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A MODEL OF WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Today's workforce is no longer made up of baby boomers who can relate to each other's experiences, backgrounds, and motivators. The modern workplace has become a melting pot of generations, cultures, technological savvy, learning styles, and even values. Today's leader must not only have an awareness of these differences, but know how to engage different employees differently in order to maximize their potential and to help them, and the organization, succeed.

Workforce engagement can be viewed as both external and internal. External engagement, with regard to the Marine Corps Intelligence (MCI) Community, occurs between Marine Intelligence personnel and those of other agencies and customers. Assessments of external engagement are outside the scope of this paper.

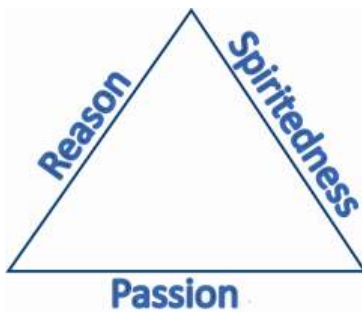
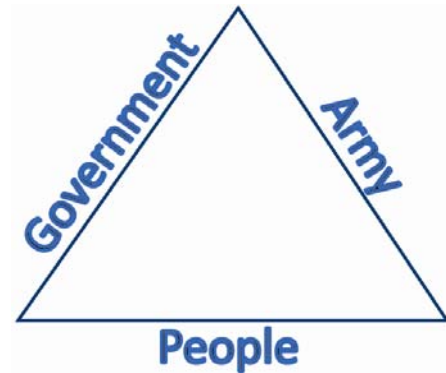
Internal engagement occurs within the Marine Corps Intelligence Community, viewed for this paper as taking place between senior leadership, middle management and the majority of intelligence personnel, both uniformed and civilian. The levels of engagement within the community can vary widely, particularly where motivation, communication and leadership are synchronized.

This paper will outline a theoretical framework by which leaders can examine the "whole person" who comes to the workplace each day. This paper also discusses and addresses spirit, the part of the person that is the most difficult or enigmatic for the purposes of a strategy engagement.

The Model Explained

We'll use the famous Clausewitzian Trinity as a theoretical framework for our model of workforce engagement. In Clausewitz's concept, a successful war effort has to engage all three elements of society: the government (the seat of policy, or the rational part), the military (the seat of martial valor, or the spirited part), and the people (the seat of animus, or as

Clausewitz sometimes says, hatred, because as he says, you may need a good popular hatred in order to sustain a war). In other words, the war effort has to engage reason, the spirit, and the passions.



This model of society is really the individual person writ large. Each individual contains the same three parts. Every person has reason, spirit, and passions.

The spirited part of the person is the part that seeks honor and recognition. It's the part that gets angry when a person perceives a slight, or that feels anger or indignation when there is injustice. It is also the part that experiences dejection, which happens when the spirit is in a low state. The lower part of the person, or passion, which occupies the base in our figure, is the seat of the baser needs or desires. Physical needs are often



located here. In their vicious (as opposed to virtuous) forms, desires such as avarice or lust, or more generally speaking cupidity, are located here.

It is important for the three sides to be in the right balance with each other. A person who gets all bent out of shape at the perception of a slight and seeks to destroy a person who offended him or her would be in the possession of an uncontrollable, disproportionate anger, and would be an unbalanced person. We might speak of such a person as having an exceptionally strong spirit, or as being unusually spirited, or as a person whose spirit exceeds his reason.

On the other hand, a person who has a weak spirit as distinct from a strong one is a person whom we might describe as dejected or demoralized. In political situations, such a person probably wouldn't stand up for himself or for others even when the cause is a right one.

A person who is greedy and uses his/her reason as a tool to obtain more money and for no higher purpose is in possession of an uncontrollable greed or avarice. This is a person whose passion exceeds the other parts of his or her being, and whose reason and spirit are mere tools of the passions.

The images of unhinged persons have analogies in images of unhinged societies if we go back to Clausewitz's trinity. For instance, an unhinged society in which spirit or martial valor rules is likely to be a military authoritarian dictatorship (as in Middle Eastern countries today, where the army is the main power broker). It is a place where the military rules because a military coup has taken place, overthrowing the constitutional order. An unhinged society in which passion (or even hatred) rules is likely to be governed by mob rule. A constitutional system in which the military power is subordinate to the civil power, and in which there are appropriate checks and balances instead of a concentration of power, is more likely to be a well-ordered society, with reason or policy on top, to use Clausewitz's terms again.

