



# MAXIMIZING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT WITHIN THE FEDERAL PUBLIC SERVICE

AN EVIDENCE-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Craig Dowden, Ph. D.

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ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL EXECUTIVES  
OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE OF CANADA

*The author of this paper, Craig Dowden holds a Ph.D. in psychology and specializes in the custom design and delivery of evidenced-based leadership development programs and services. He also dedicates time to reviewing and conducting research that provides valuable insight into the most pressing issues facing businesses today. Craig also shares his insights in various high-profile publications, including Financial Post, Huffington Post, and Psychology Today. Find out more about Craig by visiting [www.craigdowden.com](http://www.craigdowden.com), emailing him at [craig@craigdowden.com](mailto:craig@craigdowden.com) or tweeting him @craigdowden.*

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## CONTEXT

This white paper on *Maximizing Employee Engagement within the federal Public Service* follows the recent publication of another white paper commissioned by APEX entitled, *Civility Matters: An evidenced based-review on how to cultivate a respectful federal Public Service*. Over the last several years, multiple surveys have highlighted that disrespectful behaviours are disturbingly common across all levels of government and are on the rise. The impacts of incivility are far-reaching and have damaging effects on the workplace and are connected to a decrease in employee engagement. Together these white papers can assist executives cultivate a respectful workplace and increase employee engagement levels.

Employee engagement has emerged as an increasingly important issue within the federal Public Service. Several questions relating to engagement are included within the triennial Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) to continually assess and track this crucial organizational metric. Maximizing engagement is also a key area of focus for Blueprint 2020, which provides a roadmap for ensuring the federal public sector becomes an employer of choice, both now and in the future.

Research with public sector executives also documents their high level of interest in employee engagement. For the 2015 APEX Symposium, regional APEX members were surveyed pre-conference to determine their level of interest in various topics for breakout sessions. Engagement was their top choice by a large margin.

As the primary voice and support network for the executive cadre, the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada (APEX) plays a significant role in informing leadership and organizational excellence. Recognizing the crucial role of engagement and civility in obtaining key departmental and governmental objectives, APEX commissioned the white papers on employee engagement and civility.

To ensure executives receive the most credible information, this review examines the science of employee engagement to identify the empirically-supported drivers of engagement at work. The goal is to provide an empirically-based framework and toolkit which can be used to enhance engagement at an individual, team, and organizational level.

## INTRODUCTION

*"Employee engagement needs to be considered more than just a "nice to have," or something that's done from time to time, as kind of a specific exercise. It needs to be accepted really as a critical organizational function<sup>1</sup>."*

— Janice Charette, Clerk of the Privy Council

Employee engagement is a crucial area of focus for the federal public service. Although most employees are engaged in their work, survey indicators have slipped over time. In the 2014 PSES survey<sup>2</sup>, less than two-thirds of respondents (63%) recommended their department as a great place to work. An even lower percentage (57%) indicated that they would remain with their current department or agency if a comparable job was available elsewhere in the federal public service.

Results from the executive level are especially troubling, with 32% reporting being actively disengaged<sup>3</sup>. According to Gallup Inc., an American research-based, global performance-management consulting company, "actively disengaged employees aren't just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish<sup>4</sup>." Gallup has suggested that active disengagement costs U.S. employers an estimated \$450 billion to \$550 billion each year<sup>5</sup>. Disengaged employees tend to 'kill time' or are 'checked out' at the office (e.g., actively counting the days to their retirement/next vacation). They also show little or no concern for how well the organization is performing and their entire work days revolve around their breaks, which they typically extend for as long as possible. Given the important role of executives in bringing the best out of their teams, one can easily see how actively disengaged leaders represent a major problem.

Perhaps the most ambitious examination of the impacts of employee engagement was sponsored by the Gallup organization. Their senior research team conducted a meta-analysis of over 250 independent studies, which included almost 200 organizations in 49 industries located in 34 countries around the world<sup>6</sup>. A meta-analysis comprises a statistical aggregation of the results from a group of separate studies and provides powerful insight into the overall trends in a field of study. In this study, 49,928 business/work units were included, which represented 1,390,941 employees.

Their overall findings provided compelling arguments for the importance of employee engagement. First and foremost, the research team learned that the relationships between engagement and success were generalizable across different organizations and countries. They also found that business/work units that scored in the top half on employee engagement nearly doubled their success rate as compared to their counterparts who inhabited the bottom half of this spectrum.

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<sup>1</sup> National Webcast – Blueprint 2020 (Clerk of the Privy Council) <http://www.clerk.gc.ca/eng/feature.asp?pageld=406>

<sup>2</sup> 2014 Public Service Employee Survey. Results released February 2015. Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat ([www.tbs-sct.gc.ca](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca))

<sup>3</sup> APEX 2012 Executive Work and Health Survey: Synopsis. Report provided by the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada.

<sup>4</sup> 2013 State of the American Workplace. Gallup Organization. Sorenson, S., & Garman, K. (2013). How to tackle U.S. employees' stagnating engagement. Gallup Business Journal, June 11, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Sorenson, S., & Garman, K. (2013). How to tackle U.S. employees' stagnating engagement. Gallup Business Journal, June 11, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Harter, J.K., Schmidt, F.L., Agrawal, S., & Plowman, S.K. (2013). The relationship between engagement at work and organizational outcomes. 2012 Q12 meta-analysis. Gallup Organization White Paper.

Gallup separated the results for teams that scored in the top and bottom quartile of engagement and discovered striking results. Across these two groups, median<sup>7</sup> increases were found for productivity (21%), safety incidents (48%), absenteeism (37%) and work quality (41%).

Results in terms of turnover were especially striking. While turnover rates were reduced by 25% in high-turnover organizations, the impact was even more pronounced in low-turnover organizations. In this case, median turnover was reduced by 65%.

Additional research by Towers Watson, a leading global professional services company has uncovered that disengaged employees are also at a significantly greater risk for “presenteeism.” In other words, even though the employee is physically ‘present’ at the office, he or she is mentally checked out. While engaged employees only lose an average of 7.6 days each year to ‘presenteeism,’ their disengaged counterparts lose almost twice as many (i.e. 14.1 days) for the same reason<sup>8</sup>.

Within the federal public service, employee engagement has been linked to various desirable outcomes including positive leadership, empowerment, positive working relationships, and a respectful and ethical workplace<sup>9</sup>.

