



Deep Dive: Employee Engagement

An interview with Liz Behnke

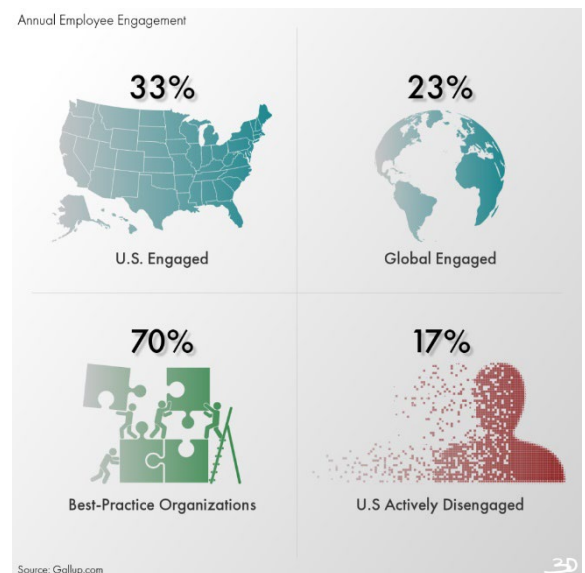
Roughly a third of U.S. employees consider themselves engaged at work, according to [Gallup's most recent survey](#). Across the globe, just under a quarter of employees feel engaged. Organizations often approach employee engagement with annual surveys, focus groups, and large initiatives to gauge, boost, and track employee satisfaction. However, the solution to improving engagement could be easier than we think.

In her upcoming book, organizational development consultant [Danielle Lord, PhD](#), of [Archetype Learning Solutions](#), outlines 12 strategic activities companies can quickly and affordably adopt to improve or increase engagement. Dr. Lord shares examples from her experience in adult learning theory, leadership development, and employee engagement to provide the reasons why engagement matters. Designed to be easy to implement and support, these activities are beneficial for leaders tasked with bolstering engagement in their workforce.

Reasons & Results of Poor Engagement

According to Gallup, a disengaged workforce costs almost \$2 trillion in lost productivity. Dr. Lord believes organizations face several hurdles to overcome disengagement including ego, the rapid pace of business, and not understanding the difference between leadership and management.

Ego, on multiple levels, can create a toxic environment and hold companies back from arriving at the best outcomes. She encourages companies to return the focus back to the entire organization.



Additionally, the rapid pace of our organizations can hinder meaningful relationship building and deeper evaluation of situations.

“We have this understanding that everything has to move at this extremely rapid pace. When we move at that pace, we’re not allowing our whole brain to process information,” says Dr. Lord. “We’re not being present and truly listening to understand and to build relationships, rather we’re listening to move on to the next task.”

This focus on accomplishing tasks without a personal investment highlights the disconnect between a satisfied employee versus a committed one. Dr. Lord advises companies striving to increase engagement to know the difference and work towards more committed employees.

“When we all feel good about being somewhere, then we’re no longer in that downward spiral of negativity. Committed is ‘I feel really good about being here, and ‘I’m here because I want to be here’ rather than satisfied, ‘I’m here because I’m getting a monetary benefit even though it sucks to be here’ or even ‘I just don’t care.’ We’re helping to bring everybody up along with us.”

This is where the difference between leaders and managers can create a barrier to shifting satisfied employees to more committed ones. The task-oriented focus of management and human connection of leadership both have a role to play, but they are not the same, according to Dr. Lord.

“I think there’s an outdated mindset around management and leadership and not understanding that the two are very different. Management is just the administrative piece. If I’m saying do this, do that, then I’m managing just fine, but there’s no leadership involved. Leadership is all about the relationship, the influence, and bringing the heart into it and caring about the individual. How am I engaging and connecting with you to make sure we have a relationship, so I know you as a person, not just as part of the team.”

The Gallup Q 12® Reveals Opportunities to Increase Engagement
(All related to U.S. Employees)



Source: <https://www.gallup.com/394373/indicator-employee-engagement.aspx>

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Of the [12 survey questions asked by Gallup](#) to measure engagement, four relate to the importance of strong work relationships. However, this human element can be difficult to quantify, making it easier to ignore, but risking poor engagement.

