

## Getting to the Heart of Employee Engagement

By [Les Landes, APR](#)

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On June 24, 1980, NBC aired a documentary called "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?" that would eventually change the course of American business. Somehow, during a relatively short period of time, the tiny Asian country had managed to rise from a poor-quality producer of low-end trinkets to a major manufacturer of high-quality automobiles and electronics sold worldwide.

When NBC correspondent Lloyd Dobbins set out to find the people responsible for that transformation, he kept hearing about a man who had become a legend in Japan but who was virtually unknown in the United States.

To Dobbins' surprise, this miracle worker was an American. What's more, the man was 80 years old, deemed "over the hill" and largely out of touch with business realities by the few people in this country who knew him. His name was Dr. W. Edwards Deming, and on the night of that broadcast, America paid attention.

Deming's message — one that eventually made its way throughout most of corporate America in some form or another — was twofold.

First, excellence requires a disciplined approach based on rigorous management systems and relevant measurement methods.

His second message was about people. He emphasized that employees could contribute more to improving an organization's performance than most companies appreciated or enabled them to do, and his success in Japan proved it.

Both of Deming's mandates have significant implications for communication professionals who play a role in fostering what has become a major priority for many organizations — employee engagement. Not so many years ago, everyone talked about employee satisfaction, but somewhere along the line, it fell out of favor because mere satisfaction did not equate to performance excellence.

### Emotional connection

The first published use of the term "employee engagement" was in the "Academy of Management Journal" article "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work" (W. Kahn, 1990).

A lot of definitions for the term have emerged since then, and until recently, I've preferred the one published by the Conference Board in 2006. They defined engagement as "a heightened emotional connection that an employee feels for his or her organization, that influences him or her to exert greater discretionary effort to his or her work." In the interest of being more colloquial, I define it today as: "the emotional connection that gets employees tuned in, turned on and eager to go the extra mile."

Sparked by the Deming broadcast and the evolving interest in employee engagement in the past three decades, publishers have flooded the business market with books and articles on how to spark that extra effort in creating high-performance organizations.



While many of the ideas have been promising and some organizations have been successful in cracking the code, research on the general state of engagement nationwide is grim. Many workers remain disenchanting and disengaged — and their potential remains largely untapped.

## Engagement

Data from the most recent annual Gallup report on engagement showed once again that American businesses are a long way from where they need to be:

- 30 percent of employees are “actively engaged” in their jobs
- 52 percent are “not engaged”
- 18 percent are “actively disengaged”

What’s more, Gallup estimates that the disengaged segment of the workforce costs U.S. businesses \$450-\$550 billion per year.

So what’s behind those dismal results, and what can we do to make compelling employee engagement the rule rather than the exception?

The shortfall stems, in part, from a failure to get at the root of human nature and how it affects motivation and performance in the workplace. That’s the underlying premise of my new business fable, “Getting to the Heart of Employee Engagement,” which poses a fresh perspective for understanding the nature of people in the workplace and what it takes to get employees more fully engaged.

The book is based on a premise that goes to the core of what makes human beings unique:

- Imagination: our capacity to imagine things that do not exist in the natural world
- Free will: our ability to make choices that are not dictated by the imprinted code that controls the behavior of all other living creatures

## Power and balance

Even more important is understanding that imagination and free will are useless without one another. Imagination without free will has no power. Free will without imagination has no purpose.

Why is that idea so significant? When you don’t give people the opportunity to exercise the combined force of their unique gifts of imagination and free will, you diminish their potential and undermine their trust in the organization. Putting it another way: You take the “human” out of human being.

While unleashing the power of imagination and free will in the workplace is a compelling notion to some people, it is frightening to others who see it as a threat to order and discipline. That might be true if people were inherently irresponsible and chaotic, but they are not. It is a common perception that employees do not like “command and control,” but that’s only half right. They hate the command part for sure, but maintaining order is important to the vast majority of employees. No one likes it when things are out of control. People just want to have some say in what those controls are and how they apply them — especially when it comes to things that affect their own lives and their ability to do their best work.

When organizations learn how to strike that crucial balance, they will have the best of both worlds. They will have the order and discipline that are essential to ensure predictability, and employees will feel the emotional connection for their enterprise that produces a level of extra effort far beyond what most managers can even imagine.



Founder and president of Landes & Associates, Les Landes, APR, is the former head of corporate communication for one of the world’s largest food companies. He speaks at many conferences and seminars, and hosts the WebTalkRadio program, “Employee Engagement: the Heart of Business Success.”