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## ENGAGING LEADERSHIP: HOW TO REVERSE THE CYCLE OF DISENGAGEMENT AT EVERY LEVEL

EVAN HACKEL ([HTTPS://ALISTERPAINE.COM/AUTHOR/EVAN-HACKEL/](https://alisterpaine.com/author/evan-hackel/)), x MARCH 8, 2016

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Engaged leadership is a new way of leading, founded on the belief that when leaders create an organization where everyone works together in open partnership, that organization becomes vastly more successful. Instead of telling people what to do, engaged leaders unlock the full potential of people's minds, creativity and emotions.

Key skills of successful leaders include:

- Setting aside personal opinions about what will work and letting people try their most prized ideas.
- Listening constantly and actively for nuggets of high value in what other people are saying and supporting the best of them.
- Asking for help, because doing so is a sign of strength, not weakness.

## How Can You Apply Engaged Leadership throughout Your Organization?

### Engaging with Trustees

When boards convene, many organizational leaders give them a report of company finances, introduce a few new hires, talk about new products – and that's about it. Those practices represent disengagement, not engagement. Remember that members of your board were appointed because of extensive leadership experience; so invite them to share in open-ended discussions about long-term mission, marketplace trends, competitive issues, and more. One way to start that discussion is to talk openly about the long-term issues your company is facing.

### Engaging with Your Top Executive Team

To be honest, I have observed many companies whose top leadership teams are hindered by internal fissures and factions that are never discovered until someone quits or a major problem arises. These problems often happen because top executives have ambitions and plans that are being stifled by company leaders or because the rejection of their ideas has caused them to self-censor.

The solution is to build a top management team that is positively disruptive. That means resisting the temptation to surround yourself with “yes people,” “people who are just like me” and people who prefer “group think” to shake things up. Also, have the courage to recruit people who are genuinely better than you at doing certain things, and let them. Their efforts will free you and results will soar.

## Engaging with Middle Managers

The leaders of many organizations overlook the fact that middle managers possess the kind of reality-based, realistic and valuable intelligence that cannot be found anywhere else in house. Instead of hearing directly *from* middle managers, they hear *about* them from divisional heads or other upper-tier executives. That kind of filtering is a crippling mistake. In contrast, engaged leaders interact directly with members of middle management. Even in very large organizations like franchises, they create – and visit – advisory boards made up of mid-level managers, leadership councils and other forums where managers can speak and be heard.

## Engaging with Front-Line and Entry-Level Staff

Too many companies seem to apply classic “mushroom management” to employees at this level. (“Keep them in the dark and hope they grow.”) What a loss, since front-line employees have critical knowledge and ideas that should be captured and reinforced. In smaller organizations, instituting an open-door policy or visiting hours can help. In larger companies, virtual suggestion boxes on the company intranet have worked well. So have general meetings where employees brainstorm and suggest ideas that are captured, responded to, and utilized.

Remember too that your company’s training programs offer a setting to invite and acknowledge new ideas from front-line staff. If you encourage your trainers to explore bigger company issues and invite ideas, you can begin to build high levels of engagement, literally from the bottom up.

## Engaging with Your Sales Team

Your salespeople know more than anyone else does about customers’ concerns, motivations to buy, opinions of your products, and much more. Yet many companies focus only on sales quotas and incentives, never soliciting salespeople’s insights. To tap this critical intelligence, invite salespeople to attend your top management meetings, listen actively to what you hear, and then implement new ideas. Another solution is to conduct brainstorming sessions during larger sales meetings, invite people to offer their best ideas, and then let them try them in the real world.

# Still More Opportunities to Benefit from Engagement

Engaged leadership can be used to build more beneficial relationships with job applicants, clients, vendors, top executives at other companies, and many more people. The more you engage at every level, the greater you can become.

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