questions, talk to people, refer to published research for ideas; 3. Brainstorm possible solutions and possible obstacles to proposed solutions; 4. Specify immediate, intermediate, and long-term (a) actions required; (b) hoped for outcomes; and (c) metrics required to track progress; 5. Assign collective accountability and a single (senior) owner; and 6. Keep senior leaders updated on impact of actions taken, and disseminate success stories. (Tool: Survey Your Work Group). (Course Project: Report Work Group Survey Results).

The final section of the course was on coaching managers (not senior leadership, but what they call “line managers”) to have the conversations with their employees about helpful changes that can be made to help improve engagement. In coaching middle managers to be accountable throughout the engagement process, there are four steps for them to be aware of and participate in. 1. Examine the engagement results, and to really understand what the results and the data say before sharing them with employees, all the while considering the impact that they themselves may have had on the level of engagement being reported by the employees in their department. 2. Explain the results and share them with employees. Ensure all employees have a clear understanding of what the data show, and the importance of increasing engagement. Encourage a balanced discussion of the strengths and opportunities for improvement that might exist within the group. 3. Line managers need to engage in the process with their employees of identifying possible solutions to problems that might exist within the group. Get input on actions that could be taken. Lead brainstorming sessions so the group can understand what’s going on, and to identify actions that could be the most beneficial, and consider the impact and effort of various possible solutions so as to identify the best ones for the group. 4. The manager should take the lead on developing meaningful action plans that require the group as a whole – manager included – to stretch and to grow, with short-term and long-term goals. It should include an analysis of the obstacles that might get in the way of successful implementation. Research clearly shows that when managers get involved in this way, engagement goes up because people feel listened to and feel that they matter. (Course Project: Choose Strategies for Improving Engagement)

Summatively, this was another informative and educational opportunity. Highly recommended.

Respectfully submitted,

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Provincial Executive