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**Leadership: Engaging Employees**

by: Rob Fenty  
Coraggio Institute  
[coraggiogroup.com](http://coraggiogroup.com)  
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# Leadership: Engaging Employees

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Coraggio Group

One of the most provocative questions we hear leaders asking today is: *“how do I get people to ‘show up’ with 100% of themselves in all work situations?”*

The answer to this question holds the key to increased productivity, industry-leading customer experiences, and teams that feel like well-oiled engines with the confidence to accomplish anything. Yet, after years of leadership trainings and reading countless leadership books, the question still perplexes us. How do we access, inspire, mobilize and align the passions and energies that come to work with our employees every day?

This article provides the themes and lessons that we have heard from leaders in a wide array of environments over the past few years with the intent of inspiring greater clarity around how to engage employees at deeper levels. Since every organization is different, these themes are not presented as formulas, but as insights to be internalized by each reader in her own way.

**Theme #1: The power of teams is determined as much by passion and engagement as by skills and experience.** As leaders, we have been taught that skills and experience (i.e. resumes) are the primary determinants of success in our organizations. As a result, we hire, differentiate compensation and even sometimes promote based primarily on skills, experience and areas of expertise. We are then perplexed when we create a “dream team” of skills and experiences and can’t generate the results that we desire. This occurs in every type of organization, from sports teams to community groups to corporations.

We find that successful leaders are intuitively changing this formula. They have realized that **individual success in organizations is actually driven by two equally important factors: Capabilities and Engagement.** The capabilities of an individual are generally determined by the collection of skills, experiences, areas of expertise and maturity that the person brings to the job. From a leader’s perspective, capabilities determine the raw power or potential of

an individual or the overall capacity to impact a team.

Engagement, on the other hand, is a measurement of the energy with which the person “shows up” in all work situations. Leaders often describe this as passion, horsepower, drive, energy or juice. Engagement is demonstrated by how much the person throws herself into assignments and challenges, the confidence with which the person approaches all situations, and the ability of the person to be 100% present in all conversations and situations. While capabilities determine potential, engagement determines velocity and power.

The impact that engaged employees have on teams is significant and compelling. Employees that are present and engaged take more ownership for their workplaces, not just their direct responsibilities, but the overall objectives of their teams and companies. They also build strong working relationships, because they communicate expectations clearly, make agreements that they can keep, and hold integrity around doing what they say they will do. Although employees ideally would always have a mix of capabilities and engagement, the overall conclusion of most leaders today is that an employee’s overall horsepower is determined more by her passion and engagement than by her skills, experience or areas of expertise.

**Theme #2: Employees want to know where, why, and what, but NOT how** — Employees want clarity, but they don’t want you to tell them how to do their jobs. There is a fine line in leadership between providing clarity and guidance and controlling the way in which employees execute. Understanding this distinction leads to significant differences in employee engagement.

A foundational leadership responsibility is to **provide the organization with clarity on where we are going, why we are going there, and what we are going to focus on to get there.** Clarity around these questions provides employees with a simple set of guiding principles and boundaries within which to operate and apply their talents to the fullest. These three elements — where, why and what — are actually critical in inspiring the full engagement of employees.

Clarity on where we are going, often provided through a combination of visions, mission statements and long term goals, orients employees to the directional aspiration and acts like a directional beacon. Transparency on why the company is going there allows employees to connect at a deeper level with the company's aspiration and allows employees to align their own values, passions, and motivations. Clarity of focus and priorities provides specific direction on what is really important and creates boundaries for making key tradeoff decisions on a daily basis. These three questions provide the foundation for employees to buy into the company's direction, but still do it in their own skin.

Nordstrom provides a great example of this. Nordstrom leadership realized that if they were going to truly provide a different service experience they had to rely on each and every person touching the customer. To do so, the original Nordstrom training manual and manifesto to their sales associates lived literally on one page. It wasn't an exhaustive set of rules and guidelines to govern the customer interaction. It simply told the associates that we trust you to always represent Nordstrom and to always make the right decision for the customer. That combination of guidance and empowerment enabled each associate to truly engage with each customer in her own way, resulting in consistent, authentic and rich customer experiences. In this example, Nordstrom provided tangible clarity on the core objective and simply guided the core behavioral drivers of each sales associate to do it in her own unique way, rather than trying to govern each associate's specific actions.

