

RELEASE DATE: Monday, June 03, 2002

SOURCE: <http://gmj.gallup.com>

CONTACT INFORMATION: The Gallup Management Journal
Editorial and Executive Offices
1251 Avenue of the Americas, Suite
2350
New York, NY 10020
(888) 274-5447

Building a Highly Engaged Workforce

How great managers inspire virtuoso performance

A GMJ Q&A WITH CURT COFFMAN

Coauthor of [First, Break All the Rules](#) (Simon & Schuster, 1999) and [Follow This Path](#) (Warner Books, 2002)

When employees join an organization, they're usually enthusiastic, committed, and ready to be advocates for their new employer. Simply put, they're engaged.

But often, that first year on the job is their best. Gallup Organization research reveals that the longer an employee stays with a company, the less engaged he or she becomes. And that drop costs businesses big in lost profit and sales, and in lower customer satisfaction. In fact, Gallup estimates that actively disengaged employees -- the least productive -- cost the American economy up to \$350 billion per year in lost productivity.

What can managers do to enhance employee engagement? What are the signs that employees are becoming disenchanted, and what can managers do to reverse the slide? We asked Curt Coffman, Global Practice Leader for Q¹² Management Consulting and coauthor of Gallup's best-selling book on great managers, [First, Break All the Rules](#), and the soon to be published [Follow This Path](#) (due out in October), to share strategies from the world's great managers.

GMJ: What can managers do to boost engagement levels in their workgroups?

Curt Coffman: First, it's important to note that most managers aren't against

employee engagement. These managers (great, good, or average) want their employees to feel that they're a significant part of the business. In fact, almost everyone joins an organization as an engaged employee. What managers do from that point on determines the path the employee will take -- toward continued engagement or toward the ranks of the "not engaged" or "actively disengaged" groups.

GMJ: Define those terms.

Coffman: Since 1997, Gallup has studied the responses of about 3 million employees that have participated in the Q¹² survey, Gallup's 12-question assessment of employee engagement levels. We've found that employee responses to these crucial 12 items tend to fall into three distinct categories.

Employees who are "not engaged" aren't necessarily negative or positive about their company. They take a wait-and-see attitude toward their job, their employer, and their coworkers. They hang back from becoming engaged, and they don't commit themselves.

The "actively disengaged" employees are the "cave dwellers." They're "Consistently Against Virtually Everything." They're not just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, actively disengaged workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

GMJ: How do engaged employees differ?

Coffman: "Engaged" employees are builders. They want to know the desired expectations for their role so they can meet and exceed them. They're naturally curious about their company and their place in it. They perform at consistently high levels. They want to use their talents and strengths at work every day. They work with passion, and they have a visceral connection to their company. And they drive innovation and move their organization forward.

GMJ: Most people join an organization as engaged employees. What do their managers need to do to keep them engaged?

Coffman: To start with, employees must have a strong relationship with, and clear communication from, their manager. They need a manager who will clear a path for them, so they can concentrate on what they do best, and do more of it. They also need strong relationships with their coworkers. They must feel a commitment toward their coworkers and from them, because that commitment enables them to take risks and stretch for excellence.

Managers also have to challenge employees within their areas of talent, then help them gain the skills and knowledge they need to build their talents into strengths. And managers should help employees develop ownership of their goals, targets, and milestones, so employees can enhance their contributions to the company and increase their impact.

GMJ: But we know that some employees' engagement levels deteriorate. Gallup's

most recent research suggests that 29% of the U.S. workforce is engaged, 55% is not engaged, and 16% is actively disengaged. Why does this happen?

Coffman: One reason is that engaged employees tend to get the least amount of focus and attention from managers, in part because they're doing exactly what their manager needs them to do. They're not "squeaky wheels." They set goals, meet and exceed expectations, and charge enthusiastically toward the nearest tough task.

Some managers mistakenly think they should leave their best employees alone. Great managers do just the opposite. Great managers tell us again and again that they spend most of their time with their most productive and talented employees because they have the most potential. If a manager coaxes an average performance from a below-average employee, she still has an average performer. But if she coaches a good employee to greatness, she gains a great performer.

The challenge comes when managers see some of the first symptoms that an engaged employee is wavering toward the "not engaged" category. Then they need to act immediately.

GMJ: What are those symptoms?

Coffman: One is that the relationship between the employee and the manager begins to diminish, and it isn't meeting the employee's needs. The second is that the employee begins feeling that their potential is being wasted -- that they don't make full use of their talents and strengths in their role.

GMJ: What should managers do when they spot an employee whose engagement levels are slipping?

Coffman: Go back to the basic principles of the Q¹². Start with expectations. Has the employee lost clarity about his role? Is he confused about what the manager, and the business, need him to contribute every day? Then make sure he has the right materials, equipment, and information to move toward those outcomes.

Next, refocus on that employee -- on his skills, knowledge, and talents. Employees who get to do what they do best every day move toward engagement. And last but not least, catch him doing things right. Recognize him for excellence. Recognition is personally fulfilling, but even more, recognition communicates what an organization values, and it reinforces employee behaviors that reflect those values.

Set clear expectations, give employees the right materials, focus on the employee, and recognize your best performers -- those are the strategies that drive engagement.

-- Interviewed by Barb Sanford

Next installment: Moving good to great: How to manage "not engaged" employees

Curt Coffman, former Global Practice Leader with The Gallup Organization, is coauthor of Gallup's best-selling book on great managers, *[First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently](#)* (Simon and Schuster, 1999). Coffman's latest book is *[Follow This Path: How the World's Greatest Organizations Drive Growth by Unleashing Human Potential](#)* (Warner Books, 2002).

[Learn More >>](#)

Gallup's Workshop on Employee Engagement provides the opportunity for a small group of executives to learn how to increase employee engagement in large organizations. The workshop will be led by executives of two companies with solid experience in this crucial management discipline.

To learn more about the workshop or to register, visit the [Workshop on Employee Engagement](#) page on the Gallup Consulting site or contact [Mary Penner-Lovci](#) at 212-899-4890 or [Amy White](#) at 609-279-2233.

Copyright © 2006 The Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ. All rights reserved. Gallup®, AS™, Business Impact Analysis™, CE11®, Clifton StrengthsFinder™, the 34 Clifton StrengthsFinder theme names, Customer Engagement Index™, Drop Club™, Emotional Economy™, Employee Engagement Index™, Employee Outlook Index™, Follow This Path™, Gallup Brain™, Gallup Consulting™, Gallup Management Journal®, GMJ®, Gallup Press™, Gallup Publishing™, Gallup Tuesday Briefing®, Gallup University™, HumanSigma®, I10™, L3™, PrincipalInsight™, Q12®, SE25™, SF34®, SRI®, Strengths Spotlight™, Strengths-Based Selling™, StrengthsCoach™, StrengthsFinder®, StrengthsQuest™, TeacherInsight™, The Gallup Path®, and The Gallup Poll® are trademarks of The Gallup Organization. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. These materials are provided for noncommercial, personal use only. Reproduction prohibited without the express permission of The Gallup Organization.