Given its numerous benefits, leaders are constantly seeking ways to enhance employee engagement. Conducting a Google search on the topic reveals almost 21 million entries! This can leave leaders and organizations wondering where to begin.

## THE FOCUS OF THIS REVIEW

The remaining sections of this paper outline the key findings in the leadership and organizational sciences relating to employee engagement. In each case, the supportive research is reviewed followed by a discussion of evidence-informed strategies that executives can bring back to their departments and divisions.

Several items are important to note here. First, the order of presentation of these core themes should not be taken to reflect their relative importance. Second, and arguably more important, the recommendations within each theme are not assumed to be applicable to every executive and/or department. Rather, these suggestions represent examples of possible applications of the scientific findings. Readers of this report are encouraged to experiment with and adopt those that seem to fit their culture and reality. The hope is that these examples may serve to prompt more ideas in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> The median represents the middle number in a given sequence of numbers. If the sequence has an even number of numbers, the median is the average of the two middle numbers. For example, 4 is the median number in the following list: 1, 3, 4, 8, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Towers Watson (2012). Global Workforce Survey – Engagement at risk: Driving strong performance in a volatile global environment.

<sup>9</sup> Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer, 2009. What Drives Employee Engagement in Your Organization?

## THE POWER OF PROGRESS

A few years ago, the *progress principle* was called one of the Breakthrough Ideas by Harvard Business Review. In this ground-breaking research, Harvard professors Teresa Amabile, Steven Kramer and their team conducted a multiyear study, which tracked the day-to-day activities, emotions, and motivation of hundreds of knowledge workers. In their analysis of over 12,000 diary entries, they discovered that a sense of progress was the top contributor to engaged performance<sup>10</sup>. Participant engagement was at its peak when they reported making meaningful headway in their projects or when they felt supported by their supervisors in overcoming or removing obstacles. Conversely, when employees felt they were 'spinning their wheels' or encountering roadblocks to goal achievement, their motivation plummeted.

Independent research has supported the importance of fostering a sense of progress. In one study, 78% of employees in highly engaged organizations agreed that their managers help them to remove obstacles that interfere with getting their work done. In contrast, only 27% of disengaged employees reported that their leaders engaged in this behaviour.

One of the most surprising elements of the progress principle is how little importance people give it in terms of its impact on their engagement. In another study<sup>11</sup>, a large group of leaders from dozens of organizations were asked to rank the relative importance of various factors on employee motivation and engagement (e.g., recognition, incentives, interpersonal support, support for making progress, and clear goals). Interestingly, leaders ranked progress dead last. This suggests that one of the most powerful influencers of engagement is rarely recognized by leaders and organizations.

One major implication of this research is that a powerful key to engagement rests directly within the control of the executive leadership. Managing work assignments in the context of the progress principle can allow leaders in the federal public service to leverage its benefits directly within their areas of responsibility.

Although, the above research was conducted specifically for federal public service leaders, it can be applied by public service leaders at all government levels, as well as leaders in the private sector across Canada. The research sheds light on various evidence-informed strategies that they can apply at an individual, team, and organizational level.

- 1) **Avoid changing goals when possible** – When employee or departmental goals are altered, the power of progress can be sacrificed, as employees may feel that their work was a 'waste of time' and that they need to 'start all over again.' Leaders would be best served by ensuring consistency of goals within their areas of responsibility whenever possible. However, if departmental or divisional realities sometimes necessitate changing direction, consider consulting with employees to allow them to feel a sense of control over the new direction. Better yet, spend time finding links between the new goals and the progress that has already been made.
- 2) **Beware the perils of indecision** – In order to feel a sense of progress, employees need to feel confident and comfortable about the direction forward. When leaders and executives introduce uncertainty into an organization, it is very difficult for employees to feel a sense of progress.

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<sup>10</sup> Amabile, T., & Kramer, S. (2012). *The Progress Principle*, Harvard Business Review Press.

<sup>11</sup> Amabile, T., & Kramer, S. (2011). *The power of small wins*. Harvard Business Review.

Each day employees wait for direction the benefits of the progress principle slip away. Although thoughtful reflection on strategic initiatives is a valuable exercise, leaders need to be aware of the potentially damaging effects of putting off their decisions and introducing unnecessary delays into the system.

- 3) **Be sensitive to the power of setbacks** – Setbacks are an inevitable part of organizational life. Leaders can amplify engagement by being sensitive to these events and making themselves even more available to their teams during these difficult periods. Spending time listening to employee concerns and collectively brainstorming possible actions can yield considerable benefits to their teams. The importance of this recommendation is heightened by the fact that past research has shown that negative events (e.g., small losses or setbacks) tend to have a more powerful impact on engagement (in the reverse direction) than positive ones<sup>12</sup>.

- 4) **Don't forget to celebrate small wins** – It is important to note that the benefits of the progress principle are not only felt after major accomplishments. In fact, "small wins" are sufficient to move the engagement needle ahead. Consequently, taking the time to highlight where smaller gains have been achieved can provide tremendous benefit to executives and their teams.

An extension of this recommendation applies especially to federal public service executives. Specifically, as one moves higher in the organizational hierarchy, our goals can become more complex, abstract, and long-term. In many cases, these goals can extend out several months or even years, which can leave executives struggling to maintain their level of engagement, as they may not see or feel a sense of progress toward a large and abstract future goal. Executives can overcome this potential driver of disengagement by breaking down their projects into smaller parts. This can serve as a motivational tool at a personal level, while also showcasing the key gains to team members.

- 5) **Identify progress vampires** – Leaders can put themselves in a position to fully leverage the power of progress by asking their team members what barriers - both people and procedural (e.g., red tape) - are making it difficult to do their work. Engaging in open conversations and brainstorming with your team around ways to minimize or eliminate these barriers to progress can yield considerable benefits for the employees and for the organization more broadly.

- 6) **View challenges as a learning opportunity instead of a crisis** – Mistakes happen. It is a reality of organizational life. A crucial decision for leaders is how these setbacks are managed within their teams and organizations. The progress principle provides guidance for how these challenges should be viewed.

