

Talent Development 14 Organization Development and Culture

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Section 3.3 in the CPTD Certification program for ATD is **Organization Development and Culture**. Section F reads, “Skill in designing and implementing employee engagement strategy.”

I have seen many engagement efforts that were highly effective. I have also witnessed some that were complete failures. In this brief article I will describe the things that cause success or failure.

I like the way this item is worded, because ATD has avoided calling it an “Engagement Program.” When you use the name “Program” to describe an effort to create higher engagement, it shows a poor understanding of how engagement is created, maintained, and improved.

I once inherited a production department of about 150 people. The incumbent Department Manager was an ex-Industrial Engineer who had a reputation of being a “people oriented” manager. As I got to know the people and the manager, I was impressed that they had an “Engagement Room” where various teams would meet to work on their “Program.” There were fancy charts all over the walls and there was a facilitator hired to run the “Program.” They had slogans and symbols for the effort.

After a while I got the impression that this effort was a text book application to Organization Development that was done by the book. All the trappings were there, but I sensed something phony about the whole deal.

I recall meeting one of the senior employees in the hallway one day, and when I asked him about how the “Engagement Program” was going, his body language was not good.

I took the time to sit with this employee, and he told me in confidence, “To tell you the truth, Bob, we all think it is a bunch of B.S. We do a bunch of mickey mouse exercises and the entire effort is all hat and no cattle.”

As I looked into the situation more closely, I realized this was an effort by the Department Manager and the facilitator to drive “Engagement,” whether the real people wanted it or not. The effort was costing money rather than having the impact the manager desired, and it was doing more harm than good.

I searched for a different manager for the department and found an excellent people-oriented woman who had a better track record. I explained to her that the mechanical approach was not working and suggest she work to develop a **culture of high trust** and scrap the “Engagement Program.”

She went to work on this and gained substantial stake from the production workers, who were happy to participate in an effort to change the culture permanently to one of much higher trust. The new Department Head worked on creating Psychological Safety in the department and got rid of the signage and slogans.

Within six months the manager had turned the situation completely around. Productivity had doubled, and the entire group of employees were as engaged as I have ever seen a group. The contrast between a mechanical approach and a genuine shift in the culture was simply amazing.

Never think of employee engagement as something you can “do to” the workforce. Instead think of engagement as an outcome of a brilliant culture. Work on trust and building an honest environment where it is safe to voice your truth, and the workforce will choose to become engaged.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*, and *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.

