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The Six-Step Guide to Library Worker Engagement

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Preface

My original goal in writing this book was to identify the characteristics of outstanding workplaces in the corporate world and then see how those characteristics play out in library organizations. My focus was on solutions and potential frameworks with which to create great places to work. To accomplish this, I have read extensively on employee engagement research, along with spending time with management consultant experts both inside and outside the library field. This background research has helped me refocus my thinking and consultant work on what constitutes a healthy, engaged workplace, along with how to successfully integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives into an organization. This book is designed to create awareness and provide advice on how to change workplace culture.

I once thought that a successful workplace culture was simply one where people were happy. I soon learned that plenty of people can be unhappy at their workplace, but glad to have a paycheck and benefits, while contributing little to their organization's success. This concept is called "checked out," where employees find a comfortable place where they are doing just enough to get by or the bare minimum at work. This is significant because most people think that being "disengaged" means that people have simply stopped working, but in reality, they are still fulfilling their basic job responsibilities, but with very little excitement, passion, or energy. We all know someone in the organization who is disengaged at work, and you even may have experienced this disengagement yourself. I know that I have been disengaged in the past and did not realize or understand what happened but the spark was gone at work, and eventually I resigned when I had found another job. Because disengagement is so prevalent in organizations, there are many researchers who study employee engagement and its direct correlation between productivity, creativity, and innovation. Engaged employees feel that their unique talents, skills, and abilities are valued and respected within the organization and that their work makes a difference. An engaged workforce propels creativity, innovation, and a healthier work culture. Organizations that cultivate employee engagement not only perform well, but in many cases they outperform their competitors.

The gold standard for employee engagement research is Gallup, the famous polling company. Every few years Gallup produces the *State of the American Workplace* (*SOAW*) report, which almost every major publication cites for data on workplace culture. Gallup has been conducting this research for well over thirty years, and the results have remained consistent. According to the 2019 report, over 70 percent of employees are disengaged at work (Gallup 2019). In terms of employee retention, more than 50 percent of employees are actively looking for a new job by reviewing job ads, engaging recruiters, or networking on sites like LinkedIn. Gallup distinguishes between employees who are “actively engaged” (loyal and productive), “not engaged” (average performers), and “actively disengaged” (checked out). If the percentage of people who are disengaged is over 60 percent, then the organization is moving toward a dysfunctional, static, or stagnant work climate.

Corporations have been studying and experimenting with employee engagement strategies in order to attract talent and improve retention. A revolving door out of a company hurts both its bottom line and its reputation. Companies are looking beyond pay and perks as they compete for talent. New trends include flexible schedules, remote work, coaching instead of supervising, more consistent feedback, recognition, and a more open, inclusive, and diverse environment. Research validates that employees young and old tend to favor companies which have programs that give back to the community. Employees who have the best experiences at work feel connected, feel a strong sense of purpose, receive recognition for their individual talents and contributions, and believe that their workplace is moving forward in a positive direction.

Great Place to Work is a global research and consulting firm that is known for quantifying the employee experience. The firm is the assessment arm for the annual *Fortune* 100 Best Companies to Work For list. I started my research by studying companies on the Great Place to Work certification list that were known for employee engagement initiatives. Great Place to Work representatives helped me settle on the areas of concentration for this book and recommended several companies for further research. I studied these companies and contacted a few employees for their input.

After talking to representatives at Great Place to Work and Gallup and doing some general research, I broke down my employee engagement research into six categories. Once I decided on the categories, I went back to the experts for verification and to see if I was on the right track. Each chapter in this book addresses one of these categories, and I have been intentional in their sequence:

- Leadership and management
- Trust
- Recognition and praise
- Feedback and performance evaluation
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion

As I narrowed my focus and looked at library organizations, I have relied heavily on firsthand accounts from library managers and workers. My original intent was to focus solely on success stories in libraries. I envisioned a book that would be a sort of "Chicken Soup for the Soul for Libraries," full of feel-good stories from libraries that are transforming their culture.

However, after putting out the call for "success stories" from the field, something unexpected happened; the success stories were fewer than I had hoped. Instead of success stories, I received tragic stories from people who felt lonely, isolated, and traumatized at work. Some of these people are still in their organization trying to figure out ways to cope. Others are actively looking for another job. Others have left the profession altogether with no plans to return. Many of the people who told these disheartening stories requested anonymity. I have included some of their stories in this book, along with a few success stories as well. The stories are narrated either by the tellers themselves or by me, based on my personal conversations with the tellers.