Approaching these problems with an overly critical mindset can quickly debilitate employee engagement. Focusing on assessing blame may send the (potentially unintended) message that this is a catastrophic error that has caused irreparable damage to the project. Looking to blame leads to a culture of fear within teams. As a result, team members may be reluctant to admit

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<sup>12</sup> Amabile, T., & Kramer, S. (2012). *The Progress Principle*, Harvard Business Review Press.

their mistakes or even discuss their work, as they may be concerned about how their leader will interpret and react to this information. This may lead to problems and issues being 'covered up' further leading to major challenges and/or crises later in the project. This can demoralize team members while also contributing to more cautious behaviour in the future.

Alternatively, if leaders view challenges as opportunities to learn, this shows the employee that all is not lost. Progress can be maintained and recovered. It also empowers employees to persevere in the future when these obstacles are encountered.

## AUTONOMY VS. MICROMANAGEMENT

*"The best executive is one who has sense enough to pick good [people] to do what he wants done and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it."*

— Theodore Roosevelt

Another key theme that drives employee engagement is autonomy. Research from around the world has shown how critical autonomy is to our well-being. These links have been found not only in North American and Western European countries, but also in Russia, Turkey, South Korea, and Bangladesh<sup>13</sup>.

Generally, one would expect that executives would experience heightened levels of autonomy, given their position in the organizational hierarchy. However, the APEX Executive Work and Health Survey conducted in 2012 showed a very different trend. In the federal public service, executives report low levels of job control. Equally as interesting, there is no significant difference found on this metric, regardless of where the individual resides within the executive cadre – entry level EX or ADM.

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, two widely respected experts in the field, have persuasively argued that autonomy is one of, if not the most important driver of motivation and engagement. Considerable research supports this view. One study found that when employees were offered 'autonomy support' (e.g., were provided ample choice over what to do and how to do it, leaders delivered meaningful feedback), significant increases in job satisfaction and on-the-job performance were realized<sup>14</sup>. In a separate investigation, employees exhibited higher levels of job satisfaction, lower levels of absenteeism, and better psychological and physical well-being when they viewed their managers as demonstrating more autonomy-support<sup>15</sup>.

To further understand the concept of autonomy, there are some important points to keep in mind. First, according to Deci and Ryan, autonomy is not equivalent to complete independence.

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<sup>13</sup> See Chirkov, V., Ryan, R.M., Kim, Y., & Kaplan, U. (2003). Differentiating autonomy from individualism and independence: A self-determination theory perspective on internalization of cultural orientations and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84; Devine, J., Camfield, L., & Gough, I., (2008). Autonomy or dependence or both? Perspectives from Bangladesh. *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

<sup>14</sup> Baard, P.P., Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (2004). Intrinsic need satisfaction: A motivational basis of performance and well-being in two work settings. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*.

<sup>15</sup> Blais, M.R., & Briere, N.M. (1992). On the mediational role of feelings of self-determination in the workplace: Further evidence and generalization. Unpublished manuscript, University of Quebec at Montreal (cited in Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004).



Rather, autonomy means acting with choice. In other words, workers can be autonomous, while still being interdependent with those around them. While employees have the freedom to work on their projects in the way that best suits them, they are still accountable for the results.

Secondly, autonomy-support is not related to the characteristics of the job/role of the employee. Instead, it comes from the culture created by the direct supervisor. In this case, employees feel they are empowered when approaching their duties and can adequately influence their work environment.

Clearly, a key factor that can get in the way of autonomy-support is when leaders engage in micromanaging behaviours. Unfortunately, a sizable proportion of employees are exposed to these debilitating behaviours on a daily basis. Research conducted by the global management consulting firm Blessing White found that almost 40% of workers report they are frequently or occasionally micromanaged by their immediate supervisors. Similarly, another study involving executives revealed that almost 90% of respondents reported having some direct experience with at least one micromanager<sup>16</sup>.

### **WHAT IS MICROMANAGEMENT?**

Although we each have a general understanding of what micromanagement involves, an interesting research study out of Fordham University was able to define these behaviours more precisely. In this survey, Dr. Robert Hurley and James Ryman asked a sample of 300 executives from 50 different organizations in 10 countries to differentiate the behaviours of micromanagers versus leaders<sup>17</sup>. The table provides the most frequently mentioned attributes of leaders versus micromanagers.

MICROMANAGERS	LEADERS
Controlling	Trusting
Not trusting	Inspiring
Insecure	Confident
Tense	Empowering
Afraid	Delegates
Too detail-oriented	Challenges
Critical	Takes risks
Demanding	Supportive

<sup>16</sup> Blessing White. Leading Technical People Research Report 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Hurley, R., & Ryman, J. Making the transition from micromanager to leader. Unpublished manuscript ([www.drbohburley.com/pdf/SMRMicromanagementPaper.pdf](http://www.drbohburley.com/pdf/SMRMicromanagementPaper.pdf))

## **WHY DO PEOPLE MICROMANAGE?**

A recent blog post in the Harvard Business Review entitled “Stop being micromanaged”, identified two highly different motivations behind micromanagement<sup>18</sup>. The first type is the individual who has incredibly high standards and who likes to exercise considerable control over the projects for he or she is responsible. Steve Jobs was given as such an example. These individuals may be seen as perfectionists who want to ensure that every project follows their ideals. According to Jean-Francois Manzoni, despite their micromanagement tendencies and the challenges they bring in terms of their style, it is possible for employees to learn a great deal from these individuals because of their lofty standards.

The second type of micromanager is more toxic. These ‘pathological micromanagers’ have an on-going need to ensure that everyone around them knows who is in charge. These leaders give their direct reports little or no autonomy and get involved in the most intricate of project details. They are also very resistant to feedback, which can lead to difficulties in changing their management style.

Based on the above research, the following list provides evidence-informed strategies that executives can use to build an autonomy-supportive culture:

- 1) **Conduct an autonomy audit** – In his international best-selling book *Drive*<sup>19</sup>, author Dan Pink suggests conducting an autonomy audit to determine the degree of self-direction within your team/organization. He recommends asking employees to rate the following four questions on a scale from 0 (“almost none”) to 10 (“a huge amount”):
  - How much autonomy do you have over your tasks at work – your main responsibilities and what you do in a given day?
  - How much autonomy do you have over your time at work – for instance, when you arrive, when you leave, and how you allocate your hours each day?
  - How much autonomy do you have over your team at work – that is, to what extent are you able to choose the people with whom you typically collaborate?
  - How much autonomy do you have over your technique at work – how you actually perform the main responsibilities of your job?

