

The Engaging Leader

Experiences, Beliefs and Behaviors

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You've heard it before—engagement matters. Time and again our data has shown us that employees and their behavior are at the center of business success. Engaged employees deliver better business performance, are more connected and committed to their companies, and strive to go above and beyond far more than their less engaged peers. Yet on a global level, only 6 out of 10 employees are engaged¹, and the solutions for improving engagement have become increasingly complex for companies operating in an environment of instability and varied economic conditions.

We also know strong leadership is the consistent differentiator to how Aon Hewitt Best Employers achieve both top quartile engagement levels and better business results.² Engaging others is a leader's business responsibility, so these facts require us to ask ourselves a simple question—how can leaders be more engaging of their direct reports and those around them?

The Leadership-Engagement Link

Aon Hewitt's Global Employee Research Database of seven million respondents puts us in a unique position to understand the leadership behaviors that drive employee engagement. According to the data, the most critical leadership drivers of employee engagement are the following³:

- Establishing direction and shared purpose
- Demonstrating character and integrity
- Developing and retaining talent
- Applying knowledge and sound judgment
- Interacting with others

You might be thinking—so what? Of course leaders need to be doing these things! And you would be right. But not all do. And what makes engaging leaders different isn't merely that they're doing these things, but how they're doing them. Research tells us that engaging leaders are “nearby leaders”—they are accessible to their people, they show genuine concern for their people and they enable their people. In short, they stay connected⁴. MIT recently bolstered this research by studying leaders' physical interactions in the workplace and found that natural leaders are “charismatic connectors” who “circulate actively, giving their time democratically to others, engage in brief but energetic conversations and listen at least as much as they talk.”⁵

The opportunity for companies, then, is to 1) engage their leaders, 2) build a bench of leaders that excel at engaging others and 3) utilize those leaders to drive a more engaged workforce and better business performance.

¹Aon Hewitt (2013). Global Employee Research Database.

²Oehler (2013). Beyond the Survey: How to Increase Engagement. *Workspan*, June, 19-22.

³Aon Hewitt (2013). Global Employee Research Database.

⁴Alban-Metcalfe, J. and Alimo-Metcalfe, B. (2001). The development of a new transformational leadership questionnaire. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 73, 1-27.

⁵Peck (2013). They're Watching You at Work. *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2013.

We wanted to know more about these types of engaging leaders. Specifically, we wanted to understand how these leaders came to be the leaders they are. We knew that if we could understand the engaging leader holistically, we would be in a better position to help companies assess, select, develop and utilize engaging leaders within their organizations. To deepen our understanding, we combined the insights from our Global Employee Research Database with a qualitative study across organizations that collected data through in-depth interviews with leaders of highly engaged teams, and employee focus groups in which employees were asked how leaders contribute (or don't) to their engagement.

Our findings were shockingly consistent. We learned that at their core, engaging leaders have three fundamental similarities: They had early experiences that shaped them; they have unique belief systems and personality traits; and they behave in unique ways that positively and exponentially impact the engagement of those around them. Thus, we have developed The Engaging Leader model below that shows the engaging leader profile is built through experiencing, believing and doing.

The Engaging Leader



Critical experiences

- Willingly took on tough assignments
- Successfully navigated through ambiguity
- Stretched and learned
- Have seen the impact of actions

Guiding beliefs

- I am driven by purpose
- Leadership is responsibility
- Serve your followers; followers are equals
- Relations, emotions, honesty and trust are important
- People are capable of amazing things
- Calm, structure and empathy are needed in the face of ambiguity
- Life is a journey and full of learning experiences

Displayed behaviors

- Find your purpose
- Step up
- Stabilize
- Energize
- Connect
- Be real
- Serve
- Grow

1. **Critical experiences.** Engaging leaders have had experiences that transformed them as individuals by shaping their core beliefs about people, about work and about what it means to lead. While no experience is identical, these early leader experiences commonly entail deep learning from taking on tough assignments that required navigating through ambiguity or difficult transformations.
2. **Guiding beliefs.** A strong set of core beliefs that are shaped by one's personality—but also by these early experiences—guide how engaging leaders approach work and, more important, their behaviors and interactions with people they lead. These core beliefs include ideas of servant leadership, that leadership is a responsibility—not about status or reward—and that relationships, emotions and trust matter.
3. **Displayed behaviors.** When these core beliefs drive leaders' day-to-day behavior, we start to see positive impact on the engagement of others. Leaders act in a way that shares their own engagement and purpose; they strive to stabilize and energize their people; they act in service of their people—taking time to connect with and grow their followers; and they conduct themselves with authenticity because their behaviors are aligned with their beliefs. This is what makes engagement happen.

