

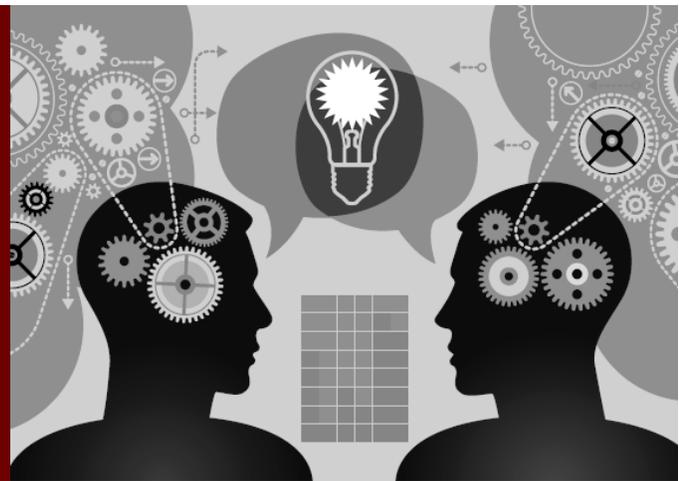
# PUBLIC SECTOR DIGEST

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## The Role of Employees in Employee Engagement

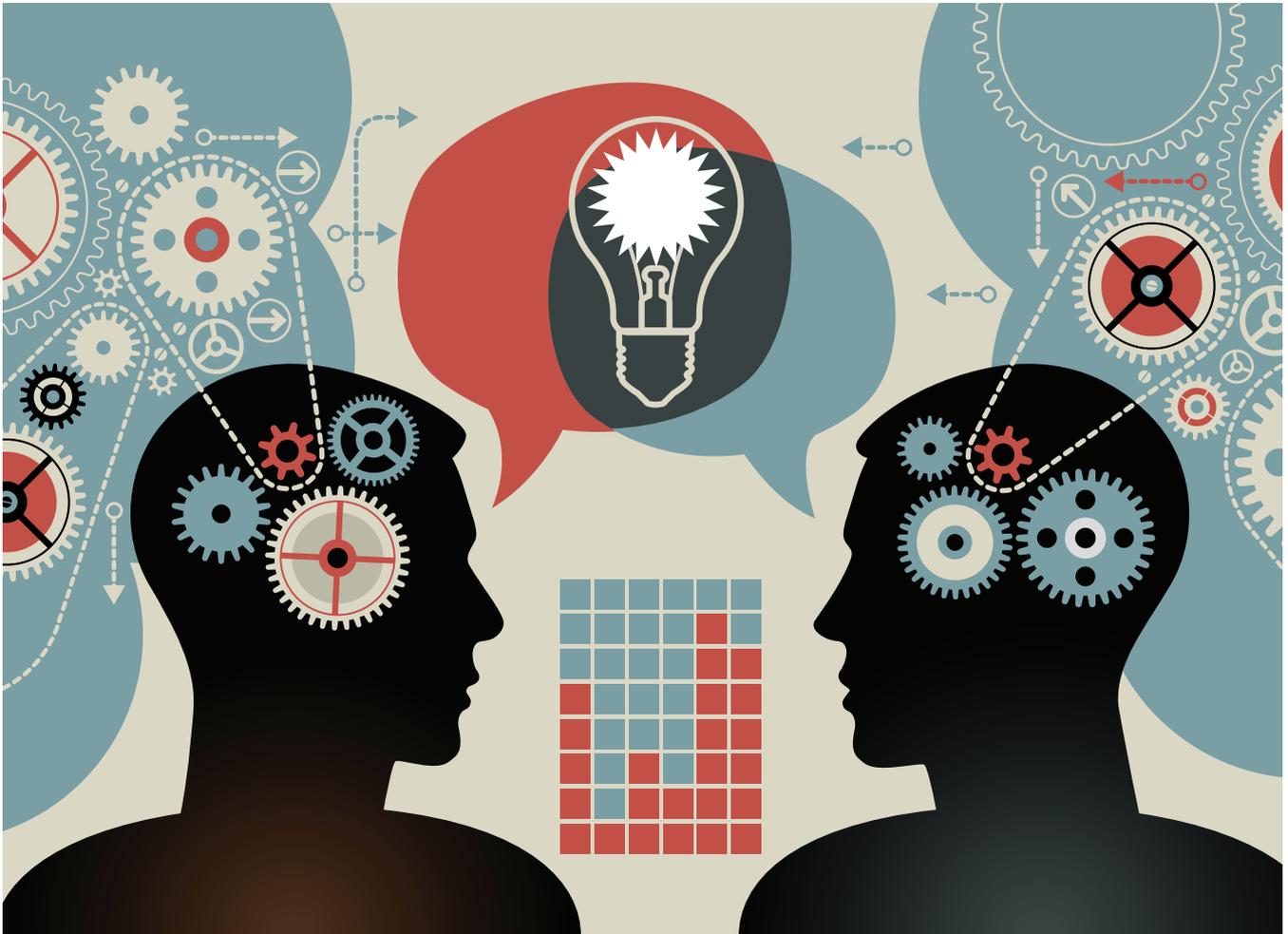
MEL TOOMEY & ELISA MASELLI, GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP GROUP

