

Frontline Leadership: A Cycle of Engagement Manifesto

By George Reavis

Traditional customer feedback practices are wrapped in programs and delivered hierarchical from the top down. They provide feedback from colleagues and supervisors to support structure and discipline with an objective of associate involvement. But today's competitive group environments require more than passive involvement. It requires active engagement. Where engagement is defined as 'involvement with hearts and minds'

What's missing is a complementary feedback—**that from one's own daily activities**. This preferable feedback is necessary to engage everyone or 'involve with hearts and minds.'

Feedback from colleagues and supervisors, although well intentioned, may fail to maintain associates' engagement on the frontlines and even actively disengage them! Often focus leaves the customer and moves towards those colleagues and supervisors. This causes confusion as to direction, priorities, and commitments.

Group leaders need a user-centered approach to keep everyone focused, committed, and learning. Complement their daily activities with a career skill for teaching associates the ability to provide themselves constructive feedback. Maintaining the connections and dialogue between associates, customers, and partners

"We will grow one operation at a time, when the customer tells us we are ready," a mentor, Web Sherrill, consistently reminded everyone in the enterprise almost three decades ago. The purpose was both to be a mantra for leading people at all levels of the enterprise and to build on a common purpose (success) and focus (the customer).

Web Sherrill, as an entrepreneur, believed in maintaining the connection between customers and those delivering products and services through daily operations. One customer retention model was to thank customers who cared enough to express a concern or question then invite them to let his associates know "How are we doing?" on future visits (mostly non-verbally) which in turn was then shared using assessments. These actions engaged everyone by providing feedback from their own daily activities--growing associates' ability to give themselves constructive feedback.

A consistent quality found in the biographies of great entrepreneurs such as Sam Walton, Walt Disney, Ray Kroc (McDonald's), and Thomas J. Watson (IBM). Entrepreneurs know that engaged associates will engage customers who in turn reengage those same associates as well as partners.

CREATING A CYCLE OF ENGAGEMENT

The cycle of engagement occurs when engaged associates on the frontlines of daily operations engage customers who in turn reengage those same associates as well as partners

ENTREPRENEURIAL ETHIC—STAY CONNECTED

Key to the entrepreneurial ethic is maintaining the connections between associates, customers, and partners through daily operations. These connections are at the core of the entrepreneur's being. They represent the experiences and relationships of daily operations as well as how the entrepreneur got started.

The engaging passion and enthusiasm in the delivery of products and services to their customers engages those customers. The customer's enthusiasm is transferred back to the entrepreneur who is reengaged. This is the cycle of engagement and every entrepreneur wants to continue these positive feelings and emotions throughout their enterprise.

Engagement is defined as ‘involvement with hearts and minds’

Enterprises often fail to make the distinction between performance and engagement. It takes a leap of faith to assume that performing associates are also engaged. Unfortunately, many discover that associates can do well on measurements such as quizzes and reviews without necessarily having their hearts and minds in their efforts on a daily basis.

If associates indeed are not engaged then, while they may execute their duties faithfully, they will not exhibit the enthusiasm needed to inspire others to their cause. The difference in simply executing a task versus sustaining enjoyment and a customer dialogue is engagement. It is also the difference in a happy and self-motivated group or workforce.

In fact, it is the difference for the group and enterprise to retain customers and associates!

So how do groups and enterprises keep everyone engaged--associates, customers, and partners alike? First begin with engaged associates and the rest will occur naturally. There are five-steps which group leaders can take to keep associates focused, learning, and committed through daily activities. But first lets see how to recognize an engaged person.

WHAT DOES ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE?

Three primary behaviors:

1. People demonstrate their intentions. They commit themselves.
2. People are reflective. They continuously learn.
3. People pay attention. They are focused.