As we have said in our Ka-Bar course, it's the whole person that comes to work each day, not just a part of the person. A good model of workforce engagement would likely be a model for engaging all three parts of the person. Is it possible to engage the

person in such a way as to foster a healthy balance in the three parts? Is it possible that a wise Command policy of rewards and recognition may restore the balance in an employee who places a disproportionate emphasis on receiving external rewards? Conversely, is it possible that a poor method of engagement might foster an imbalance in the three parts, producing employees who are either greedy or unduly desirous of recognition for their contributions? Is it possible that a poor policy of rewards or recognition may upend a well-balanced employee? Finding the right harmony—the right amount of recognition and the appropriate scales of rewards and pay increases—seems to be crucial for keeping the employees, not to mention the work force as a whole, in balance and for not creating a dynamic where the members of the work force become insatiable for money or prizes or are likely to attrit in search of illusory gratification at other organizations. Clausewitz’s model is incredibly fertile for identifying and addressing these questions, and in this paper we only touch the surface.

The challenge for a model of workforce engagement is to address all three parts of the person and to address them in such a way as to foster, and indeed in some cases, where the right balance already exists, preserve the right balance.

Recognizing Effective Workforce Engagement

Effectively engaging the “Whole Person” is a challenging task, particularly with the diversity of generations and backgrounds in today’s workforce. For the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that the individual’s passion is being addressed through salary, and his reason by the work that he produces. This portion of the paper focuses on ways to better engage an individual’s spirit.

In their book on unleashing human potential, Curt Coffman and Gabriel Gonzalez-Molina discuss how effective engagement occurs within an organization. They write, “it probably isn’t common knowledge that the variation in employee engagement *within* a company is greater than the variation of employee engagement *between* two companies in the same industry. *In a majority of those companies [studied], only 20 to 30 percent of the employees were engaged in their work.* These companies were

operating on a fraction of employee engagement. The most engaged work groups were the most productive. The rest tended to be average, mediocre, or downright destructive.”¹

A lack of effective leadership engagement can lead to the development of disgruntled employees, which can be viewed as an internal threat. This is not a physical threat, but a threat to performance, morale and productivity.

The degree of leadership engagement in an organization will directly affect its employees’ engagement toward assigned duties and tasks. Successful internal engagement favorably affects output, morale, and retention, all of which are difficult to measure with a poll. In fact, a recent Gallup poll found that 80 percent of organizations polled were doing some type of study (climate or employee attitude) and that “60 percent of the organizations studied reported being worse off after the surveys were taken than before. For one thing, the communication levels between employees and managers were seriously diminished. Second, the disconnect between senior management and employees was considered even wider.”² The reasons for the communication failures and disconnect was a flawed design of the studies:

“The studies were designed to view the organization from the top down. Unfortunately, the questions didn’t address, much less solve, the real issues that employees were facing day in and day out at the local level. Nor did they include local accountability; these studies were never reported at the workplace level, so middle managers assumed that the issues would be resolved at the top. The middle managers felt that this information did not specifically address their local workplace conditions. And since they were not provided with practical guidelines to act upon, they felt no responsibility to react to them.

¹ Curt Coffman and Gabriel Gonzalez-Molina, Ph.D., *Follow This Path* (New York: Warner Books, 2003), 76.

² Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina, 77.

Next, the very purpose of the studies wasn't clear. Were they supposed to create an impression of how good morale was, or to identify pockets of dissent? The effort was rarely linked to the issue that really mattered: increasing the performance of the organization. Even worse, the studies attempted replace dialogue. More than a few participants came away with the impression that their company was so out of touch with its employees that it was forced to ask dozens of questions just to find out who they were. ”³