*Leadership & Management*



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## LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

# THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEES IN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

MEL TOOMEY & ELISA MASELLI, GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP GROUP

Employee engagement correlates with significant business outcomes, including retention of talent, customer service, individual and team performance, productivity, safety, employee health, and even enterprise-level financial performance. Organizations with strong engagement tend to do a lot better than those where engagement is low; productivity can be as much as 25 to 45 percent higher in companies where engagement is also higher, according to Hay Group.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in spite of its importance, employee engagement remains embarrassingly low and largely unaffected despite significant research by scholarly institutions and large sums having been spent to improve it.

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Generally, studies on the topic attribute employee disengagement to the following factors: how pay and salary increases are determined; not helping employees develop skills, and advance; and, failure to build connections between senior management and employees.

A 2012 Towers Watson study found that globally, 65 percent of workers are ‘not highly engaged’. In other words, they don’t much care. Further, 17 to 24 percent demonstrate active antagonism toward their employers. Six years earlier, a Towers Perrin study showed that only 14 percent of employees were fully engaged. The same study showed that at most 62 percent were moderately engaged. The moderately engaged will do as they are told, but are unlikely to take initiative. Lastly, the same study shows that 24 percent are actively disengaged. These employees are ‘hostile’. Most of us don’t even need to hear these facts and figures; we can look at our own workplace to personally experience this statistically bleak state of affairs.

Over the years, the improvement in employee engagement has been minimal, despite the effort of a sizeable community of experts. Maybe there is an unexamined assumption in the background that provides a clue. It is likely that organizations consider low employee engagement as a problem to be solved. Maybe it is not a problem at all, but rather, a condition.

### I. PROBLEMS AND CONDITIONS

Problems have solutions. Managers are tasked with locating problems and fixing them; complex problems can be solved using root cause analysis. This approach locates a problem at its source, and solves the problem there, at the root, which causes all the derivative manifestations to disappear. However, it is not a useful approach when dealing with conditions. Conditions respond to continuous treatment, more like the hygiene of regular tooth-brushing and showering, and not to a one-time, discrete solution. Additionally, the challenge with conditions is not locating the root cause, but rather is to locate ‘root responsibility’. To date, responsibility for low engagement has been placed with the management; it is the organization that is expected to provide what is missing. To improve engagement, experts suggest that management address the reasons in very thematic and programmatic ways. They are told to communicate, to inspire, to involve people. Various ‘cures’ offered for low engagement include addressing:

- employee perceptions of job importance
- clarity of job expectations
- career advancement opportunities
- recognition and regular dialogue with superiors
- quality of working relationships
- perception of, and alignment with, the ethos of the organization

However, perhaps senior management and the organization can’t bear all the responsibility. Not shouldn’t, just can’t. Employers do have a clear responsibility to provide appropriate working conditions and fair compensation, and most do this well. However, it is absurd to expect management to be wholly responsible for

employee engagement, especially for characteristics such as ‘employee perception’. The burden of responsibility for increasing employee engagement, in fact, should lie with the individual employee. This is where the leverage is located in dealing with the condition of disengagement. Every employee must take responsibility for his or her own work experience. Admittedly, it is a radical notion that individuals could, or even should, be responsible for their workplace experience, particularly when most have abdicated the quality of their own work experience to the organization. We propose that we as employees are responsible for our own perceptions; we have a choice about our interpretations. Much of what we consider to be objective fact is actually an interpretation

### II. EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION

Our experiences at work create emotional responses that we then interpret. The combination of experience and interpretation results in an empowering experience, a neutral experience, or a disempowering experience. This means that each experience can leave employees in one of three relationships with their work: a relationship that empowers (the fully engaged), an ambivalent relationship, (the moderately engaged) or a disempowered relationship (the actively disengaged). Engaged employees consider themselves empowered, and so tend to treat work in generative and constructive ways. Disengaged employees tend to take destructive actions. Moderately engaged employees vacillate between passive involvement to behaving passive-aggressively, failing to intervene when it would make a difference.

Picture what your work experience would look like if most of your colleagues cared about the future of their organization, completed their obligations with full conviction, and even invested a little discretionary effort. Even when not employed in an ideal role, even when the circumstances of the organization are challenging, doing excellent work can be its own reward. Employees who withhold their best work tend to develop weak bonds to their organization, which leads to lower productivity and lower retention. The combination of weak bonding, low productivity, and low retention creates a vicious cycle that has real cost for both the organization and the individual. We are suggesting that raising employee engagement may require a grassroots movement, one in which employees partner with management in treating the condition.

