3 Key Drivers of Employee Engagement for Seamless Change Adoption

by Cheryl Jackson and Annie McManus

Understanding the key drivers of employee engagement is essential for organizations during times of change. Whether you are adopting a new technology or navigating changes to your organizational structure, there are several essential factors you can rely on to help drive employee engagement. By exploring these drivers, organizations can better equip themselves to foster a thriving workplace culture that supports employee well-being, productivity, and retention during moments of change.

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Relationship with Manager: Building Trust and Considering Individuality

A primary role of management is to develop the relationship with their employees through a foundation of trust and respect. For some, this may be a challenge as many leaders are promoted into management due to their technical skills, and do not possess these softer skills.

Engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather an individualized equation where managers need to be aware of their employees' strengths, interests, skills, and passions, and connect work to align to those as much as possible.

Employees also need to know they can trust and depend on their managers and leaders to guide them through challenges. Managers play a significant role in the success of change efforts. Through regular communications, they can identify gaps and resistance points, and apply appropriate messaging and tools to support the employee through that change. An individualized approach for change requires an individual model for supporting employees through that change.
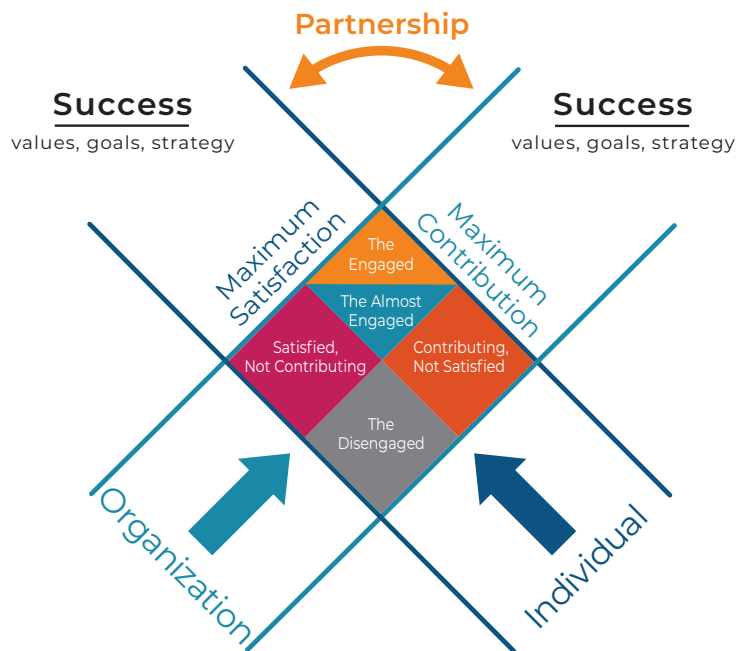
Our individualized approach to change, the R2P2 model, considers the elements employees need to fully understand and adopt the change.

Reason	Clarity around what is changing and why, understanding the risk of not changing, and what's in it for the individual	
Role	Actions and activities assigned to or required of a person to make the change successful	
Path	Knowledge, skills, and ability to be successful in the change and remove obstacles to adoption	
Partner	Social networks to provide coaching, practice, and reinforcement as well as individual accountability	

Empowering employees to take ownership of the R2P2 model for themselves, identify their own needs, and express those to their managers, will allow them to feel connected to the change and have a sense of ownership in their own adoption. This requires a certain amount of vulnerability that is only possible when employees have a strong relationship with their manager that is built on trust and a sense of belonging. Therefore, leaders must communicate clearly and promptly, addressing employees' concerns and humanizing the process. Changes, such as the rise of generative AI, can disrupt daily tasks and lead to disengagement.

Any form of change is hard, so it's necessary to bring employees into the fold and be attentive to the individual needs of team members. Employees may not be aligned with the change and may feel disconnected, isolated, and ultimately disengaged. Share with them why the change has happened, what role they play in it, how they will need to change behaviors, actions, or processes to address this change, and how you will upskill them to meet the future needs of the organization.

Managers should lead by example, yet also be attentive to the needs of the employees that report to them. They need to focus on both the performance (or contribution) side of the **X Model of Engagement** as well as the satisfaction side. Ensuring that you have built a healthy foundation where employee needs are seen – and acted on – will enable you to be resilient and pivot more easily during and after times of change.

Partnership

Success
values, goals, strategy

Success
values, goals, strategy

Maximum Satisfaction

Maximum Contribution

The Engaged

The Almost Engaged

Satisfied, Not Contributing

Contributing, Not Satisfied

The Disengaged

Organization

Individual

Tactile Recommendations

- Effective foundational leader training, such as emotional intelligence, communication, accountability, giving and receiving feedback, handling conflict, and decision making.

- Provide tools and resources for managers, such as templates or messaging that they can leverage to provide the appropriate updates regularly to their teams.

- Actively listen to employee feedback and concerns. Ensure you have a process for employees to provide their feedback and foster a psychologically safe environment where employees are rewarded for providing their insights.

- Recognize and genuinely appreciate individual employee contributions. This includes celebrating milestones and achievements – and providing a safe space to recognize mistakes or risks that may not have paid off.

- Empower your employees to own their work and contribute to decision-making processes. Enable them to make decisions that are within the scope of their work.

Onboarding and Reboarding: Ensuring Smooth Transitions During Change

We are all familiar with the concept of onboarding: integrating a new employee into the organization and equipping them with relevant information about their job, their team, and the important cultural elements for the organization. Another similar process is reboarding, which is where an existing employee is transitioned to a new team, role, or has an adjustment of responsibilities within their role. The goal is to help employees adapt to changes in their role or their team environment by providing what they need to be successful in this new environment or situation. You can leverage what you know about the reboarding and onboarding processes during times of change to ensure that you are equipping each employee for the change at hand.