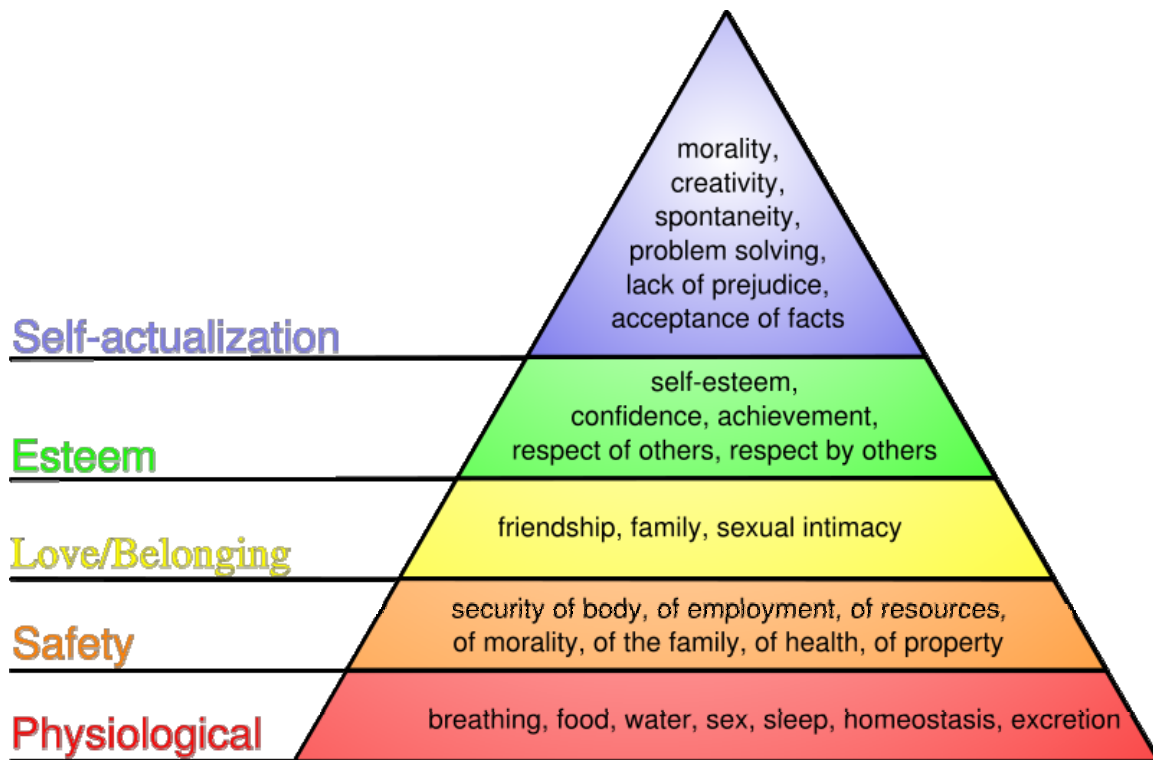
Engaged Employees are Motivated

A major factor directly affecting employee and organization performance is motivation. Engagement falters where motivation is lacking. Motivation builds employee morale and effective communication maintains it. “Morale is the mental attitude of employees toward their employer and jobs. High morale is a sign of a well-managed organization, because workers’ attitudes toward their jobs affect the quality of their work. One of the most obvious signs of poor manager-worker relations is poor morale. In contrast, high employee morale occurs in organizations where employees feel valued and heard and where they are able to contribute what they do best. ”⁴

Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs can be directly applied to motivation and communication. In our Ka-Bar textbook, Ka-Bar Leader Development: *Leadership on the Cutting Edge*, the authors describe the five basic kinds of needs: physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. They further write how Maslow suggested “that these needs constitute a hierarchy of needs, with the most basic or compelling needs-physiological and safety needs-at the bottom. Maslow argued that these lowest-level needs must be met before a person strives to satisfy needs higher up in the hierarchy, such as self-esteem needs.

³ Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina, 78.

⁴ Louis E. Boone and David L. Kurtz, *Contemporary Business 2003*, (Mason, Ohio: South-Western, 2003) 343.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs⁵

Once a need is satisfied, Maslow proposed, it ceases to operate as a source of motivation. ”⁶As employee pay is directly connected to how an employee is able to acquire food and lodging, it is natural to understand why pay addresses an employee’s physiological needs and therefore is considered most important when addressed by the organization that employs him. This includes the motivational impact of promotions and raises to improve current standards of living. When a senior leader is discussing changes that may affect workforce pay, undoubtedly the issue gains all attention.

Along this thought, the authors further write that “to have a motivated workforce, managers must determine which needs employees are trying to satisfy in organizations and then make sure that individuals receive outcomes that satisfy their needs when they perform at a high level and contribute to organizational

⁵ “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs,” *Motivational Theories and Creativity*, 23 December 2010, URL:<<http://angiereyes.wordpress.com/2010/12/23/motivational-theories-and-creativity/>>, accessed 11 March 2011.

⁶ Kirk Mensch and Myra Dingman, *Ka-Bar Leader Development: Leadership on the Cutting Edge*, (United States: McGraw-Hill Primis, 2010) 571.

effectiveness.”⁷ Bonuses and recognition awards naturally address those performing at a high level, but these are only effective if there is a clear understanding to all the workforce of the rules, process and outcomes of these programs. Communication is an essential part of recognition. Performance and recognition awards directly affect motivation and must be clearly communicated in employee engagement plans. The absence of information concerning the process breeds rumors, gossip, confusion, and frustration from most of the workforce.