### III. TAKING INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Most jobs require that we deal with three distinct types of tasks. Distinguishing between them and learning how to deal with them as unique undertakings gives us greater choice, and with that comes the possibility of taking more responsibility for our experience of being at work. As we saw earlier in the list of reasons for low engagement, not having a choice causes disengagement, e.g., being at the mercy of pay decisions or significant change. If we can restore choice, we have a chance to alter our relationship with our own engagement. The three distinct types of tasks comprise the work we are expected to do, the work that is unexpected, and finally, the seemingly never-ending job of integrating the unexpected workload with the expected.

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### Expected work

This is what our job description says we are paid to do, including the added responsibilities driven by circumstances, such as changes in head count or responsibilities that our boss expects us to fulfill. While some enjoy the routine, for others, this type of work can seem ordinary or lackluster, and may be a source of annoyance and dissatisfaction.

### Unexpected work

This is the work that no one anticipates; it requires attention and time that was almost certainly reserved for other matters. Here, someone else’s problem has become your emergency. Some may appreciate the challenge and urgency, but for others, the disruption can be the source of anger, frustration, or at the very least, can impede the completion of expected work.

### Integration

This is the unification of the unexpected with the expected. Time and resources remain constant, so doing the work of both the expected and unexpected requires that we negotiate to feel some relief. We also must make compromises, such as working late to meet critical deadlines for which no relief could be obtained. Here is where we confront a familiar internal voice that says; “It shouldn’t be this way!” And yet, this is the way of work.

How do we deal with each of these domains of work, and what choices do we have in each? By understanding how to work best within each of them, we can see the points of leverage for increasing choice, and consequently, engagement.

## IV. MASTERING THE UNEXPECTED

When dealing with the unexpected, the basic choices are to react or adapt. To react is to behave in response to an external stimulus, usually negatively. To adapt is to modify in response to the stimulus, to become adjusted, or to make it suitable for a new use. We can create two different cycles here: vicious or virtuous. In a vicious cycle, two or more events become self-reinforcing and produce detrimental results. It is a closed system maintained by a negative feedback loop linking the cycles. ‘Negative feedback loop’ is fancy talk for gossip, saying disempowering things about our coworkers, executives, or the organization. You can probably already see the seeds of disengagement here.

By contrast, a virtuous cycle has favorable results. A virtuous cycle’s feedback loop empowers coworkers, the boss, and the organization by acknowledging their contributions and appreciating their commitments, even in the face of challenging circumstances. In the case of both a virtuous cycle and a vicious one, each iteration reinforces the previous one, so the more often we empower and acknowledge others, the more likely those behaviors are to become the norm. At the same time, the more often we engage in gossip and other behaviors characteristic of low engagement, the more power we give to that condition.

## V. GOING BEYOND THE EXPECTED

Of course, we need to deliver what is expected of us. But as in each

domain, we have a choice; here it is between doing the bare minimum and going beyond. Creation and innovation can be an important part of most jobs, not just in scientific and technological research. They can be about finding new possibilities for improving workflow, processes, or even our own experience. It may seem that we would need to be already engaged to even consider this as a course of action, but again, this is about making choices. Making this choice requires a self-generating relationship with our commitments, rather than a dependency on our organizations. Bringing creativity and innovation to our work allows for excellence, which isn’t just a gift to our organizations; it’s a gift to ourselves as well.

## VI. NEGOTIATE AND COMPROMISE

Negotiation is really just a conversation. It’s based in requests (asking for something), promises (what you can count on me for), proposals (seeking alignment), invitations (inclusion), and making offers (providing something).<sup>2</sup> Compromise is about putting our commitments ahead of our expectations, being willing to give up something to have our commitment fulfilled. We all have expectations that are unmet. When these unmet expectations shape our experience of work, we are often disappointed, which can lead to disengagement. When our commitments shape our experience at work, we have room for compromise; perhaps we did not achieve all that we expected, but what we did achieve is consistent with our commitments.

If we’re going to insist on having our expectations met in exchange for being engaged at work, then there is little chance to improve engagement. First of all, a job in which we consistently meet expectation would probably become boring. Imagine a baseball game in which every hit is a home run; while it would be exciting at first, eventually it would become monotonous. Our jobs and responsibilities become interesting when they include challenges, and meeting challenges requires engagement. Maybe it’s time to move beyond thinking that engagement is our employer’s responsibility, and for us to begin to partner with our organizations by making choices about how we are going to engage.



**MEL TOOMEY** is the Founding Partner of Generative Leadership Group, and the designer of an accredited Master’s Degree in Organizational Leadership. He holds an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters for his contributions to establishing leadership as a profession. He serves as Scholar in Residence at The Graduate Institute in Bethany, Connecticut, where he works to advance his methodology for rapid leader development.



As GLG’s VP of Communications, **ELISA MASELLI** focuses on capturing clients’ ideas and language in ways that speak to their needs. She consults in the areas of corporate communication, cultural integration and change leadership, and lives in Somerville, N.J. She can be reached at: [elisa\\_maselli@glg.net](mailto:elisa_maselli@glg.net).