Engage me

"Be the source of inspiration, not the source of desperation."

Silvia Damiano

Silvia Damiano was a finalist in the 2010 AITD National Training Excellence Awards, Organisational Learning Effectiveness category. She discusses how L&D professionals can incorporate engagement strategies into learning design.

The latest neuroscience findings are incredibly useful in understanding our working lives, particularly in the realm of what engages people at work. This aspect of organisational effectiveness has intrigued me for a long time, so much so that I embarked on the journey of writing a book, called Engage Me, in 2010.

Year after year, across the world, organisations invest time and effort in developing practices to increase the levels of staff engagement. According to studies by the Hay Group, employees with the highest level of engagement perform 20 per cent better and are 87 per cent less likely to leave the organisation. Workplaces with engaged employees are up to 43 per cent more productive.

Considering how relevant the topic is in today’s workplaces, I thought about researching key concepts that managing consulting companies have been preaching for years, and I compared them with the views of ‘real’ individuals currently working in organisations. I conducted many one-on-one interviews and also surveyed 600 people from different client groups, asking what they believed were the most engaging and disengaging factors.

Despite working in the corporate world for 20 years facilitating, coaching and developing programs for better leadership and teamwork, I could not ignore what I had learned earlier in my life while undertaking my science degree. Combining science with what happens in an organisation has always interested me. I chose the latest scientific information in regards to how our bodies (made up of 50 trillion cells!) ‘engage’ in different environments.

After all, each of us has a body and a brain. We gather experiences throughout our lives and this, combined with our genetic make up, generates a series of emotions, thoughts, feelings and beliefs that play out daily in our working lives.

Many leaders—usually very analytical and linear thinkers—believe that establishing processes for people to follow and creating an army of task focused employees, will guarantee outcomes that will result in high profits and also in high levels of engagement. That might be the case in some organisations. However, without continually looking at ways to engage people’s hearts in the task AND with their teams and leaders; success and commitment are limited.

The reality is that independent of industries or countries, based on the Gallup Organisation, only 29 per cent of the workforce is actively engaged. With companies being obsessed in trying to understand the reasons for engagement, I thought this was a project worth pursuing.

A guiding light in this research work was the case of the Spanish company Desigual (Unequal), who is the living proof of engagement in action. Desigual has headquarters in Barcelona, Spain, and has had an incredible growth over the last two years following an expansion plan into many countries. With the exception of their CEO who is in his forties, most every other employee is Gen Y. Their motto is: fun and profits. They knew from Day One that if they were to keep a motivated and engaged workforce, particularly in such a competitive industry such as clothes manufacturing, they had to do something really different. This company allowed creativity to its highest degree, encouraged communication and connection more than any other company I know of, and they were also willing to have employees participate in their profits.

As well as looking at case studies I also considered the information provided by
David Rock at the Neuroleadership Summit in Los Angeles in late 2009. Based on Rock’s studies, our brain networks become involved in the different ‘engagement’ states as we work. He proposed a more expanded model than Gallup. His model is about five levels of engagement: deeply engaged, engaged, neutral, disengaged, actively disengaged. These five levels are directly linked to the threat/reward circuits in the brain that create different responses.

With this idea of a threat or reward response as the basis of engagement the challenge for me was to find out directly from ‘my subjects’ what was the first thing that popped into their heads when I asked them the question: “What engages you the most at work?”

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To my surprise, almost no one responded that understanding the vision of the company was one of the main reasons to be engaged, something that consultants have been repeating over and over for the last two decades. I am not suggesting that people do not need to understand and/or share the vision of the company. However, this is not the first thing that people expressed as priority number one, when the question was asked.

Their responses were more aligned to the biological drivers of engagement explained by David Rock in Los Angeles.

One thing led to another.

As I started the interviews with a selected group of leaders, I thought of approaching one of my clients from the telecommunications industry. She was very keen on this project and invited me to meet with some leaders from her organisation.

One of them was a beloved leader in his unit, the Managing Director of Networks, who became passionate about the book and the idea of rolling out an engagement program throughout his whole division. Coincidentally, lifting engagement scores was his big aim for 2010, before he retired a few months later.

The book then became part of this learning initiative, which started with me presenting a series of keynote speeches on the biology of engagement, to all leaders in the unit, who were based all over Australia.

Everyone participating received a book and they were all invited to share its content with their teams. The second phase was about encouraging all these teams to send ideas to improve engagement to the Organisational Effectiveness leader responsible for the coordination of this program. The Managing Director and his executive team took the best ideas into consideration for implementation.

A crucial element for this program was the implicit trust placed in the leaders to become coaches in terms of sharing the knowledge with their people about the importance of engagement. It was also imperative that they should not only educate, but also have the ability to elicit input from their team members that, in itself, is a very empowering and engaging activity.

Combining interview responses and online surveys, it was very clear to me that everyone has different engagement drivers. It was also interesting to notice that these drivers varied with the different professional groups analysed.

Engagement in learning initiatives

Below are the three most important engagement drivers that emerged from this analysis. As a learning professional I have found that taking them into consideration can significantly improve the design of learning initiatives. They can be utilised in understanding how to get the best out of people, independently or where they sit in an organisation. These are:

1. Having the opportunity to be challenged in terms of solving problems, overcoming obstacles and using creative thinking.
2. Feeling they have the autonomy to make choices (even if small such as being able to choose working hours and ways of working).
3. Knowing that they have the chance to help and develop others.

The order of the factors changed with the different groups. For example, in a teaching institution, the third response became the first. The first response was the same for both IT and finance populations.

There was no noticeable difference between male or female groups.

Other responses that emerged from the interviews were:

“I need to be enjoying what I do to be deeply engaged.”

“I feel engaged when I am emotionally connected to the people in my team, when there is a sense of belonging.”

“I am engaged when there is certainty and clarity about what I need to do and the goals are achievable.”

“I need to have purpose when I work. Then I am fully engaged in whatever needs to be done.”

Conclusion

Finding out what is happening in different organisations in terms of engagement and then converting serious business knowledge into an enjoyable learning experience, is the final, successful result.

Learning about engagement at work can be fun. The book contains short stories, inspirational quotes, funny cartoons and photographs, with the purpose of getting ‘busy’ leaders to read the basics of engagement.

Creating this program and assisting one of my clients in the process has been very personally satisfying. It has also allowed me to meet many great leaders who have the good intention of engaging others in the process of achieving their personal vision.

Originally from Argentina, Silvia Damiano is a highly respected and sought after speaker and facilitator on the topics of Emotional Intelligence, Neuroleadership and Engagement working with clients from a variety of industries, which include finance, pharmaceutical, health, manufacturing and professional services.

An expert in the design and implementation of Organisational Learning strategies, Silvia headed the Learning and Development functions for Ernst & Young, in Chile and worked as a Senior Manager for Westpac Banking in Australia.

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