

The Five Must-Do's of Full Worker Engagement

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Introduction

We know that a fully-engaged workforce is the differentiator for organizational performance. More men and women need to show up at the beginning of the day with an owner's mind (intent upon doing what is right and possible), rather than heading home at the end of the day after they've completed just what is necessary and required.

Engaged men and women produce competitiveness, excellence, innovation, speed, accuracy, and profitability, not to mention that hard-to-define "zing" that sets the best apart from the rest. Outperforming organizations magnetically attract, effectively awaken, and irresistibly retain highly engaged workers. It's a virtuous cycle. For the leader who is suffering that vicious downward cycle of dullard workers and organizational lethargy, this flywheel of engagement and results can look like a fantastic merry-go-round with no place to jump on.

We know a few additional things about worker engagement:

- Testing engagement levels, however necessary this is, doesn't fix what's wrong. Often, organizations figure out how to get better engagement scores, but their improved test scores aren't always reflected in more engagement.
- Fixing an organization's struggles with low engagement isn't a small organizational or leadership tweak. There are, in fact, five interrelated must-do's that need attention.
- Leadership must own this challenge.

I'm going to take my time through these five must-do's, not because they are particularly difficult to understand—they aren't—but rather because time is exactly what is needed. We must be highly intentional and patient in this work. Rome wasn't built in a day, and a highly performing, fully engaged workforce won't be either. Anxiousness or false urgency won't help at all. We must take time and we must be attentive as we proceed. Making a mad dash toward full worker engagement would be somewhat akin to trying to capture a butterfly with a baseball bat.

Part 1 of 5 Must Do's: Effectively Answer the Why Question

An entire movement has grown up around "finding purpose" and "answering the why question." This is with good reason. Human beings are wired for purposefulness; failing to provide workers with a link between their daily tasks and a great and compelling purpose is tantamount to managerial malpractice.

A few points are important to make, and they often are missed by the "purpose movement."

1 | A "Great Purpose Statement" (your company's compelling "why," or your "vision," if you prefer) must tap into the deep requirement human beings have to contribute their lives and labors to the valuable service of others. We were "born to make a difference," but a "big, hairy, audacious goal" (to use one of Peter F. Drucker's favorite expressions) won't automatically tap into the need of the human person to serve others. As you rethink your

organization's "why," test it, not in terms of its audaciousness (which I'm in favor of), but in terms of its usefulness to others, to the world, to the care and service of people. Ask your workers to give their very best, because the object of their labors deserves nothing less.

2 | If you have a big, hairy, audacious vision statement that doesn't speak to serving, that's fine. Just slide it over into your set of goals. You believe you can and should double revenue in the next quarter, then press into that goal. What a fantastic goal that may be. But it fails the "effective purpose" test, because no one on earth will look back at such an accomplishment from the age of 75 and say, "That was my life's most meaningful moment!"

3 | When you become clear about your "Great Purpose Statement," translate it into every daily work assignment. Tell stories of people doing the everyday things you ask them to do and how those tasks brought true good to the world. Help your workers see what you see through stories and continuous encouragement. No job is menial when we understand why!

Leaders who are committed to cultivate an exciting and fully-engaged workforce will take the time to effectively answer the "why question." They continuously draw the links between the work done every day and the results that matter so very much in the world.

A last word in this Part 1 of 5 on Worker Engagement. There is no perfect sequence to the five must-do's. Part 1 doesn't need to go first. Organizational leadership, like life, must be taken in the order that is sensible, given competing demands and unique circumstances. As you reflect on all five must-do's, take a careful look at what you are currently managing, and then select the next one to focus on. Choose whichever one you believe you're ready for now, your organization needs most in this moment, or your team is best equipped to master.

We always grow this way, one step at a time!

Part 2 of 5: Treat Your People as a Treasure (Not a Tool)

A fully-engaged workforce is the make or break of great organizational performance. Fully-engaged men and women give their company or organization an edge that

is nearly indomitable.

Human beings carry the knowledge, or in some cases the suspicion, that their lives have irreducible value. What I mean by "irreducible" is that their value can't be explained just by the work they do, the things they make, the service they offer, the help they give, or any such human act, work, task, job, or contribution. Human beings are not valuable because they do; they are valuable because they are. This is why we are called a "human being," and not a "human doing."

Human beings who have been treated reasonably well in their childhood carry the knowledge that this is true. They know that they are a treasure. They know that the love they were shown wasn't earned by them; they are loved just because they are.

Your people are a treasure. The only appropriate treatment of a treasure is to safeguard it, showcase it, and prize it for its great worth.