**Theme #3 Employee engagement is directly affected by the health of relationships** — We have all been in situations where teams work like magic and others where they simply don't work. Interestingly, one of the primary themes that highlights the difference between the two situations is not tied to the difficulty of the task, the ambiguity of the environment, or even the strength of the leader. **Teams that work always have clean, effective working relationships.** The irony is that teams with effective working relationships spend more time actually focused on results. Teams that focus entirely on results at the expense of team relationships actually spend more time in execution cleaning up relationship ambiguity, tension and breakdowns and therefore spend less time on actual value creating activities.

Teams that exhibit effective working relationships generally show two traits. First, the members consistently align expectations and experiences. In other words, they communicate directly with each other to clarify each other's expectations of what is going to happen and how it is going to happen. Employees in high performing teams don't necessarily think of themselves as friends and they don't necessarily spend much time together outside of work. However, they have figured out how to work together. They know what to expect from each other; they directly communicate to ensure that others' expectations align with the expected action; they renegotiate expectations when plans or actions change; and they deliver on their agreements. They trust each other based on this consistent alignment of expectations and actions. Here is a simple model of how this applies in all relationship interactions.

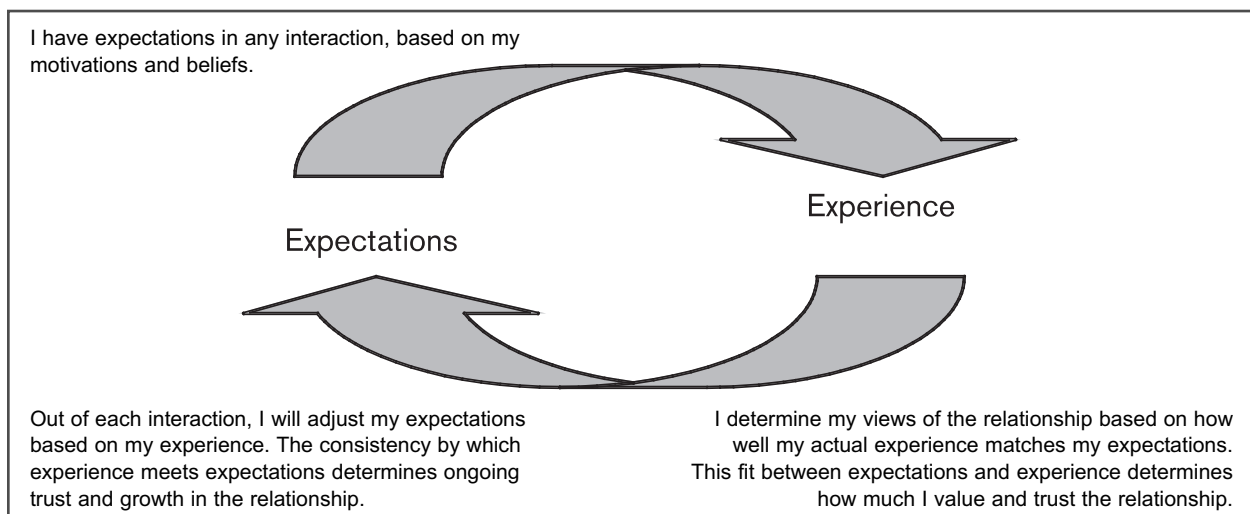


Figure 1

Second, employees in high performing teams clean up tension as soon as it happens — tension never lingers. They can disagree, confront, and even make each other mad. However, they know the importance of keeping their relationships clean and therefore do what it takes to clean up any tension that arises. They know that tension can take on a life of its own regardless of the cause. Tension in relationships that is not cleaned up gets carried forward into future interactions in two damaging ways. First, if you do something that makes me mad and don't clean it up, my anger may get passed on in my interactions with others, therefore causing them tension. That cycle of tension can actually carry itself all the way through the team in a matter of minutes due to the interconnectedness of team relationships. Second, if I have tension because of something that you did, I may carry it into future interactions between the two of us, thus affecting our ability to be successful together.

To clean up tension, leaders commonly use four simple steps, although they always do it in their own way. The key is not to follow the steps like a formula, but to ensure that the relationship is clean with no residual effect of any tension or ambiguity.