Leads to these behaviors:

- People enjoy what they are doing. They are happy. Smiles are apparent.
- Associates are self-confident as they receive energy back from customers. A relationship much like a performer has with the audience.
- Customers or beneficiaries respond in kind and are enthusiastic.
- Assessments (opinions) are shared and there is a customer-focused dialogue evident in all daily activities.

A number of [studies](#) indicate that one third of associates are presently "engaged" in daily operations. This is crucial for all group leaders because only engaged associates are high performers and will engage customers--[critical for loyalty](#). But how do group leaders engage those not presently engaged?

MOVE EVERYONE TOWARDS FULL ENGAGEMENT

Engagement on the frontlines of daily operations is "people involved with their hearts and minds." Where [involvement](#) is the matching of challenges and skills to avoid a person being anxious, apathetic, or bored. This can be managed to a large degree. Hearts and minds however, being more intangible, can only be managed with limited success and require leadership activities to continue for any length of time. Examples of behavior from the heart are passion, emotion, enjoyment, feelings, and intentions (at least as perceived by others). Those from the mind are thought, attention, reflection, informal learning and communication.

To illustrate the range of engagement from full engagement to actively disengaged we use an [engagement continuum](#). No one is static on the continuum, everyone can constantly move in either direction. By moving associates toward "engaged" and even "full engagement", group leaders create tremendous opportunities for productivity and making collaborative tasks easier and more enjoyable.

The daily activities themselves provide customer feedback.

To move from involvement, where ability matches the tasks performed, to engagement requires a complementary feedback to those from colleagues and supervisors. This 'internal' feedback must be learned by any combination of experiences from family, school, or workplace. Unfortunately, this learning is not on any curriculum but rather coached or mentored.

“It is difficult for people to stay absorbed in any activity unless they get timely [connected] information about how well they are doing. Feedback may come from colleagues or supervisors but preferably the activity itself will provide the feedback. The ability to give oneself objective feedback to oneself is in fact the mark of an expert.” – Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of Good Business

MISSING LINK FOR SELF-MOTIVATION

Yes, where engagement is defined as ‘involvement with hearts and minds’ there is a missing link to maintain the engagement of everyone in today’s daily operations!

The missing link? As simple as leading activities for re-asking, on the frontlines of daily operations, the critical questions as to “How are we doing?” With associates, customers, and even [partners](#) (internal and external).

Group leaders teach associates to let the daily activities themselves provide customer feedback.

Associates still receive feedback from colleagues and supervisors but also participate in asking the all-important questions (mostly non-verbally) for “How are we doing?” As they learn to get feedback from their own daily activities associates also develop the ability to give themselves objective feedback. This is the mark of an expert and for being fully engaged.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

This missing link of re-asking is mostly non-verbal. Rather it is done with a 5 step process or set of actions. For actions always get results whether they are categorized as managing or leading. The formal description of this re-asking is a “secondary asking process”.

“95 percent of all thought, emotion, and learning is unconscious; thought is based on images (not words); most communication is non-verbal; quality questions beget quality answers.” -- Gerald Zaltman, How

Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market

Do not confuse a process with a program. Programs may contain processes but by definition must be executed from the top of the enterprise down. A process is nothing more than a set of actions which often repeat or continue and can exist anywhere. A recipe is a perfect example of a process. This secondary asking process is a user-centered approach or recipe for creating engagement!

"Building relationships is a process, a set of actions, and not an event." -- Bob Thompson, Founder of CRMGuru.com

What are these actions to engage people through daily activities? For them to learn to get feedback from the activity itself and, with practice, develop the ability to give oneself objective feedback. Yes moving them to full engagement in their performance.

[Re-asking] is a recipe for creating engagement!

We find [five common actions \(process\)](#) that any group can do both individually and collectively to engage everyone. The real benefit comes as those who are engaged then naturally build a cycle of engagement between associates, customers, and partners alike. The cycle will occur unless the group inadvertently blocks it.