Human beings who have not been treated well in childhood nevertheless still carry the suspicion that they are worthwhile. Even the child who has only heard, "you're worthless" can't make peace with the message. This child spends years, if not a lifetime, waging a fierce war against this unacceptable idea. Human beings can no more be taught to placidly accept the idea that they are worthless than a dog can be taught to happily not wag its tail. "Human" and "worthy" coexist as serenely as romance and flowers. "Human" and "worthless" will battle each other to the death.

And what does this have to do with worker engagement? Simply this. The leader who wants sentient, imaginative, creative, hard-working, talented, and generous

workers on the team must value them. They must see their people as a treasure, not a tool. They must treat their people, first of all, as people, valued because of who they are, for their presence, more than for what they'll do.

There are at least three responsibilities of leadership that flesh out treating your people as a treasure.

1 | Take a true interest in them. As has been humorously observed, authenticity is really hard to fake. Indeed, it is. You have a certain number of direct subordinates; start with them. Learn to know them. Ask them about their lives, their aspirations, their struggles and needs. Make room for a true human connection and build on it over time.

2 | Give them increasing responsibility and authority, and teach/coach them to success. Grow your people. The way growth ordinarily progresses on the job is through delegation. Learn to delegate effectively; be thorough, detailed, supportive, and transparent. Yes, you might be able to do it faster yourself than if you must show someone else how to do it, but there's not enough of you to go around. And besides, the treasure is your people, remember? Invest your time in them!

3 | Allow and forgive mistakes and errors. Build a review process that rewards candor and admission. Make telling the truth the attractive and celebrated option. And use regular team meetings to talk through mistakes, collaborate on solutions, and affirm those who work for you. Make it clear that you are invested in your people's growth; people can't grow if there isn't grace for error.

Highly-engaged workers report being loved and feeling loved at work! If you peel this report back one layer, you find that they have leaders who are taking time to express true interest in them, taking time to effectively delegate new tasks and responsibilities to them (so that their people can make progress at work), and taking time to help them learn from their mistakes (rather than punishing them and driving them into hiding).

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Part 3 of 5: Do and Be What You Say

I once addressed a group from Baker Leadership's Fast Track Program. The subject was "Serving Leadership," and we were talking about values, or "Doing and Being What You Say." I was making a point: "The reason that the greatest businesses and organizations on earth are so great is precisely because they are filled with great people intent upon doing great work that day on the job!"

I've made the point many times. Strip the data to the bones, and the secret you find inside every out-performing organization is what Industrial Scientific founder and chairman, Kent McElhattan, calls "a people competitive advantage." You want to shine in your sector, then pack your team with people who think like owners, serve like soldiers, do what's right at any price, and never whine that something's not in their job description. Great organizations are filled with people who do great things without being told.

The world is filled with such places, though newspapers and popular culture are bereft of any of their stories. As I crawl inside great businesses around the world and observe their disciplines, I see the pattern as clearly as the nose on a face. Great organizations have lots of great people doing great things, above and beyond management's demands and the dictates of their job descriptions.

Not only do I see the pattern of behavior from place to place, but I hear remarkably identical language. An example from a line-worker at ProMinent Fluid Controls: "Here at ProMinent, everyone is authorized to do the right thing without needing to check with a manager first." Great organizations are packed with people behaving greatly by making daily ordinary contributions that go above and beyond managerial mandate. Clear?

As I walked through these points at the Fast Track Program, I said, "Once you declare your values, you must live them, stand by them, die by them." I then asked a question, "Why is it imperative, when you face a clash between your principles and your profit that you, as leader, MUST stick with principle?" Sonja Spangler, a fast-tracker from the group, raised her hand. "People won't do their best for a leader who violates his own principles."

What more is there to say? Great organizations are

great because they're filled with people who freely choose to do their very best. It's maddeningly simple, yet stunningly hard. We leaders can't make our people do their very best. We don't have the muscle to pull this off, and we aren't mind-readers. We don't know what someone's best is; we only know what we want them to do. Someone's best is far, far more than what we have the ability to tell them to do. Someone's best is what they, freely, by their own private choice, decide to do, whether it is asked for, paid for, or even conceived of by the boss.

Do and be what you say! This is a must-do of full worker engagement. Show that you don't mean what you say, and you'll still keep your employees. They'll "quit and stay," swapping out the notion of making an actual difference with the notion of protecting their paycheck. After all, human beings are rational and self-interested; however much you disappoint them, they've still got bills to pay.

On the other hand, show that you DO mean what you say, and some incredible human beings will start showing up. They will, because a human being wants more than a paycheck; a human being wants a calling, a worthwhile day, a story to tell at night about how their work makes a difference. Do and be what you say, and awaken greatness all around you!

Part 4 of 5: Make and Keep First Things First

The "Pareto principle" observes (from nature, economics, business, and human organization in general) that 80% of life's results come from 20% of life's efforts. The Pareto principle is also called the "80-20 rule" and the "law of the vital few."