“It’s the immeasurable things that we often discount. We can’t measure it; therefore, it doesn’t make sense. We’re always hearing what’s the ROI, but what’s the ROI of not doing it?” asks Dr. Lord. “Within the organization, it’s the damage that we can’t measure, the damage to the customer relationship. Even the new employee that comes into the organization and gets pulled aside by someone

who is experiencing a lot of negativity. What's the first thing they are going to do? They download, 'this is an awful place, you're going to hate it here.' What's that doing to a new team member?"

She recounts a recent interaction with a colleague that captured this intangible human component. "I was talking with someone a couple of days ago, and he said, 'I can tell when a team is really engaged, because I walk in, and I feel it. Sometimes you just feel the happiness.' And then they walk into another organization, and there's this grayness everywhere. It comes down to what kind of world do you want to live in."

Unfortunately, grayness and negativity often don't end at the office door. Dr. Lord points to the effect on our families and communities when employees experience dissatisfaction in the workplace.

"Expanding out into the macro-environment around the community is this [transference](#). If I had a bad experience with my manager, and I bring that home to my spouse or my children, then they take that back out into the community. How is this impacting us globally rather than just as individuals? We cannot see the positive when we're all stuck in the cycle of negativity and dysfunction."

Key Roles in Improving Engagement

Leadership sets the tone for engagement at an organization, with the person at the top shouldering the greatest responsibility.

"I'd love to see CEO changed to Chief Engagement Officer rather than Chief Executive Officer, because it really does take the entire organization to ensure engagement," says Dr. Lord. "It starts at the top. That person has to say, 'This is the culture that I want, so my expectation for all of my managers, is to ensure that is the culture we have by engaging daily with your team members.'"

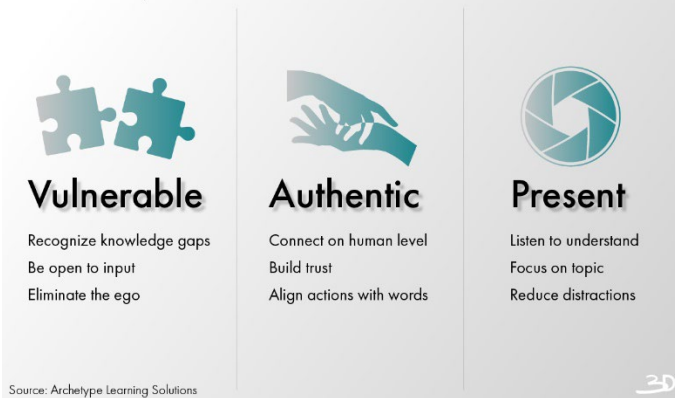
Dr. Lord stresses the need for consistency in how leaders and managers enact and emulate this behavior. "I can work with one leader and have a great experience, then go over to this other manager and have an awful one because that consistency around engagement has been lost."

According to Gallup, "The most fundamental engagement element is knowing what is expected of you." Managers play a vital role in setting and tracking those expectations. Key to that is the open dialog with team members in effective individual meetings. Dr. Lord encourages managers to pay attention to our one-to-one meetings.

"I like to think of it as an organizational date. That's your time to be connected, re-establish priorities, looking at the barriers coming up, and celebrate wins regardless of how small. It's really making that time about them, and understanding what their needs are, rather than the manager just dumping more stuff on them or multitasking while they're going on about their day. Make it about the employee."

Leaders and managers could boost engagement by connecting with employees where they do their work. Dr. Lord suggests the practice of rounding or management by walking around to build these human relationship-centered, trust connections, especially through the one-to-one meetings.

"There's a tenseness to it, among a lot of people, of being called to the principal's office. Do you get the same degree of interaction and level of conversation in that place of stress? When I, as the leader, have to come to you, now I am in your work environment, and we're interacting in a different way. I can visually see if you have the tools and resources that you need. What does your desk space look like? Is it a happy space?"