Involvement is part of the "how" operations are conducted and actions taken. This is critical for a user-centered approach and those individuals taking care of customers directly on a daily basis. They participate in the "how" (Skills) while receiving the "what" (Challenge) through support from Management. Both aspects are re-enforced through learning experiences on-the-job. Dr Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describing "Flow" in his book [Good Business](#)

These actions, with practice, will become a career skill for any group leader as well as a tool for any supervisor/administrator to maintain alignment within an enterprise. Align the “what” needs to be done from administration with the “how” to get it done on the frontlines of daily operations.

1. **THANK:** Builds recognition and leads appreciation.
2. **INVITE:** Demonstrates intentions, which leads to commitments.
3. **ASK CRITICAL QUESTIONS:** Creates attention and leads to long-term focus.
4. **GET FEEDBACK FROM ACTIVITIES:** Keeps associates engaged at a high level.
5. **SHARE ASSESSMENTS:** Develops opinions that foster dialogue.

How do you lead these actions with your group?

1. Thank

Begin and end with "[Thanking](#)" everyone. This provides recognition and appreciation through daily operations. Almost always in writing and one of three correspondences which you create with your supervisor and Marketing.

Initially thank your customers or those who are beneficiaries of the groups efforts. In some settings such as education this could be, at least in part, the group members themselves. As you repeat the steps it will be only natural to also thank associates and partners as well.

2. Invite

Next invite participation to demonstrate everyone's intentions. Again, almost always in writing and one of the three correspondences you create with the support of your supervisor and Marketing.

While only a small percentage will likely accept your invitation, everyone will understand your intentions to better serve them and achieve excellence. As the process repeats intentions will be demonstrated to associates and partners as well as customers.

LEAD INTENTIONS FOR COMMITMENT

One of the most critical yet overlooked behaviors in any group setting. Intentions directly affect commitments through group experiences and relationships.

Why are intentions overlooked? Because they are difficult to manage or measure. The recipient perceives them as from the heart and when managed they often appear scripted and insincere.

Actions can lead intentions through daily activities. Demonstrating intentions is related to the soft 'people' skills such as appreciation, recognition, reflection, attention, and dialogue.

When someone demonstrates their intentions you know where they stand, what they are about, and why they act. They make promises and commit to their performance to everyone—customers, associates, and partners alike.

3. Ask Critical Questions

Then [ask](#), almost always non-verbally, "How are we doing?" on the 'critical' daily operations which determine success. Do not reinvent the wheel here. These questions are already being asked at the administrative level to determine the "what" the enterprise needs to do. Simply re-ask the five or ten most important from a frontline daily operations perspective. Coordinate these with your supervisor.

This also is in writing and one of the three correspondences to seek support from your supervisor and Marketing.

4. Get Feedback from Activities

Distribute the [feedback](#) with everyone through activities. Let them '[naturally](#)' become involved and engaged. With practice this will be a learned experience which will self-motivate and inspire the group both individually and collectively.

5. Share Assessments

Continue to bulletin or [share](#) workplace experiences and relationships. Make **assessments** (share opinions) by fostering a **continuous dialogue**. Measurements are definitively black and white and do not foster a two way discussion. Assessments, on the other hand, are opinions and do foster give and take discussions or dialogue. This is very important for the people part of group experiences and relationships. Assessments are an important part of informal learning and communications as well. These represent the largest part of communications and learning in most enterprises.

MORE THAN METRICS

The metrics or measures for any group are critical for survival. They foster structure and discipline and represent the progress of the group or the lack thereof. Metrics are most needed for the hard managerial skills group leaders need to execute the programs and systems of the enterprise.

But group leaders also need more than metrics for the softer people skills to lead hearts and minds. Assessments are also needed to help everyone share opinions that foster dialogue. Important for emotions, enjoyment, feelings, and enthusiasm.

