10 Ms OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

WORKPLACE LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE PROFESSIONALS NEED TO BE ENGAGEMENT CHAMPIONS.

By Cris and Mel Wildermuth



LISTEN TO THIS FEATURE
at www.astd.org/TD/TDpodcasts.htm

Mary yawned and glanced distractedly at the large wall clock. A talented linguist, she spoke four languages, three with native proficiency. In spite of her talents, Mary dreaded technical and detailed translation work. She hated the lonely hours limited to a single task that offered no outlet for her creativity. At work, she often longed to talk to someone. Today, Mary is trying to complete at least 50 percent of a translation, but it seems to be taking forever. In desperation, Mary closes her laptop and goes to fetch her fifth cup of coffee.

Two cubicles over, John, a gifted technical writer, suddenly realizes that he is thirsty. Regretfully, he gets up and surveys his work. In three hours he has completed a long and detailed report, including forecasts, ROI calculations, and an easy-to-follow explanatory section. John is pleased. He thinks to himself, "If only every day were just like today—no co-workers trying to coax me into joining a committee, no telephone calls, no invitations for lunch."

You have likely encountered employees like Mary and John during your career. Both are talented, smart, and capable. While John is "in the zone" at work, Mary is unhappy and unproductive. Why? Mary and John differ greatly in their level of engagement.

Engagement matters

Experts have defined engagement as a persistent state of work fulfillment. This fulfillment translates into enthusiasm and passion, higher than average levels of concentration and focus, and an irresistible boost of energy. Indeed, passion, focus, and energy are key components of engagement. Take away any of these factors and engagement suffers.

The potential positive impact of engagement on the organization's bottom line is substantial. In 2002, the *Journal of Applied Psychology* released a meta-analysis of 7,939 business units in 36 companies that related engagement to improvements in customer satisfaction, productivity, profits, turnover, and safety records. More recently, a 2006 study in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* connected engagement to employee satisfaction and commitment.

Not surprisingly, engagement is the current battle cry for many management experts. "We're all about engagement," one of our clients says. "Engagement is part of our values and training curriculum. We want to make sure our employees, leaders, and customers are engaged."

The 10 Ms of engagement

There are 10 Ms of engagement to help create engagement-friendly organizations. Nine of these components operate in three separate but deeply connected dimensions: organization culture, the job, and the person. The final factor—the match—connects the dots between culture, job, and personal issues.

Organization culture. Interculturalist Geert Hofstede described culture as a "collective programming of the mind" in his book *Cultures and Organizations*. Such programming permeates organizational life, prescribing official rules (the way things ought to be done) and unofficial rules (the way things are done) around the organization. Four Ms characterize engagement-friendly cultures: model, metropolis, magnate, and moderation.

Model symbolizes integrity. Model-rich organizations promote and reward authentic employees, impose exemplary punishment for ethical violations, and demonstrate unimpeachable commitment to a clear slate of values. As a result, employees see themselves as better people as they fight for worthwhile causes.

Metropolis describes an organization characterized by camaraderie, support, and respect. Positive social interactions bring acceptance and safety to work, which is crucial to engagement. After all, workers can hardly focus on challenging tasks when they are overwhelmed by fear or social isolation.

Magnate represents acknowledgement and appreciation. Engaged employees know how their job fits "the big picture" and why it matters. Magnate organizations allow everyone to share in the celebration of significant achievements.

Moderation governs employees' energy. Simply put, workers cannot feel exhausted and be engaged at the same time. Interestingly, the 2003 study "Recovery, Work Engagement, and Proactive Behaviour"

ENGAGEMENT IS BUILT ON TIME, COMMITMENT, AND CONSISTENT MONITORING.

in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* connected regular repose and engagement. Moderation reminds us that people need to recharge their batteries.

While these four cultural Ms may not generate engagement, they work together to bring inspiration, safety, meaning, and balance to work. Few work cultures offer perfect conditions. An engaging job could be an asset, though.

The job. Let's face it—some jobs are simply more engaging than others. In general, two Ms characterize engagement-friendly jobs: manager and moon.

Manager represents empowerment. Employees seem more engaged when they have some decision-making power and a greater sense of control over their jobs.

Moon symbolizes learning. In general, people are more engaged when activities tax their energy and intellect. This factor feeds employees' confidence and sense of accomplishment, adding meaning to the job.

Manager and moon remind us of the importance of job design. Rich and challenging jobs engage workers. Some people, however, seem to be naturally engaged, cheerfully completing routine or strictly defined jobs.

The person. Some people appear oblivious to difficult leaders, hard times, and hostile work environments. Against all odds, they have the determination of the Energizer bunny. Three Ms characterize these active employees: mirror, malleability, and microphone.

