

Beyond Engagement

by Aaron Smith: December 16, 2015

Typical workforce engagement initiatives focus on unlocking discretionary effort but fail to inspire. The result, too often, is dedicated but exhausted teams. To unlock value creation and innovation, we need to better manage people's energy, and it starts with making conversation part of the organizational fabric.

Since co-founding leadership training provider Juice Inc. in 2003, Brady Wilson's prominent focus has been energy, and more specifically, showing organizations why they need to better manage workforce energy in order to bring about successful initiatives. It is an idea that he says is confirmed by recent discoveries in brain science, chief among them that the executive function of the brain — the driver of value creation and innovation — runs on energy, not on the dedication and commitment that engagement policies seek to create.

For more than two decades, Wilson, author of the new book *Beyond Engagement: A Brain-Based Approach That Blends the Engagement Managers Want with the Energy Employees Need*, has grappled with the issues that short-circuit employee engagement, working with senior leadership teams to build the conditions in which energy can flourish and be sustainable in their organizations.

“Organizations have spent mega-millions on employee engagement pursuits that are producing the very disengagement they hope to fix,” Wilson says. “I regularly encounter great people who are engaged but depleted. They love their organization but hate what it is doing to them. They're committed but consumed by the cause. I live to help people like this.”

ProjectsAtWork recently asked Wilson to share his thoughts and recommendations. Here is a summary of our exchange.

First off, you believe employee engagement efforts are misguided. How so?

Over the last 20 years working with organizations, I have witnessed situations where up to 50 percent of the employee population believe no meaningful outcomes will occur as a result of an engagement survey. This crisis of belief causes acute pain inside well-intentioned leaders who are doing their best to unlock employee engagement.

But it is unfulfilling for employees too. One employee once told me “We talk about engagement all the time. It's like being in a relationship and constantly being asked to talk about the relationship, rather than taking the time to hold hands and walk down the beach.”

Increasingly, I am seeing workplaces full of people who are engaged, but not energized. Sure, employees and managers may be committed and loyal workers: they may come in early, stay late, and work hard in-between — but those workers are also exhausted.

So tired teams are a common problem?

Yes, and what makes this dynamic so compelling is the brain science — when employees are low on energy, the first thing they lose is their executive function. The other parts of their brain can still function in a depleted state — the fight and flight function, the autonomic functions that control the immune system, digestive system, heart rate and balance — but the executive function is metabolically expensive, so the brain shuts it off first.

Why is the brain's executive function important?

The executive function is what gives us the ability to focus our attention, regulate our emotions, think clearly, articulate needs, connect the dots, make great decisions and execute strategies. Clearly these are the power tools of value creation and innovation. Without them, we default to duct-tape fixes, workarounds, reactivity and fire-fighting. We don't have the energy required to get to root cause or address the systemic issues so we're constantly dealing with symptoms. This

hard-wires depletion right into the ecosystem and makes it virtually impossible to sustain employee engagement.

How are engagement policies failing, and what are the consequences?

Many of today's leaders certainly have good intentions where their employees' engagement levels are concerned. But typical engagement initiatives focus on unlocking discretionary effort — that is, getting people to go above and beyond the call of duty. This is virtually impossible without appealing to the human brain. When employees are engaged but lack passion, resilience and excitement, all leaders get in return is dedicated under-performers: people unable to put their best work forward.

In today's competitive marketplace, effort without innovation just won't cut it. The "usual" engagement strategies are not working for this very reason. I still firmly believe that employee engagement is critical for building workplaces where people are dedicated and committed to the organization, and willing to give discretionary effort. However, **employees simply cannot put forward their best work unless they are also full of passion, resilience, verve and excitement.** These things are by-products of energy.

What do organizations and leaders need to do instead?

To create a truly engaged organizational culture, businesses need to focus on both engagement and energy — essentially, moving "beyond engagement" as we know it today. One of the best ways to shift from managing engagement to managing energy is by implementing conversation into the overall organizational fabric. It may sound overly simplistic, but conversation truly creates natural opportunities to unlock insight and possibility in employees' minds. This generates energy, which fuels a great customer experience and sustainable business results.

In fact, brain science shows us that meaningful, face-to-face conversation that demonstrates value, respect and care is a much more effective way to boost employee performance than surveys, town halls, newsletters and departmental action plans.

Can you elaborate on why conversation is so important?

Conversation releases high-performance hormones, boosting the brain's processing power by forming a feel-good energy cocktail of connection, calm, concentration, creativity and curiosity. Conversation also promotes trust and deepens the leader-employee relationship.

In addition, conversation addresses negative beliefs. Brain science shows that it is not our capability but our *belief* in our capability that impacts how effective we are. Leaders who engage in meaningful conversation with teams can identify and address negative beliefs, and create a much greater sense of agency in their people.

Conversation also helps leaders get to know the "backstory" or context behind engagement scores. Rather than jumping to action with broad-brush, one-size-only action plans, a solution that takes individual needs into account honors how the brain operates.

Finally, conversation manifests into partnering relationships, allowing leaders and team members to co-create powerful solutions that both parties are willing to adopt and implement.

How do organizations embed conversation into their operating systems?

Short, frequent "Energy Check" conversations are a proven and effective way leaders can unlock insight and possibility in employees' minds. Conversation syncs with how people think. It can be as simple as asking employees what is energizing them at the moment, and what is depleting their energy. Done systematically, this technique can catch issues before they become calamity-based, saving time in the process.

Think outside the realm of technology. What else within an organization has the potential to engage and energize employees, bring teams closer together, and create a high-performing workforce? Yes, it's conversation. Conversation is what enables all the "apps" in an organization to work. It feeds into and empowers customer service, feedback, coaching, strategy and innovation: all the things that can make a business successful.

Moving beyond engagement as we know it today is about honoring our native wiring, which needs to use conversation to drive the apps that make things easier and produce great results. Because of its power, conversation is an operating system that costs little — but yields much, much more than you likely ever thought possible.