

HOW ACTION LEARNING CAN IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT AT WORK

Do you know the percentage of people who consider themselves engaged at work? Take a guess before you continue reading.

According to Gallup World Poll with data collected in 155 countries between 2014 and 2016, only 15% of the workers consider themselves engaged at work, that is, who feel committed to their work and motivated to be highly productive for being involved and enthusiastic about the work they do.

Gallup also studied the positive impact of engaged workers on business and presented in the State of the Global Workplace report indicators such as: lower absenteeism rate, higher productivity, lower turnover rate, lower rate of quality incidents, fewer security incidents, positive impact on sales, higher profitability.



Many programs are designed for organizations to improve employee engagement, but effectiveness can be low or even negative if people believe that the goal is only to improve engagement survey results. Engagement occurs only when workers realize that the company and leaders really care and want to provide an organizational environment that enhances productivity, as well as the connections

among employees and the general well-being.

Studies, articles and researches have been conducted to help organizations and leaders improve employee engagement as this is one of the factors that help organizations to survive and thrive.

Fred Kofman, Ph.D. in Economics, author of "Metamanagement" and other books, was the Executive Development Vice President at LinkedIn and is currently the Leadership Development Advisor at Google, invites us to see the business world as a three-dimensional space. For him, disengagement at work is the result of inattention to the human dimensions, since organizations usually seek solutions in only one of them: the materialistic dimension.



These are the dimensions:

> "It" is the impersonal and materialistic dimension. It focuses on tasks, systems, processes, resource allocation and responsibilities. It refers to the organization's ability to make its members work rationally to achieve their goals.

> "We" is the interpersonal dimension. It includes the relationship between individuals, their interactions, the quality of their connections and the type of community they create. It involves the organization's ability to have its members working collaboratively toward their goals.

> "I" is the personal dimension. It covers the values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, inspirations, well-being, sense of purpose and happiness of the individual. It comprises the organization's ability to have members who are committed and enthusiastic about achieving their goals.

These 3 dimensions can be noted during the Action Learning process. How does this happen? Let's explore each of the dimensions and give real examples of how they can be observed in the practice of Action Learning.

"It" dimension is well worked by a leader when they establish goals, strategies, and roles clearly, as well as provide access to knowledge, resources and to people who are necessary for the employees to get the job done. In the materialistic dimension, managers are trained to have efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness.



However, when an organization has a low quotient in this dimension, the employees' efforts are misdirected and conflicting because they are disorganized and poorly equipped, resulting in disengagement and low energy.

Efficient performance is essential for business survival and the "It" dimension focuses on it.

In Action Learning, the group has a task: to solve an urgent, important and real problem. The roles and responsibilities of every participant, including the coach, are explained in the beginning of each meeting and can be reminded whenever it is necessary. In a multinational company, 3 multifunctional groups worked on their major issues that prevented them from achieving their goal. One of the participants asked me, their coach: "What do you think is the best thing for us to do?" To which I replied with another question, since the Action Learning coach only uses questions, "Who can remind us of the second ground rule?". At that time, the group recalled the rule and comprehended it from their own experience.

Although vital, organizational results of the "It" dimension are not enough to engage people. As business success depends on the commitment of the people who care deeply about their work, we will investigate the two human dimensions: "We" and "I".



The "We" dimension refers to the quality of interactions and relationships among members of the organization. Human beings are social and interpersonal success is necessary for survival in business as well: if people do not cooperate and do not respect each other, the organization fails. This dimension deals with organizational behavior

and may seem uncomfortable and unfamiliar to the ones who have been trained only in "It" dimension because it takes care of aspects such as group cohesion, solidarity, trust and mutual respect. The focus is to create a group that feels they are working together to achieve bold goals.

A successful leader in the "We" dimension creates a collaborative environment and is attentive to the emotional elements of engagement at work. When an organization has a low "We" quotient, the efforts dissipate in politics, management of egos and difficult issues are avoided.

In Action Learning, the "We" dimension is practiced as the group collaborates to achieve a goal: to solve a problem in approximately 2 hours and improve their own performance as a group, taking ownership of the problem and their performance. The use of questions also leverages this dimension as asking questions demands listening closely to others, and this behavior impacts the participants' relationships. Receiving a question is often perceived as a gift: an opportunity to express your opinion or knowledge or experience, making the recipient feel important and useful. The group is enabled to develop trust in a safe environment with no hierarchy and with the "authorization" to not know (they are not experts in the subject), to ask and to share their vulnerabilities.



During a leadership development program for the managers team of an NGO, one of them revealed the problem "I do not have a backup colleague who can cover for me during my vacation", they realized that even if the team was small, they acted separately and were unaware of each other's activities and concerns. At the end of the meeting, each participant offered to back up key activities in other departments.

Now let us examine the "I" dimension, which refers to the need for personal fulfillment, self-realization, self-transcendence. It also comprises personal growth, meaning and happiness. Everyone in the organization, regardless of their position or where they stand in the hierarchy, wants to feel whole, that their life and contribution are important. When they feel that way, people are more productive and creative, resilient in the face of setbacks and enthusiastic about opportunities. They believe in themselves and in their ability to respond appropriately to the circumstances of life, connect with others, and deliver excellent results. To have the best of the employees, the organization needs to offer meaningful engagement opportunities.

When an organization's "I" quotient is low, employees become disengaged, put less energy into their activities, and see work as giving them just a little more than a salary.



In Action Learning, the "I" dimension is met by giving each participant the autonomy to elect the leadership skill he wants to develop during the session, therefore deciding on the focus of his personal and professional growth. Each participant contributes to the solution of the problem with their experience, opinion and also with their doubts and their not-knowing. Being part of the group generates self-knowledge about their own values,

behaviors, assumptions, beliefs, actions, thoughts and feelings. Each participant is invited by the Action Learning coach to create meaning for their participation, development goal and learning.

In a communication and conflict resolution development program, by the end of the Action Learning meeting, one of the participants mentioned that she had never thought about using questions during the meetings with her team, and in the following session, she reported having used and incorporated them.

While working on all the 3 dimensions, organizations promote employee engagement by improving how members of the organization work together, how they relate to each other, and how they support one another's well-being. Action Learning provides real experience of the 3 dimensions simultaneously, valuing both "We" and "I" human dimensions and the materialistic dimension "It", therefore making people feel more engaged and enthusiastic about their work.

References

Gallup. 2017. State of the Global Workplace. Canada, Gallup

Kofman, F. 2018. The Meaning Revolution, USA, Currency.

Macquardt, M.; Banks, S.; Cauwelier, P, Ng, C.S. 2018. Optimizing the Power of Action Learning, 3rd ed. Boston, Nicholas Brealey.

Pink, D. Drive: the surprising truth about what motivates us. New York, Riverhead Books.

/published 2020