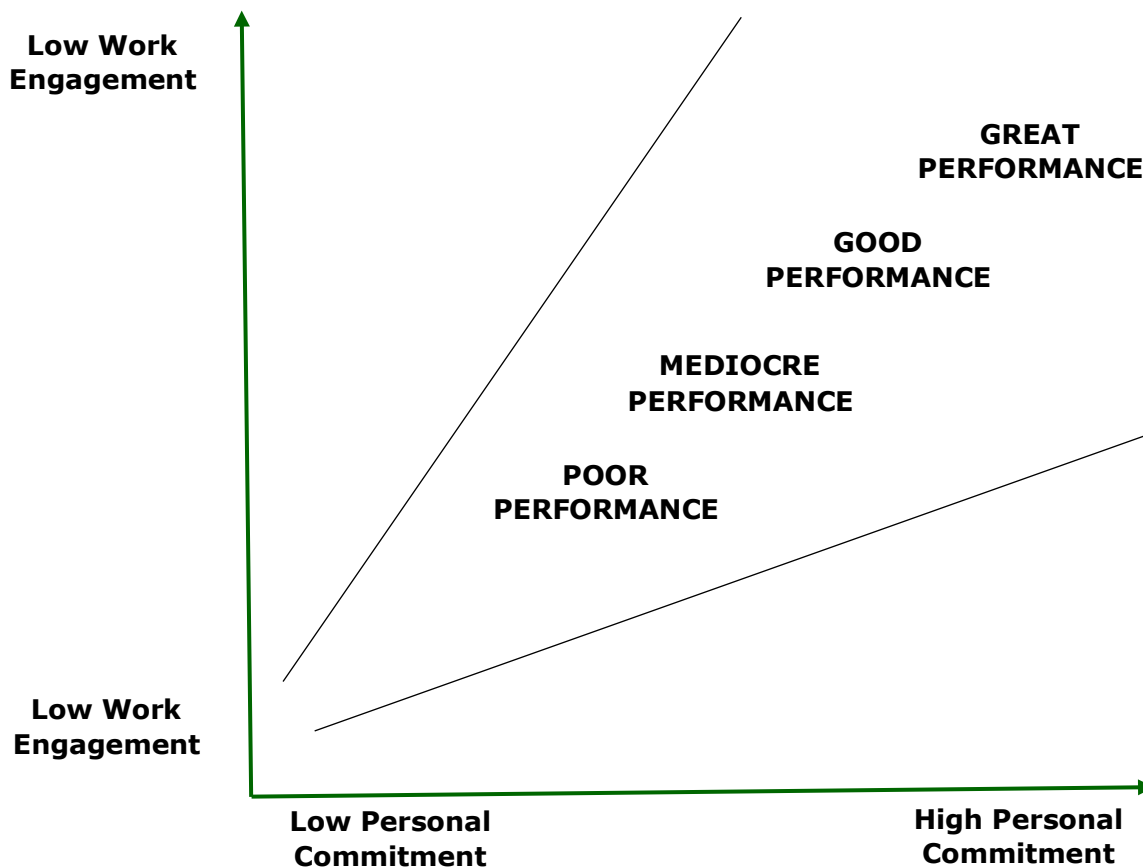


How Coaching Can Improve Employee Engagement

Wikipedia's definition of an 'engaged employee' is *one who is fully absorbed by and enthusiastic about their work and so takes positive action to further the organization's reputation and interests. An engaged employee has a positive attitude towards the organization and its values.* But will an employee who is fully absorbed and enthusiastic about their work (ie. one who has high work engagement) *necessarily* take positive action to further the organisation's interests? They might really enjoy their job, and do it very well, but they may not stay long if they don't particularly like the organisation they work for, disagree with its values or feel under-valued. Similarly, someone might love the organisation they work for because of its ethics, leadership or intention (ie. they have a high personal commitment) but that doesn't *necessarily* mean that they will be particularly engaged in their day-to-day work – they may be badly managed, lack skills or resources or have low motivation - and so they might be a mediocre performer.