Another major component of this book are the question-and-answer interviews placed at the end of each chapter. These interviews are with successful library managers and administrators who are taking steps to improve their workplace culture. My introductions to the interviews are partly based on the site visits and personal observations I made at their libraries.

In the interviews, I asked my subjects questions about the six themes that lead to employee engagement. I present these interviews where I see a connection to the chapter theme, but the interviews are broader in scope. They provide living examples of how organizations have approached employee engagement.

REFERENCE

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1

Leadership and Management

I measure my own success as a leader by
how well the people who work for me succeed.

—MARIA SHI

“*I want to be the new museum director because I enjoy having the power to control others instead of being controlled.*” I looked up from my reading glasses at the person answering the question. I had been invited to serve on a search committee for a new museum director, and the interview question was about his leadership style. Why would someone answer that they need to control others as an answer to their leadership style? Overall, the candidate’s qualifications were impressive, and he was very charming, but this was not his first “power and control” answer in the interview, and in my opinion, it was a major red flag. I was not alone in my assessment, and after the interview, several other search committee members raised the alarm to the museum board. The museum board members disagreed with our findings and thought the candidate’s confident “take no prisoners attitude” was exactly what the museum needed to turn the place around. Two years later, this same museum board voted unanimously to fire the director in a vote of no confidence. This same “power and control” museum director had terrorized the museum staff members, alienated key donors, and ultimately caused a noticeable dip in museum attendance. The museum director did not leave quietly, and after a very public breakup that was covered on the news and radio, the museum was scrambling to repair the damage.

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The road to employee engagement and a healthy workplace always starts and ends with good management. Gallup research consistently find that companies which have solid leadership always outperform their competition in creativity, innovation, low absenteeism, and low turnover (Crowley 2015). But how does an organization build the "right leadership team"? How do we select the best manager/supervisor/director for a position? This chapter is going to look at why libraries and other cultural heritage institutions are falling short at selecting good leadership and will suggest how to develop better recruitment strategies moving forward.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

When I started interviewing people about their workplace culture, almost everyone had a terrible boss or horrible management story. Narcissistic bosses dressing people down in meetings. Micromanaging leaders who have employees write daily and sometimes hourly reports during the pandemic. A supervisor who stopped talking to his employees and gave them the "silent treatment" for three months until the staff members threatened to get a lawyer. An inflexible boss who turns down or ignores every new idea or project. A management team that fired five employees with an all-staff message a few days before the Christmas holiday. A cruel boss who laughed after berating a staff member until she broke down and cried during a staff meeting. For every one of these stories, the incidents were relayed like they had happened yesterday, and the incidents themselves left invisible scars of mistrust and disharmony in the organization.

However, when I turned the tables and asked interviewees what they thought great management would look like, it took people longer to reflect. After some thought, employees said they wanted managers to demonstrate how their work performance directly contributes to the success of the organization. Managers who create a sense of belonging for everyone in the organization regardless of the hierarchy within the organization. Managers who are open and flexible, and who encourage new and exciting ideas and allow people to fail forward. Leadership that celebrates accomplishments both large and small so that everyone feels they are part of a successful team. A management team that truly advocates for the staff and always has their best interests at heart. Managers who truly value diverse perspectives and lead with empathy, compassion, and kindness. Do we have any leaders who live up to these expectations? Of course we do, and there are wonderful leaders all over the world who are making a difference. The problem is that trying to pick an empathetic, compassionate leader who can inspire and motivate employees can often feel like a roll of the dice. So, how can we begin to move toward a healthier work environment by hiring good, talented managers? Before we consider this question, let's talk about whether anyone can become a leader or a manager.

ARE LEADERS BORN OR MADE?

Can anyone be taught to be a great manager with the right training? Does everyone have the right talent and is it really just a matter of timing and opportunity? A few years ago I created the "Are Leaders Born or Made?" workshop, which resulted in lively and informative conversations on this subject. During the workshop, we developed a list of things that would happen to an organization if there was great management. Then we looked at what traits, skills, and abilities are needed to be a great manager. Then we looked at various leadership, supervisory, and management job ads to determine the gap between what is needed for great management and how organizations actually recruit new managerial talent. Finally, I asked the million-dollar question: could their organization's current administration meet these "great leadership" expectations through training, coaching, and consulting? There were always a few participants who said yes, but most people in the workshop thought that it could not be accomplished. What does the research say?