Observant business leaders have seen the Pareto principle at work in their efforts:

- 80% of profits coming from 20% of time spent
- 80% of profits coming from 20% of customers
- 80% of complaints coming from 20% of customers
- 80% of the defects coming from 20% of processes
- 80% of sales coming from 20% of the product line
- 80% of sales coming from 20% of the sales team

As can be observed in these several examples, the Pareto principle shows up both in the top line and the bottom line of the business. The activities that achieve the

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company's revenues are not evenly distributed; some activities are far more profitable than others. The business's cost centers are not equally valuable; some costs achieve more for the business than do others.

Many efforts have become quite refined and specialized in addressing (or capitalizing upon) the Pareto principle. For large manufacturing organizations as well as hospitals, six sigma processes, kaizen, and lean disciplines in general are nearly universally utilized. Smaller organizations can also be found in pursuit of one or another of the "black belts" in lean process that can be earned from competing certification bodies, though smaller organizations typically use less sophisticated approaches to find savings and to leverage assets.

The point of all of this is that organizations are always paying attention to more things than they should. Organizations are always doing the things that create profitability, that bring value to customers, and that establish and sustain brand and reputation. And, organizations are always doing other things, unnecessary things, wasteful things, error-prone things, and distracting things.

The obvious question to ask right now is this: Why would an organization do the things that make it profitable, AND do other things that rob it of profitability? This question is not hard to answer. Organizations do both kinds of activities precisely because they are not sufficiently clear about which activities are valuable, and which activities are not. They know that the sum total of

all they do adds up to the sum total of all they achieve. But they suffer from blindness as to which specific things actually matter.

It's an easy thing to say, "Make and keep first things first." It's not an easy thing, however, to do what this statement demands. This is true for two reasons, both of which are challenging:

1 | We must find out what the first things are. What are the 20% of our activities and efforts that produce most of our results? We must inquire, investigate, measure, test, question "sacred cows" and ask outsiders for input. We are prone to self-blindness. The short way to explain this is that we are good at understanding the activities of others (and judging them), but lousy at understanding what lies within ourselves (and being honest about it). Humility is required to learn the truth about things that are absolutely near and dear to us.

2 | We must act upon what we learn. The fact that 20% of our efforts account for 80% of our results, and that 20% of our processes account for 80% of the drag on our efforts, usually points to people. Some people are not contributing, and we must caringly deal with them. They need to be placed into new roles, or guided out of our organization toward a kind of work that is better for them. Some activities must decrease, so other activities can increase. Again, this fact will often point to people. Pet projects, the way we do things, and other sacred cows will need to be tucked into bed. Moral courage is required to do the things that we have discovered are right to do.

Humility to learn the truth, and courage to act upon what we learn: making and keeping first things first comes down to these two exercises of great character.

Most lean manufacturing enthusiasts know that this work is important, but most do not know fully why.¹ Six Sigma gurus know that significant costs and waste can be eliminated from our organizations through such discipline. And they are correct about this. What I find is less understood, especially in western society's application of lean disciplines, is the human gain that this work can achieve. Yes, costs are eliminated, which is critical, right, and good. But, even more importantly, human beings are honored. That is to say, human beings can be honored in this process.

The key to this last point is that we must understand that our people are our greatest treasure (the second of the five must-do's). Applying lean processes while devaluing people produces an unexpected result: greater cost savings and diminished productivity. This can be very frustrating to the mechanically-minded manager.

Applying lean discipline while treasuring people, however, produces cost savings and increased productivity. Why? Because human beings detest having their efforts wasted, just as organizations suffer when efforts are wasted. Lean processes, married to a true appreciation for people, elevates the dignity of the people in the organization. Making and keeping first things first declares that a human being's time, skill, effort, training, and ideas are highly valued by the organization. Eliminating waste and majoring in the majors, dignifies

¹ Six Sigma is a set of techniques and tools for process improvement. It was developed by Motorola in 1986. Jack Welch made it central to his business strategy at General Electric in 1995. Today, it is used in many industrial sectors. Six Sigma seeks to improve the quality of process outputs by identifying and removing the causes of defects (errors) and minimizing variability in manufacturing and business processes. It uses a set of quality management methods, mainly empirical, statistical methods, and creates a special infrastructure of people within the organization ("Champions", "Black Belts", "Green Belts", "Yellow Belts", etc.) who are experts in these methods. Each Six Sigma project carried out within an organization follows a defined sequence of steps and has quantified value targets, for example: reduce process cycle time, reduce pollution, reduce costs, increase customer satisfaction, and increase profits. The term Six Sigma originated from terminology associated with manufacturing, specifically terms associated with statistical modeling of manufacturing processes. The maturity of a manufacturing process can be described by sigma rating indicating its yield or the percentage of defect-free products it creates. A Six Sigma process is one in which 99.99966% of all opportunities to produce some feature of a part are statistically expected to be free of defects (3.4 defective features/ million opportunities). Motorola set a goal of "Six Sigma" for all of its manufacturing operations, and this goal became a byword for the management and engineering practices used to achieve it.