Additionally, timing is essential. Recognition should immediately follow an employee’s effort or achievement. “This will give the greatest impact. It also tells an employee that his supervisor knows he is on the right track. Just as it is important to promptly tell an employee when an improvement in performance is in order, it is equally important to praise on the spot for a job well done. Giving praise has strong, positive effects, not only on the recipient, but on coworkers who see that the seniors care not only about what the workers do wrong but also what they do right.”⁸ The smallest measure of recognition provided to an employee (such as a public email acknowledgement) can reap a significant amount of worker motivation. Some personnel, such those from the Millennial Generation (born after 1981), are particularly influenced by this type of measure, which, incidentally, costs nothing but a small bit of effort by leaders.⁹

Engaging through Effective Communication

Effective engagement by senior leadership should emphasize a solid communication and internal marketing plan. Otherwise, disenchantment spreads through the workforce, leading to “unhappy, disgruntled employees who badmouth the company and share their apathy, irritation, or unhappiness with anyone who will listen.” Eventually employees lose their feeling of ownership or loyalty, leading to lackadaisical performance, an overall attitude of just ‘putting in their time,’ or high turnover.

⁷ Mensch and Dingman, 571.

⁸ Florence M. Stone, *The Manager’s Question and Answer Book*, (New York:AMACOM, 2003), 36.

⁹ Elizabeth Ryan, “Managing and Developing Talent” presented in Ka-Bar Cohort 3 class. Stafford, VA. , 8-9 March 2011.

Improved engagement and communication is not a complete fix for these issues, but it can definitely alleviate people's negative feelings about them.¹⁰

Communication can be defined as "a meaningful exchange of information through messages."¹¹ Its importance, both internal and external, is obvious, but the recognition of communication shortfalls is not always obvious or recognized by senior and middle management. Communication within the Marine Corps Intelligence Community, particularly between leadership (management) and employees, was consistently evaluated as poor based on results provided by employees in the 2010 Command Survey. This is not surprising in such a large network of geographically separated personnel, many of whom do not experience direct interaction with their senior management. However, this trend throughout the community was also prevalent within worksites. What is interesting is that no further detailed study was made to capitalize on this discovery, going forth to analyze and identify precise causes, effects and possible corrective actions. Additionally, there were no feedback measures implemented to determine where the workforce thought communication was ineffective.

Obtaining accurate, non-filtered feedback is probably the most neglected communication step in many organizations, and it often leads to significant disconnects between senior leaders, middle management and subordinate workers. In Susan M. Drake's book, Light Their Fire, she describes two-way communication as being a three-element process:

"For communication to be two-way, the message must be sent, received, and understood. This means that you may have to change the words you use, vary the vehicle or vehicles you employ, and even vary the spokesperson who delivers the



¹⁰ Susan Drake et al, *Light Their Fire* (Chicago: Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2005), 76.

¹¹ Boone and Kurtz, 376.

message. Just because you send information out doesn't mean people "get it" or can act on it. It's much more complicated than writing an e-mail or giving a speech. "¹²

Effective communication involves six elements: a sender, a message, a channel, an audience, feedback, and context. ¹³ To recognize communication weaknesses or outright breakdowns, an organization must pay particular attention to these processes, and constantly evaluate for effectiveness. A leader (sender) should not send a message without consideration of these basic factors. Regrettably, doing so is a common practice, resulting in workforce and leadership frustration due to misunderstandings or even non-receipt of the intended message. An effective leader needs to periodically evaluate the organization's communication process.

There are certain planning and execution steps that must be taken to ensure effective communication. The following is a list of recommended questions:

- What is the intended effect (end state) of the message?
- What is the priority and importance of the message?
- Who is the target audience to receive the message?
- Is the message simple and does it clearly state the intended meaning?
- What would be the most effective method of delivering the message?
- Is feedback necessary?
- What type of feedback will determine the timely receipt and accurate comprehension of the message?
- Is two-way communication desired?
- Was the desired end state achieved?
- Does the message need to be resent in another more effective form of communication?

First, what is it that the sender intends his workforce to understand? What is the desired end state as a result of the message being understood? Does the message communicate clearly this intent? Simplicity is usually the key to a clearly understood

¹² Drake et al, 95.

¹³ Boone and Kurtz, 377.

communication. Lawrence Weinbach, the chairman and chief executive officer (CEO) of Unisys, writes that “the principle of simple, straightforward messaging has to apply to every communication device the company employs. He further states that “it is not enough for communication to be constant. What you communicate must also be easy to remember and to repeat.”¹⁴ Too much message clutter diminishes the power of your communication.¹⁵ Leaders must be able to convey in simple terms the message intended and not bury it amongst lesser relevant information.

The message could be as simple as the mundane passing of general employee information, such as announcing a change in designated smoking areas, to something as important as a restructuring of the organization. The leader next determines the target audience. Varying a message by audience is known as positioning.¹⁶ Since the audience will often vary as per who needs to hear what part of the message, the sender should consider whether it best be broken down and delivered in separate messages to separate audiences? The separation may be as a result of hierarchy or perhaps due to unique functional differences in the workforce. The message could be intended for all members of a specific department or branch or it could be for middle management only. Often, all employees are to receive the message as simultaneously as feasible, particularly if it concerns all.