Gallup research studies conclude that only 30 percent of the total workforce has what it takes to be a great leader. Other experts state that companies and organizations end up spending more money and time trying to fix bad leadership than in hiring the right leaders in the first place. "Spending the extra time and determining what skills are needed to positively move the organization forward eliminates the roll of the dice" (Chamorro-Premuzic 2017). "People skills" are very important in a successful manager. However, when you take a critical look at most job descriptions that require "people management," this kind of supervisory skill tends to be a throwaway line when compared to the quest for applicants with years of experience, impressive subject expertise, or professional recognition. Although the latter are all wonderful traits, they are not good indicators that a person can motivate, inspire, coach, and develop staff members.

For me, I was initially in the camp that anyone could be a good manager; they just needed the right training. I had personally taken several leadership trainings and participated in several management institutes before becoming a regional manager. However, after becoming a regional manager, what I observed is that some people are natural born leaders, some work hard to become better managers, and some should not even be managing potted plants. This did not mean that the bad managers were bad employees; they just did not have the "people management" gene.

To get an outsider's point of view, I sat down with a successful management consultant whose flourishing business is providing coaching and training for dysfunctional organizations. She said that she concluded years ago that natural leaders are born, not made, but saying this to clients is always bad for business. Her theory is that it's very hard to train or mentor people to become empathetic, compassionate, flexible, adaptable, and transparent. Because it's difficult and most organizations do a lousy job picking the right managers, she has stayed busy for over twenty-five years. She said the secret to her long-term success is her ability to quickly identify the emerging leader who is usually already working in the organization but is ignored by management. The best leaders are not the narcissistic ones who are consumed by ambition and are jumping up and down touting their own accomplishments. The best leaders are ones who people gravitate toward because they genuinely like people—the ones who are eternally positive and who know how to bring people together to resolve conflicts. Sadly, the consultant said that these people are often overlooked, even though they have the strongest foundation for leadership training.

From my experience, I tend to agree that some people are natural leaders, some can be trained, and some should pursue other promotional opportunities altogether. For me, I tell people all the time that I would make a horrible analyst because it does not suit my natural and unique talent and skills. However, if someone paid me good money and excellent benefits, could I do it in a pinch? The answer is yes. But should someone pick me? Well, the short answer would be that they would be better off with someone else who has the natural talent and aptitude for the analyst position. However, if I was truly motivated to become an analyst and I made a commitment to be the best analyst I can, then I have a better chance than just taking the job for a paycheck.

One senior manager told me off the record that he hated the "people" stuff but had a growing family at home and needed the additional income. During my "Are Leaders Born or Made?" training, I commonly ask participants a hypothetical question about managers getting the same pay and perks but eliminating all the "people stuff"; typically, about three-quarters of the participants raise their hands for that deal. These managers are not alone; Gallup states that 45 percent of higher-level executives are disengaged and only 29 percent of managers are engaged at work (Runyon 2017). If managers are not inspired and motivated on the job but don't want to let go of their pay and perks, how can they inspire their employees?

Before we address this, in the "Are Leaders Born or Made?" workshop we did address the elephant in the room. There were many people who were upset that not everyone could be a leader as this is usually the only avenue for career advancement. Many managers secretly hated their supervisory work, but they needed the money, or they were ambitious, or they wanted more independence and freedom. And to tell the truth, most organizations have only limited career promotion options that do *not* require supervising someone. To encourage employee engagement, some companies have explored other position titles (coordinators, project managers, project directors), along with financial incentives and promotional opportunities, which allow people to advance without being forced into people management. Toward the end of the workshop, the participants spent some time exploring these non-supervisory promotional options and how to make them a reality. Almost everyone agreed that providing more avenues to take the lead while leaving the "people management" to individuals who naturally shine in this area is always a win for an organization.

RECRUITMENT MISTAKES

Gallup had a controversial research study showing that companies fail to select the right talent for the job 82 percent of the time (Beck and Harter 2019). This fact, combined with the fact that only 30 percent of the workforce are more naturally inclined to leadership, means that spending some extra time on recruitment and the search process is needed. Where do traditional management searches go wrong? The first place to look is the job description and the recruitment materials. When you talk to people about what they're looking for when they're creating a job description for a position, the eight skills/abilities, personal traits, and qualifications in the list below always seem to rise to the top.

Here are some of the traditional skills/abilities, traits, and qualifications that organizations use to select a manager or supervisor:

1. Expertise/technical skills
2. Years of experience
3. Desire to get things right/perfect
4. Ability to discipline, fire, or manage "bad employees"
5. Previous supervisory experience
6. Ivy League education/Ivy League career
7. Outcomes, accomplishments, and professional reputation
8. Swagger, personality, confidence

On the surface, there is nothing wrong with this list. However, when you look at what makes a good manager or great leader, none of these qualifications guarantee success. In most cases, this is where the softer skills—skills involving the "people stuff"—come into play. Soft skills are the "intangible" qualities possessed by great leaders that make working for them so special. From my years of doing this exercise, the abilities listed below are what come to the top when we consider what people are truly looking for in a good leader.

