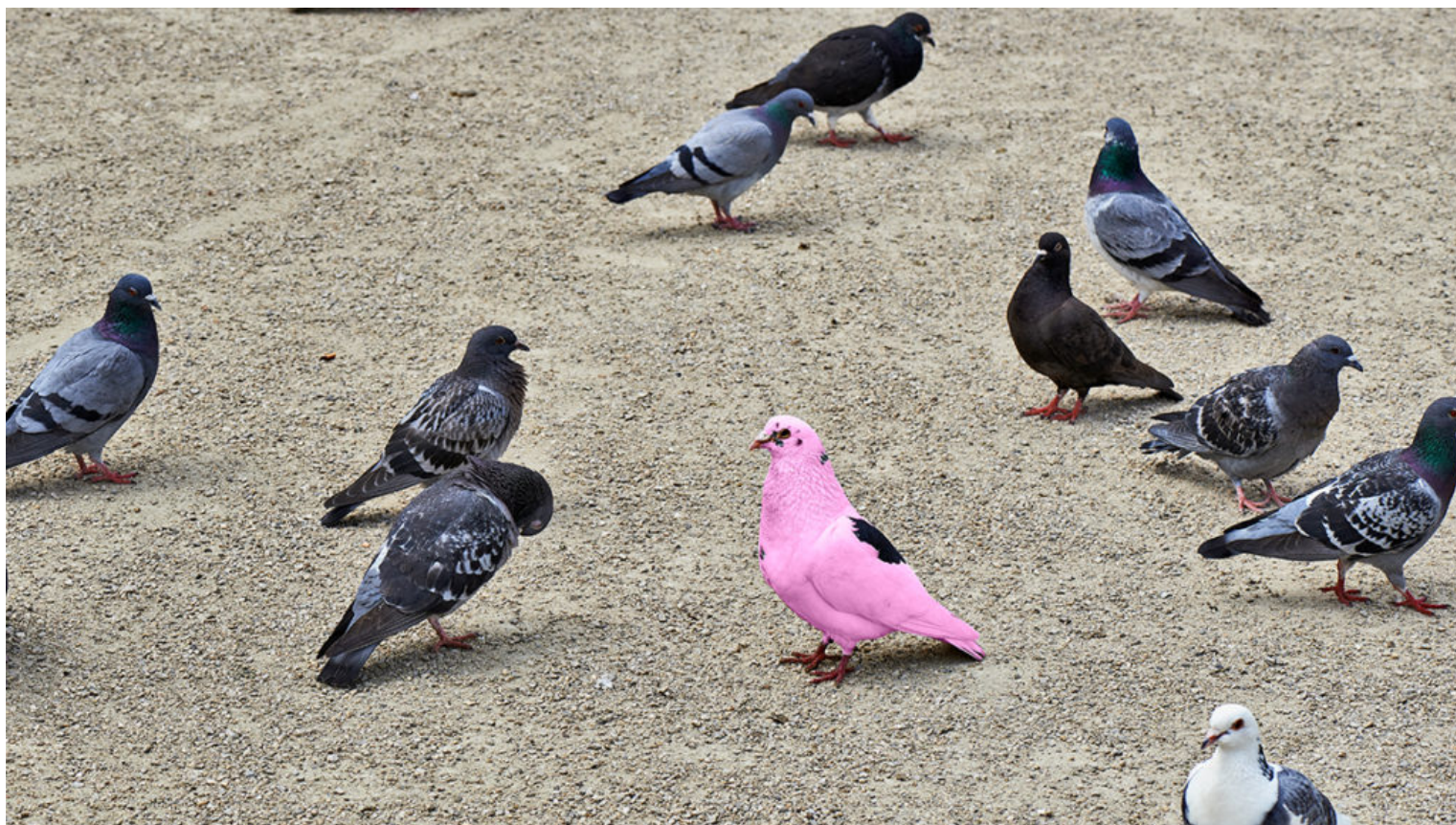


LEADING TEAMS

Is Employee Engagement Just a Reflection of Personality?

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Most people would like to have a job, a boss, and a workplace they can engage with, as well as work that gives them a sense of purpose. This aspiration is embodied by a famous Steve Jobs statement: “Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do.” In line, a recent report by the Conference Board shows that 96% of employees actively try to maintain a high level of engagement, even if many of them struggle to succeed.

In a similar vein, the scientific evidence suggests quite clearly that few things are more critical to an organization's success than having an engaged workforce. When employees are engaged, they display high levels of enthusiasm, energy, and motivation, which translates into higher levels of job performance, creativity, and productivity. This means not only higher revenues and profits for organizations, but also higher levels of well-being for employees. In contrast, low engagement results in burnout, higher levels of turnover, and counterproductive work behaviors such as bullying, harassment, and fraud.

It is therefore not surprising that a great deal of research has been devoted to identifying the key determinants of engagement. Why is it that some people are more engaged – excited, moved, energized by their jobs – than others? Traditionally, this research has focused on the *contextual* or external drivers of engagement, such as the characteristics of the job, the culture of the organization, or the quality of its leaders. And although there is no universal formula to engage employees, it is generally true that people will feel more enthusiastic about their jobs when they are empowered to achieve something meaningful beyond their expectations, feel connected to others, and when they work in an environment – and *for someone* – that is fair, ethical, and rewarding, as opposed to a constant source of stress.