The timeliness and importance of the message will dictate the priority of its delivery. If the message holds a high level of importance, is critical in nature, or yields an intended end state that is time-critical, the leadership can choose to immediately deliver the message in person and in the case where it concerns all employees, an immediate all-hands meeting can be called when and where feasible. Still, “nobody can talk to everyone in person, all of the time. That is what makes the Internet so valuable.”¹⁷ The message could be delivered within minutes by email to all personnel, although there is no guarantee that all personnel are at their workstations or will read

¹⁴ Dennis C. Carey and Marie-Caroline Von Weichs, *How To Run A Company* (New York: Crown Business, 2003), 209.

¹⁵ Drake et al, 62.

¹⁶ Ibid, 85.

¹⁷ Carey and Von Weichs, 209.

the message in a timely manner. For personnel who are geographically widely distributed, redundant methods should be considered to ensure all personnel are reached.

When communicating bad news, timeliness and method are particularly important. The expression that bad news doesn't get better with time is accurate. Delay in passing news sews further discontent and demonstrates the seniors' mistrust in employees. "Nine times out of ten, employees already know the news before the official word comes out."¹⁸ Additionally, delay usually causes employees to speculate that things are worse than they are. The inevitable gossip feeds inaccurate information and employees begin to lose trust for management. The end result is less productivity and decreased morale.¹⁹

Susan Drake advises leaders to prepare a script of remarks and to follow it during the meeting. She further recommends telling people as many facts as possible and not to attempt to justify the actions of the organization or defend oneself, as the purpose of the meeting is about the people who make up the company.²⁰

If good news is to be passed, it should be passed publicly, with proper fanfare, particularly when recognizing the favorable contributions of employees. Drake writes,

"...Every company can build confidence and gain followers by shouting about employees' successes. Just imagine how proud each person will be as their name is called, or their picture appears in your town's newspaper, or when you congratulate them in front of their families. This sort of recognition earns you points not only with the employee, but also with his or her friends and family."²¹

¹⁸ Drake et al, 100.

¹⁹ Ibid, 100-101.

²⁰ Ibid, 101.

²¹ Ibid, 100.

Another important factor to consider is the context. “Every communication takes place in some sort of situational or cultural context.”²² How and where a communication is passed can bear strongly on how the message is interpreted. The wrong venue can actually become a distraction or provide a clash with the intended seriousness of the communication. For example, the firing of personnel should be conducted face-to-face within the confines of an office, and not in public or before other employees. The context not only provides the atmosphere for the communication, but highlights the seriousness or importance of the message.

Once the message has been communicated, did the intended audience actually receive the message and, more importantly, did they understand it as it was intended by the sender? “Senders must pay attention to audience feedback, even solicit it if none is forthcoming, since this response clarifies whether the communication has conveyed the intended message.”²³ If the message was not interpreted as the sender intended, a determination must be made as to the cause. Was the message lost in excessive and unnecessary wordiness or misunderstood due to a lack of simplicity?

Also, a determination of how to collect feedback must be decided. Sometimes leaders consider the absence of questions to be a positive reflection of the level of understanding of their employees following a meeting in which information or instructions are passed. Silence may only be a reflection of existing employee timidity, internal confusion, apathy, or the result of unintended intimidation due to the seniority of others present or peer pressure. Peer pressure can entice to employees to not speak up in order to keep a meeting short or to avoid looking silly with a stupid question. Other times employees may keep silent for fear of tipping the apple cart by asking a question that could be interpreted as being disagreeable or they believe that a question reflects one as being cynical, unruly or disloyal. A leader should consider whether it would be best to ask employees for feedback directly or through middle management, if they can trust that their subordinate leaders will ensure that feedback is unfiltered and

²² Boone and Kurtz, 377.

²³ Ibid.

accurate. Another method is to leave behind a questionnaire or monitor an organization's internal blog.

Soliciting feedback or questions becomes moot, however, once any employee who asks a question is chastised for any reason. And again, bad news travels quickly in a disengaged workforce. It can take a very long time to get employees to trust again after such an incident.