1. **Acknowledge** “it” directly and honestly (“I want you to know that I broke one of our agreements.”)
2. **Take responsibility** for “it” and its implications. Express value for the relationship (choose the connection over being “right”) (“I feel badly that I made you late on your deliverable because I didn’t do what I said I would do.”)
3. **Make amends** — whatever is required. The key here is that the relationship is clean — no residual feelings or effects from the broken agreement. Sometimes this means buying a gift, sometimes saying that, “I will never let this happen again.” Sometimes, the key is asking what you can do to clean it up.
4. **Clarify and make a new agreement.** The previous agreement was broken and therefore doesn't exist. You have to make a new one.

Figure 2

**Theme #4 Leaders that truly engage employees understand their motivations and attitudes —**

To truly tap into employees’ passion and engagement, leaders must understand what drives that engagement in the first place. Our simple conclusion is that all

employees’ behaviors are simply rooted in their beliefs and attitudes about work, life, themselves, their company, and you as a leader. These individual beliefs form the filter through which they form their thoughts and opinions, choose their actions, and determine their willingness and capability to engage with others. The obvious challenge is how we use that conclusion to gain greater insight as leaders in engaging our employees.

The simplicity of human behavior is that we operate based on our inner motivations. The complexity is that we very rarely express or demonstrate those motivations to the people around us. Based on our work with leaders and teams, we have developed a simple model that allows us to extrapolate insight into the beliefs, attitudes and motivations that are driving employee behavior. Based on this insight, we can then do our own analysis of the best way to align and mobilize individual and team behavior in a desired direction.



Figure 3

The first step is to observe the actual behaviors that are occurring. A common tendency for leaders is to immediately move into analysis of why the person is exhibiting that behavior rather than simply observing the behavior itself.

We have found that behaviors are not random, but they instead follow specific patterns. Therefore, the second step is simply to see the themes and patterns that are occurring across the behaviors. This forces leaders to be truly honest about the behaviors themselves rather than explaining them or even rationalizing them. Out of these themes and patterns, leaders can then generally extrapolate insight into what is driving the behaviors. The simple key of this process is not to form conclusions based on individual acts or behaviors or analysis of why those behaviors occurred, but on the themes and patterns that exist across multiple actions and behaviors. This picture gives leaders a much more complete and real view of their employees’ motivators. This same analytical process can be used at the team level to understand a team’s behavioral patterns and beliefs.

Starbucks has an articulated belief around positive intent, meaning that people always assume positive intent of the other person's actions and words. As a result, an unspoken implication of this cultural agreement is politeness, which at times may show up as appeasement and avoidance of creative tension. To illustrate the process, let's assume that a team leader in Starbucks observes his team not directly confronting each other around tradeoff decisions or perhaps even exhibiting passive-aggressiveness toward each other. If the leader focuses on the individual behavior, he may simply confront it without understanding what created it. By using the model above, the leader can quickly gain insight that the theme of behavior is politeness, which stems back to a belief of positive intent. As a result, the leader can lead an open conversation within his team about how positive intent does not mean that the team stifles creative tension and disagreement that are both necessary for innovation and effective working relationships.

One of the most provocative realizations of this work is that our beliefs and motivators are actually just choices. We can choose to change our beliefs the minute that we clarify them and decide that they are no longer working for us. As a result, leaders have the opportunity every day to gain insight into the

existing beliefs and motivators of employees and appropriately challenge them as part of their personal and professional development. Interestingly, the "aha" moments that people speak of when they experience something that "changes their lives" are often tied to revelations regarding beliefs that now totally make sense or that no longer work for them.

### **Summary: Lessons and Takeaways**

Out of these four key lessons, leaders have told us a variety of "one-liners" that they use as part of their way of leadership. These lessons when presented together ironically provide a roadmap to higher levels of employee engagement.

- *Tell the truth — directly and openly*
- *Make sure everyone knows where, why and what*
- *Communicate my expectations directly and listen to others*
- *Be 100% present in all interactions*
- *Own my choices and their consequences*
- *Look for the tradeoffs and make sure priorities are clear*
- *Ask why*
- *Value relationships and results equally*

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#### **About Coraggio Institute**

Coraggio Institute is where we organize our thinking and the way we approach our work. Here we collect our thoughts, ideas, experiences, research and writings. We call it our think tank — a self-perpetuating well of knowledge and insight that informs all that we do as consultants as well as the method by which we design and deliver our learning and development programs. For more information about Coraggio Institute or Coraggio Group, visit [coraggiogroup.com](http://coraggiogroup.com) or call 503-493-1453.