Not surprisingly, Pink highlights the fact that these results need to be anonymous and framed without fear of reprisal. Although there are no established norms for interpretation, the key outcome from this exercise is creating an opportunity for conversation, whereby employees and leaders can examine how to possibly increase job control within these different areas. Even if there is limited wiggle room, just having the discussion and exploring possible small steps can be wonderfully engaging and empowering for individuals.

- 2) **Check in with employees versus checking up on them** – Not surprisingly, the research that led to the progress principle also sheds light on the challenges inherent with micromanagers. Specifically, while micromanagers are quite skilled at setting goals, major challenges arise from

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<sup>18</sup> Manzoni, J.F. (2011). Stop being micromanaged. Harvard Business Review Blog Network. <https://hbr.org/2011/09/stop-being-micromanaged>

<sup>19</sup> Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*. Riverhead Books.

their tendency to dictate every step of the process in excruciating detail. This leads to the impression that micromanagers are checking up on their team members rather than checking in with them.

This approach is very problematic, as team members perceive that they are not trusted to complete their work. There is also constant pressure, coupled with countless requests for status updates. Unfortunately, offers of support or helpful guidance are rarely provided. Micromanagers are viewed as judge and jury and represent an obstacle to getting work done rather than being seen as coach and facilitator of goal achievement.

This raises an interesting dilemma for leaders and executives. On the one hand, they want their employees to perform well and stay engaged, which requires some degree of guidance/involvement. In other words, too little direction and the leader's vision may not be fully realized. At the same time, too much direction can lead to the dreaded label of micromanagement and employees may feel stifled in their creative processes.

In the past, the fine line between guidance and micromanagement was based on personal feel or previous experiences. Today, the science of leadership excellence is beginning to contribute concrete evidence, which informs 'best practices' in terms of how to tackle this potential conundrum.

In a recent study, Leadership IQ surveyed over 30,000 Canadian and American workers to examine the optimal amount of time managers should spend with their employees each week<sup>20</sup>. To frame this question, the research team measured how many hours employees typically spent with their managers each week, and then linked these results to various employee performance metrics such as engagement, innovation, and inspiration.

Overall, the median amount of time that employees spent with their immediate supervisor was three hours per week, which included a combination of email, telephone, group meetings, or one-on-one time. Based on their analysis, the optimal amount of time that managers should spend with their employees was six hours per week. For example, when comparing employees who spent six hours a week with their manager versus those who only spent one, the former were 30% more engaged (e.g., "I recommend this company as a great organization to work for"), 29% more inspired (e.g., "Working here inspires me to give my best effort"), and 16% more innovative than their counterparts.

It should also be noted that employees who spent more than six hours with their supervisors did not see any improvement in their scores on any of these metrics. In fact, their scores slightly declined.

The research team also wondered whether the degree to which the employees liked their manager might affect the results. Essentially, if an employee was not particularly fond of their manager, would it be less beneficial to spend six hours per week with him or her? Is it better to spend less time with a manager an employee does not like?

In an interesting twist, this was not the case. Increased inspiration was observed regardless of how much the employees liked or disliked their supervisor.

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<sup>20</sup> Murphy, M. (2014). 'Optimal Hours with the Boss' Study: North America Research Overview. Leadership IQ White Paper.

The researchers found that leaders who spent more time with their employees also tended to use different forms of interaction. For example, for leaders who spent only one hour per week with their employees, 33% of that time was in face to face interaction while 42% of these exchanges were via email. For leaders in the optimal category, (i.e. six hours per week), 48% of their interaction time involved face to face interactions, with only 27% occurring through email.

A final question that was explored was the optimal amount of time that senior leaders should spend with their supervisors. While the team hypothesized that executives would need less time as a result of their seniority, they found the opposite. Executives within the organization experienced their highest levels of inspiration when they interacted with their supervisors around 7-8 hours per week while middle managers were at their best with 9-10 hours per week of contact.

As leaders, these results provide a framework for how to determine the optimal level of involvement leaders should have with their team members. Finding the right balance is crucial, as it allows the employee to feel supported while helping to avoid feelings of micromanagement. Six hours may also not be appropriate for everyone; however this research can provide a starting point on which to build individual engagement strategies to benefit the leader and his or her team.

- 3) **Share information** – Micromanagers tend to hoard information, refusing to share it with their team/colleagues, as they view it as a status symbol and/or source of their power<sup>21</sup>. This lack of information sharing seriously undermines the ability of their teams to deliver results. It may also contribute to poor ideas/output, as team members do not possess the information they require to proceed. This sets up a negatively reinforcing cycle, as the lack of information sharing leads to declining team performance, which escalates the micromanagement behaviours.
- 4) **Build trust with your employee** – One of the primary culprits of micromanaging behaviour stems from a fundamental lack of trust between the leader and his or her employee. Although this can be incredibly frustrating, especially for the employee, demanding to be trusted will likely further damage the relationship. Rather, leaders would benefit from figuring out what is most important to him or her and then communicating these needs directly to their employees. Better yet, leaders should engage their direct reports to ask them whether they have any questions or concerns about their management expectations. Ask lots of questions and explain that the goal of this discussion is to arrive at a mutually agreeable framework to manage workload and responsibilities.

Micromanagement can come from anxiety, a key source of which may be a lack of information. Leaders should strive to have an open discussion with their team members about the level of information they need and explain the reasons behind it. In the absence of explanation, people

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<sup>21</sup> Amabile, T., & Kramer, S. (2012). *The Progress Principle*. Harvard Business Review Press.

interpret others' actions and words through narratives, which are often cast in a very negative light. Even if leaders have experienced success using similar reporting patterns in the past, employees may not be aware of this fact. Letting their team know the 'why' behind their reporting expectations can be incredibly helpful and avoid potential feelings of micromanagement.

