



► Employee engagement begins with individual activity.

# Creating an Employee Engagement Culture

by Paul Vragel, President, 4aBetterBusiness, Inc.

**T**he improved business performance benefits resulting from employee engagement have been documented by many studies. Engaged employees go beyond what is required, find new ways to reduce costs or increase value, and are willing advocates for their companies.

Despite widespread efforts to achieve engagement, however, studies show that 60-70% of employees remain not engaged or actively disengaged. What's going wrong?

## Improving Engagement

One contributing factor is a misunderstanding of how employee engagement actually develops. While engagement is commonly considered from an organization-wide perspective, it does not start as a group activity. Rather, engagement starts with an individual taking an action and making it a habit. As more individuals adopt the engagement-driven activity as habit, the behavior spreads virally and becomes accepted and even expected in the organization. Over time, this creates an engagement-driven culture (see Figure 1, p. 28).

Initiating engagement on an individual basis is routinely dismissed as impractical and inefficient, so many initiatives start on a “mass” basis—large-scale surveys or communications from the leadership about the desire for engagement and commitment. The engagement of individuals never really starts, and the mass communication predictably fails to achieve or sustain the desired mass engagement. Instead, the initial actions to create employee engagement must:

- Build trust
- Start by listening, not telling
- Use the expertise employees already have in their daily work
- Result quickly in tangible actions that address issues and improve outcomes
- Provide the opportunity for reinforcement to form habits

## Engaging 12 Million

To illustrate the possibilities for building from individual activity, consider the real-life case of a large-scale health problem. Cholera causes a significant number of childhood deaths throughout the developing world. One remedy using easily available materials (oral rehydration therapy) was developed and applied in a pilot program that reduced deaths from 30% of victims to just 3.6%—a stunning result.

Many of the affected countries were interested in these outcomes. To introduce this remedy to their populations, they decided on “low-touch,” mass communication programs. It was expected that the life-or-death consequences for their children would be of sufficient interest to engage parents and result in widespread adoption. However, despite the consequences, these countries failed almost entirely to achieve meaningful adoption of the remedy.

After years of widespread failed adoption, one country (Bangladesh) decided to apply a different approach. Instead of mass communication, they decided to introduce the remedy door-to-door in a country of 100 million people, with a target reach group of 12 million. They developed an approach that involved the communication of simple messages on a person-to-person basis. A small team would travel to a village. Individuals from the team would speak directly with every woman in the village about the symptoms of the disease, the remedy's effectiveness, and the method to make the required solution from materials the women already had (salt and brown sugar).

Gradually, the team discovered even more effective methods of working with the women in the village, including having the women make the solution with guidance, rather than simply providing instructions. With some feedback from reinforcement visits, they discovered improved ways to have the women in the village retain the information, and made the remedy's use a habit when disease symptoms were detected.

## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT CULTURE

As the village women saw success with the remedy, they spread the message to others. This viral approach changed the behavior in the villages and achieved widespread adoption of the remedy. Over a 10-year period, the trained teams taught the remedy and solution preparation to more than 12 million mothers. As the teams examined the adoption over a decade and more, they also saw that women who were children at the time of the initial visits were now also using the remedy. This was a strong indicator that the remedy's use had been passed on to the next generation and become part of the culture.

A 30-year follow-up study found that almost 90% of children with the disease were given the remedy. Child deaths in Bangladesh from the disease plummeted more than 80% over a 25-year period. As a recent study by the Gates Foundation and the University of Washington has documented, those countries that continued to try the low-touch, mass-communication approach failed almost entirely.

### Applications for Business

While your business likely doesn't have a population of 12 million, the same principle applies: begin with individuals. In one example, a mid-sized manufacturer was experiencing both quality and delivery issues. Corporate policies sup-



ported engagement, but actual engagement in the organization was limited.

The company changed its focus to begin with action on an individual basis, working in the language of the business and without new training. Based on their knowledge of their own daily work, employees identified over 100 items to change. Using the process-based systems that were simultaneously put in place in the company, most of these suggestions were implemented quickly and employee engagement was ignited.

With the improved change capability from these process-based systems, habits and behavior developed quickly, and the high level of engagement was palpable to customers. Profits improved 30% within six months (without capital investment or layoffs). Within 12 months, the company was able to pursue and achieve its first business with Toyota, a world standard. The employee engagement evident throughout the plant was an important factor in winning this business.

In another example, a mid-sized distributor with value-added and logistics operations was experiencing reduced fill rates, high damage rates, and extended turnaround times on orders. Absenteeism was high, and the primary problem solving method was to discipline the person found to be associated with the problem.

When the company began working with individuals and using their expertise from their daily work, a number of persistent problems were resolved quickly. The fast response developed individual engagement and promoted the habit of ongoing identification of practical ideas for improvement. Employees and management transformed to a process-based way of thinking and acting.

Within months, damage was reduced to its lowest level ever, fill rates increased to over 99%, and the company saw a record number of perfect attendance awards—all evidence of the engagement culture that had developed. The company used the improved performance to win and retain profitable new business from marquee customers. 🌐

For additional information, contact the author at (847) 606-2605 or [pvrangel@4abetterbusiness.com](mailto:pvrangel@4abetterbusiness.com), or visit [www.4abetterbusiness.com](http://www.4abetterbusiness.com).

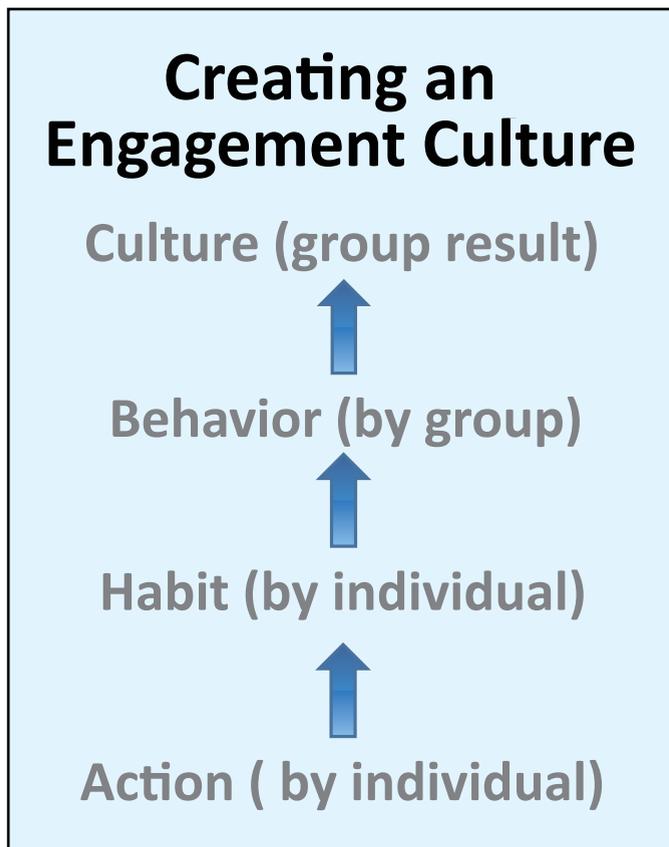


Figure 1. Engagement starts with an individual taking an action and making that action into a habit, which then spreads virally.