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## Employee Engagement: Doing It vs. Measuring

Theresa Welbourne

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It seems today that employee engagement is in vogue. Everywhere I look I hear about balanced score cards that include a placeholder for employee engagement, and I learn about organizations making their living out of measuring engagement and trying to explain it to their clients. I like the idea, but I worry about it.

I worry that this is what employees would call “another HR thing.” Let’s face it – we have lots of “HR things.” They are called fads. These are the bandwagons upon which we hop.

Perhaps it’s time to evaluate whether employee engagement is a fad or a new knowledge domain from which HR executives can help make their companies a better place to work. One key difference between an HR fad and a real intervention is who owns the new process. Therefore, in this article I would like to evaluate who owns employee engagement with the goal of deriving ways in which we can make employee engagement a useful process and not just one more fad. But before going further, I want to define employee engagement.

### ***Defining Employee Engagement***

I like to define engagement in terms of what people do at work. I use something called role theory to elaborate on that definition. Role theory reviews different roles that people engage in at work, and it explains reasons why people engage in certain roles and not in others. My colleagues and I have been able to use role theory to understand conditions under which employees are either engaged or disengaged and examine what happens under both conditions. In particular, we uncovered five work-related roles that exist in any company. These roles are:

1. Job holder role – employees come to work and do the job that is listed in their job description.
2. Team member role – employees go “above and beyond” to help members of their team work toward common goals.
3. Entrepreneur role – employees come up with new ideas and processes and try to get those ideas implemented
4. Career role – employees do things to enhance their career in the organization; they learn, they adapt new skills, and more.
5. Organization member role – employees do things that

promote and help the company even if it's not part of their jobs or their team's duties.

Employees are in a highly engaged state when they are doing the non-job roles. In general, we find that most employees have a sense of fairness, and even if their employer treats them poorly, most will show up to work and do the job role. But having employees show up at work simply doing their jobs gets an employer nowhere in terms of long-term competitiveness. If all of your employees show up and only do their jobs, then you are not building organizational strength and long-term competitiveness through people because anyone can hire those same employees and duplicate what you are doing.

It's the synergy that comes from people working together and gathering creative ideas that leads to long-term organization wealth creation. That synergy and "above and beyond" behavior is evidence of employee engagement.

The question that we must ask ourselves is: "what are we doing to engage employees?" I've seen some approaches that involve using magical survey questions (the super 15, 30, 100, or more questions) to investigate and understand what you have to do in order to transform your workforce from disengaged to engaged. This means the process of engagement is dictated by the specific questions that one chooses to measure engagement. This approach worries me because it seems that we are trying to MEASURE engagement without necessarily helping individual managers really AFFECT engagement in their day-to-day work.

### ***Real Employee Engagement Rules***

Engagement cannot be a corporate initiative. Employee engagement happens only when you remove barriers to work, and those barriers are unique to every work group. We often think that super important corporate initiatives will transform our organizations into places where everyone will come to work and want to be more engaged. Corporate initiatives can't make the magic. That's why all those other HR fads did not work in the past. That's why employees wait for the latest fads to be over. Corporate initiatives live out their life and then go away. The people who deliver the corporate initiatives have to make engagement happen, and those people must be your managers.

We are good at providing managers with engagement scores, but we are not quite so good at giving them things that they can use to change engagement. In order for engagement to be something other than a fad, we need to be specific in helping managers, and our solutions have to be customized to help each individual manager.

Let's get back to one of my earlier statements in this article. In order to know whether engagement is a fad or a long-term management intervention, we must examine who owns the initiative. When we don't give managers something specific to do about engagement that is within their own control, then the owners of the engagement process are corporate HR. If corporate HR owns employee engagement, it will

be a fad. If you tie engagement to day-to-day management work, then managers and employees themselves own engagement. Only when managers own engagement will it not be a fad.

### ***How do you move ownership to managers and employees?***

In order to move the employee engagement process from ownership by corporate HR to ownership by managers and employees, several things must happen.

