

# Cracking the Curiosity Code

*The Key to Unlocking Human  
Potential*

*Diane Hamilton, PhD*

*Chapter 5*  
**Curiosity and Engagement**

Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement.  
Daniel H. Pink

The term “engagement” could be misleading, especially in the context of this chapter.

Generally thought of as an individual’s level of enthusiasm for their job, in this context, employee engagement is about one’s emotional commitment to the organization and its goals. So then we ask:

- How engaged are we in our current jobs?
- How engaged are our employees in theirs?
- How committed are they to their company and its goals?

The questions don’t stop there.

- What actions can we take to re-engage the unengaged?
- Why is the issue of employee engagement so important?
- What is the link between engagement and curiosity?

I launched our quest to understand the issue of engagement in the workplace in my interview with Kevin Sheridan, a leading consultant in the field of employee engagement and author of *Building a Magnetic Culture*.

Sheridan cited a Gallup survey that concluded that “Dis-engaged employees and turnover cost companies over \$500 billion per year.” According to Sheridan, that’s the massive amount of money companies lose in the form of employee disinterest, lost productivity, attrition, recruiting, retraining, and other costs associated with employee disengagement every year.

Citing numbers from multiple studies and surveys, Sheridan categorized employees into three buckets: actively engaged, ambivalent, or actively dis-engaged. Then he stated that those in the ambivalent bucket constitute about sixty percent of our

workforce with another fifteen percent in the actively dis-engaged bucket.

These numbers mean that roughly three quarters of the U.S. workforce is either marginally engaged or completely unengaged in their jobs and the growth of their companies.

Based on this assessment, America's workplace consists of more zombies than innovators and go-getters. Sheridan likens it to the walking dead.

\*\*\*

Consider the influence of another radio show guest, Doug Conant, former CEO at Campbell's Soup.

Doug's story is included in many of the courses I teach. He is credited with turning around a poorly engaged culture by doing a multitude of things, including writing personal notes. When I asked him if he wrote to all his employees, he responded, "We went back and did the math. I wrote ten to twenty a day, six days a week, religiously, for fifty-two weeks a year. We did the math and at a minimum, it was 30,000 notes to Campbell employees. It felt like more.

"Because we only had 20,000 employees, virtually everybody in the company had a note or two from me. That includes executive assistants and receptionists pinned in their cubicle or desk somewhere. I acknowledged something they'd done to help us move the company forward," said Conant.

Take a moment to reflect on your company's situation. Where do your employees fall on the spectrum of being fully engaged versus totally disengaged? What's the effect of these numbers on your

company in lost productivity, attrition, recruiting, and training new employees?

What is the burden of your company's managers to motivate employees and keep them focused on the tasks at hand?

In 1996, with the automation revolution in its infancy, company leaders were preoccupied with things such as corporate reengineering and massive layoffs to improve productivity. This was noted in *The Loyalty Effect*, a book by Senior Consultant at the Bain Company, Frederick F. Reichheld.<sup>i</sup>

Reichheld wrote about working with a team of fellow consultants to calculate the bottom-line effect of companies losing customers (over half in less than five years), losing employees (more than half every four years), and losing investors (roughly half every year).

Reichheld's objective was to calculate the cumulative costs of those losses, to understand why they were occurring, and to determine what could be done to reverse such an alarming trend. He examined other companies that were not experiencing those losses, including Toyota Lexus, State Farm, USAA, Chick-Fil-A, and John Deere. It became important to understand the practices these companies used that made the difference.

What he found was engagement, practices to ensure that a company's customers, employees, and investors were actively engaged in the success of the company and its employees. The practices uncovered that affected levels of engagement included compensation and related practices and benefits. But the causes went far beyond these to include training, career development, and recognition and retention practices.

Reichheld also discovered that corporate reengineering and layoffs had done little to yield gains in corporate performance. He concluded that the massive disruptions corporations hoped would improve their efficiency through their reengineering and layoffs had the exact opposite effect on morale, attrition, and productivity.

In contrast, the author found that companies such as the insurer USAA were achieving far greater yields than others by investing in their workforces. Employee training, career development, and recognition programs were cited as major factors that caused USAA to increase its productivity a hundred times with only a fivefold increase in its workforce.

Reichheld summarized, USAA “invests in employment and compensation policies that make their employees *want* to stay and produce.”

Some twenty years after the initial publication of *The Loyalty Effect*, technologies have improved, and business practices have evolved and changed. Yet Kevin Sheridan, in *Building a Magnetic Culture*, cited the same formula that Reichheld found two decades earlier. The issue of poor employee engagement continues to separate top-performing companies from the also-rans.

\*\*\*

In today’s world, exactly what is employee engagement, especially as the workplace continues its migration from the Baby Boomer culture to that of Gen Xers and Millennials?

Sheridan cited three simple factors:

- 1) Recognition
- 2) Career development

### 3) Employee relationships with supervisors

Millennials, Sheridan said, love feedback. They look for compliments regarding their work as many as twelve to fourteen times a day. Baby boomers climbed the corporate ranks in a very different time and culture. They neither expected that level of feedback in their own work nor do they feel compelled as managers to provide that feedback to their Millennial employees.

\*\*\*

Appreciation is a wonderful thing. It makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well.

Voltaire

“Suck it up,” said Sheridan. If you cannot provide feedback to your employees fourteen times per day, you should at least target six to eight times a day. And it’s not about being nice; it’s about retaining talent and increasing productivity.

