

# The Rules of Engagement

**Greatness lies in using what you already have**

*by Sue Johnston*

If there are five people on the job, how many are actually working?

As it turns out, fewer than you might think.

We're not just talking about New York City cab drivers on a rainy day – or even road repair crews. Statistics from the Gallup Organization tell an alarming story about a great many organizations. Only 20 per cent of employees are truly engaged in their work.

That means four out of five people are not. Oh, they show up for work. Some may even think they're working hard. But they're not fully committed.

Engaged employees bring passion to their work, feel it's worthwhile, and work with enthusiasm. They believe in themselves, their work, their products, and the company's value to its customers.

At the core of this is emotion, some thing we have, historically, tried to suppress in the workplace.

## **Using emotional intelligence**

We are at the beginning of the era of the “emotional economy,” in which great leaders and managers can make their organizations more effective and profitable by tapping into emotions – their employees' emotions and their own.

In a nutshell, scientific study of the brain shows that humans in the workplace aren't like computers – processing information and using it to make logic-based decisions. It seems human beings in the workplace are emotional first and rational second.

The research supporting emotional intelligence theories suggests that the skill of being in tune with one's self and being able to understand and use emotions is more important than intellect. By linking neurological evidence and what business people used to call “soft skills,” Daniel Goleman, in his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, redefined what it means to be “smart.”

At about the same time, the Gallup Organization – probably the world's foremost research company – began to explore what separated vibrant, productive and profitable workplaces from the non-so-great ones. They asked, “What conditions attract and keep top employees?” and “What attracts and keeps loyal, profitable customers?”

Between 1995 and 2001, Gallup interviewed 10 million customers and 300 thousand people in hundreds of organizations around the world. They crunched the numbers to discover the links between employee opinions and attitudes and business performance.

They learned how to spot the negative business practices that can cause a workplace to crash. They also learned how to spot the sources of strength every great team possesses. And they learned how to build enduring bonds between a company and its customers.

What they learned was this: Great organizations use the innate skills and talents of their employees.

A lot of companies claim, "People are our greatest asset." Yet it seems very few companies truly recognize the value represented by the natural talents and emotions employees bring to the job every day.

According to Curt Coffman, co-author of *First, Break All The Rules* and *Follow This Path*, great managers use six strategies to manage the emotional dimensions of the teams they lead.

1. Building relationships
2. Communication
3. Connection to customers
4. Recognition
5. Freedom to act
6. Developing individuals and teams

### **Building relationships**

Great managers maintain strong, caring relationships with everyone on their teams. That's a variance from the old approach, from the days when people believed everything in business had to be rational, and a manager would try to make employees see things management's way.

Today, great managers consider employees' views and ideas. They discuss employees' problems honestly and help them see possibilities. They provide constructive direction.

### **Communication**

Building true relationships requires true communication, the second of the six strategies. Coffman suggests great managers clearly define and consistently communicate goals and objectives.

They also know that, in communication, one size does not fit all. Furthermore, they also do something poor managers don't – they ask questions and they listen to the answers.

Communication consultant and author Roger D'Aprix suggests that every manager must answer these six employee questions to keep them motivated.

1. What's my job?
2. How am I doing?
3. Does anyone care?
4. How's my unit doing?
5. Where are we heading?
6. How can I help?

Think about your own organization. Are you answering those questions for your employees? Is someone answering them for you? Knowing the answers to those questions keeps us all engaged in our work.

### **Connection to customers**

The Gallup Organization discovered that engaged employees are highly likely to produce engaged customers. Great managers show employees how to develop connection to customers. They know what Gallup discovered, that satisfying needs and providing superior products are important, but customers form their opinions of a company based on how they're treated.

Great managers help their teams see the many connections each employee has to the organizations' customers and the chain reaction those connections create. They set high standards for customer care and embody them in their own style. They help employees see that there's a point to what they are doing – and that customers recognize and benefit from that.

### **Recognition**

Great managers also recognize the contribution of their employees in ways that are meaningful to each individual.

I once worked for a bank that had VIP reward cards managers could hand out to people who had done something particularly well. They were attached to air travel miles, so their value was more than symbolic. In talking with my group about the program, I discovered that it would have more value to them if, rather than getting these VIP cards from me, they could earn the right to give them to other people in the organization who had helped them out in projects. For my team, the freedom to give someone outside our department a reward card was more rewarding than receiving one.

### **Freedom to act**

The fourth strategy for engagement, and one of the most powerful, is granting employees freedom to act. Excellent managers don't "micromanage," an unfortunate management style prevalent in less-than-great organizations.

Great managers define the desired outcomes, set a good example, and get out of the way, letting their employees use their innate talents and learned skills and knowledge to reach the goal.

If we return to my group at the bank, our job was to write the volumes of policies and procedures for an organization of more than 50 thousand employees. These were in 26 fat blue binders and, organization-wide, took up acres of real estate. But the policy we developed for our department was one short sentence: "Know your customer and do what you think is best." Our dream was to help make that the policy for the whole bank.

### **Developing individuals and teams**

You can't even dream of a policy like that unless your organization develops its individuals and teams, the sixth strategy for engagement. One of the best ways to do that is to work with people to help them recognize and develop their strengths. Then you give them jobs that use those strengths in service to their customers.

You don't need to be very smart to recognize that people like doing what they're good at. When people love what they're doing, they do it better. When that happens, competence meets confidence – and customers notice that something special is happening.

When tasks are assigned based on people's innate strengths, rather than the narrow confines of their job descriptions, it can pay off in a better customer experience, leading to customer loyalty and increased profitability.

### **Why is all this important?**

The big, wide world out there is full of people who can do what we do faster, better, cheaper, or more conveniently somewhere else. Even in a local market, organizations need to fully engage their employees to improve productivity, incubate innovation, reduce turnover, and improve profitability.

An employee who comes to work for a pay cheque, or who believes the mission of his or her organization is to make the CEO wealthy, does not bring heart and spirit to the job, regardless of learned skills and formal education. On the other hand, someone who feels supported and well employed in marching towards a valuable cause will bring his or her emotional self to the job, as well as the physical self.

Employing these rules of engagement costs you and your company nothing, in terms of cold, hard cash. It requires only concern, mindfulness, respect for everyone, and caring communication.

It can make your organization great. If it also makes your CEO rich, so be it.

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