



Adaptive Action: Employee Engagement

by Royce Holladay

The retreat was successful. The cross-functional action team documented problems with employee engagement and crafted a plan to respond. Everyone was satisfied. Then, out of the blue, someone asked how they would roll the plan out to the rest of the organization.

- *The executive suggested a memo and a story in the monthly newsletter.*
- *Middle managers asked for bullet points to share in staff meetings.*
- *Customer service reps, who were supposed to benefit most, wondered aloud what difference the plan would really make and how to respond to their cynical team members.*

In that brief closing conversation, the group recognized what had brought them to the retreat in the first place. The air of celebration stalled, and the room became very quiet.

One person captured the sense of the group, "We just spent fifteen hours 'solving' employee engagement, but we can't even agree about how to engage employees in our decisions about how to engage them. How crazy is that?"

It's true. Employee engagement is one of the greatest challenges of organizations today. In the last decade, leaders are more challenged to engage employees, even as they feel more vulnerable and uncertain themselves. At the same time, employees look to leadership for security as they experience overwhelming uncertainty and unpredictability. This landscape of dis-engagement gets more intense as organizations become more diverse, more changeable, more unpredictable—more uncertain. Until people can engage differently with uncertainty, they will not be able to engage differently with each other.

Human Systems Dynamics offers a new way to think and act in these uncertain and turbulent times. This enlightened perspective engages everyone in short, iterative cycles of Adaptive Action for solving problems and taking action. Adaptive Action helps people engage with the environment and with each other through three simple questions: **What?, So what?** and **Now what?**

Adaptive Action reveals that employee engagement is not a program, but a pattern. Successful engagement isn't revealed in an annual survey, and it isn't changed by slogans or rewards. Real, meaningful engagement happens when each interaction, decision, practice, or policy is grounded in authentic and meaningful exchanges among individuals and groups. Effective employee engagement has to be a way of life—a system-wide cultural pattern—that permeates the whole of the organization, not simply a program sponsored by HR.

When employee engagement is a pattern, anyone in the organization can:

- Recognize healthy engagement when it happens, when they ask:
 - **What** are the facial expressions of people I see in the hallway?
 - **What** tone of voice resonates in the break room?
 - **What** is the rate of absenteeism, illness, turnover?
 - **What** stories are remembered and retold?
- Understand the conditions that influence levels and types of engagement, when they consider:
 - **So what** are the met and unmet needs of employees and customers?
 - **So what** contribution are people allowed to make?
 - **So what** connections bring individuals and groups together in inquiry?
 - **So what** in the system exists to recognize individuals for their unique contributions?
- Take intentional action to engage with self and others in meaningful ways, when they wonder:
 - **Now what** can I do to connect more richly with more people?
 - **Now what** policies and procedures constrain personal and professional contributions of individuals or groups?
 - **Now what** measures can we put in place to help see, understand, and influence patterns of engagement across the organization?
 - **Now what** stories can I find and retell that focus on the ways the environment supports and reinforces the humans who are its greatest resource?

It's important to remember that these questions can be asked at multiple scales across the system:

- An individual can examine his or her own interactions and engagement with others or at larger scales.
- Members of a group/team, either individually or together, can use these questions to explore the ways they engage with each other and the ways their unit interacts with the other units or with the whole.
- Finally these questions can be used to explore issues around engagement between and among individuals and groups across the whole organization.

When these questions shape system-wide decision making and action, patterns of deep and meaningful employee engagement become the norm. Engagement is no longer a question that gets asked at the end of a two-day retreat. It's no longer relegated to the Human Relations Department or to the CEO or to the Director of Communications. When productive engagement is embraced as a privilege and responsibility of each person in the system, powerful patterns of engagement become the norm and everyone reaps the benefits.

Use the attached tool as a way to guide questions that shape employee engagement in your organization. And then join us at <http://AdaptiveAction.org> and let us know what emerges.



Adaptive Action for Employee Engagement: What can I do?

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| What? | Recognize healthy engagement when it happens. | <p>Ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the facial expressions of people I see in the hallway? • What tone of voice resonates in the break room? • What is the rate of absenteeism, illness, turnover? • What stories are remembered and retold? • What other evidence do I see of engagement? |
| So What? | Understand the conditions that influence levels and types of engagement. | <p>Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So what are the met and unmet needs of employees and customers? • So what contribution are people allowed to make? • So what connections bring individuals and groups together in inquiry? • So what in the system exists to recognize individuals for their unique contributions? • So what else might I learn from the evidence? |
| Now What? | Take intentional action to engage with self and others in meaningful ways. | <p>Challenge yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now what can I do to connect more richly with more people? • Now what policies and procedures constrain personal and professional contributions of individuals or groups? • Now what measures can we put in place to help see, understand, and influence patterns of engagement across the organization? • Now what stories can I find and retell that focus on the ways the environment supports and reinforces the humans who are its greatest resource? • Now what else might I do to strengthen the patterns I want? |