1. Engagement does need to be measured, but you have to conduct measurement more frequently than once a year, and magic “engagement” metrics are not enough. You need multiple ways to assess engagement, and those metrics must include performance measures. When you understand what “above and beyond” behavior is, then you can measure engagement and the outcomes of engagement.
2. You can't have engaged employees without super engaged managers. Engagement improving efforts must start at the top and work their way down. The most senior executives must be assured that they are engaging their senior team, and that team has to work on creating a high engagement environment for its direct reports, and so on and so on. The process of engagement must start at the top, but I don't mean via a mandate from the top. I want the CEO to really understand the degree of engagement of his/her direct reports, find out what's in the way of their becoming more engaged, and then DO something with his/her data. Those direct reports to the CEO should then repeat the engagement “doing” process with their own direct reports. Engagement must be done by “leadership through example.” Because this process of top-down engagement is owned by each level of management, each managers him/herself benefits from the process, and then they share the benefits with their own employees. In this learning process, managers “own” employee engagement.
3. Engagement is about getting rid of things that block productivity. We think that we can magically motivate people, but what we primarily do in business is create lots of ways to demotivate people. We bring people to work, ask them to do something, then put lots of obstacles in the way of their being able to succeed. We excel at demotivation – not motivation. Creating an engaged workforce means getting barriers out of the way for your employees to be effective. I don't know what the blocks to productivity are for every employee. I cannot create a magic set of 20, 40, 80, or 300 survey questions that will assess the things that are getting in the way of productivity and performance. These things can be “lumped” into categories, but they differ from company to company, department to department, and employee to employee. These productivity blockers and

demotivators are not taught in a basic introduction to management book. They are not going to disappear with the purchase of some new technology or from hiring the latest management guru. Engagement will happen when each individual manager learns what's getting in the way of his/her employees' performance, and each manager chooses to take action.

4. The process of engagement is a process; you can't get it right at year end. You have to create a continuous learning, continuous improvement, continuous measurement, and continuous action process to maximize productivity.

### **Key Challenges**

It's fairly easy to run a point-in-time employee engagement survey and then show scores to managers. When you do this, employee engagement is an "event." You can get lots of attention and spend significant amounts of money, but to what end?

It's much more difficult to make engagement a way of life in your organization. It is much easier to join in with the newest fad than it is to create something lasting. But creating lasting change drives improved firm performance, and isn't that the real goal of employee engagement?

Thus, taking the time to engage yourself and your managers in the engagement process may be worth the effort for truly strategic HR executives. You will find that this is not the easiest path, but it may be the one that leads you away from fads to something very real.

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### **Author**



**Theresa Welbourne**

[prpro@chartermi.net](mailto:prpro@chartermi.net)

[www.eepulse.com](http://www.eepulse.com)



Theresa M. Welbourne, Ph.D. is the founder, President and CEO of eePulse, Inc. as well as an Associate Professor of Organization Behavior and Human Resource Management at the University of Michigan Business School.

Prior to summer, 1999, she was on the faculty of the Human Resource Studies Department (from 1992 to 1999) and the Entrepreneurship and Personal Enterprise Program (from 1993 to 1999) at Cornell University. She received her Ph.D. in Business from the University of Colorado, Boulder in 1992. Prior to that, she spent approximately ten years working in the field of human resource management as a practitioner and as a consultant. Dr. Welbourne's expertise is

in the area of employee management in high growth and high change organizations. Her particular focus is on understanding how various human resource, communication, leadership, and rewards strategies affect the longer-term performance of organizations and the employees within those firms.

As CEO of eePulse, Inc., she leads a technology and research business that is

delivering web-based Pulse surveys powered by the company's proprietary software called Measurecom™. The measurement and communication tool was developed based on Dr. Welbourne's research and consulting. She conducted a number of studies with initial public offering firms and large firms undergoing large-scale interventions.

In these studies, she demonstrated the direct effects of leadership and human resource management strategies on firm survival and financial performance (e.g. stock price growth, earnings growth, etc.). Her research has been featured in popular publications such as Inc. Magazine, The Wall Street Journal, Business Week, The New York Times, and Entrepreneur Magazine. Her work has been published in several books and in journals such as the Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Management, Human Resource Planning, Executive Talent, Compensation and Benefits Review, Journal of Applied Psychology, and Journal of High Technology Management Research. She is currently writing a book (publisher is Jossey-Bass) that summarizes all of her research to date.

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