

6 Ways to Create an Engaged Workforce: How Employee Engagement Supports Company Innovation

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Introduction to Self-Direction

The business world right now is in the midst of a change so profound as to make the word “revolutionary” seem inadequate. Although it’s difficult to predict with any confidence the outcome of this change, one thing is certain: today’s rapidly transforming organizations will be the streamlined, agile, and innovative companies of tomorrow... and they will require a radically new kind of employee.

That employee will need the ability to work both independently, with minimal supervision (if any), and jointly as a member of a team. That employee will be expected to solve problems and manage conflict without external guidance. And they will be required to take responsibility for their own personal development and career planning.

In short, that employee will need to be self-directed.

The Business Case for Self-Direction

In the current information society, our primary form of work is neither agriculture nor manufacturing. It’s the management of data and information. During this time, we’ve begun to transform almost everything in our path, particularly in relation to the ways we make our living.

Business markets have been refined—many organizations no longer think in terms of mass markets but in terms of market niches. This process of creating smaller and more fragmented audiences continues with our reliance upon technology.

Employees who are given the tools to become self-directed are positioned for the successes that are associated with employee engagement: happiness with their position and the organization, motivation to do good work, and confidence in their ability to help the company succeed.

Creating an engaged workforce brings a bottom-line benefit to the company. It creates an environment where employees are comfortable in continuously improving existing structures and suggesting innovative ideas to move the organization forward.

Self-direction focuses on the behaviors that help employees meet not only organizational needs, but also a more personal need for success in all spheres of life. There are six principles of self-direction, which together help develop the kind of person who can successfully bridge the old and the new, contributing to the rapidly changing organizations of today and prepared to fulfill the requirements of tomorrow.

In a few hundred years, when the history of our time will be written from a long-term perspective, it is likely that the most important event historians will see is not technology, not the Internet, not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time – literally – substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves. And society is totally unprepared for it.”

– Peter Drucker

Self-Direction = Employee Engagement = Innovation for Your Organization

Behavior #1 - Know Yourself

Know yourself – perhaps the most important principle of self-direction. An injunction as old as time but as fresh today as four hundred years ago, Shakespeare wrote: "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

At the heart of self-direction lies self-awareness.

There are a number of ways that we increase our self-awareness. We can reflect upon our successes and failures and come to understand more clearly our strengths and weaknesses. We are able to explore personal and professional relationships and eventually learn which are productive for us and which aren't. We might respond to questionnaires hoping to receive some systematic information about our self-perceptions. All of these approaches are valid and can be highly productive. However, it's also important to consider other peoples' perception of us.

One of the most powerful ways of increasing our understanding of ourselves is, in fact, to find out how others see us. Although from time to time others may give us feedback on how they think and feel about us, they seldom provide that feedback in an effective way designed to change behavior.

Behavior #2 - Do Meaningful Work

Most of us spend more of our adult lives working than we do engaging in any other single waking activity. We spend more time working than we do with our family and friends. We spend more time at work than we do in all of our eating and recreational time put together. Yet study after study shows that significant numbers of people don't like (and some even hate) their jobs and, if given the chance, would choose some other career path.

Years ago, most work was boring, repetitious, and sometimes even brutal, so a negative attitude toward work was certainly understandable. And of course, plenty of such jobs are still around. But in today's business world, this method of job creation is no longer appropriate. Work has become an increasingly important vehicle for self-pride and fulfillment.

Still even today there are far too many men and women who have failed or refused to follow the path toward professional purpose and productivity, what Joseph Campbell refers to in his works as "bliss."

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The closer the match between the employee as a person and the interpersonal demands placed on them by their work, the more they will find work to be a source of meaning and significance. To do meaningful work, there must be a connection between the person and the job.

Behavior #3 - Be Part of the Solution

Successful problem solving is essential to successful self-direction. Problem solving is best understood as the process of changing the way things are now to the way we would like them to be. Since successful self-direction requires us to live up to our full human potential, at its heart lies the process of changing the way we are now to the way we would like to be. This allows employees to become fully engaged in their personal and professional lives.

There was a time when most people weren't expected to be problem solvers; instead they were expected to turn to an external authority for a problem's solution: a boss or an expert; to tradition, the rules, or even "the way we've always done stuff around here."

Business demands require that we solve problems on our own. While not denying the value and importance of external expertise, successful organizations will try to transfer that expertise to the individual employee through extensive training, and then expect that employee to be self-directing and become part of the solution.

Behavior #4 - Manage Conflict Productively

Conflicts, like problems, are a fact of life. Sometimes we find ourselves in conflict with others because we disagree about:

- A situation—our perceptions about the way the world "really" is.
- The target—what we feel the world "should" look like. Or,
- A proposal—the "best" approach to get from here to there.

We sometimes find ourselves experiencing so-called "personality conflicts," often disagreeing with, not understanding, or just plain not liking certain other people in our lives. It could be a co-worker, a vendor, or even a supervisor.

Again, years ago, we could often look to an external authority figure to resolve our conflicts. There was always a boss, an expert, even a friend or family member more than willing to tell us what to do. Today however, we are increasingly expected to manage our own conflicts without the option of including such authority figures.