- 5) **Agree upfront** – Another great way to avoid the perils of micromanagement is to agree beforehand on the extent to which leaders will be involved in a project. Leaders who set clear expectations on both sides feel more comfortable delegating the components of this assignment while ensuring that their employees have sufficient guidance to proceed and feel supported should they run into any challenges. Agreeing to a predefined template and sharing it within the team maximizes the chances of it being realized through the course of the project. If any deviations occur on either side, this framework can be referenced to clarify any misunderstandings.
- 6) **What if you are a micromanager?** – When someone recognizes that they have a tendency to micromanage, they have made an important step toward changing their behaviour. The next step is to acknowledge it with their employees. Set aside ongoing opportunities to discuss the situation and build trust by explaining why you want to make changes to your management approach. Understanding the purpose behind a change of direction can engage employees and encourage them to embrace the new direction. When discussing past micromanagement, it is important to first apologize for the behaviour. Let your team know that you understand the impacts your behaviour had on them and that you empathize with their situation. This sets a strong leadership example for your team, demonstrating that you are not afraid to accept responsibility or show humility. This may encourage your team members to step forward and share their thoughts whenever they might be struggling.

Discuss what will be done to minimize the future appearance of these behaviours. One potential strategy would be to encourage your team to approach you one-on-one (or even in a group context) when they see some of the 'old' micromanaging behaviours coming to the surface. If you find yourself falling back into old habits and no one calls you on it, you should openly acknowledge it and continue to encourage your team/colleagues to bring it to your attention.

Another playful strategy may be to borrow a technique from Marshall Goldsmith and set up a 'fine jar' for your infractions<sup>22</sup>. He suggests that each time a leader engages in a 'negative' behaviour such as micromanagement, the leader pays a \$5 fine for their transgression. The money can be put toward a charity or a team outing. The key is to allow the team to assist the leader in a fun and positive way and remove the stigma of 'speaking truth to power.'

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<sup>22</sup> Goldsmith, M. (2007). What Got You Here Won't Get You There. Hyperion.

## FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

A recent Blessing White survey examined the primary employee engagement drivers for professionals around the world. Interestingly, having “more opportunities to do what I do best<sup>23</sup>” was ranked number one in North America and in many other countries.

Leveraging the power of strengths is an idea that has been spearheaded by the Gallup<sup>24</sup> organization for over a decade. Based on their global research initiatives involving hundreds of thousands of employees across various organizations and sectors, Gallup researchers have highlighted the numerous benefits of using a strengths-based leadership approach.

In one of their most famous large-scale studies, the results showed that people who were aware of and utilized their strengths more frequently were significantly more likely to be high performers within their organizations. The benefits of using strengths were not just limited to performance, however. Additional research revealed that employees who received “strengths feedback” were much less likely to leave their organizations (i.e. 15% lower turnover) compared to other employees.<sup>25</sup>

Not surprisingly, the capacity of organizations to leverage the power of strengths-based leadership is widely within their control. In another research project focusing on workgroups, Gallup discovered that managers who received a one-hour coaching session on understanding and applying their strengths experienced significant increases in their engagement scores when compared to other managers who did not have this discussion. Equally as important, these benefits cascaded down to their teams, who experienced significant improvements in their own engagement scores following the intervention.

Given this strong and emerging evidence base, what steps can federal public service executives take to capitalize on their strengths and the strengths of their teams?

- 1) **Develop awareness** – The research is very clear that the foundation of maximizing strengths is awareness of our individual and collective strengths. This intuitively makes sense — how can individuals maximize their strengths if they do not even know what they are? There are several ways individuals, teams, and organizations can accurately determine their strengths.

First and foremost, several strengths-based assessment tools exist, with Gallup’s StrengthsFinder 2.0<sup>26</sup> being the most widely known. This tool is based on over 40 years of research and has been administered to almost twelve million employees and leaders. Completing this 45-minute online assessment yields a personalized report, which details the individual’s five signature strengths (from a list of 34). It also provides 50 different Ideas for action, which can be immediately put into practice. The latest version of the book also includes a Strengths-Based Action Plan, which assists readers in setting specific goals for building and applying their strengths in the year ahead. The relatively inexpensive cost is also a benefit.

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<sup>23</sup> Blessing White (2013). Employee Engagement Research Update.

<sup>24</sup> [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com)

<sup>25</sup> Asplund, J., & Blacksmith, N. (2011). The secret of higher performance. How integrating employee engagement and strengths boosts both. Gallup Business Journal, May 3.

<sup>26</sup> Rath, T. (2007). StrengthsFinder 2.0. Gallup Press.

For executives, Gallup has released *Strengths Based Leadership*<sup>27</sup>. This book summarizes their extensive research, which includes survey data collected from more than one million work teams and in-depth interviews with 20,000 leaders and 10,000 employees around the world.

Similar to *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, readers receive an access code, which provides them with a link to the online assessment tool. Once again, a personalized report is generated that summarizes their five signature strengths. The book also explains how readers can capitalize on the three key elements of effective leadership (i.e. knowing your strengths and investing in the strengths of others; getting the people who possess the right strengths on your team; and understanding and meeting the four basic needs of those who look to you for leadership).

For those individuals on a limited budget (or with no budget at all), the Values In Action (VIA) Institute on Character also has a validated strengths assessment (called the VIA Pro<sup>28</sup>), which measures character strengths. These character strengths represent core capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that bring benefit to the individual and to the people around them.

Another option is to ask colleagues or friends to identify your greatest strengths<sup>29</sup>. However, it is crucial that this feedback be specific. For example, the term “interpersonal skills” can represent a vast array of talents (e.g., good listener, warm/friendly demeanour, engaging communicator). If this type of descriptor is used, ask people exactly what they mean when using the term, as it will enhance your personal and professional development. The more specific the feedback provided, the better able you will be to identify and leverage these strengths in the future.

It should be noted that one of the primary advantages of using a strengths-based lens is that by its very nature, it is a positive assessment and feedback process. Rather than focusing on our weaknesses or skills gaps, talking about our strengths is an energizing activity. It reinforces how we add value to our world and generates positive feelings about our capabilities.

