



How to Improve Employee Motivation, Commitment, Productivity, Well-Being and Safety

By L. Scott Kimball and Carl E. Nink

“**P**eople are our most valuable asset” is one of the oldest clichés in business today. Yet it is true, and evidence exists that organizations worldwide are struggling to meet production and service demands knowing that these outcomes are directly dependent on the ability, commitment and skill of a work force that is predominantly disengaged. According to Gallup Organization research, only 29 percent of employees are motivated and energized.¹ What, then, is happening to the other 71 percent?

For as long as organizational dynamics have been studied, at least in the past century, researchers have been struggling to understand how the many aspects of human relations in the workplace affect bottom-line performance. Organizations must consider the nature of employee engagement, because this one variable is likely to predict an organization’s ability to achieve high results with productivity, profitability, customer service, staff retention and workplace safety.²

Job satisfaction is critical to maintaining an engaged work force. A 2005 report of the Conference Board (based on a national survey) shows that a growing number of employees are unhappy with their jobs.³ Dissatisfaction crosses all ages and income levels. According to the survey, just

more than half of all workers earning more than \$50,000 are satisfied with their jobs. However, only 14 percent are very satisfied. Of those earning less than \$15,000, about 45 percent are satisfied.

The Conference Board report shows that employees overall are least satisfied with the fringe benefits and promotional and bonus pay policies. The greatest decline in satisfaction occurs with workers ages 35 to 44 (60.9 percent to 49.2 percent), the report indicates. The study also found that four in 10 workers feel disconnected from their employers and two-thirds of the workers are not motivated or do not identify with the agency mission. In addition, the study indicates that one-fourth of all employees are not productive and are simply there to get a paycheck.

Satisfaction with pay is less powerful as a predictor of job satisfaction or employee engagement and is less likely to predict whether an employee stays or goes. Employees may join a company because of its generous pay scale or lucrative benefits package, but how long they stay and how productive they are is determined by the relationship with their immediate supervisor much more than by their satisfaction with pay. Gallup research provides 12 questions that give managers a working management model to increase the level of engagement of their employees.⁴ The Gallup research indicates employees are “engaged” when:

- They know what is expected of them;
- They have the right materials and equipment to do their work correctly;
- They have the opportunity to do what they do best every day;
- In the past seven days, they have received recognition or praise for doing good work;
- Their supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about them as a person;
- There is someone at work who encourages their development;

- Their opinions seem to count;
- The mission of the company makes them feel like their work is important;
- Their co-workers are committed to doing quality work;
- They have a best friend at work — someone to unconditionally rely upon;
- In the past six months, they have talked with someone about their progress; and
- They have opportunities to learn and grow.

High scores on the 12 questions indicate the presence of deep worker “engagement,” which is the condition that engenders satisfaction and other emotional outcomes like loyalty and pride.

The Impact of Employees With Low Engagement

Managers should be concerned about the devastating costs of low employee engagement. Gallup estimates that actively disengaged employees — the least productive — cost the American economy up to \$350 billion per year in lost productivity, including absence, illness and other problems that result when employees are not engaged.⁵ A recent Gallup survey found that actively disengaged workers are absent from work 3.5 more days a year than other workers — or 86.5 million days in all.⁶

Engagement also affects the physical and psychological well-being of employees. The recent Employee Engagement Index survey points out that 62 percent of engaged employees believe their work lives positively affect their health, while 54 percent of actively disengaged employees feel their work life is negatively affecting their health.⁷

With costs for health care skyrocketing, the ability to control costs through investments in strategies to improve employee engagement could create a large payoff. More important for those involved in the stressful work of corrections, 78 percent of engaged employees

derive psychological well-being from their work life, compared with 48 percent of employees categorized as not engaged and only 15 percent of those actively disengaged.

The way to encourage people to become part of an organization is through relationships. Employees who feel disconnected emotionally from their co-workers and supervisor do not feel committed to their work. As such, correctional staff who tend to hang back and do the minimum because they do not believe anyone cares also become vulnerable to inmate games and setups.