Although a significant amount of communication transpires, it is predominately one-way, without proper feedback mechanisms in place to grade for effectiveness. Marcus Buckingham in The One Thing You Need to Know describes a list of universal needs by all in a society, to include freedom from fear of the future, and a desire for clarity.²⁴ In order to understand whether clarity is being delivered, feedback is essential. Seniors must remove as many filters as possible to accurately interpret the feedback, as opposed to just hearing what they want to hear. "Clarity is the antidote to anxiety, and therefore clarity is the preoccupation of the effective leader. If you do nothing else as a leader, be clear."²⁵

If an important message is being delivered, a feedback mechanism must be planned prior to the message being delivered. For example, if the DIRINT or senior management decides to hold a town hall meeting for all employees in order to discuss an important issue, such as introducing a new pay system, provide an updated status on MCISR-E, or discuss another community wide issue, it is advisable to determine the desired mechanism of feedback prior to the event. This could be as simple as a question and answer period, but the effectiveness of this would be weakened by the lack of time needed to dwell on complicated issues and the unintended climate of peer pressure to let sleeping dogs lie and avoid questions.

After receiving feedback, the information should be evaluated for the effectiveness of the message, its delivery method and determination of desired end state. If the message was not received as intended or conveyed, then the reasons for the failure must be determined. Additionally, if the desired end state was not achieved,

²⁴ Marcus Buckingham, *The One Thing You Need to Know* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 138.

²⁵ Buckingham, 146.

it must be determined as to whether the fault lies with the message or elsewhere. Mike Rother, author of Toyota Kata, writes that “a process will tend to erode no matter what, even if a standard is defined, explained to everyone, and posted. This is not because of poor discipline by workers (as many of us may believe), but due to interaction effects and entropy, which says that any organized process naturally tends to decline to a chaotic state if we leave it alone.”²⁶

Feedback is only effective if appreciated by the leadership. Failure to accept feedback can be due to dispositional factors, which could cause fundamental attribution errors. A leader may choose to believe that the workforce is not compliant when the true attribution may actually be with the communication method. As Will Rogers stated, “It’s not what we don’t know that hurts, it’s what we know that isn’t so.”²⁷ Another fault line of Single Loop Learning may be the distraction of a self-serving bias. If a leader does not want to hear something that disagrees with what he believes or desires, he may not listen or accept conflicting feedback. The goal for a leader is Double Loop Learning, which includes vetting feedback and listening to the results, thus establishing two-way communications.²⁸

In the Trinity Model of Engagement, accurate feedback would inform the sender if the targeted side (reason, spiritedness, or passions) of the triangle is effectively engaged. If so and a determination is made that the message was properly received, then the process is complete.

Other Ways to Engage the Spirit

In addition to increasing the effectiveness of an organization’s communication methods, there are myriad other ways to positively engage the spirit of a highly capable and creative workforce.

Spirit, that part of an individual that becomes angry when a person perceives a slight, or that feels anger or indignation when there is injustice, is also that part of a

²⁶ Mike Rother, *Toyota Kata*, (New York:McGraw-Hill, 2010), 13.

²⁷ Mensch and Dingman, 15.

²⁸ Mensch and Dingman, 14-20.

person that wants to come to work every day, and wants to engage in the processes around him, to be part of the greater picture. It is that part of an individual that seeks autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Every day, frustrated executives throughout corporate America are asking their managers the same question: “Why aren’t my people motivated? Why can’t we make them engage?” Their frustration is understandable. They’ve tried reward incentives, company picnics, threats, and increased accountability methods. Still, the workforce is unmotivated, work is completed at only a marginally satisfactory level, people are leaving for jobs elsewhere at a rapid rate, and company morale is decidedly low. In fact, everything they try seems to only make things worse.

It makes no sense. These are hard working, bright, talented men and women who took jobs in their company with genuine desires to excel and make great contributions. But despite occasional sparks of brightness and accomplishment, the company runs nowhere near its potential.

Some managers try to demand motivation, but this tends to create something superficial and the resulting changes, if any, are usually short-term. Motivation and engagement come from within. Instead, effective managers can foster an environment that encourages self-motivation and engagement by engaging the spirit.

Find the Bright Spots

One place to start is by looking for “bright spots” in an organization, as described in the book Switch: How to Change Things when Change is Hard, by Chip and Dan Heath.²⁹ Bright spots are those work sections, projects, and successes that exhibit the organization’s ideal. Regrettably, most people by nature do not focus on these bright spots, but tend to take them for granted. For example, a parent looking at a report card with mostly As and Bs but one C will tend to ask first, “why did you get a C here?” And a store manager who sees success in four of his five departments will most likely ask first

²⁹ Heath, Chip and Dan. “Switch,” (New York: Broadway Books, 2010) p. 28-48.

what the fifth department did wrong. But there's so much more to learn by asking what the other departments did right.

There are many bright spots in MCI. Accolades arrive almost daily from our customers. There are branches that are not losing good employees to other agencies. There are briefings that are incredibly well received by their audience. There are employees who enjoy their work and inspire those around them, cultivating a spirit of teamwork. What are they doing right?

