

# EMPLOYEE ENGAGE THYSELF



DR **JOHN IZZO**

# EMPLOYEE, ENGAGE THYSELF

(A White Paper)

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JOHN IZZO, PH.D.

When I co-authored the book *Awakening Corporate Soul* (Fair Winds Pres, 1994) in the early 1990's, very few people were talking about employee engagement. We suggested that some companies and leaders engendered a fundamentally higher level of commitment from their people that translated into sustainable business success. Since that time, raising employee engagement has become a top priority for almost all companies large and small.

Yet if you look at the business literature on engagement over the last two decades, most of the focus has been on changing leadership behavior to drive higher engagement. The prevailing thinking appears to be that employees are simply the passive receptacle of manager's behavior. If only leaders recognized people, provided career coaching, inspired a higher purpose, listened to people's opinions, and so on then employees will become engaged like a billiard ball hit by the cue on a pool table.

But what if there is another factor at play? What if some employees are simply more engaged or do a better job of engaging themselves? This is not to say that leadership behavior doesn't matter—it matters a lot! In fact, I have spent the last twenty years helping leaders change their behavior which often led to significant gains in engagement. The problem is that there may be another accelerator that organizations are not even considering: Helping people learn how to engage themselves.

## THE CASE FOR EMPLOYEES ENGAGING THEMSELVES

But, you might ask, what is the case for employees engaging themselves? In the process of researching *Awakening Corporate Soul*, I had asked about 3,000 people to tell me about the most engaged times in their career—those moments when they felt like they gave everything they had to their work and gave it gladly. The research was conducted about four years before Gallup did their large quantitative studies on employee engagement, yet the results from my interviews yielded similar findings. It turned out that managers and leaders did have a large impact on people's engagement. They said things like "I felt recognized for my good work," "I felt my opinion mattered," "my boss cared about me," "my leader inspired me with a sense of purpose" and "I was proud of the services or products my company provided.

Yet of equal interest is that many of the things people mentioned had next to nothing to do with how they were managed. They said things like "I lived my values," "I really saw the higher purpose in the work I was doing," "I was in a job that fit what I love to do," "I was learning and challenging myself to try new skills," and "I saw my work like an artist and always tried to do it better." In other words, a meaningful part of what engaged people came from within them, rather than from outside.

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Besides our research with these 3,000 people, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence about the fact that employees engage themselves. In my twenty-five years of consulting to companies I have met hundreds of employees who were very engaged in spite of bad leadership and hundreds who were disengaged in spite of having great leaders. All of us know someone who seems to love their job in spite of their manager and others who seem to hate their job in spite of having good leadership. What's more, having personally poured over the results of hundreds of employee survey results taken within my client's companies, every business unit has highly engaged people and almost all of them have a meaningful number of less engaged people in spite of having the very same managers. Clearly there is more at play than simply leadership actions.

Adding to this mix is a growing body of research in the field of positive psychology at places like Harvard showing that happy people are more resilient, more successful, more productive, and more likely to be engaged than unhappy people. In other words, people who are happy are also more likely to be happy at work. Even more exciting is the mounting evidence that people can be trained to be "happier."

What is suggested here is that maybe we need to start burning more than one fuel. For now, most organizations focus almost exclusively on changing leader's behavior through training and performance management. What if we could actually train people to engage themselves?

## TRAINING PEOPLE TO ENGAGE THEMSELVES

Shortly after the publication of *Awakening Corporate Soul*, we began offering a workshop based on the book called "Spirit at Work." Since we were doing a great deal of consulting with hospitals our first attendees were health care workers including nurses, housekeepers, lab techs, and admin clerks. While we worked with leaders to change their behavior to become more engaging leaders, we also offered these workshops to help people at all levels rediscover their own engagement.

The workshop helped people examine what energized them at work, how they could take better care of their own happiness outside of work, helped them connect to the higher purpose of their work, explore what they wanted their work legacy to be, and how they wanted to impact others, and also helped them identify what they could do to enhance their own career development. Following the workshops, leaders started reporting that employees who had been only mildly engaged starting to engage more deeply. Some people even quit, having realized in the course of the workshop that they would never engage in the jobs that they were in, so they did themselves and the company a favor by leaving voluntarily rather than be asked to leave.

Years later I was asked to do a series of sessions at a large Telecommunications company where many people had been in their jobs for years and many leaders believed these people could not be re-engaged. Almost 12,000 people went through an experience that challenged them to think about how they could be better team members, have a bigger impact on the company and on their teammates, and also take better

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care of themselves outside of work. Again, managers reported that people came back more engaged and more importantly, came back less likely to blame the company or their manager for their own disengagement. They had been put, if you will, in a place of personal responsibility.

## JOB PURPOSE AS A CASE IN POINT

Let's take a case in point. There is evidence that employees who see their job as a "calling" rather than a "job" are more productive, more customer focused, work longer hours and are much less likely to call in sick. Your first response may be that some jobs have a higher purpose or that some leaders show people the higher purpose and others don't. While it may be true that some jobs have a more obvious calling and that some leaders work hard to help people see the purpose in their work, we have found people quite able to discover the "meaning" in their own work when given the tools and opportunity to do so. What if we could help our people discover their own "calling" in their job thus connecting deeply to why it matters that they do it well?

Another example relates to learning and growth. We know from the large Gallup studies on engagement and from our research for my book Values Shift, that when people say they have "had an opportunity to learn and grow" in the last year in their job they are more engaged. We also know that when people change jobs or roles within their organization they get a significant "bump" in their personal engagement. This should be no surprise because human beings brains are hard wired for routine but excited by change. Challenge is a good predictor of engagement. But again, the assumption is that the only way to get people more "challenged" is to either have them change jobs or for leaders to provide job enrichment through new tasks. What if people could be trained to identify their own learning curves and find ways to enrich their own job by identifying areas for improvement, finding ways to bring new art to old tasks, and taking on learning outside of work to enhance their growth.

Then there is the issue of happiness. Even if you grant that happy people are also more likely to be more resilient, more productive and happier at work, can people really be trained to be happier? Once again, there is now a growing body of evidence that we can in fact be trained to be "happier." That is, that by giving people simple tools and techniques our personal happiness and resiliency can be enhanced leading to, you guessed it, more productive and engaged employees. Here is a simple example. Research shows that if people keep a gratitude journal once a day they become happier, are more resilient and o have better immune response after three months. It is my view that with some intentional effort we can train people to be happier.

## GETTING PEOPLE TO STEP UP TO ENGAGE

Almost twenty years after writing Awakening Corporate Soul, I wrote Stepping Up-How Taking Responsibility Changes Everything (2012). In the book, I discuss what happens when we stop looking to anyone else to create change besides ourselves. It turns out that people who feel like victims are less

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successful, have poorer health outcomes, are more likely to be depressed and have less successful relationships than people who feel their own actions create most of the effects in their lives.

We have recently combined the Spirit at Work material with the new ideas from Stepping Up to create a program that challenges team members at all levels to take greater responsibility for their own happiness and their careers while stepping up to take more initiative at work. We are looking for a few great companies willing to pilot the program to demonstrate empirically that people can engage themselves while stepping up to have a bigger impact on the company and their teams. Let us know if you want to be one of the organizations spearheading this new venture.