Mirror relates to people who reflect a healthy self-esteem. When employees are strong in the mirror factor, they have a sense of self, are proud of their accomplishments, and may not need constant reinforcement or support from others.

Malleability symbolizes change resiliency and flexibility. In a competitive and lean work environment, malleability helps employees adjust to multiple hats and learn new tasks.

Microphone characterizes employees who are unafraid to speak for themselves. The microphone effect helps them ask for help and improve their work conditions.

When put together, the three personal Ms of engagement paint the picture of a proud and confident, flexible, and assertive employee. Not all jobs, however, require these attributes. Instead, some jobs might be better performed by modest, conservative, and quiet workers. This dilemma leads us to the last M of engagement: the match. Imagine you can work for the perfect company. There is a catch, though. You must be willing to perform any job available. Would you be willing or able to do anything?

Match recognizes that people are passionate about different jobs. People's personality and talents matter. For instance, not everyone needs the same amount of social interaction (metropolis) or recognition (magnate).

By definition, the match is a key requirement for engagement because passion is a major component of engagement—and passion cannot be taught. Passion is the result of doing what one was born to do. Enter the role of human personalities.

The role of human personalities

The word personality stems from masks worn by Greek actors in ancient times. These masks were called "persona" and represented the actors' moods, such as happiness, grief, or anger. Our personalities, however, include not only our moods, but also a correlated set of actions.

Let's return to the example of Mary, our gifted translator who is an extrovert, spontaneous, and creative. What moods and actions offer insight into Mary's personality? For starters, Mary is easily bored in a quiet office; she craves human interaction and works better when others are around. In addition, Mary hates uncreative work, so even though Mary has the knowledge and skills required for technical translation, her personality makes her a poor match for this sort of job.

An interesting model to analyze personalities is the Five Factor Model (FFM). The FFM is a broadly used taxonomy of personality traits converging in five broad

areas: need for stability (tolerance for stress), extraversion (tolerance for sensory stimulation), originality (interest in new and untested ideas and theories), accommodation (tolerance for not having your way), and consolidation (goal orientation and focus).

Arguably, the FFM is one of the most influential models currently adopted by personality researchers. A recent search on the PsycINFO database limited to the thesaurus phrase "five factor personality model" revealed 1,246 articles or dissertations published since 1994.

The FFM is a useful model to consider in engagement initiatives for various reasons. First, FFM traits help predict which cultural and job "Ms" are most important for certain employees. For instance, metropolis is likely more important for extroverts than for introverts. Moon, on the other hand, may matter more to the curious and original employee.

Secondly, personality is connected to personal engagement factors. Malleability, for instance, is probably connected to a low need for stability and a high originality. Finally, certain FFM traits are good predictors of engagement for certain jobs. Because so much research has been conducted on the FFM, we now have a shot at connecting personality and passion.

Performance improvement implications

The enthusiastic client mentioned earlier added engagement to their organization's value statement. That is a good start, but it isn't enough. Four solutions may increase their odds of achieving a more engaged workforce.

Educate the leaders. Leaders should understand the importance of engagement, their role as leaders inspiring engagement, leadership styles most likely to enhance engagement, as well as the importance of the match. Leaders need to be able to help employees find their most engaging jobs. In addition, leaders must understand environmental and personal conditions most likely to lead to burnout and disengagement.

Encourage networks. Promote formal and informal opportunities for employees to get to know one another on a personal basis. Consider offering regular team building processes. Champion a culture of celebration and camaraderie. Reward supportive and respectful employees. Avoid reward systems that stimulate competition rather than collaboration.

Champion work-life balance. Excessive workloads often prevent vital recovery processes. Beware of workaholics, and help employees optimize time and energy management. Leaders may want to consider including wellness programs in their curricula.

Facilitate the match. Help employees inventory their own personal strengths and weaknesses. Personality, talent, and competency assessments may be particularly helpful in this task. In addition, leaders need to create processes to facilitate internal transfers and encourage employees to find their passion.

BUT ULTIMATELY, ENGAGEMENT REQUIRES THAT ALL EMPLOYEES OPERATE FROM THEIR OWN STRENGTHS AND PASSIONS.

Engagement is built on time, commitment, and consistent monitoring. Educating leaders, encouraging social interactions, and respecting work-life balance will help in the transformation of engagement. But ultimately, engagement requires that all employees operate from their own strengths and passions. The prize is elusive—any changes call for further adjustments in a perpetual search for the perfect match. **T+D**

Cris *and* ***Mel Wildermuth*** *are the executive partners of The Effectiveness Group, a consulting firm specializing in leadership development and employee engagement; wildermuth@bright.net.*

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
T+D welcomes your comments. If you would like to respond to this article, or any article that appears in *T+D*, please send your feedback to **mailbox@astd.org**. Responses sent to the mailbox are considered available for publication and may be edited for length and clarity.