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human work, dignifies human beings, and elevates the human spirit in and for your important enterprise.

Part 5 of 5: Strengthen What's Strong

Great organizations are great because many men and women choose to give their best at work, beyond their job description or their manager's commands. This is the power of full worker engagement. Men and women make this choice, to give or not give their all on the basis of the leader's actions and role modeling. We've been reviewing exactly what these actions are, calling them "must-do's."

In the fourth must-do of full worker engagement, we addressed the importance of making and keeping first things as first things. Stated differently, it is imperative that we know how we are uniquely strong as an organization so that we can continuously invest ourselves into our strengths. Every business has a sweet spot, a unique value proposition in the marketplace, that must be understood by all and capitalized upon. What is strong must be continuously strengthened.

Nowhere is this more important than with our people. The organizations that outperform in the marketplace are investing a great deal of time and focus into understanding how each person is wired, what their strengths are and where their individual passions lie. And why is this? So that these people can be given more and more work that is right in their personal sweet spot. Great companies, where their people are concerned, focus on strengthening what is already strong.

We must begin with a clear understanding of what a

strength is. First, a few definitions (or descriptions) of what a strength is:

- "A strength is an activity that makes you feel strong—it's an activity that strengthens you." Marcus Buckingham
- "A unique mix of competencies and the desire and drive to use them in pursuit of an outcome of unrivaled personal importance." Arthur F. Miller, Jr.
- "A combination of Spiritual Gifts, Heart (Passion), Abilities, Personality, and Experience, or S.H.A.P.E." Erik Rees and the Saddleback Church

I offer these three definitions for the purpose of observing that there isn't one definitive definition of a strength. A strength has to do with activities that give us life and joy and deep satisfaction. A strength has to do both with our competencies and our desires and drive. A strength has wrapped within it almost everything about us: our abilities, to be sure, but also our gifts and personality and passion and experience.

In short, our strengths are far more than our abilities; this is the short point that must be made. What we're good at doing is only one part of the strengths equation that we must consider when investing in our people. Great organizations know this and take the time to discover not just what someone can do well, but more importantly, what they love to do.

Why is it so important that we fully understand what a strength is, and that we invest in strengthening our people's strengths? Several reasons come to mind:

1 | If we only consider the things our people can *do* well, they will likely be assigned to tasks that lie outside of their passion and drive. A "can do" that isn't married to a "want to do" will not produce excellence, perseverance, or high achievement.

2 | Mastery is most closely correlated to the time and repetitions a person puts into a task. If ten thousand hours of dedication is required to develop mastery in an area—and research suggests this is so—then the only way we develop master performers is by placing them into their competency and desire. Why? Because competency alone won't motivate ten thousand hours'

worth of dedication or a desire to share ideas for advancements and improvement.

3 | We grow more in areas where we are already strong. From a simple ROI standpoint, investing “x” units of input into helping a person strengthen a strength will net a multiplier of return to us, as compared to investing “x” units of input into helping a person strengthen a weakness.

4 | Settling for everyone being equally good at everything is the definition of mediocrity.

5 | Great workers stay where they have opportunities to grow. Invest in your people's strengths, and their strategy for staying motivated and stretched will be to remain loyal to you. Don't invest in their strengths, and their strategy for growth will be to jump ship.

Great companies are the product of great wins. Great wins are the product of great teamwork. Great teamwork is the product of diversely excellent teammates. Diversely excellent teammates are the product of points 1 through 5 above. If you want your company to win, strengthen what's strong!

As stated at the outset, engaged men and women produce competitiveness, excellence, innovation, speed, accuracy, and profitability, not to mention that hard-to-define “zing” that sets the best apart from the rest. Outperforming organizations magnetically attract, effectively awaken, and irresistibly retain highly-engaged workers. It's a virtuous cycle.

And how do outperforming organizations do this? They effectively answer the why question, treat their people as a treasure (not a tool), do what they say, make and keep first things first, and strengthen what's strong. In *The Serving Leader*, I detailed this through the five actions: Run to Great Purpose, Upend the Pyramid, Raise the Bar, Blaze the Trail, and Build on Strengths. Stated either way, the bottom line is the same. Great organizations are great because of their great people who have freely chosen to give their very best to leaders who earn such great service by their own great service, their serving leadership.

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