“Where motivation is concerned, the journey is more important than the destination. It’s more important for people to be proud of what they are doing every day than it is for them to be proud of reaching a major goal. That’s why it is crucial to celebrate the “steps” as much as the “landings” – Jon Katzenbach, author of [Why Pride Matters More Than Money](#)

From a customer's perspective, the cycle of engagement can be seen and felt quite easily

WORKING BACKWARDS TO ENGAGE HEARTS AND MINDS

In summary, existing managerial activities provide everyone feedback from supervisors (vertical) and colleagues (horizontal) but it is difficult to manage customer feedback one gets from their own daily activities (internal). Studies suggest that one out of three associates have learned this self-motivating experience although they often do not even realize it as it is not on any group's curriculum (family, school, church, or enterprise). Frontline leaders can, however, lead activities to provide this feedback and keep everyone moving towards full engagement.

Persons who are engaged are involved with heart and mind and will demonstrate intentions, reflection, and attention to stay committed, learning, and focused respectively. The big reward of customer loyalty occurs as a cycle of engagement develops where an engaged associate engages the customer and in-turn is reengaged through customer interaction. In fact, the most magical moment for any group occurs when a customer becomes engaged because not only has a loyalty been established for the customer but also the reengaged associate experiences satisfaction and enthusiasm. Associates are energized by customers much in the same way a performer is energized by the audience.

Group leaders are often engaged themselves--a key reason for their promotion. They may feel caught-in-the-middle between meeting the needs of supervisors and keeping everyone (associates, customers and partners) fully engaged in daily operations. For two big reasons:

1. On the enterprise frontlines **three critical areas merge together. Everyday of workplace relationships and experiences which must work with each other for results** . Those three groups are Associates, Customers, and Partners who continuously interact among each other within their groups as well as between them. Management and leadership activities are required simultaneously.
2. Peoples' **level of engagement can move on a continuum from fully engaged to actively disengaged**. At any point in time it is difficult to know exactly where people are on the continuum or which way they are moving.

The cycle of engagement builds a momentum, much like a [flywheel effect](#), based on human interaction. Focus, learning, and commitments flow from daily experiences and relationships as everyone develops the ability to provide themselves with objective feedback. This is human nature and has the same effect that is evident in any performing group be it in sports, arts or entertainment. Engaged performers engage fans and audiences who in turn reengage the performers as well as partners.

The practice supports continuous learning when group leaders do it with rather than to everyone. Even in classroom situations, if the instructor wants to take learners on a journey toward reaching a competency level rather than simply a rote memory exercise then the practice will keep everyone on the same page working towards the same goals. The bonus for learners is they also develop a life skill they can apply in any group situation. From a customer's perspective, the cycle of engagement

can be seen and felt quite easily. The next time you have an opportunity, observe and assess levels of engagement on the continuum in a setting of multiple interactions such as a restaurant. You will be able to readily identify associates who are getting customer feedback from their own activities (engaged) and are engaging customers. Their demonstration of intentions, reflection, and attention can be seen and felt. In turn, the enjoyment and self-motivation they receive back from their customer interactions is noticeable as well. Others may be following all policies and procedures and be performing their respective tasks but are not receiving the same customer feedback from their own activities. They, in turn, are visibly not, to the same level, engaging customers and being reengaged themselves from similar activities and customer interactions.

Part of the curriculum of families, schools, and enterprises should be the "Engaging 5" steps. Everyone learning to receive customer/beneficiary feedback from their own daily activities. Feel the enthusiasm, enjoyment, pride and self-motivation of the cycle of engagement.

"If you give a team member customer feedback, you focus them for a day. If you teach a team member how to 'ask' for customer feedback, you focus them for a lifetime!" .

George Reavis is the author of "[Propel Frontline Leaders](#)" for implementing the cycle of engagement within the organization. Read his weblog "[Frontline Leadership TRENDS](#)" and more about his work at <http://ThankingCustomers.com> . In addition to his "Cycle of Engagement" George has also written on the concept of [CRL \(Customer Relationship Leadership\)](#) for groups and enterprises.

George lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma but coach's frontline leadership around the world [virtually](#) in the English language.