

A Puzzle Reveals THE SECRET INGREDIENT OF SAFETY

By Rodd Wagner

More than 3 decades after Boston University professor William Kahn (1990) coined the term employee “engagement,” its implications are proverbial. “Engage” workers and they will deliver more of what the enterprise needs of them. “Disengage” them and you start a tug-of-war between the company’s goals and the workers’ sense of fairness.

They’ll look out more for themselves. The so-called disengaged are more likely to be apathetic to product defects, do less for customers, skip work, produce less and eventually quit.

But in one aspect, the most frustrated workers are, strangely, worse at looking out for themselves. One could assume that people who hate their jobs become self-protective enough that they would be less likely to get injured on the job. In fact, not only are disengaged employees more likely to get hurt, but higher accident rates are among the outcomes most highly correlated with worker demoralization (these connections are a central feature of Wagner & Harter, 2006. The most recent statistics can be found in Harter et al., 2020).

Undoubtedly the increased safety among those better led and managed is partially due to conscious factors such as higher levels of safety rule compliance and improved teamwork. But the magnitude of the difference in accident rates (top quartile workgroups suffer as many as 70% fewer accidents than bottom-quartile workgroups. See Harter et al., 2020) suggests that powerful subconscious forces are also at work. No worker, whether with high or low morale, wants to get hurt. Watts (2011) writes:

When trying to explain someone’s behavior, or to anticipate it, we focus on certain conscious motives and incentives that are most obviously relevant. In doing so, however, we ignore a multitude of other possibly relevant factors, many of which operate below the level of consciousness. (p. 271)

Neither senior leaders nor frontline managers can completely fulfill their safety stewardship without understanding those factors. And this phenomenon bears directly on whether and to what de-

gree general employee well-being should fall within the jurisdiction of safety leaders. If, as ISO 45003 asserts, employee well-being is essential and depends on the “fulfillment of the physical, mental, social and cognitive needs and expectations of a worker related to their work,” (ISO, 2021) then the leaders of industrial organizations must understand how those aspects

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interact in the minds of their employees, especially as they combine to either cause or prevent a serious incident.

Hidden behind the apparent contradiction of the safety differential (“I’m demoralized so I’ll drop my guard and get a concussion”) and the consultant-speak of “employee engagement” is a simple truth: The secret ingredient of worker safety is happiness. Those who want to keep their people safe must broaden their priorities beyond the checklist of incident-proximate necessities such as lockout/tagout and PPE to the ultimate imperative of developing a workforce better able to navigate industrial hazards because it is happier.

Invoking happiness as a business strategy inevitably prompts eye-rolling. Too sappy. Too humanitarian. Too vague. Not goal-oriented enough. But purpose-driven happiness, or its military parallel, morale, have much longer pedigrees and tighter psycho-

logical connection to motivation than the more artificial concept of engagement.

A workplace researcher can ask an employee straight up how happy the person is on the job without explaining the self-evident term. Measures of engagement are derived from other, plain-English questions about job conditions that make workers happy. Are you paid fairly? Do you have an attentive manager? Do you feel a sense of progress? How is your work-life balance? Are you connected to the company mission? Do you feel respected and included for who you are? Are you recognized for good work?

In fact, when a straightforward happiness question and so-called engagement factors are asked in parallel, the two concepts correlate so highly as to be nearly synonymous, leading some social scientists to question whether the concept of “employee engagement” adds anything to the mix.

When I was the workplace research practice leader at BI Worldwide, we asked people, “how happy are you at work?” with a 100-point slider and followed up that query with 36 more traditional engagement questions about aspects such as pay, work-life balance, meaning, teamwork and professional growth. The correlation between job happiness and engagement was an exceptionally high 0.77. My colleague Amy Stern and I concluded:

The overlap between those who are happy and those who are engaged is so large that there simply are no appreciable numbers of people who are happy at work and not engaged, or, conversely, engaged and not happy. In the vast majority of cases, engaged employees are happy, and happy employees are engaged. (Wagner & Stern, 2016)

Correlations between engagement and satisfaction, a less intense form of job happiness, run as high as 0.91 in Gallup’s analyses (see Harter et al., 2020).

Given employee engagement is a relatively new label put on ages-old human phenomena, it may be nothing more than

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“old wine in new bottles” (Briner, 2014). And many questions about happiness turn out to be upstream safety factors: good sleep, receptive managers, solid training, a manageable pace and a common purpose.

The logic is straightforward: If engaged employees are far safer, and engagement and happiness are virtually identical, happy employees are safer employees. In my company’s surveys for clients, the connection is even clearer: The happier employees are at work, the less they feel at risk of an accident. A statistically significant correlation between job happiness and perceived on-the-job safety emerges each time the company conducts its human factors assessment at a client organization. Those correlations average -0.28 between “I am happy with my job” and “I am concerned I will have an accident on the job.” They average -0.39 between job happiness and the statement, “For safety reasons, I wouldn’t want a friend or relative to work here.”

The reason happiness and engagement correlate so highly is because they are the corresponding sides of a solid social contract. The enterprise wants engagement;

the employee wants happiness. The ultimate reason to focus on happiness rather than engagement is because it better creates a two-sided bargain, unleashing the power of human reciprocity that is central to vigilance against accidents. Employees who most forcefully agree that their companies are trying to make them happy are also most inclined to look out for that employer’s interests (Wagner, 2017). And in the process, they look out for themselves. **PSJ**

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