- 2) **Have a strengths discussion** – Once individuals are aware of their strengths, leaders can incorporate this heightened self-knowledge into ongoing conversations. For example, rather than providing feedback solely from a corrective lens, leaders can share strengths-oriented feedback with their team members. This type of feedback highlights the tasks in which their employees excel. Leaders can work with their team members to identify other arenas in which employees can utilize their natural talents. Finally, leaders can also encourage their team members to share their insights into others’ strengths in the workplace. For example, executives can align strength-based action plans with the Performance Management Assessment (PMA) cycle or succession planning. Bringing more strengths-related concepts into daily routines helps keep them top of mind.
- 3) **Conduct a “strengths audit” to identify opportunities for growth** – Leaders can ask their employees to provide suggestions about where they feel they can add even more value by maximizing their strengths. Leaders can also encourage their team members to keep their eyes

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<sup>27</sup> Rath, T., & Conchie, B. (2009). *Strengths Based Leadership: Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow*. Gallup Press.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/The-Survey>

<sup>29</sup> This idea is an extension of the Best Reflected Self Exercise. <http://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/cpo- tools/reflected-best-self-exercise-2nd-edition/>

open for new and interesting ways to apply their natural talents at work. Leaders can also view their work and the work of their employees through "strengths goggles." They can examine existing roles and responsibilities to find opportunities to capitalize on employee strengths even more. An optimal strategy is to bring their employee into the conversation. Employees possess unique and invaluable insights into how they can bring the best of who they are into their current role.

- 4) **Assign tasks based on strengths** – Rather than just assigning tasks randomly or through some other self-directed process, strengths-oriented leaders collaborate with their teams to determine who is the best fit and has the most to offer for specific aspects of a project or assignment.
- 5) **Team-based strengths exercise**<sup>30</sup> – Executives can also leverage the following four-step strengths-based exercise with their teams:
  - A. **Feedback** – Each direct report receives a number of cue cards corresponding to the number of people on their team. For example, if someone works on a team with 5 people, they would receive 4 cards. Each card has the name of one team member in the upper corner.

On one side of the card, the individual writes down what special contributions the named employee makes to the team. On the opposite side of the card, the individual writes down unrealized strengths/opportunities he or she observes in their team member. The spirit of this message is as follows: "To take our team to the next level, here is how I see you can enable us to achieve that goal."
  - B. **Distribution** - Once everyone has had a chance to write down their observations about each team member, individuals collect all of their personal cards from their colleagues.
  - C. **Interpretation** - Each team member reads and reflects on the observations that were shared through the cue cards. Similar to the Best Reflected Self exercise<sup>31</sup>, the goal here is to identify common themes that occur on both sides of the card. In this way, team members learn of their strengths. This is an incredibly empowering and positive exercise, as the focus is on the natural talents people bring to the table.

Following this reflection exercise, each team member writes at least one paragraph, which outlines what he or she has learned from reading the observations on both sides of the card.
  - D. **Public Commitments** – Once these paragraphs are completed, the group reconvenes and each team member publicly thanks the group for the lessons he or she has learned through this exercise. Then team members read their paragraphs aloud to the rest of the group. The overall goal of this process is for each team member to highlight the commitments they are making to the group and ask for their support in remaining accountable to these important personal goals. This leads to a high level of enthusiasm for building and sustaining peak performance and gives team members permission to step in and provide respectful reminders when someone is not living up to their strengths and commitments.

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<sup>30</sup> Cameron, K. (2013). *Practicing Positive Leadership*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers

<sup>31</sup> <http://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/cpo-tools/reflected-best-self-exercise-2nd-edition/>



## MEANING AND PURPOSE

The critical role of meaning in employee engagement and organizational success has received a lot of attention. Many popular press books, including Simon Sinek's international best-seller *Start With Why*<sup>32</sup>, have brought this issue to the forefront. Organizational psychologist Wayne Cascio has reported that the average American identifies meaningful work as the single most important feature they look for in a position<sup>33</sup>. This finding has been replicated globally, including countries in Europe and Asia. In fact, research suggests that maintaining focus on meaning and purpose is a crucial activity for organizations to invest in during challenging times<sup>34</sup>.

Empirical research has also started to accrue, showing the direct linkages between meaning and positive employee outcomes. Professor Adam Grant of Wharton Business School has highlighted how increased meaning in work environments yields impressive results.

Call centres are universally recognized as one of the most challenging environments in which to work. A primary reason is that there is little or no room for autonomy, as agents normally have to follow their scripts to the letter. As a result, the work becomes extremely repetitive, which can lead to boredom and disengagement.

Professor Grant was called in to assist with a seemingly impossible task. His mission was to find ways to re-energize the staff within a call centre that was responsible for soliciting donations from alumni to support a university scholarship program for incoming students<sup>35</sup>. Previous solutions forwarded by managers included pay raises, more breaks, free lunches, more holidays, as well as providing stress management workshops. None of these options achieved the desired results.

One of the major challenges of call centre work is that potential donors generally did not react well when receiving these calls from their alma mater. Dr. Grant found that, in many cases, the call centre representative (CCR) was met with a variety of verbal abuses and expletives or an impolite slamming down of the phone. Even the most pleasant alumni declined, with an average rejection rate exceeding 99%.

Dr. Grant was determined to find a way to introduce meaning into the work of these agents. In his view, they had lost sight of the true purpose of their work and how it profoundly benefitted others.

To test his idea, he randomly assigned CCRs to one of three intervention groups and then tracked their performance for one month. Here is a description of each intervention group:

- Control Group - did not receive anything during the study period.
- Personal Benefit Group - received a letter from the Human Resources Department outlining all of the tangible benefits the CCRs received from working in the call centre (e.g., salary, benefits, etc.).

<sup>32</sup> Sinek, S. (2011). *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. Portfolio.

<sup>33</sup> Grant, A. M., & Hofmann, D. A. (2011). Outsourcing inspiration: The performance effects of ideological messages from leaders and beneficiaries. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 116, 173–187.

<sup>34</sup> Altus Q & Red Balloon (2013). *Employee engagement capabilities report: An insight into successful strategies to drive employee engagement*. White paper.

<sup>35</sup> Grant, A. M. (2008). The significance of task significance: Job performance effects, relational mechanisms, and boundary conditions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 108–124.

- **Task Significance** – received a letter written by one of the scholarship recipients, which outlined what the scholarship meant to him. In an emotional and heartfelt letter, the recipient was able to express how this financial award made attending university possible and all of the life-changing things that it subsequently inspired.

As Dr. Grant predicted, the opportunity to connect people more directly with the meaning of their work profoundly affected their performance and level of engagement. Although employees in the Personal Benefit and Control groups had the same level of performance across the two time periods, CCRs in the Task Significance Group “earned more than twice the number of weekly pledges (from an average of 9 to an average of 23) and more than twice the amount of weekly donation money (from an average of \$1,288 to an average of \$3,130).” In an expansion and future replication of his work, Dr. Grant asked a scholarship recipient to visit the call centre in person. Under these conditions, performance increased 500%!

