

# ENGAGEMENT

## THE NEW ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGE

BY FRAN TREHEARNE AND DAVID OMAN



Organizational change appears to be the only predictable element in leadership today. The scope and nature of change, however, continues to evolve. We have experienced quality management, decentralization and empowerment, self-directed work groups, matrix structures, the quest for employee satisfaction, and the goal of being the employer of choice. Beyond merely satisfying employees, however, lies the far greater challenge of engagement. Engagement is the new organizational imperative and is foundational to making change work. People who are disengaged, who are just going through the motions at work, have little interest in ensuring successful change.

For a number of years demographic projections have suggested that we will be facing extreme labour shortages, particularly in the arena of knowledge workers. The emerging challenge however, is that even when you can enlist employees, they are often not fully engaged in the work that they do. The issue is not so much one of labour shortage, but rather one of "engagement shortage."

While all of us can identify a disengaged employee, it may be much more difficult to recognize the drivers of this behaviour. The disengaged employee is the one who makes no effort to identify or meet your needs... the airline-booking agent who volunteers no alternative routings to ease your travel arrangements, the waiter who just does not make an effort to serve you in a timely fashion, or the civil servant who insists on following policy even when it makes no sense.

Going through the motions, doing the minimum necessary, and hiding behind organizational policy is not just inconvenient, but costly. Organizational losses in productivity alone are huge, but add to that the losses in customer loyalty, market share and ultimately, the ability to attract high value employees, and the real cost is immeasurable.

Disengagement is reaching alarming proportions. Gallup reports that fifty-five per cent of employees in public and private sector organizations in the U.S. are disengaged, doing only what it takes to get by. A further nineteen per cent are actively disengaged and work against the best interests of their organization. This leaves only twenty-six per cent of employees engaged with their work. Research in Canada, while not yet as exhaustive, suggests the situation is not much different.

For over twenty years we have been studying engaging organizations and talking with people about the working conditions that enable them to engage more fully, and have noted a remarkable pattern in their responses. Engagement is largely a function of context.

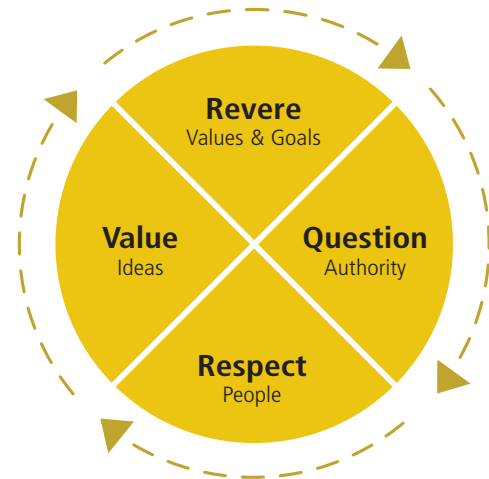
Moving to an engaging culture requires organizations to change the way they do four key things:

### 1. Values and Goals

More engaging organizations REVERE values, goals, and other widely shared understandings. These are the foundation and the principles to which people turn for guidance in times of conflict or confusion. They serve as a bulwark against expediency and are a source of pride and purpose.

### 2. Ideas, Opinions, and Perspectives

More engaging organizations VALUE ideas, opinions, and perspectives. Adequate resources are quickly allocated for development and



implementation of good ideas. Diverse opinions and perspectives influence decisions. Ideas are explored rather than judged.

### 3. People

More engaging organizations RESPECT people. They take people seriously, they don't waste their time. They are trusted. Their contributions and skills are known in the organization, recognized, and regularly called upon. They are provided with the information and tools they require to add value.

### 4. Authority

More engaging organizations have a greater capacity to QUESTION authority without fear of reprisal. Those in positions of power are not always seen as having the best perspective. Policies and procedures are not "written in stone." Taking calculated risks and even making mistakes are seen as means by which learning occurs. So what exactly is the "magic" in this formulation? The four dimensions of engagement working together create the context for people to feel good about the work they do. The new organizational context enables and encourages people to add value. Employees who have a set of values and goals on which they can rely, who know their ideas and opinions are valued, who are respected, and who can question their managers and organizational policies, know they can make a difference.

Engaging organizations are creative and dynamic, flexible in the face of change and act as a magnet for talent. An engaged workforce is the new competitive advantage.

Fran Trehearne has helped countless work groups to rejuvenate themselves and begin finding the kind of novel solutions increasingly required for organizational success. He is a sought-after speaker and coach in the creation of engaging organizations.

David Oman enjoys working with leaders to build cultures that are growth-oriented and flexible in the face of constant change. He is a popular consultant and facilitator who believes in blending theory with practice. David is the principal of the Convergence Group. ([www.convergencegroup.net](http://www.convergencegroup.net))