

*"It is not the ship as much as the skillful sailing that assures the prosperous voyage." – George William Curtis*



## Avoiding the Employee Engagement Vacuum

Mark S. James | December 12, 2018



**We know from physics that nature abhors a vacuum.**

**It applies to human behavior, as well.**

Behavior and performance in the workplace are heavily influenced by answers to five questions always on the minds of employees.

The answers also leverage two undeniable truths of human and organizational behavior:

- What gets talked about is what gets done
- What gets measured is what gets done

This checklist is designed to help leaders and local managers better engage employees through effective answers to these questions. The right answers can change or reinforce behavior because fully informed employees typically attach greater personal meaning to the right behaviors and are more engaged in their work.



### What Should I Do?

**Don't leave employees to figure it out on their own.**

**What gets talked about is what gets done.**

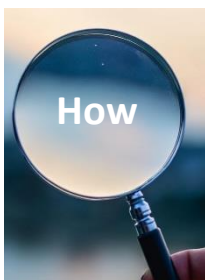
Static job descriptions alone are not enough to answer this question.

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Businesses operate in a dynamic environment which is constantly changing. Leaders and local managers are uniquely responsible to:

- ✓ Regularly view job descriptions for clarity and completeness
- ✓ Consistently communicate clear and unambiguous:
  - Values – Who we are...what we stand for
  - Mission – What we are here to accomplish
  - Vision – Where we want to be
  - Expectations consistent with values, mission, vision
- ✓ Create dialogue with employees by asking them about:
  - Pain points or barriers in the way of getting their job done?
  - What do they need?
  - What don't they need?
  - Issues outside the workplace that might be affecting their engagement
- ✓ Help employees think about what to do when things change in real time
- ✓ Coach employees to overcome "functional fixedness," the mental set where one cannot perceive an object being used for something other than what it was designed. Example: During the *Apollo 13* mission to the moon, NASA engineers had to overcome functional fixedness to save the lives of the astronauts aboard the spacecraft. An explosion damaged several systems causing problems with the carbon dioxide filters. Engineers found a way for the astronauts to use spare plastic bags, tape and air hoses to create a makeshift air filter, saving the astronauts' lives.



## How Should I Do It?

Employees must know how to do the job.

Your learning and training must fill the gaps.

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- ✓ Review clarity and completeness of these requirements for each job/employee:
  - Skill sets
  - Knowledge
  - Tools
  - Processes to follow
- ✓ Identify gaps between what is required vs. what employees possess
- ✓ Provide learning/training to fill gaps
- ✓ Learning should address knowledge/skills needed to perform the job plus the “soft” behaviors, beyond technical ability, that enhance the customer experience
- ✓ Assess the confidence of employees, pre- and post-learning. It is not enough to fill people’s heads with information and have them to retain it to call your training a success. Employees must also **have the confidence** to use it.



## How Am I Doing?

Tell employees how they are performing, frequently.

What get measured is what gets done.

Employees who are left in the dark about their performance are not apt to be engaged for long.

An annual review is not often enough. Infrequent feedback creates uncertainty and stress as employees wonder the rest of the time, “How am I doing in the eyes of my manager and leaders?”

Frequent feedback about individual performance empowers improvement and improvement empowers engagement.

- ✓ Establish clear team and individual performance expectations and metrics

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- ✓ Display team or department performance metrics in a visible and conspicuous manner
- ✓ For measured performance: Wherever possible, update employees on how they are performing as soon as performance metrics are updated
- ✓ For observed performance: Whenever possible, acknowledge employees as soon as possible after observing them perform a noteworthy act
  - Example: Employee takes a shortened lunch to help another employee
  - Example: Employee did not follow a safety procedure
- ✓ Recognize positive performance publicly.
- ✓ Discuss and coach about negative performance privately
- ✓ Integrate measurable performance feedback into coaching of individual employees to reinforce connection between right behaviors, job requirements and results
- ✓ Be clear with local managers/supervisors that their role as a coach is a key responsibility of being a manager



## Why Should I Do it?

aka What's in it for me?

Connect personal and organization goals.

The answer here are the positive outcomes for the employee and the organization when they perform in their job.

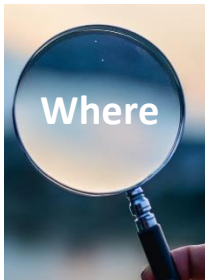
Often referred to as the "motivation question," this one can also be stated as, "What's in it for me?"

When employees see a clear connection between their performance and the success of the organization, engagement is reinforced.

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- ✓ Identify specific intrinsic and extrinsic factors that inspire employee behavior and align them with the goals of the organization
- ✓ Use well planned and communicated recognition and incentives to reinforce the WHY
- ✓ Recognize positive performance publicly to reinforce the WHY among peers
- ✓ Thoroughly communicate recognition and incentive plans. Most often these efforts fail because they lack visibility and awareness
- ✓ Be clear with local managers/supervisors of their responsibility to:
  - Focus on positive reinforcement vs. negative consequences with their teams
  - Encourage an atmosphere where "if we make mistake, we acknowledge it happened and move on quickly"



## Where Am I Going?

aka What is my future here?

The answer here directly impacts both engagement and the ability to retain your best talent.

The more an employee is unclear about their future with the organization, the more likely they are to be lured away.

Moreover, in a full-employment economy, keeping good talent is especially important because replacing good talent in such an environment can be expensive and time-consuming.

For leaders:

- ✓ Have learning, skills development and career tracks defined and in place
- ✓ Encourage managers to be transparent about opportunities and expectations



# Performance Perspectives

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For managers/supervisors:

- ✓ Regularly discuss opportunities for advancement and ways to achieve them
- ✓ Coach individual employees on ways to maximize their experience and qualifications for new assignments
- ✓ Understand ways an employee may want to expand their experience and competencies