On its face, this result may seem shocking. The working environment was still the same. The odds of rejection and the potential for the varied and unpleasant reactions remained identical. What was different now was the possibility that the next phone call might result in the opportunity to fund a scholarship. The “why” of their work was abundantly clear. With this revelation, the CCR’s entire mindset about their job and the value of their work was changed forever.

## **HOW TO BUILD MORE MEANING AT WORK?**

- 1) **Spend more time engaged in meaningful activities** - The perfect job does not exist. In every position, there are certain tasks and activities that can be uninteresting and even considered boring. Research suggests that when our calendars become overwhelmed with these trivial demands and we get removed from our most meaningful activities, problems arise.

In one fascinating study with medical professionals, the importance of maximizing opportunities for meaningful work was readily demonstrated. Although doctors and nurses may seem to be in a profession that is naturally imbued with a heightened sense of meaning by the nature and consequences of their work, these occupations suffer from high levels of burnout and poor mental health.

In this study<sup>36</sup>, a large sample of physicians (nearly 500), was surveyed on a number of factors. One key area of interest was the extent to which the doctors were spending time on the area they deemed most meaningful to them, which the majority (68%) noted as patient care. The researchers were interested in determining whether those professionals who spent more time engaged in meaningful work would exhibit the lowest levels of burnout, and that is exactly what they found. Specifically, for those who spent less than 10% of their time engaged in their most meaningful activity, 57% were burned out. However, physicians who spent more than 20% of their time in their most meaningful tasks — patient care — reported about half the burnout their peers had.

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<sup>36</sup> Shanafelt, T., West, C.P., Sloan, J.A., Novotny, P.J., Poland, G.A., Menaker, R., Rummans, T.A., & Dyrbye, L.N. (2009). Career fit and burnout among academic faculty. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 169, 990-995.

The impacts of spending more time on the activities that matter did not only decrease their risk of burnout, but also increased their desire to stay in their position. This research shows how a lack of meaning can drive employees to want to leave their employers, even when they occupy roles in which there is an abundant amount of professional meaning.

- 2) **Play 'Whose Purpose Is It Anyway?'**<sup>37</sup> – This is another terrific exercise included in Dan Pink's Drive, which is designed to close the gap between perception and reality. Pink suggests bringing your team or division into a meeting and giving everyone a blank three-by-five inch card. Then ask each person to answer the following question in one sentence: "What is our organization's purpose?" Collect the cards and then read them aloud to the entire group. The degree to which these answers align speaks volumes about whether individuals have a common understanding of the purpose of the organization or whether this is more fractured. As Pink notes, "if people don't know why they're doing what they're doing, how can you expect them to be motivated to do it?"
- 3) **Link employee work to the 'Big Picture'** – Oftentimes, employees can complete work and have no idea how it contributes to the larger purpose of the organization. Without this more nuanced understanding, work can seem meaningless. In public sector organizations, where political pressures or changes in direction can lead to starting and stopping, this risk factor is even more elevated. In this context, it is important to be sensitive to this reality and work with your teams and your divisions to identify how meaning can continue to be found in the assigned workload. Leaders would benefit from recognizing the importance of reframing how they see meaning within their contributions. Most crucial is the fact that this reframing must be authentic. Leaders and their teams must truly believe that their work matters.

Gallup recognizes the importance of meaning and purpose in maximizing engagement in employees. As they explain in one of their core summaries "*Great managers often help people see not only the purpose of their work, but also how each person's work influences and relates to the purpose of the organization and its outcomes. Reminding employees of the big-picture effect of what they do each day is important, whether it is how their work influences the customer, safety, or the public*<sup>38</sup>." Indeed, Towers Watson reported similar results, as they found one of the primary drivers of sustainable engagement was when employees understood how their work contributed to the broader goals of their organization<sup>39</sup>.

- 4) **Connect with end users** – In a blog posted in Harvard Business Review<sup>40</sup>, Professor Adam Grant talked about the importance of showcasing how world-class teams and organizations showcase their impacts on their key stakeholders. For example, he shared the story of Medtronic, a leading medical devices company that brings in clients whose lives have been transformed by using their products during their annual Christmas parties. Not only does it provide these individuals with the opportunity to express gratitude for the role these products have played in their lives, it serves to directly link the work of Medtronic employees to their end users.

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<sup>37</sup> Pink, D. (2009). Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us. Riverhead Books.

<sup>38</sup> Harter, J.K., Schmidt, F.L., Agrawal, S., & Plowman, S.K. (2013). The relationship between engagement at work and organizational outcomes. 2012 Q12 meta-analysis. Gallup Organization White Paper. Page 8.

<sup>39</sup> Towers Watson (2012). Global Workforce Survey – Engagement at risk: Driving strong performance in a volatile global environment.

<sup>40</sup> Grant, A. (2011). How customers can rally your troops. Harvard Business Review Blog Network.

In the case of the federal government, executives could survey their key stakeholders and ask how their division or work unit work supports their initiatives and priorities. Furthermore, employees could be encouraged to share emails from citizens and/or benefactors of their work. Where possible, invite people in who benefit from the work of various teams to share their experiences. This exercise may be especially effective in teams/divisions that are more in the background when it comes to client contact.

## THE ROLE OF TRUST IN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Despite the value of the above themes, one of the foundational elements of building an engaged workforce is the level of trust that exists between the leadership and the rest of the organization. Research strongly suggests that this is crucial for team and organizational success. For example, in one recent survey, highly engaged employees were much more likely to report that the senior leadership in their organizations had a sincere interest in their well-being than their disengaged counterparts (e.g., 74% versus 18%)<sup>41</sup>.

Interestingly, additional research suggests that trust in senior executives has an even stronger relationship with high employee engagement than does their level of trust with their immediate supervisor. Unfortunately, even though trust matters more in the upper levels of leadership, the same research revealed that it is tougher to earn<sup>42</sup>.

In a follow-up study, Blessing White was able to identify four behaviours that differentiated senior executives who were able to drive engagement versus those who did not. These included:

- Senior leaders act in alignment with our organization's core values or guiding principles.
- Senior leaders communicate honestly.
- Senior leaders link the work of the organization to a larger purpose.
- Senior leaders have created a work environment that drives high performance.