Leaders should have the ability to:

1. Genuinely connect with others who may approach life and work differently. (*Social Intelligence*)
2. Deliver both good news and bad news. Can see both sides of an argument. Can make the tough decisions on behalf of the organization. (*Diplomatic*)

3. Encourage different points of view and change or modify plans as needed. Open to making mistakes and growing as a team. (*Flexible*)
4. Support individual goals by removing potential obstacles and setbacks along the way. (*Strategic Thinker*)
5. Take a step back and see the problem or concern from another person's point of view. How would I feel if this were happening to me? (*Compassion*)
6. Provide staff with their undivided attention during formal and informal conversations. Create opportunities for two-way communication. (*Active Listening*)
7. Take ownership and responsibility, admit mistakes, and recognize that they do not have all the answers. (*Personal Accountability*)
8. Stand up for their team and fight for equity, work-life balance, and equal opportunities. (*Advocate*)
9. Practice what they preach, and demonstrate honesty, transparency, trustworthiness, and reliability. (*Integrity*)

RECRUITING LEADERS AND MANAGERS

So, the next question is, if we are doing the management recruitment searches ineffectively, what are some strategies to revise the search process?

1. *Develop a leadership vison/statement*. This leadership statement/vision/philosophy should be created for the entire organization. The organization should come together and brainstorm what is needed in every department within the organization. From there, the organization should work on a leadership vision that should be implemented at all levels for continuity. Otherwise, the employees and staff will have vastly different experiences from department to department, where one area loves working for the organization and another department feels left out and unlucky. Once you have the leadership vision, that is what is added to the job recruitment documents so that candidates know up front the work expectations.
2. *During the job screening and job interview, make sure there is the right balance between questions to ascertain the candidate's competence and questions to ascertain soft skills*. This goes for both the prescreening interview and the selection interview. Once the organization

determines what it is looking for, the search committee can devise selection questions that will match the new qualifications. So, instead of eight or nine questions to probe the applicant's technical expertise, professional recognition, and years of experience, the committee has some questions on skills and expertise, and others to determine the applicant's empathy, compassion, flexibility, integrity, active listening, advocacy, and personal accountability.

3. *During the selection interview, listen closely for inflexibility, controlling tendencies, and self-absorbed tendencies.* In some cases, the wrong person will be obvious—like the museum director who wanted power to control (and to eventually terrorize) his staff members. At other times, it will require listening very closely to see if the person spends too much time talking only about themselves and their accomplishments, or appears inflexible, indifferent, or uninterested in the people management part of the job.
4. *Watch out for potential managers who lean toward perfectionism tendencies.* It cannot be stressed enough that perfectionism and inflexibility discourage cultivating a diverse workforce. Individuals with these traits are tempting picks because on the surface they appear to have high standards, are hardworking, are never satisfied, and are always pushing for a better product or outcome. However, when it comes to people management, they rarely recognize and praise their employees for jobs well done, they rarely take risks for fear of failure, and they reward assimilation instead of agility. Perfectionism can also cause some managers to have trouble delegating, to take on too much work, and to maintain a constant sense of urgency without much self-reflection.

Last year, I was recruited to apply for a position as a public library director. During the selection interview, I quickly noticed that five out of the nine questions were about how I disciplined, fired, or reprimanded "unruly" staff. When I casually mentioned to the selection committee that over 50 percent of the questions focused on punishment and penalty, I received cold stares and an eventual scolding that these were standard executive management questions. As you can imagine, I withdrew my candidacy as soon I returned home. Later, I found out through a mutual friend that the organization was suffering from low morale and trust issues and constant grievances from disgruntled staff. I told my friend that I was not surprised because the questions an organization selects can tell you a lot about that institution. So, make sure you take time to review your selection questions and what a potential candidate would conclude about your organization.

STRESS AND EMOTIONS AT WORK: CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Being able to manage stress and complex emotions at work, along with leading through positive reinforcement (addressed in the next section), are foundational skills that every manager should have at their disposal. When it comes to stress, almost every manager and supervisor must diffuse conflict, hurt feelings, and sometimes battles in the workplace. Managers who avoid conflict and ignore problems may think that ignorance is bliss, but tension and strife in the workplace can increase the stress level for everyone. Stress and conflict can make people lose focus, can decrease creativity and innovation, and can even make people want to leave their jobs. What current research has found is that people are more on edge at work nowadays, and the tensions between staff and team leaders are at an all-time high.