One bright spot in particular is the recent MCIA "Science Experiment" during which personnel were asked to write their contributions to a mission depicted on a wall of a Marine charging across the battlefield with an MCIA map. What made this assignment particularly noteworthy was not the content on the enormous paper background, but the engagement of the workforce in filling the 15-or-so-foot-long paper, to include creating a need for a second paper to be rolled out beneath it for more input.

The employees who took part in this exercise were not forced to partake. They were not threatened. Their comments were completely anonymous. They received no reward or recognition for their efforts. But they attacked the paper with gusto. Their pride in their work was clearly evident in what was written there. One person, seeing the dividing lines between functional areas scribbled "tear down these walls!" on all the lines. Another wrote multiple paragraphs, as if there was no way to write everything in his job within the paper boundaries. Someone else wrote simply "I made this," alongside which three other workers scrawled, "Me too."

What better indication of a ready, willing, and purposeful workforce could an employer need? This workforce is quite proud of their contributions.

Autonomy: the Genesis of Bright Spots

"Relying on management to fix problems is great, if you want compliance.

If you want engagement, increase autonomy."

In addition to finding and focusing on the bright spots in an organization, another way to foster an engaging workforce is to encourage autonomy—the desire to direct one’s own life—wherever possible. According to a study in Ode Magazine, traditional management techniques are out of sync with human nature. When a company’s main source of management is control, the only motivators are “power tools:” fear, coercion, punishment, etc. These motivators work for short periods of time, the way a horse being whipped will run faster as long as he can. But eventually, productivity goes down.

However, often, when employees are given more autonomy, studies have shown, productivity actually goes up. This can primarily be attributed to the idea that their motivators are not to grab that carrot dangling from its stick. A good worker usually possesses a drive to do things because they matter.

Most of the personnel in the MCI have that drive. They worked hard to get where they are, and they probably have a lot of good ideas. They are motivated by the Marine in the field and by the idea of getting him everything in their power to give to ensure he can complete his mission successfully and safely. Find a way to tap into that without saying “it’s been done,” or “it won’t work,” or “we don’t have time for that,” and motivation will skyrocket.

In contrast, a particular de-motivator that actually decreases the level of autonomy is needless accountability methods. While a certain amount of forms and bureaucratic procedures are necessary, less is always more. When a company’s engagement level begins to drop, there is a tendency for managers to start feeling as if they must increase their level of control, and this manifests itself in increased reporting. Two such examples recently initiated at MCIA are DIAP sheet requirements for every interaction and an added level of local travel approval procedures, even for those who

just have to travel to a sister agency for a meeting. These types of requirements can give the message that employees are not trusted, which, to an honest employee, can be insulting enough to justify leaving an organization. The opposite approach, broadening autonomy measures and dealing with exceptions as exceptions, would foster a better environment for engagement.

A good leader learns what motivates his employees (each employee may have different ones) and works to meet those motivators if possible. And again, contrary to conventional wisdom, it's not always rewards that inspire workers. Rewards may be appreciated, but today's brilliant work force is looking for more. According to David Whyte, a contemporary poet who has developed a series of seminars focused on the conversational nature of leadership in today's workforce, we should instead find ways to "make work a reward and not just a way to rewards."

Daniel Pink explains in his book "Drive," that carrots and sticks (rewards and punishment) may work for some situations, such as for menial, rote tasks. However, for those who find satisfaction in the work itself, this type of reward "can give us less of what we want: They can extinguish intrinsic motivation, diminish performance, crush creativity, and crowd out good behavior. They can also give us more of what we do not want; they can encourage unethical behavior, create addictions, and foster short-term thinking."

Fun: Fuel for the Spirit

Enthusiasm is contagious. If one person becomes enthusiastic, others around that person will become enthusiastic as well. One excellent method for creating an enthusiastic work force is to bring fun into the workplace. Fun can come from a group brainstorming activity; a short, social breaks such as a birthday celebration or lunch together; or other brief departures from the routine—in other words, more workforce interaction, more discussion, and less screen staring. This may sound contrary to common sense, but it is well documented that people who take breaks from their work

and engage in open dialogue enjoy their work much more and are actually more productive than those who sit at their desks all day pounding on the keyboard. Need proof? Find the sections in your organization that work well, and ask the workers why they like it there. Most likely, they will tell you their workplace is fun.

Another simple, motivating practice that is disappearing with advances in technology is basic social conversation. Whyte suggests that “most executives are promoted out of their original core technical competency and into the field of key human relationships, relationships that are mostly sustained through holding necessary and courageous conversations.”³⁰

The need for face-to-face social interaction is becoming deeper as the workforce welcomes more and more Millennials to their ranks. As organizations increase in size, more effort should be made to pass information on important issues in smaller assemblies, rather than en masse. Additionally, smaller-group settings are more conducive to interactive discussion and better feedback.

