

Source: Gallup Management Journal
Date: 11/12/09

Driving Engagement by Focusing on Strengths

Too many managers focus on fixing people's weaknesses -- or worse, they simply ignore employees altogether. This doesn't boost performance.

By Brian Brim and Jim Asplund

The two of us spend a tremendous amount of time helping organizations build higher levels of employee engagement. We do this not just because it's the right thing to do for employees -- we do it because Gallup's research has proven that the more engaged your employees are, the better results your organization achieves.

That same research has shown that managers play an essential role in driving engagement. We've understood this for a long time, but we decided to dig deeper and look more closely at how certain management styles could have a particularly powerful impact on employee engagement.

No news is not good news

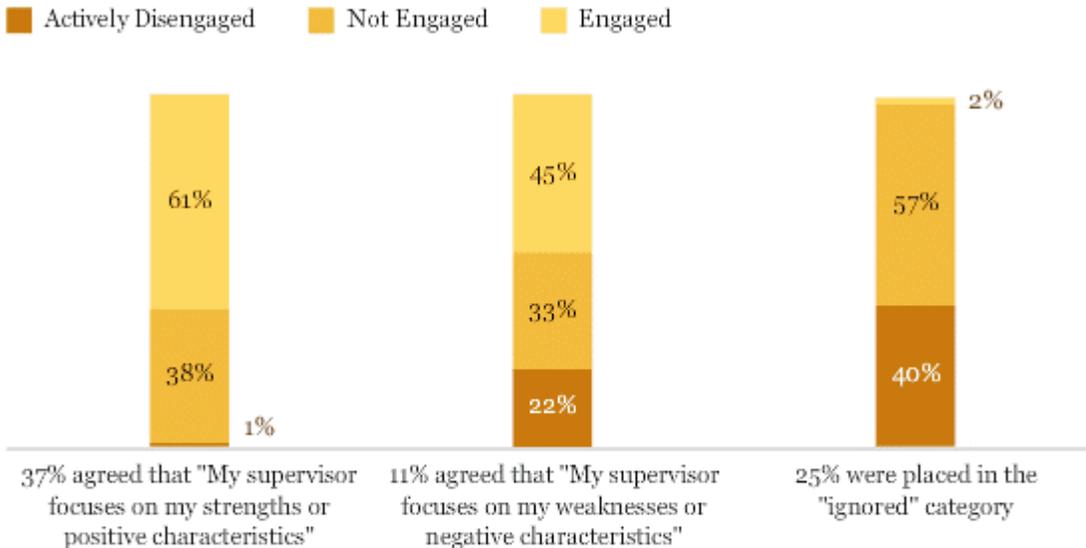
A manager's approach to engagement is a broad topic. So to investigate it more specifically, Gallup broke it down into three categories based on employee perceptions:

- employees felt their manager focused mostly on employees' strengths
- employees felt their manager focused mostly on employees' weaknesses
- employees did not feel their manager focused on either strengths or weaknesses

To test the effects of these different approaches on employee engagement, Gallup asked a random sample of 1,003 U.S. employees how much they agreed with these two statements: "My supervisor focuses on my strengths or positive characteristics" and "My supervisor focuses on my weaknesses or negative characteristics." Employees who did not agree with either statement were put into an "ignored" category.

Reducing Disengagement

Gallup research has found that if your supervisor focuses on your strengths, your chances of being actively disengaged at work are only 1 in 100. But being overlooked may be more harmful to your engagement than if your supervisor focuses on the negative: If your supervisor ignores you, you are about twice as likely to be actively disengaged than if he or she focuses on your weaknesses.



Gallup asked a random sample of 1,003 U.S. employees how much they agreed with these two statements: "My supervisor focuses on my strengths or positive characteristics" and "My supervisor focuses on my weaknesses or negative characteristics." Employees who did not agree with either statement were put into the "ignored" category.

GALLUP®

Copyright © 2009 Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved.

We were disturbed to discover that a significant percentage of the respondents fit into the "ignored" category (25%). As you can see from the chart above, many U.S. managers ignore their employees, or so the employees perceive. Even more importantly, we found that if your manager focuses on your strengths, your chances of being actively disengaged at work are only 1 in 100. If your manager ignores you, though, you are about twice as likely to be actively disengaged at work than if your manager focuses on your weaknesses. Being overlooked, it seems, is more harmful to employees' engagement than having to discuss their weaknesses with their manager.

Why is this important information for managers? Because employees who are ignored feel like they don't matter. There's a crucial phenomenon inherent in employee engagement: The best employees don't want to be coddled; they want to *matter*. They want to be part of something greater than themselves, and they want to know how they contribute to that something. They want to be heard, and above all, they *do not* want to be ignored.

So although it seems counterintuitive, when managers focus on weaknesses rather than ignoring employees, those employees' chances of being engaged actually improve. That's because people prefer to get any feedback over no feedback at all -- even if that feedback is criticism.

"I've worked with and for every type of manager represented in your data," said Larry, a manager we met at a speaking engagement. "Bottom line: A manager who ignores employees is a person who has no business being in that role. People bother them. People are the 'nuisance' aspect of their job, so they ignore them as much as possible. If you are the kind of boss who ignores your employees, you shouldn't be a manager."