



Three Strategies for Employee Engagement

Terry L. Mathis, founder and CEO, ProAct Safety

Wed, 2013-09-25 15:48

Where carrot-and-stick attempts at motivation fail, these three strategies offer a proven path to true engagement.

For the past three years, if you asked leaders of large organizations to describe their ideal culture, you would most likely hear the word “engagement” in their response. Whether they view engagement as a step toward a better culture, a desired characteristic of it or the leader’s role in cultural development, they all feel the urgency of getting their workers engaged and are looking for the best ways to make it happen.

An examination of multiple organizations across several different industries indicates that most successful engagement efforts utilize one or more of three strategies. Several of these organizations don’t view these as three separate strategies, but as three aspects of a single strategy. In either case, versions of these three approaches seem to permeate successful engagement initiatives. For the sake of effective (and possibly clever) labeling, let’s call these “The Three ‘A’s of Engagement.” They are: affinity, affiliation and autonomy. Psychologists have suggested that affinity and affiliation are very basic human needs and recent research suggests that autonomy is an element of effectively motivating cognitive tasks.

Affinity – A basic human need is to believe in something. Without affinity, or believing in a cause, workers will put their hands and feet to work but not their hearts and minds. Workers who don’t find affinity at work look for it at home or in the community. The only thing wrong with away-from-work affinity is that the body comes to work and leaves the heart behind. Organizations with engagement regularly outperform those without it. The sense that the organization needs better engagement usually comes from the realization that workers are less than enthusiastic about their jobs.

One way to get workers engaged is to challenge them to get involved in a worthwhile cause with a good rationale for pursuing it. For many years, it was theorized that urgency was what stimulated employee engagement. Some actually invented artificial emergencies to rally the troops. Over time, it was realized that such engagement tended to be short-lived, and that long-term engagement was more about worthwhile causes than urgent ones.

So, what makes a cause worthwhile enough to foster affinity and result in engagement? There can be several possible answers. One is simple altruism. One of the most effective ways to create affinity for causes is to humanize them. Many organizations have diminished their emphasis on the numbers and focused on the individuals. They put a face on the cause. They stress that increased effort or effectiveness is required because of human need and not organizational greed. In short, they put the caring back into the effort. When the organization pursues any form of excellence for altruistic, humanistic reasons, they tend to win over those reluctant hearts and minds.

There seems to be a natural affinity in many people for success, for winning, for excellence. In short, self-

improvement is a self-motivating cause that many already deeply believe in. Connect that inherent motivation to an opportunity to improve and you can potentially create greater engagement. It is always easier to believe in an improvement project if it works. This underscores the necessity of communicating wins to maintain the momentum of the project. It is not enough for improvement to work; those involved must know it is working.

Affiliation – This is not just an activity to participate in; this is something to belong to. Just as with affinity, organizations that do not offer affiliation at work drive workers to find it outside of work. Many workers would pour their efforts into improvement projects if allowed and facilitated to do so. If they find no affiliation at work, they look for it in church, community or charity. The need for affiliation is strong and workers will find something to give them a sense of belonging. Improvement efforts can potentially provide a sense of affiliation, but most don't.

Strategies to create affiliation need both the right structure and the right PR. The structure needs to facilitate participation and the PR needs to create the belonging. For example, safety committees, teams, problem-solving groups, observers, auditors and the like offer workers activities to get them involved in safety. However, if these groups or activities don't offer meaningful involvement, they often create disengagement. Many teams or committees are led by management, and workers are there almost in a token sense. Many observation and auditing programs recruit caring people then define their participation in terms of confronting rather than helping their fellow workers. It is not enough to offer participation; it must be meaningful participation. It must also be facilitated (i.e., meetings are on-shift rather than days off or holdover times, and adequate meeting rooms and materials are provided).

Even meaningful participation falls short if the PR isn't right. The participation needs a team flair (a name and logo or something with uniform qualities such as caps, shirts, hard-hat stickers, etc.). The activities need to be known to everyone and the successes recognized and celebrated. Membership needs to be special and valued. Some organizations have successfully turned the whole population into an improvement team with meaningful participation. Others have smaller teams with rotating involvement opportunities that impact the whole population in meaningful ways. Where they differ in structure, they match in PR. PR is a function of marketing. Most organizations assume that everyone buys into company programs and there is no need to really sell them on it. However, organizations that create true affiliation in specific programs almost all market heavily and effectively. Getting buy-in and belonging requires selling and PR.

Autonomy – This is not complete freedom to do whatever. It is defined decision rights. W. Edwards Deming said, "People support what they help create." Giving workers participation opportunities gives them a feeling of belonging. Allowing them to help create those opportunities for participation gives them pride, ownership and a deep sense of fulfillment that motivates their creativity. Sometimes this can be accomplished by simply letting a team or committee design itself. This can be done within the limits of a strategic framework and can even be reduced to a series of pre-defined choices.

The traditional carrot-and-stick theories of motivation have been proven to be ineffective and even counterproductive when applied to cognitive tasks. If your improvement project only requires mindless compliance from workers, such schemes may be of help. If this is the case, you will need all the assistance you can get because compliance rarely fosters engagement. It is hard to win over hearts and minds with a project that requires neither caring nor creative thought. True autonomy is the ultimate utilization of hearts and minds. It challenges the caring (affinity) to take collective form (affiliation) and produce results

through creative methods (autonomy).

Successfully using an autonomy strategy for engagement almost automatically utilizes affinity and affiliation. The most highly successful engagement projects make strategic and synergistic use of all three. Organizations whose employees strongly believe, firmly belong and creatively contribute to improvement efforts have an operational advantage that cannot be easily offset by any other competitive element. True engagement is almost always accomplished by one or more of these approaches.



Terry L. Mathis, coauthor of STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence and founder and CEO of [ProAct Safety](#), was named one of “The 50 People Who Most Influenced EHS” for the third consecutive time in 2013 by [EHS Today](#).

Source URL: <http://www.industryweek.com/engagement/three-strategies-employee-engagement>