Models for Engagement

The authors of the book Fish! Tales: Bite-sized Stories. Unlimited Possibilities, describe the environment of the communication company Sprint in 1997. The workplace was depressing, with a high turnover rate and low morale. The managers’ initial solution was to make a lot of rules in the call centers.

“In a competitive, high-pressure environment, there’s a tendency to manage by taking over versus letting people do their jobs,” said the plant manager.

The company had rules for what employees could wear – down to the color of jeans authorized (any color but blue), and what they could read at their desks between calls. At one point, employees even had to document how many times they said “thank you” to each customer, to ensure they maintained awareness of the correct tone and phone manners. They had so many rules, the managers turned into police. One manager

³⁰ Wythe, David. Leadership, Vocation and Work. <http://www.davidwhyte.com/organizational.html>

remarked, “instead of finding new ways to make money for the business, we were walking around checking on people all the time.”

Meetings became derailed by nitpicking and complaining, stress levels hit an all time high, and the retention rate for good employees was dismal. But everything changed when some of the managers, after reading attending a seminar, decided to make their environment more enjoyable. They began saying yes to more requests, and saying no less often. Music? Sure! Quiet spaces for people who don’t want music? Of course. Dancing in the halls for a quick break? Why not?

One would expect production to decrease, but it did not. In fact, the more ways people found to enjoy their work, the more production increased. Additionally, supervisors spot checking phone calls discovered their call takers seemed genuinely happy and the conversational tone was always pleasant. Better yet, the customers were responding in kind. Business soared.

A similar event occurred at MCIA in the first week of March 2011. The editors in Quality and Dissemination Division, decided to commemorate National Grammar Day, and invited other members of the command to come visit them for an open-house. They decorated the walls with humorous drawings and quotations about grammatical errors; they made delicious Letter Bars and Grammar Crackers to be given as prizes for anyone who completed their grammar quiz, and they actively engaged all their visitors with humorous games and wisecracks. The two-hour activity not only boosted morale within the editing division, but the preparations brought editors and illustrators together in a fun and creative environment, and the event strengthened relationships between editors and analysts who visited their spaces. Production during that week did not suffer, and in fact, the following week, the production level increased.

Recommendations:

1. Capitalize on the Paper Board idea. Generate, perhaps monthly, a new board, with questions that actually give the employees a voice. Granted, initially this will open options for sarcasm and potential rudeness, but eventually, particularly

if positive change occurs, negative comments will disappear. Paper would be better than white boards for this type of feedback, as it requires commitment and cannot be erased by another individual. Some questions that could lead to input include:

- Describe something you tried in your job recently that worked well?
- Who in this command helped you with your job today and how?
- What is working well at MCIA right now?
- What have you read recently that you'd recommend to others?

2. Use All Hands meetings more dynamically. Many topics covered at All Hands meetings, such as plans for the parking garage can be conveyed through the message board and other media. Instead, these occasions offer a rare opportunity for engagement. The employees come from throughout the command; many don't know each other, and they don't know what other branches do, or what they have recently accomplished, or are working on. What an excellent forum for interaction. Consider the following:

- Announce recent command success stories, breakthroughs, or positive feedback from outside the command regarding a recent briefing, product, or service provided. Branch heads should be eagerly submitting success stories up the chain.
- Introduce one or two teams to come up front and discuss a recent project or ongoing activity. (Cohort 2's work on i-Country product).
- Identify employees who accomplished tasks that are perhaps not award worthy, but are worth recognition. (A few recent examples include Dan Bafford, who arranged an MCIA golf tournament, Tony Cash, who designed a command T-shirt, and MSgt Chris Jourdan, for his contributions in

- Meetings devoted entirely to engaging the workforce on a specific topic (DCIPS, MCISR-E), have great value, but might be better as separate exchanges designed to encourage interaction (perhaps announced with unique titles, rather than as the monthly All Hands). In this way, attendees will become accustomed to, and might more eagerly anticipate, the positive atmosphere of the monthly event. Additionally, this allows them to better prepare mentally for a forum by forming questions and planning to take notes. Engagement at both events would likely improve.
 - Offer periodic Leadership Engagement Seminars -- voluntary roundtable discussions on a defined topic. This type of environment gives middle managers the opportunity to brainstorm and offer suggestions upward, and exchange meaningful dialog with their peers.
3. Finally, there are numerous ways the command can express genuine care and concern for employees, but nothing says more than an occasional 2-5 minute visit from seniors, particularly to those places that are out of their way. Employees might not expect all seniors to know them by name, but they do appreciate seniors who attempt to interact with them in their work spaces.

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