Causes and cures of team disengagement

Collaboration and team engagement are more important than ever for corporate performance – not to mention national levels of productivity. Yet employee engagement remains a conundrum too many organisations are failing to solve.

The problem of how to get employees more engaged is particularly focused on teams, at a time when organizations are becoming less hierarchical, more egalitarian and collaborative, with performance now often being measured at the team level rather than that of the individual.

A new research into barriers to engagement at the team level, from Ashridge Executive Education at Hult International Business School, reveals different nuances to disengagement that undermine the engagement effort.

The study, which involved 195 participants from 28 teams across seven industry sectors, shows that labelling teams 'engaged' or 'disengaged' is misleading. Instead, four different levels or 'zones' of engagement emerge from the research:

Zone of Contentment (21% of teams studied). Contented teams don't push themselves. They never go 'above and beyond,' happy, instead, to do the minimum and go home. On average, members of these teams may be older than members of other teams and as a result of this longevity, they may just be coasting till retirement.

Zone of Disengagement (32% of teams). A high level of mistrust is one of the distinguishing characteristics of disengaged teams. There is infighting between team members, who often form into warring cliques; team members don't feel valued and respected; and a blame culture permeates the team. The leaders of these teams, often imperious leaders who do not listen to others and exhibit volatile behaviour, bear a major portion of the blame for the negative team environment.

Zone of Pseudo-Engagement (21% of teams). True teamwork is absent in these teams. Instead, team members play the system for their benefit, for example, by filling their time with busy work to appear to be engaged and active. They also 'manage up' – doing what it takes to garner the team leader's favour. Team leaders themselves are also more focused on their own success (ingratiating themselves with executives, for example) than on the success of the team. This zone is especially nefarious since seemingly proactive team behaviours can disguise the negative team climate.

Zone of Engagement (25% of teams). Team members support each other, personally and professionally. They work together and actively seek solutions. They feel empowered and valued by their leaders and each other. They go above and beyond, and they have fun doing it. Team leaders, set high standards, support their employees to enable their success, and display their respect for their employees. As a result, these teams are deeply committed and connected to each other, which leads to superior performance.

What can be done to influence team engagement?

The researchers suggest the following actions leaders or organizations can take in the different zones:

Teams in the Zone of Contentment. Through honest conversations, help team members acknowledge that they are in this zone. Perhaps varying work, introducing new projects or bringing in new blood may make a change. If change is not possible, because of age or attitudes, use the team accordingly, for example in back office functions where routine is as important as initiative.

Teams in the Zone of Disengagement. The team leader is often a major cause of problems and should be replaced with team leaders who demonstrate emotional stability and strong people skills. Work also with team members, giving them more autonomy, offering regular and consistent

feedback, and treating all team members equally. Remember, disengaged teams have rarely been consulted and appreciated; any steps in this direction should help.

Teams in the Zone of Pseudo-Engagement. Set team targets and explicitly reward teamwork: team members must learn that the success of the team, not the individual, is paramount. Team members should understand that 'looking good' individually at the expense of the team is not valued or rewarded. Also, strengthen the connection between team members by co-developing a shared purpose. Connectivity initiatives, such as social activities, can also help.

Teams in the Zone of Engagement. Although this team is performing at a high level, leaders should not get complacent. Set new challenges to excite team members, share and rotate leadership to foster distributed leadership, ensure regular feedback to keep individuals and the team growing, and celebrate success consistently.

In general, ensuring that people are given challenging and varied work, that they feel they can trust their colleagues, and that they can trust and respect their leader is essential in fostering engaged teams. In addition, the researchers warn that leaders should use of engagement surveys carefully, as they do not always reveal the whole picture of engagement.

The research was conducted by Ashridge Executive Education at Hult International Business School in association with Oracle and the UK government's Engage for Success.

Read the original research paper here: [Shades of Grey: An Exploratory Study of Engagement in Work Teams. Amy Armstrong, Sharon Olivier, Sam Wilkinson.](#) *Engage for Success/Ashridge Executive Education/Oracle study*