How to Keep Employees Engaged

First, managers need to demonstrate a sincere sense of caring about employees and what is important to them. Managers can help employees refocus on the demands of their roles and on the skills, knowledge and talents they bring to their jobs. The manager who takes time to discuss employee strengths and how these can make a difference forges essential ties and connections that lead to employee commitment.

Engaged workers stay with the organization longer and are more committed to quality and growth than are those who Gallup describes as nonengaged and actively disengaged workers. For employees to engage and commit to their employer, they need:

- A strong relationship with their manager;
- Clear communication from their manager;
- A clear path set for concentrating on what they do best;
- Strong co-worker relationships;
- A strong commitment to their co-workers so they will take risks and stretch for excellence; and
- Opportunities to learn and grow.

Worker engagement depends on managers striving to build a strong foundation for strong engagement.

Most of the time, having meaningful conversations that strengthen commitment can interrupt the disengagement process. Great managers clearly define and consistently communicate goals and objectives to their team members and are always soliciting ideas and feedback from them. And when a team member has a problem, a great manager will keep the communication open, honest and direct, even when communicating a difficult message.

What Separates Great Managers From the Rest

The Gallup Organization found that great bosses maximize the potential of workers by not trying to change them. Gallup believes fixing weaknesses is a waste of time. Rather, great bosses match employees with jobs that fit their strengths.

For those employees who are engaged, The Gallup Organization found employee retention up 44 percent, safety (accidents, etc.) down by 50 percent and productivity up by 50 percent, all of which are important in facility operations.⁸ Engaged employees:

- Use their talents every day;
- Consistently demonstrate high performance;
- Are naturally innovative and strive for efficiency;
- Intentionally build supportive relationships;
- Are clear about desired outcomes;
- Have emotional commitment to what they do;

- Display high energy and enthusiasm;
- Never run out of things to do and create positive things to act upon;
- Broaden what they do and build on it; and
- Commit to their work group, company and role in the organization.

Measuring Employee Engagement

The Gallup Organization went through many variations of questions during the course of its work with approximately 3 million employees. Through various rigorous confirmatory analyses, Gallup settled on the most powerful 12 questions to form its survey — referred to as the “Q-12.”⁹ This survey measures employee engagement on a five-point scale indicating weak-to-strong agreement. The analyses of survey results show those organizations with high Q-12 scores experience lower turnover and better teamwork, productivity and other manifestations of superior performance.¹⁰

Measuring Staff Emotional Engagement

Getting the team of correctional staff prepared for and committed to the formal survey process is important. The process involves administering the survey, statistical analysis to provide results and systematic presentation of the results to facility leaders (both security and nonsecurity staff) in a one-day seminar designed to be a motivating and empowering experience. This has been seen as an extraordinarily ben-

eficial process for the facility. The survey’s purpose is to provide insight into what is driving employee engagement and, therefore, facility performance. The seminar is powerful, usually resulting in much team unity, shared aims in goals and clarity of direction. Regardless of the outcome, the process is a positive one that acts as a starting point in taking the organization to new levels of performance.

Survey results challenge the conventional view on the determinants of worker morale. Many are inclined to think that objective work conditions determine job contentment; some might argue that the challenges of working in a correctional environment leads to employees feeling less engaged than professionals with a sunny corner office. That view is flat-out wrong, according to Gallup results. Workers experiencing the same pay, intolerable noise, physical hardship, speed of the correctional environment and so forth can manifest abysmal or exceptionally high engagement scores. Worker engagement depends on managers striving to build a strong foundation for strong engagement. For this reason, effective management is the focus of the one-day training. Correctional leaders explore new alternatives to build an engaged work force.

What goes into that foundation depends on local conditions and circumstances — the view from the unit level. Efficiency, in this view, largely depends on the distinctive culture of small teams and shifts.

Management & Training Corp. (MTC) is an international private contractor that manages correctional facilities and Job Corps centers. MTC frequently uses staff surveys to create a more positive work environment that enhances

opportunities for personal growth and development. MTC correctional facilities are believed to be the first to use a formal survey instrument regarding employee emotional engagement.