The following story is about a friend who was reentering the workplace. She is a tax accountant who started her career at a prestigious accounting firm with excellent pay and benefits. Within a few months, her dream job turned into a nightmare due to a toxic and sadistic boss, overly competitive colleagues, and grueling, thankless work. After spending two years fighting with the company—which left her alienated from everyone—she finally walked out without securing another position. Instead, she worked as an independent consultant for twelve years, but she never forgot the nightmare that her dream job had turned out to be. Fast forward to the present, where life changes forced her to consider going back to a corporate job to pay some outstanding medical bills. Because she had never resolved the pain from her initial corporate experience, she approached work understandably guarded and reserved. My friend was quick to start a fight, and she wrote meticulous notes about these interactions; moreover, she let people know that she kept these notes in folders in case she needed to seek legal action. Luckily, her manager noticed that she turned in excellent work, and people liked her but could sense some past trauma that was stopping her from trusting her new organization. So, the manager approached her, inquired about her past work experiences, and let her know that this organization was different and that they would work together to rebuild her trust in the organization and her new colleagues. My friend was a little resistant at first, but in time she came to trust the manager, and she began to see how her previous pain was showing up at the new job. With her manager's guidance, compassion, and positive reinforcement, my friend gradually began to let her guard down, which enabled her to enjoy both her job and her team members. Today, she loves her corporate job, her great pay, and her supportive boss, and she feels lucky that she selected a better option this time around.

The reason I mention this story is that every employee has what I call an "invisible bag" that they bring to work. In this bag are their life stories, the good times, the bad times, and any painful wounds or experiences that may or may not have healed. We have all observed people who are just fine during peaceful times but who become quite different when exposed to stress, high emotions, and conflict. There are some things we can predict in terms of triggers, but as in the case of my friend, she didn't see how her own actions were playing a part in creating workplace stress. In this case, her manager confronted the behavior and showed empathy and compassion, but expected my friend to improve the behavior. As she began to realize that the manager had her best interests at heart, she was able to open up and become a better team member. Being compassionate and empathetic doesn't mean that a manager should ignore conflicts in the workplace. Even the best manager—one who is normally calm and reasonable—can quickly turn agitated and unreasonable. Overall, for new managers, I recommend that the organization spend some time investing in conflict management and conflict resolution training and workshops so there are agreed-upon strategies on how to resolve problems in the organization.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

To obtain measurably superior results in the workplace, managers must understand why people behave as they do with the same depth that a rocket scientist understands gravity. (Daniels 2016)

When I first became a library director and regional manager, I was sent to standard, mandatory training classes. I noticed one thing right away; the county system spent a considerable amount of time going over the "progressive discipline" model. This model starts with a talk and, if the behavior does not get better, can end with dismissal. It is based on the premise that people want to avoid punishment, so they will adjust their behavior to avoid future negative consequences that could lead to their dismissal. This model appeared logical, but something did not feel right. Although most managers used progressive discipline, this tool rarely improved work performance, and in fact it often led to disengagement, grievances, and constant conflict. On the other side of the equation, one of the branch managers in my region never had any problems with his staff. While other managers spent much of their time in grievance hearings and writing expectation memos, this manager had happy employees, high productivity, and hardly any progressive discipline memos. What was his secret? I sat down with this very mild-mannered branch manager, and he said something that forever changed my perspective. He calmly told me: "I just expect the best out of my employees and praise them for their potential instead of their faults." I quickly remembered his staff evaluations, and they were all glowing, to the point that I secretly thought he was embellishing a bit. He admitted that his praises were not always 100 percent true, but by expecting the best from them, his staff almost always rose to the occasion.

So, why did this manager produce better results than the tried-and-true methods of progressive discipline? Why did "accountability and the constant threat of discipline" backfire in terms of employee engagement? It was not until I started my research that I came across a book that finally answered all of my questions. I will summarize some of its key points, but I highly recommend that you buy a copy of the book as a reference. The book is *Bringing Out the Best in People: How to Apply the Astonishing Power of Positive Reinforcement*, 3rd edition, by Aubrey Daniels.

In the book, Daniels looks at over eighty years of studies that focus on human behavior in the workplace. The application of the results of these scientific behavioral findings is called "performance management." It is performance management that teaches managers how to influence their employees' behavior. When it comes to behavioral analysis, Daniels spends most of the book talking about the behavioral consequences of *positive reinforcement* and *negative reinforcement* as these relate to employee engagement. The two consequences that increase behavior are positive and negative reinforcement. The two consequences that decrease behavior are punishment and penalty.

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