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Employee Engagement Requires the "Right Stuff"

By [Theresa Welbourne](#)

September 1, 2005:
Years of research have led CIO Update columnist Theresa Welbourne of eePulse to one inescapable conclusion: we're all just a little confused and we don't know what to do about it.

For the last eight years, I have been involved in very frequent data collection from employees in over 100 organizations. These companies collect data as frequently as weekly, and we have been able to study the data resulting from this process.

The analysis of longitudinal data on engagement, or what we call "employee energy," and the many comments that accompany the scores, has led to some interesting findings.

We ask employees to rate their energy levels

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at work and ask for comments about what's affecting energy. Reading and analyzing hundreds of thousands of comments, from a diverse samples of companies, we've been able to discover the No.1 thing that negatively affects employee energy at work: confusion.

Employees simply don't know what to do first when they go to work in the morning.

Strategic alignment, management by objectives, competencies, 360-degree performance discussions, large-scale employee engagement surveys, millions of dollars in consulting, etc., etc. — none of it seems to work. Why? Because these programs do not address what the individual employee needs, which is focus today not lofty strategic direction about tomorrow.

You can be in complete alignment with values, culture, strategy, and vision and still have no clue what to do when you show up Monday morning. This is because strategy execution requires a whole lot of work, and most companies simply don't have enough people to get the work done.

Also, the pace of organizational change is very high everywhere, and that makes realignment and priority setting even more important than strategic alignment processes.

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Wireless technology continues to make great inroads into networks. But IT pros still must contend with a number of issues such as security, access and integration.

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Companies have made multi-tasking a new art form. But along the way, very few have slowed down to think about how managers and employees realign their current work with the many added new tasks that are thrown at them.

Let’s not forget the benefit of email, voice mail, and the Blackberry phenomenon — even more tasks delivered to you even faster. Employees don’t know how to best shift their work schedules when six-to-12 new high-priority items come onto their plate daily.

They are de-energized because they say they don’t have enough information to know what to do next.

The result of this “confusion” phenomenon is that many organizations have data indicating that employee energy scores are at rates that fall below where employees are most productive. At the same time, these employees report that their amount of work and pace of work are at record highs.

Employees are struggling with too much work, having too much to do. The phenomenon is widespread today. The problem exists because being energized is not about being busy.

In order to be optimally energized at work (and most productive), employees need to be focused and busy working on the right stuff. Today, many organizations are experiencing a “right-stuff” problem.

Our data shows that even the most senior leaders are in the right stuff trap. If this is the case then, of course the rest of the employee population will experience the same problem. The right-stuff problem is turning into an epidemic!

The Simple Solution

What do you do to treat right-stuff symptoms?

No.1: Find out if you have a problem, and then discover where the right-stuff problem is most rampant. Measure employee energy and confirm what’s affecting energy levels.

No.2: Measure employee energy frequently. Fluctuation in energy predicts performance.

No.3: Where groups are experiencing the right-stuff problem, quickly work with managers to help employees focus on the key priorities.

No.4: But, before managers are told to fix the problem, look at your employee energy data by manager level (level reporting to the most senior executives in particular). The CEO and his or her team need to make sure that their own direct reports understand their priorities. This is a weekly problem, not a strategic alignment dilemma.

No.5: Lastly, before talking to your senior leadership team, have a discussion within your own HR department. The data we collect shows that HR often is most negatively affected by the right-stuff problem. HR is in the business of putting out fires, and taking on many requests from multiple internal and external customers. As a result, employees in HR are, in many cases, even

more confused than employees in the rest of the company.

The world of business is not likely to slow down, and the business environment is not getting easier for any of us. The answer to the right-stuff problem will not be slowing down the pace of business. The solution has to come from creative minds who work to help all employees realign priorities in the agile and complex business environment in which we all exist today.

Theresa Wellbourne, is the founder, president and CEO of [eePulse](#) and an adjunct professor of Executive Education at the University of Michigan Business School. If you wish to participate her ongoing leadership study, which is available to you at no cost, please register at: www.umbs.leadership.eepulse.com.

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