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By being aware of the possibility of apparent conflict, we can focus our problem-solving efforts on the area where real conflict exists. Real conflict means that disagreement *does* exist about what the situation is, what the solution ought to look like, or what action should be taken to resolve the problem. In the case of real conflict, self-directed employees can utilize the problem-solving models to gain some direction in resolving conflict.

Behavior #5 - Learn How to Learn

Self-direction begins with self-awareness. That self-awareness is followed by a set of specific skills: job skills, problem-solving skills, or conflict management skills. A very strong case, however, could be made that the most important self-direction behavior is the skill of learning how to learn. The accomplishment of that skill may well make all the others possible.

Long gone are the days when people had jobs and careers that were relatively stable. The prospect of working for a single company for a lifetime is uncommon and in some cases, discouraged. The average person born in the latter years of the Baby Boomer generation held 11 jobs from age 18 to age 44. If today's workforce no longer has employment security, then maybe they can at least have what Rosabeth Moss Kanter refers to as "employability security," which is the "knowledge that today's work will enhance [our] value in terms of future opportunities."

To attain that kind of security, we must become better learners. We are faced with the challenge of learning almost daily. Knowledge is doubling exponentially and, as the world becomes more technologically connected, the possibilities of new learning will increase tremendously.

We can no longer afford to muddle through on our way to new knowledge and new skills. Or rely on others to tell us what we need to know and when we need to know it. Once employees understand how to become effective learners, they can increase their skill and comfort in those areas they enjoy and find alternatives when presented with learning activities that aren't favorites.

Behavior #6 - Manage to Change

The answer to this behavior lies in the concluding statement of John C. Cavanaugh's research into the nature and causes of adult change: "Adults appear to remain the same *unless they perceive a need to change.*" That's the reason why significant life experiences cause us to change; they create, sometimes quite painfully, an awareness of the need to change.

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As we manage to change by learning to use the behaviors associated with our preferred ways of thinking and acting, we will find ourselves feeling frustrated less frequently. At the same time, we accomplish the objectives of productivity and meaning associated with our preferred skill and sensitivities. In Erich Fromm's terms, you will come to make fuller and fuller use of your personal and professional powers. You will come to more fully realize your inherent potential.

In Summary

The greatest challenge of the future is social, not technological. In the excitement generated by the latest technological marvels, from fiber optics to the Internet, to new drugs and medical breakthroughs, we tend to forget that our major problems are *people* problems.

It's almost a cliché to say that technology has outstripped our ability to manage it, but it's our willingness as a society and as human beings to manage technology that will largely determine the quality of our business and economic innovations.

Additionally, if the challenge of the future is social, it's also personal. The social transformation needed to solve the problems of today and tomorrow is, at its heart, a personal transformation. As we change ourselves, we in fact change our businesses and our world.

In order to direct the incredible innovations, ideas, and challenges of our world, we must first direct ourselves. The organizations in which we live and work are becoming radically different from the way they were in more stable and secure times. To survive and thrive in those organizations requires some fundamentally new behaviors on our part.

We hope this whitepaper has prompted ideas and insights leading your organization toward creating the open and self-directed workforce that will help your business reach its operational goals.

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Self-Direction Activity: Developing Your Own Action Plan

Select six values that are important to you or the organization you work for.

Please record those six traits in the numbered boxes on the chart below. Then, on the left-hand side of the chart, describe the ways your current job allows you to fully demonstrate those values. Next, on the right-hand side, describe the ways your current job prevents you from demonstrating those values. Finally, identify 1-2 specific steps you could take to improve the way your job allows you to be your most productive.

In what ways does your job allow you to be...?	In what specific ways does your job prevent you from being...?
	<div data-bbox="573 590 1130 688">1.</div>
	<div data-bbox="573 785 1130 884">2.</div>
	<div data-bbox="573 980 1130 1079">3.</div>
	<div data-bbox="573 1176 1130 1274">4.</div>
	<div data-bbox="573 1371 1130 1470">5.</div>
	<div data-bbox="573 1566 1130 1665">6.</div>

Take action: *What 1-2 specific steps can you take to improve the way your job allows you to be your most productive?*

Resources and Acknowledgements

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About Sharlyn Lauby, SPHR, CPLP

Sharlyn Lauby is author of the HR Bartender blog and president of ITM Group Inc., a South Florida based training and human resources consulting firm. Her company focuses on providing solutions to engage and retain employee talent so their clients can innovate and create shareholder value.

Prior to starting ITM Group, Sharlyn was vice president of human resources one of the world's largest organizational consulting firms. She has designed and implemented highly successful programs for employee retention, internal and external customer satisfaction, and leadership development.

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About Ultimate Software

Ultimate is a leading cloud provider of people management solutions. Built on the belief that people are the most important ingredient of any business, Ultimate's award-winning UltiPro delivers HR, payroll, and talent management solutions that seamlessly connect people with the information and resources they need to work more effectively. Founded in 1990, the company is headquartered in Weston, Florida and has more than 1,400 professionals focused on developing the highest quality solutions and services. In 2012, Ultimate was ranked #25 on FORTUNE'S "100 Best Companies to Work For" list. Ultimate has more than 2,300 customers with employees in 115 countries, including Adobe Systems Incorporated, The Container Store, Culligan International, Major League Baseball, The New York Yankees Baseball Team, and Texas Roadhouse.

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