But despite the importance of these contextual drivers of engagement, how people feel about their job, boss, and workplace may also vary as a function of people's own character traits. Indeed, even before organizations started talking about the need to “engage employees,” many managers appeared to regard motivation as something individuals *brought with them* to work – a characteristic of people they hired. This is why two individuals may have very different levels of engagement even when their job situation is nearly identical (e.g., they work for the same company, team, and boss), and why there is always demand for employees who display *consistent* levels of ambition, energy, and dedication, irrespective of the situation they are in.

This raises an obvious yet rarely discussed question, namely: how much of engagement is actually just personality? A recent meta-analysis provides some much needed data-driven answers. In this impressive study which synthesized data from 114 independent surveys of employees, comprising almost 45,000 participants from a wide range of countries – and mostly published academic studies, which met the standards for publication in peer-reviewed journals – the researchers set out to estimate the degree to which people differed in engagement *because of their character traits*. To

illustrate this point, imagine that a friend tells you that she hates her job. Depending on how well you know her, you might question if her views are a genuine reflection of her dreadful job, or if they just reflect your friend's glass-half-empty personality. Or think of when you read a Tripadvisor, Amazon, or IMDB review of a hotel/product/movie: to what degree does that review convey information about the object being rated, versus the person reviewing it? Even intuitively, it is clear that reviews are generally a mix of both, the rater and object being rated, and this could also apply to people's evaluations of their work and careers.

Although the authors examined only the impact of personality on engagement – without considering the known contextual influences on it – their results were rather staggering: almost 50% of the variability in engagement could be predicted by people's personality. In particular four traits: *positive affect*, *proactivity*, *conscientiousness*, and *extroversion*. In combination, these traits represent some of the core ingredients of emotional intelligence and resilience. Put another way, those who are positive, optimistic, hard-working, and outgoing tend to show more engagement at work. They are more likely to show up with energy and enthusiasm for what they do.

So if you want an engaged workforce, perhaps your best bet is to hire people who have an “engagable” personality? The recent study we reviewed suggests that doing so will actually boost your engagement levels (as measured by surveys) more than any intervention designed to improve leadership, or to craft the perfect job for people. However, while this may look like an attractive position to take for managers, particularly if they wish to make engagement an employee problem, there are four important caveats to consider:

For starters, being more resilient to bad or incompetent management may be helpful for individual employee well-being, but it can be damaging for the wider performance of the organization. Frustrated employees are often a warning sign of broader managerial and leadership issues which need to be addressed. If leaders turn employee optimism and resilience into a key hiring criterion, then it becomes much harder to spot and fix leadership or cultural issues using employee feedback signals. It is a bit like a restaurant owner saying: “Instead of serving better food, or improving the service, I will boost my reviews by ensuring that my diners have lower standards!” While that may boost customers' satisfaction ratings, it will certainly not raise the quality of the restaurant. Put another way, surrounding yourself with people who are more likely to give you positive and optimistic feedback does not actually make you more competent at your job.

Second, as data from the study clearly show, at least half of engagement still comes from contextual factors about the employees' work – issues or experiences that are common across employees in an organization. So while one employee's opinion might be heavily biased by the personality of that individual, a collective of views (like those often captured in organizational surveys) are more representative of the shared issues and challenges that people face at work. This is important because organizations are not really just a collection of individuals – they are coordinated groups with shared identity, norms, and purpose. Engagement therefore represents the “cultural value-add” an organization provides to its people at work – shaping their energy, behaviors, and attitudes over and above their personal preferences and styles. Ignoring this point isn't an effective strategy for good leadership, and would cause you to leave valuable performance drivers out of your decision making.

Third, the most creative people in your organization are probably more cynical, skeptical, and harder to please than the rest. Many innovators also have problems with authority and a predisposition to challenge the status quo. This makes them more likely to complain about bad management and inefficiency issues, and makes them potentially more likely to disengage. Marginalizing or screening out these people might seem like a quick win for engagement, but in most organizations these people are a significant source of creative energy and entrepreneurship, which is more difficult to get from people who are naturally happy with how things are. To some extent, all innovation is the result of people who are unhappy with the status quo – who seek ways to change it. And even if hiring people with engageable personalities does boost organization performance levels (and decreased undesirable outcomes), there are big fairness and ethical implications when it comes to excluding people who are generally harder to please and less enthusiastic in general, especially if they are just as competent at their jobs as any others.

Last, anything of value is typically the result of team rather than individual performance, and great teams are not made of people who are identical to each other, but of individuals who complement each other. If you want cognitive diversity – variety in thinking, feeling, and acting – then you will need people with different personalities. That means combinations of personalities to fit a variety of team roles – having *some* individuals who are naturally proactive, extroverted, and positive, working together with some who are maybe the exact opposite. The implication of this is clear: if your strategy for “engaging” your workforce is to hire people who are all the same – in that they are

more engageable – you will end up with low cognitive diversity, which is even more problematic for performance and productivity than having low demographic diversity (though we think both types of diversity should be pursued).

So, if you want to truly understand engagement in your organization then you need to look at both who your people are and what they think about their work. In other words, more *calibration* to employee personality is needed. For example, managers leading teams of people who are generally harsh or negative could benefit from seeing engagement data through the lens of personality, helping them to target issues that are genuinely impacting team performance.

And this then also opens up a new opportunity: to think about how engagement data could also be used to encourage employees to better understand their own views about work, giving them more flexibility to take personal ownership and find ways to thrive. In a recent study, researchers found that 40% of managers identified emotional intelligence and self-awareness as the most important factors influencing whether an employee takes responsibility for their own engagement. If we can combine what we know about engagement with what we know about personality, then we can help each person more effectively navigate their organizational reality – leading to better, more effective organizations for all.



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