



## **Employee Engagement:** *How to optimise productivity and employee satisfaction*

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Imagine a group of 5-year-old children who have signed up to play football, although none of them have any real experience with the sport. Their coach, wanting to focus on the basics, spends the whole practice reviewing the rules of the match, mostly how important it is not to touch the ball with their hands. How will these children respond on match day? It is very likely they will stand away from the ball with their hands in their armpits – afraid of the ball. If the ball comes near them, they will move out of the way for fear that if they get too close to the ball they will make a mistake. Visualising these children standing on a pitch with their hands in their armpits afraid of the ball, you are seeing what a disengaged employee looks like, afraid of making a mistake. They stay away from the real work at hand. If your organisation is similar to most other organisations, then this accounts for nearly 70% of your workforce.<sup>1</sup>

Employee Engagement is the optimising of productivity and employee satisfaction, which results in better organisational performance and reduced staff turnover. When trying to create a more engaged work force, it is useful to understand some of the underlying root causes of this disengagement: the culture directly, and the leadership that creates and sustains this culture. In this paper, we will examine how organisational culture and leadership can create disengagement and show the type of leadership you need to create the culture that will result in your organisation maximising both productivity and employee satisfaction.

The above example of children staying away from the ball, as they are afraid of making a mistake, is not only descriptive of disengagement, it is descriptive of passive cultures. The more your organisation has a passive culture, the more disengaged your work force. In passive cultures, employees do not believe their effort makes a difference, good performance goes unrecognised

# Cultural Alignment<sup>SM</sup>

## White Paper Series

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This lack of direction and lack of decision-making on the leadership perspectives give the employees the feeling that the organisation is without concrete goals and objectives. This lack of direction or goals, forces the employees to view the rules, procedures and processes as the real guiding force of the organisation, not the leaders. This creates the fear of making a mistake mentioned previously and the resulting passive culture and employee disengagement. Leadership that overuse consensus get a moderate amount of employee satisfaction with very low productivity.

and poor performance is punished. In this environment, taking risks to improve performance has no upside but only a potential for a downside if it generates a mistake. At the extreme, employees show up and dread every moment of work.

These cultures emerge in organisations as a result of the two fatal flaws of leadership, overuse of command or overuse of consensus. When leaders overuse command, it is an indication of an aggressive culture. These cultures are based on the belief that they are right, which builds arrogance, which drives the need to micromanage. The employees who are micromanaged start to develop the belief that their effort makes no difference at all, which leads to a passive culture and employee disengagement. Aggressive cultures cannot exist without passive cultures being part of it. The more the leaders attempt to drive performance and productivity, the more the culture resists the change. This combination of aggressive and passive cultures is frustrating for both leadership and employees. Leaders get frustrated with the lack of initiative and passion from the employees. The employees are frustrated with the way they are treated. Productivity is moderate and employee satisfaction is low.

The second fatal flaw of leaders is the overuse of consensus. Here the leader is striving for consensus in all decisions, attempting to minimise conflict and maximise employee satisfaction and hoping that productivity will follow. This is generally a result of leaders understanding how damaging micromanaging can be, so they avoid providing any direction at all.

To create employee engagement, you need leadership to create a third culture, a constructive culture that reinforces a belief that each employee's effort can make a difference and maximises both productivity and employee satisfaction. *On the following page the correlation between these types of culture and engagement are presented.*

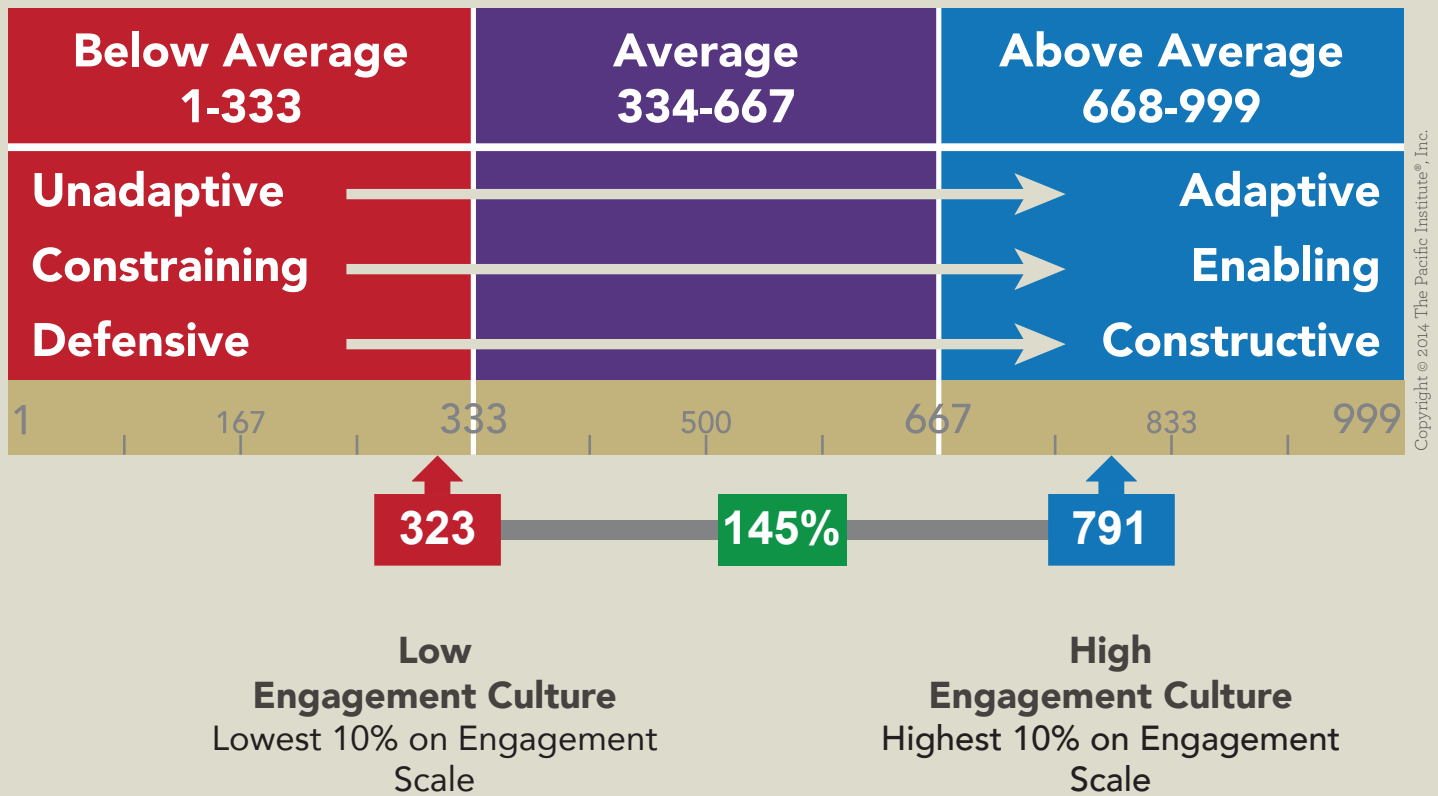
The leaders of constructive cultures recognise the need to create achievement motivation in the entire workforce. Achievement motivation strives to:

- Set clear goals and objectives for everyone in the organisation
- Balance ability and challenge when assigning work and projects
- Engage the intrinsic motivation of individuals
- Provide constant feedback to allow for self-correcting
- Reinforce cause and effect thinking by articulating broad strategies for accomplishing the well defined goals and objectives
- Create the opportunity for Flow<sup>2</sup>

While all the above points are critical for employee engagement, it is the last point, creating the opportunity for Flow, that is ultimate. When an employee is in a Flow state, productivity and satisfaction are truly being

# Correlation between Culture and Employee Engagement

## The Performance Index Continuum™



Correlation between engagement and culture is .597  
A third of the variance in engagement can be explained by culture.  
Engagement is an outcome of culture.

## Engagement Scale

The engagement scale utilised in this data set is the aggregate of the five statements below. Respondents were asked the extent to which they agree with the following five statements:

- you are satisfied being a member of this organisation
- you feel appreciated
- your supervisor gives you timely feedback
- you know what is expected of you at work
- there is someone at work who encourages your professional development

This data set comes from four survey projects with a total population of 532.

maximised. In a Flow state, individuals get lost in their work, they become extremely focused, they lose sight of time and they are extremely energised as the Flow state causes the body to produce endorphins. The endorphins drive satisfaction and the focus drives productivity.

The key question then is how do you lead someone to this state? For that, we go back again to children. When our children are playing a video game, they more often than not achieve the Flow state. They get locked into the game, lose all sense of time, are extremely happy with the way they are spending the time. The video game producers clearly understand how to trigger achievement motivation and the flow state. So, what can we learn from these games? First, each video game has a very clear goal or objective and while there may be sub-goals or quests, they are all aligned to help the player achieve the larger objective. The smaller goals, the goals at each level, help to break the large quest into smaller more achievable pieces, create a natural cause and effect strategy to complete the overall quest.

Second, most video games are not about winning, but about advancing to the next level. They start out relatively easy, and as you achieve each level, they increase in difficulty. The focus on advancing to the next level creates an opportunity to always challenge the players without overwhelming them. Since it is not about winning, but personal achievement, the children cooperate and help each other with tips and suggestions to improve their performance.

Third, the games provide constant feedback, with sound, pictures and scores. Most of the feedback is positive, but there is some negative feedback. When

you make a mistake for the first time in the game, generally nothing happens, no negative consequence but also no positive reinforcement. If you make the same mistake a couple of times, you may lose your spot and have to start back at the beginning of that level. For the most part, the way mistakes are handled minimises the fear of making a mistake, and allows for creative or innovative approaches to try achieving the next level. The positive feedback is constant. Every time players take a correct action it results in positive reinforcement. This encourages players to repeat the positive actions, and to increase their frequency of success. When they experiment with a new approach, if it is correct, they get positive feedback right away, so they know to continue with that approach. This constant and mostly positive feedback is designed to help players grow in their ability and confidence within the game.

As leaders work towards creating a constructive culture through clear and challenging goals, as well as providing positive feedback, they create a collective belief in all employees that their efforts make a difference. When employees believe their effort makes a difference, they are engaged in the task at hand. They will demonstrate the passion and energy needed to achieve the highest levels of productivity while also being highly satisfied as an employee of the organisation. They are going after the ball, instead of being afraid of it.

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1 *Engagement, Wellbeing, and the Downturn*  
Jennifer Robison, The Gallup Management Journal – August 2010

2 *FLOW – The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Copyright © 1991 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Harper Perennial