Sheridan also cited career development as being equally critical. Employees are eager to learn, grow, and expand their horizons, and the companies that provide a robust career development program will excel.

The third driver the author cited is the employees’ relationship with their immediate supervisors. How many of us actively engage in our company’s performance if we don’t like the person we work for? Sheridan explained that this is not about the issue of likability; it’s about human nature.<sup>ii</sup>

Another proponent of employee engagement I interviewed is Dr. Bob Nelson. A consultant on the subject to literally hundreds of companies, he has authored twenty-nine books on the topic,

including *1501 Ways to Motivate Employees* and *The Management Bible*.<sup>iii</sup>

Nelson stated that the key to engagement is recognition. Echoing the same message as Sheridan, he said that employees (especially Gen Xers) look for constant recognition.

Similar to the sentiments Sheridan expressed, this practice wreaks havoc on many baby boomer managers who weren't trained to provide that level of constant feedback.

“Search for moments of positive achievements,” Nelson advised, “even small achievements, and recognize them immediately. Tomorrow or next week is too late. You will have lost the moment. Delayed recognition could even have a negative impact.”

The author went on to share stories and anecdotes that demonstrated the bottom-line virtues of employee engagement and teaming and cited his experiences characterized by the African proverb *Embutu (or Ubuntu)*, roughly meaning, “I am because we are.”

The 2008 world champion Boston Celtics embraced the same philosophy and even have the term engraved on their championship rings.

\*\*\*

### ***Management Practices to Attract and Retain Talent***

Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, management consultants for the Gallup Organization, conducted an extensive study to find the best management practices that attract and retain talent and achieve high levels of productivity. They ask questions such as, “Should a good manager be able to identify good talent? Or should



a good manager be able to groom talent? What prevents employee attrition, better pay, or better management?”

Their massive study was conducted over twenty-five years and compiled into *First, Break All the Rules*.

Commonalities they found in high-performing managers were, first, they did not hesitate to break all the rules of conventional management practices, as the title of their book suggests. Second, they placed a great deal of emphasis on the care, well-being, and development of their employees.

Re-enforcing Sheridan's third driver that employees should have a close relationship and are liked by their co-workers, Buckingham and Coffman concluded:

In today's tight labor markets, companies compete to find and keep the best employees, using pay, benefits, promotions, and training. But these well-intentioned efforts often miss the mark. The front-line manager is the key to attracting and retaining talented employees. No matter how generous its pay or how renowned its training, the company that lacks great front-line managers will suffer.<sup>iv</sup>

The authors further explained how the best managers select employees based on talent as opposed to skills or experience. Also, they:

- set clear expectations;
- define the right outcomes rather than the right steps or process to follow;
- motivate people;
- build on each person's unique strengths rather than trying to fix weaknesses; and

- find the right fit for each person as opposed to believing promotion to management is presumed to be the next rung on the organizational ladder.

Citing both corporate and individual performance metrics, Buckingham and Coffman concluded that the top-performing companies all excelled at employee engagement. They can determine an employee's commitment to their company by asking twelve key questions, such as, do I know what is expected of me at work? And, do my opinions count?

In 2018, a *Harvard Business Review* study revealed that while eighty-three percent of executives believe curiosity is encouraged at their company, just fifty-two percent of other employees feel the same way. Leaders who recognize this are more likely to encourage their teams to explore and less likely to make false assumptions.<sup>v</sup>

Kevin Kruse is another popular spokesperson on engagement and the author of multiple books on the topic, including *Employee Engagement*.

In my interview of him, he lauded the value of Buckingham and Coffman's work but concluded that twelve questions were too difficult for managers to remember. Instead, he sought to simplify the questionnaire. Working with researchers, he distilled the twelve questions into four.

- 1) Growth: Do my employees feel they are growing in their work?
- 2) Recognition: Are they being recognized for their work?
- 3) Trust: Do they trust that they and the company are on the right track?

4) Communication: Are there means by which to engage in those discussions?

Kruse cited simple, inexpensive examples of how to engage employees in these questions. He emphasized catching them in laudable or even coachable moments to cite their behavior and let them know they are valued. He said that employee engagement is neither expensive nor time consuming when done well.

Using these four questions, are your employees actively engaged in their work? If the answer is no, then what can be done to engage the ambivalent or the actively disengaged?

Sheridan (*Building a Magnetic Culture*) offered a sampling of three actions that could be taken:

- Volunteer them for assignments or committees.
- Mix them with workers who are actively engaged.
- Consider moving them into a role more suitable to their skill set, as they may be in the wrong job.

So, what is the relationship between engagement and curiosity? Simply stated, curiosity is the engine that propels employee engagement, by asking questions such as:

- How can I improve in my job?
- In what ways can I make this a better company?
- What are my competitors doing?
- What are the best practices in my industry?
- What do thought leaders say?

It is your curiosity that will help you find the answers to each of these questions. Curiosity leads to motivation, which leads to engagement.

How engaged are your employees? The answer lies in the question, “How curious are your employees about their work?”

I am engaged; therefore, I am curious.

Anonymous

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Loyalty-Effect-Hidden-Profits-Lasting/dp/1578516870>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Building-Magnetic-Culture-Productive-Workforce-ebook/dp/B005NASHM0>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/1501-Reward-Employees-Nelson-Ph-D/dp/0761168788>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/First-Break-All-Rules-Differently-ebook/dp/B00HL2S4LW>

<sup>v</sup> <https://hbr.org/2018/09/research-83-of-executives-say-they-encourage-curiosity-just-52-of-employees-agree>