Roughly 30% of employees strongly agree with four of Gallup’s survey questions related to the connection points often covered during one-to-one meetings. To make these and other conversations meaningful, Dr. Lord employs the acronym VAP – vulnerable, authentic, and present – which she believes is at the heart of leadership.

“The vulnerability comes from knowing we’re in this together, we’re a team, and I’m open to your ideas. Authentic is putting yourself out there as a human as well, understanding you’re a spouse, a

parent before you’re an employee. Present is listening deeply to understand, not having to have all the answers, and leaving the ego behind.”

She also feels that peer relationships play a role in employee engagement, though they aren’t fostered by leadership and management as much as they could be. According to the survey, only one in five U.S. employees feel they have a best friend at work, and the perception of their coworkers’ commitment to quality dropped 5% in six months.

“We have the opportunity as peer employees to be helping extend engagement through the relationships we develop.” However, Dr. Lord notes, “There’s no encouragement at all to connect with your fellow employees at a human level and build those relationships. I’ve never heard in my thirty-year career, ‘why don’t you take 30 minutes and grab some coffee together. Sit down in a community space, chat, and get to know one another as people.’ You do not hear that; it’s not encouraged at all.”

One theme underlying all these interactions is consistency, especially when it comes to communication. Whether communicating at an enterprise level from the leadership or in team meetings, consistency in behavior should reflect this consistency in messaging.

Dr. Lord provides this example, “If I’m putting out this nice, elegant statement saying, ‘All is great in the land of Oz. Here’s what we’re going to be doing, and we need your input on this.’ Then I approach you with, ‘I don’t have time for you right now’ or ‘Be brief, be bright, be gone,’ then that’s a disconnect for the brain. I’d have a hard time reconciling what I’m supposed to be doing. You said you wanted my input. I brought you my input, and you told me it was a waste of your time.”

This disconnect between messaging and behavior can be disengaging for employees. Likewise, if managers are not aligned with leadership around mission, goals, and objectives, the team is left rudderless.

“In management meetings themselves, they don’t take the time to check for clarity and understanding, to make sure the managers have bought on, don’t have another agenda they’re trying to push, and that they truly, truly understand what the goals are.”

Stressing the importance of reaching employees where they are, Dr. Lord reminds leaders to speak to both sides of the brain. “You can connect with everyone within your organization. I’m giving you facts and data to connect with the left-brain people. I’m giving what we’re doing to create a better community overall, so I can better connect with those right-brained individuals. Make sure you have both of those connection points.”

Three Ways to Improve Engagement

Building those connection points is a central theme of Dr. Lord's upcoming book, *Engaging your employees: 12 strategic activities to drive your organization's culture and commitment*. "I wrote the whole book with the idea in mind that any one of the 12, you could put the book down and take back into the organization that moment."

She shares a sampling of the activities that are easy to implement:

#2 – About Me Posters: "They are templates I've made to be disseminated to teams, primarily for new hires who are coming into the organization. There's already a way to connect with them. It's also a powerful team building activity when we can find just one thing to connect over. It changes everything."

#4 – Re-Recruit: "You took a lot of time, effort, and energy to recruit someone into your organization, but have you told them that you're still happy they're there and that they're still a meaningful, impactful member of the team. Sometimes we need to hear that. Just a simple, 'I'm glad you're part of the team.'"

#11 – Thank You Cards: "You can sit behind your desk and fill out a thank you note. Thank them for being here, for their contributions, for their ideas. There's a lot of safety in a thank you note. It's a very tangible representation of a job well done."

Dr. Lord developed two of the 12, but the rest are available "in the ether" for anyone to develop.

"With the exception of the thank you notes, every single one of those is free. Executives often believe that employee engagement should be big and fancy. That comes with a cost. It feels good in the moment but is not necessarily tangible, and it is oftentimes too late. The whole thesis of this book is you don't need to do a survey. If you have this kind of heartfelt relationship and trust with your team members and managers, you should be getting the real time feedback and making the observations you need to keep your pot of happiness simmering all the time."

The book will be [available on Amazon](#) this May.