While measuring correctional staff emotional engagement, in addition to basic demographic questions, MTC has added questions to gather employee feedback on aspects of organizational culture such as trust, general job satisfaction, staffing, communication, leadership and management. These additional questions provide insight into potential correlations between these areas and employee engagement. MTC staff at the Central North Correctional Centre (in Ontario) and the Lake Erie Correctional Institution and North Coast Correctional Treatment Facility (both in Ohio) completed the surveys.

The data gathered helped facility managers create goals for future improvements. The one-day retreat subsequent to the survey is an integral step in the process of improving employee engagement. Facility leaders develop clear answers on how they can best meet the needs of staff and increase overall productivity in their organization. During the retreat, managers learn they are not alone in the effort to improve the operation. This raises morale. Commitment to each other, the facility and the organization is also renewed.

The potential improvement in employee engagement is heavily determined by the follow up that occurs after the management retreat. Volunteers from the team of managers form a committee responsible for implementing a plan using the determined goals.

Facility leaders, as with most managers, are concerned about the nature of negative feedback. Most important, they want to learn how they can improve working conditions to create a more engaged work force. Displaying survey feedback in graphic format has helped make it easier to interpret and understand.

The Importance Of Surveying Staff

It is important for managers to seriously consider employee input or suffer the costly consequences. With a limited number of engaged employees, many people are working in unhealthy settings with others who have become disenchanted and actively disengaged. These employees are not just unhappy at work. They act out their discontent and sow seeds of negativity at every opportunity. They undermine the work of others. They are not just indifferent to agency goals and mission, they express mistrust and outright animosity.

When they do show up for work, they are counterproductive. Probably many have encountered this negative workplace behavior. These workers walk around the work area with glazed looks or move from place to place stirring up trouble with whining, complaining and even paranoia. Management's failure to act will contribute to the downward spiral. Disengaged employees can cause lost productivity, including absence, illness and other problems that result when workers are unhappy at their workplace.

The good news is that managers have excellent opportunities to grow their number of engaged employees. For great managers, the path toward engaging employees and keeping them engaged begins with asking them what they want and what is important for them to be effective in their roles. These managers develop employees around their strengths. It is clear, given the low productivity and losses resulting from actively disengaged staff, surveying staff and acting on the results to increase employee engagement may be the least expensive path to organizational success.

ENDNOTES

¹ Coffman, C. and G. Gonzalez-Molina. 2002. *Follow this path: How the world's greatest organizations drive growth by unleashing human potential*. New York: Warner Books.

² Buckingham, M. and C. Coffman. 1999. *First, break all the rules: What the world's greatest managers do differently*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

³ HRMS Inc. 2005. U.S. job satisfaction keeps falling, the conference board reports today. *NetAssets*. Retrieved March 10, 2005, from www.hrms-netassets.net/templates/template.asp?articleid=832&zoneid=29.

⁴ Buckingham, M and C. Coffman 1999.

⁵ Crabtree, S. 2005. Engagement keeps the doctor away: A happy employee is a healthy employee, according to a GMJ survey. The Gallup Organization. Retrieved Aug. 19, 2005, from <http://gmj.gallup.com/print/?ci=14500>.

⁶ Krueger, J. and Killham, E. (2005). At work feeling good matters; happy employees are better equipped to handle workplace relationships, stress and change according to the latest GMJ survey [Electronic version]. *Gallup Management Journal*. Available from <http://www.gallup.com/>.

⁷ Crabtree, S. 2005.

⁸ Coffman, C. and G. Gonzalez-Molina. 2002.

⁹ Buckingham, M. and C. Coffman 1999.

¹⁰ Coffman, C. and G. Gonzalez-Molina. 2002.

L. Scott Kimball, Ph.D., is a contract faculty member at Loma Linda University and serves as organizational development director at Management & Training Corp. Carl Nink is executive director of the MTC Institute in Centerville, Utah.