Other research sheds important light on how to foster trust within employees. One ambitious study interviewed employees from 20 different organizations who worked in knowledge-sharing environments. Based on their extensive set of interviews, they identified 10 different attributes of trustworthy leaders:

- 1) **Act with discretion** – This involves the extent to which people trust that they can share sensitive information, which will be held in the strictest of confidence.
- 2) **Consistency between word and action** – As the name suggests, walking the talk is an essential element of building trust and it was also noted in the above employee engagement research. An important piece of advice for executives within this theme is to be careful about overpromising and under-delivering. Be realistic about what you can commit. If you are unable to meet your commitments, ensure this gap is acknowledged, take responsibility, and apologize for the shortcoming.

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<sup>41</sup> Towers Watson (2012). Global Workforce Survey – Engagement at risk: Driving strong performance in a volatile global environment.

<sup>42</sup> Blessing White (2011). Employee engagement report – Beyond the numbers: A practical approach for individuals, managers, and executives. White paper.

- 3) **Ensure frequent and rich communication** – More frequent interactions allow employees an opportunity to build stronger relationships with their leaders. Based on research cited earlier, leaders would further benefit from maximizing the amount of time spent in face to face rather than email/telephone interaction.
- 4) **Engage in collaborative communication** – Not surprisingly, people are much more inclined to trust people who demonstrate a willingness to listen and share the responsibility for crafting a path forward. Leaders would be well served to exercise caution when dismissing employee ideas too quickly or taking a more directive approach in their leadership style.
- 5) **Ensure decisions are fair and transparent** – One of the major sources of frustration within organizations is the rationale behind organizational decision-making, especially when it comes to promotions/career development. Leaders need to be sensitive to these situations and strive to communicate as much and as openly as possible in these circumstances. Asking questions and making themselves available can go a long way towards reinforcing a view that decisions are fair. It should be noted that in the latest PSES Survey, non-transparent staffing was a recurring theme. Given the above, addressing this issue will be important in terms of enhancing engagement and trust with public sector leaders.
- 6) **Establish shared vision and language** – Clarity around the vision, values, and goals of the organization enhance trust. When people pursue their own ideas as to these goals, conflict and mistrust can result.
- 7) **Hold people accountable for trust** – One of the major sources of disconnect within organizations is when people are not held accountable for living core values. While leaders and executives are held to very high standards, if employees are allowed to act contrary to these organizational guideposts, frustration and distrust tend to flourish. Leaders need to take immediate action when disconnections occur to ensure employees understand and recognize that there are universal expectations for how people work in their organizations.
- 8) **Create personal connections** – Sharing personal information serves to increase levels of trust, especially when similar interests and values are discovered. Dedicating time to discussing life outside of work can go a long way towards building trust. Leaders are people too.
- 9) **Give away something of value** – When we offer something of value to someone, it can often evoke a deeper level of trust, as people appreciate the trust put in them. Concrete examples of this type of leadership practice include sharing your expertise/insight with people as well as offering your personal network of contacts.
- 10) **Disclose expertise and limitations** – Many leaders feel pressure to have all the answers. When setbacks occur, individuals may feel they cannot admit fault for fear of losing the trust of their teams. However, by adopting a contrary approach, the very thing they wish to avoid (e.g., losing trust), actually transpires.

Leaders need to be aware that expressing vulnerability and being open about their knowledge and skills gaps build trust with their teams.

11) **Engagement starts with civility** – Past research<sup>43</sup> has shown that disrespectful words and actions take a tremendous toll on the emotional, psychological, and physical health of employees. Public sector executives need to be aware that if incivility is tolerated within their organizations, disengagement will likely result. Maintaining and protecting a positive culture is an essential building block for maximizing employee engagement.

## THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

One final question relates to who is ultimately responsible for employee engagement. Is it the manager, the employee, or the organization? While undoubtedly each of these actors plays a role, recent research suggests that managers are responsible for the bulk of the effort. Gallup recently discovered that managers account for at least 70% of the fluctuations in engagement scores across business units<sup>44</sup>. This suggests that of all of the possible influencers on engagement, the manager is the key to achieving peak performance.

Interestingly, additional research supports the view that engagement is a team sport. In one recent examination, organizations with most engaged employees were significantly more likely to agree with the idea that everyone needs to be involved for engagement initiatives to be successful<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Civility Matters: An evidenced based-review on how to cultivate a respectful federal Public Service. APEX white paper (May, 2015) (<http://www.apex.gc.ca/uploads/key%20priorities/health/civility%20report%20-%20eng.pdf>).

<sup>44</sup> Beck, R., & Harter, J. (2015). Managers account for 70% of variance in employee engagement. Gallup Business Journal. April 21.

<sup>45</sup> Altus Q & Red Balloon (2013). Employee engagement capabilities report: An insight into successful strategies to drive employee engagement. White paper.

## CONCLUSION

Both white papers commissioned by APEX, *Maximizing Employee Engagement within the federal Public Service* and *Civility Matters: An evidenced based-review on how to cultivate a respectful federal Public Service* can be used by leaders as remedial resources, they can be used to stimulate discussions that will result in concrete actions designed to improve the quality of the workplace now and well into the future.

Employee engagement will continue to be an important issue as workplace demands increase and organizations are expected to strive for continuous improvement. In this environment, executives and organizations will be forced to rethink how they fulfill their responsibilities to their stakeholders and to the citizens of Canada.

Although countless recommendations exist when it comes to cultivating a respectful workplace and raising engagement levels, current scientific research highlights a way forward. Most importantly, these strategies do not require extensive capital investments. Rather, they require enhancing our leadership style and identifying more positive behaviours and opportunities. Working with our teams and our divisions to leverage these opportunities will strongly contribute to building the modern and efficient public service envisaged in Blueprint 2020.

APEX will continue to assist executives in their quest to achieve leadership and organizational excellence, while supporting and growing the people and organizations they serve - to maintain the world-class quality of the Public Service of Canada.



ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL EXECUTIVES  
OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE OF CANADA

75 Albert Street, Room 400, Ottawa ON K1P 5E7  
Telephone: 613.995.6252 • FAX: 613.943.8919  
E-mail: [info@apex.gc.ca](mailto:info@apex.gc.ca) • [apex.gc.ca](http://apex.gc.ca)