Another clear theme that emerged from our study of engaging leadership was that in order to engage others, leaders must first be engaged themselves. This is an important prerequisite concept that seems to be grounded in both the guiding beliefs and displayed behaviors in our model. Before companies can look to their leaders to engage the masses, they must first understand and create engagement in the leadership ranks. Like most people, leaders are engaged by career opportunities, pay and recognition, and working for a company with a strong reputation. However, leaders are uniquely engaged by their own leaders (suggesting a multiplier network effect), the quality of the other senior leaders around them, and the people and work processes that enable them to do their jobs. These are the external drivers of leader engagement—but we also know from this engaging leader research and our selection research that a leader's personality, beliefs and style have a significant impact.

The Engaging Leader model is not meant to be a checklist for how to be an engaging leader. The experiences, beliefs and behaviors “show up” differently in each leader. What is consistent, however, is how these leaders bring their experiences and beliefs to bear in order to engage. They:

- **Find purpose** in the work they do, and make it their mission to connect their people to that purpose.
- **Step up** in the face of challenging or ambiguous situations, and navigate their people through those situations.
- **Stabilize** people by staying positive and maintaining composure under pressure.
- **Energize** people by connecting them to purpose and painting the possibilities.
- **Connect** with people through accessibility, genuine concern and emotional presence.
- **Are real** in how they authentically communicate with their people.
- **Serve** their people by empowering, removing barriers and working alongside others if needed.
- **Grow** their people's capabilities through coaching, mentoring and development opportunities.

Next Steps

So, where do we go from here? How do we take this new perspective on engagement and put it to good use in an organizational context? We think the path forward might look something like this:

- **Measure employee and leadership engagement.** A prerequisite to making engagement happen through engaging leaders is to understand engagement levels and engagement drivers for both employees and leaders. This provides greater insight into where leaders need to focus behaviors to engage others. In addition, this measurement is required to understand whether or not you have the baseline level of engagement in the leadership ranks to be successful and what you can do about it if you do not.
- **Assess and select for engaging leadership.** As our model above suggests, there are both personality-based and behavioral aspects to engaging leadership. We believe that organizations should be assessing for engaging leadership through measures like personality tests (our validation studies have found that personality attributes like positivity, industriousness, achievement orientation, enthusiasm, cooperation and sensitivity are predictive of whether a leader will be engaged and engaging of others) and 360-degree reviews to measure leader behaviors and perceptions from others' points of view. Assessing leaders and future leaders through these means will allow organizations to 1) identify engaging leaders; for example, to use them as multipliers in their leadership team; 2) identify development needs for those leaders who have the potential to become engaging leaders; and 3) select leaders into the organization and promote internal candidates who demonstrate engaging leadership. Building a critical mass of engaging leaders through assessment and selection will help drive employee engagement, but also will change the face of your organization by building a culture of engagement.
- **Coach and develop.** While some aspects of engaging leadership may be hard-wired, others can most certainly be learned through coaching and development. As we found, early experiences have a significant impact on belief systems and engaging behaviors. Start building engaging leaders from within today. Throughout our study, we found that the process of getting leaders to reflect on how they engage others (or don't) was incredibly impactful. Getting your leaders thinking about how they can be part of the solution doesn't cost a thing...and it gets the conversation started today. Powerful coaching and development events for today's emerging leaders become the critical early experiences of tomorrow's engaging leaders.
- **Engage the disengaged leaders.** Until leaders themselves become engaged, it's unlikely they will be able to engage others. And if they aren't capable of being engaged, then they probably shouldn't be leaders in your organization. However, there are many engaging leaders out there, and organizations have a great opportunity to engage the engaged in order to engage others. That is to say, utilizing your engaged leaders as change agents to drive and increase engagement among the leadership ranks is a good starting place.



The previous recommendations are not a program—they're a culture change. And the change starts and ends with individual leaders. So as a leader, ask yourself:

- How energized, motivated and engaged are you in your job? What drives you?
- What were your experiences as a leader that made you grow and become engaged? How can you support others in being exposed to similar experiences?
- What are your beliefs about the role of the leader?
- What are your beliefs about people and work?
- How present are you with others?
- If not you, then who?

Aon Hewitt Solutions

Aon Hewitt can help your organization build a culture of engagement through your leaders. Our solutions, which can be tailored to meet your organization's needs, include:

- **The Engaging Leader Workshop for Senior Leaders**—Help senior leaders understand how to re-engage and lead others in a more impactful way.
- **Engaging Leader Assessment Suite**—Tools to assess where individuals are in relation to the three drivers of engaging leadership (experiences, beliefs and behaviors).
- **Engaging Leader Selection Solutions**—Methods to select those who are most likely to be engaged and to engage others.
- **Engaging Leader Development Events**—Development solutions to build the awareness and capabilities needed to drive engaging leadership.
- **Engaging Leader Coaching**—Coaching solutions to connect leaders with their own level of engagement.



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