This indicates that employee engagement has two dimensions – work engagement (the individual's dedication and enjoyment in their day-to-day work) AND personal commitment (the individual's commitment to the organisation because of its values and employment practices).

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Employee engagement therefore needs to be considered from both these two viewpoints if an organisation is to get the very best performance from its employees in a sustainable way. Long-term discretionary effort – the result of both high work engagement AND high personal commitment - is exclusively in the gift of the employee, and this requires a number of workplace characteristics to be in place. All successful organisations are workplaces that exhibit these characteristics and it will come as no surprise that all these characteristics are exhibited by organisations with a clear sense of vision and purpose and a strong coaching culture. Senior leaders must really consider employee engagement as a key strategic business objective because it demonstrably leads to long-term staff retention, higher levels of motivation, better performance, and better results. The Harvard Business Review states that organisations with good employee engagement are twice as successful as less engaged organisations and have a far lower occurrence of accident and safety incidents. Engaged employees give greater discretionary effort, are willing to learn and to apply and share their learning. In addition, employee engagement is a good predictor of customer satisfaction, employee retention, productivity and profitability.

The workplace characteristics for successful employee engagement include:

- **Values alignment**
A workplace that has a clear and unambiguous message about its ethical stance and operating principles that guide its conduct and behaviour and where individuals feel aligned with these principles in their working lives
- **Sense of belonging**
A workplace where employees feel that they are part of a bigger whole, which cares for them as individuals and which is demonstrated through strong leadership, clear communication, and appropriate management and colleague behaviours
- **Enjoyment**
A workplace that supports and encourages flexible, interesting and engaging workplace practices that allow energy and fun in the working day
- **Individual expression**
A workplace that allows individuals to express and contribute their own unique gifts and talents and to feel valued for their contribution and to be fully responsible
- **Learning**
A workplace where learning from mistakes is far more important than not making mistakes and where creative thinking, exploring boundaries and taking calculated risks is encouraged
- **Achievement**
A workplace where individual and team achievement is celebrated, learning is shared, and high performance is rewarded
- **Recognition**
A workplace where everyone feels that their contribution is recognised and worthwhile and how their achievements make a difference

These characteristics are fundamentally *relational*, that is, they are about building effective relationships – with the organisation, with managers, with colleagues, with staff, and with clients and customers. For relationships to work there needs to be trust. Gaining trust is only achieved through communication – that is, listening and speaking in all forms. And of course, coaching is all about listening and speaking with a specific intention – that is, to build relationship and improve results. As Downey says, it is *the art of facilitating the learning, development and performance of others*.

With that definition, it is not difficult to appreciate how coaching sits at the heart of effective employee engagement, and the powerful leverage it can have in shaping an enjoyable, responsive and high-performance workplace. Coaching does not remove the need for clear management, but by equipping managers and team leaders with coaching skills, there is far greater potential to build workplace trust, and more effective, productive working relationships. Through a coaching approach, and associated coaching skills, managers and team leaders can:

- demonstrate a genuine interest in individuals through high quality listening, which helps to build trust and rapport
- use structured and precise questions to better understand individual and team needs and to create clarity for action
- shape personal performance objectives in a way that allow individuals and teams to express their unique talents and utilises the talents of all in a more focussed and targeted way
- provide high quality feedback in a non-judgmental way that is valued by the receiver as a beneficial learning opportunity to feel good about, rather than as a criticism to feel bad about
- encourage individuals and teams to take responsibility for action and to find their own solutions to problems rather than always rely on the manager
- encourage individuals and teams to be more creative, share their learning and take more calculated, carefully considered risks
- foster an environment of mutual collaboration and confidence rather than uncertainty and doubt
- create more space for individual expression and enjoyment at work

A coaching approach then can reap huge rewards not only in terms of performance, but also by building, over time, a workplace culture that meets all the requirements for successful employee engagement.