One challenge during these instances is the loss of productivity due to changes to the role or process. Leaders need to recognize and expect that employees will be entering a new learning curve when change is occurring, and a transition is taking place. Managers must ensure that they are providing the proper resources to their team. This may mean taking a step back to reevaluate team needs, looking at how they collaborate, and invest time and effort into developing processes and documentation impacted by the change. By taking this time to address the tactile needs of the team, the leader will be able to move their team more quickly through the learning curve and regain the necessary productivity levels.

One factor that you may want to focus on is how you can continue to help people learn, grow, and develop. If the change requires a new skillset, managers must ensure that employees are receiving relevant and timely training related to their new responsibilities. Organizational change can also provide employees with the opportunity to for career development, by allowing them to grow into new roles. Are your managers comfortable holding career and development conversations with their employees? If not, the managers themselves may require training on how to hold these conversations and support their employees.

Tactile Recommendations

- Develop a reboarding process so that you have the template for the training needed for these moments of change.

- Establish a mentorship or buddy program/process to provide employees with access to another leader or a peer who can partner with them during the transition phase.

- Lean into the team by encouraging networking opportunities, team building, and social connections that help build the team in this new environment.

- Demonstrate empathy, effective communication (relevant and timely), and provide employees a safe place to share their concerns to ensure that they feel valued and supported.

- •Provide refresher training on updated processes, systems, or other impacted areas so that employees are clear on updated components or expectations.

- Consider coaching or counseling services to support employee wellbeing during transitions.

Building Change Agility:
Navigating Unplanned Change with Resilience and Preparation

Change is often discussed in terms of "planned change" such as program implementations, but what about unplanned change like we experienced throughout 2020? When unplanned change occurs, change agile organizations can more easily adapt to the new demands because they already have the basic capability to mobilize, share information, learn quickly, and manage their own resistance. Their teams are prepared, and their policies are flexible enough to support the new behaviors.

Change agility refers to the organization's readiness for change and is a key factor in maintaining productivity and engagement throughout times of transition. What's powerful about change agility is that organizations can, and should, begin developing it early, before a change is planned, making the adoption of the change smoother and more effective.

Change agility consists of:

Change leadership

Individual readiness

Organizational readiness and infrastructure

An aligned leadership team that understands their role as sponsors and champions of change is the most critical element of effective change adoption. Employees require regular reinforcement from leaders to understand the importance of a change effort. Helping leaders understand their role as sponsors and key stakeholders increases employee readiness and resilience.

Leadership is the top factor in change success, but without individual readiness and accountability, the effort is doomed to fail. Ultimately, organizations are made of individuals, and those individuals create the overall culture. Individual characteristics such as resistance management, optimism, adaptability, and risk aversion impact how quickly employees adjust to change and rebound after difficulty. These create the foundation for the organizational culture of change agility. Programs that develop and reinforce the practice of these characteristics will prepare individuals for embracing future change by helping them mentally prepare for and adapt to change.

They become more resilient, spending less time discouraged and in a state of fear regarding the change, they more readily see the positive aspects of the change, encouraging others to do the same, and they recognize their own patterns of resistance, managing them within themselves, reducing the energy required by leadership and change practitioners to bring individuals along. Resources spent preparing employees in advance of change will pay dividends when the change ultimately arrives.

Finally, organizational readiness and infrastructure is a key factor in change agility. Regardless of how prepared leaders and employees are for tackling the effort head on, if the infrastructure itself is inflexible, change will be stuck in its tracks. Organizational readiness includes the overall culture discussed above as well as the foundational infrastructure made up of technologies, processes, and procedures. Rigid systems will limit an organization's ability to adapt and flex with the changing environment and needs. Testing the readiness of these systems ahead of time is a great way to assess organizational readiness for change and make necessary adjustments.

Just-in-time training and development is effective in many different situations. When it comes to developing change-agile organizations, transformation takes time. Waiting until change is within sight will not allow enough time for significant growth. The following activities are steps organizations can take immediately and build over time to be ready for change when it occurs.

Tactile Recommendations

- Develop leaders and managers to be actively engaged in the change and adoption process establishing the critical foundation necessary for effective implementation

- Develop a strong network of skilled change champions within your organization that will support change efforts throughout the various levels, functions, departments, and teams

- Develop a culture of adaptability and flexibility, helping employees develop these competencies through training and creating a support system to reinforce the new behaviors

- Develop an organization-wide learning culture by making learning easier to access, educate managers on the value of learning and development for employees, and create visibility for learning options and resources available to employees

- Review technology, procedures, and policies to identify risks and create infrastructure that can adjust with changing needs

Final Thoughts

As organizations adapt to evolving work environments, understanding employee engagement amid change is vital. By embracing strategies for fostering trust, facilitating smooth transitions, and promoting change agility, organizations can thrive in dynamic landscapes. For deeper insights on navigating change and enhancing employee engagement, contact us today. **Let's collaborate to drive your organization towards sustained success.**

About the Authors

Cheryl Jackson, PhD

For over 15 years, Dr. Cheryl Jackson has been supporting transformational efforts in Fortune 500 organizations across a variety of industries. With a doctorate in Industrial-organizational psychology, she combines her experience with scientific methodology and research techniques to create practical solutions that drive meaningful change in the workplace. Her focus is organizational effectiveness strategies supported by organization design, change management, assessment and development, employee engagement, leader development, and performance management.

Annie McManus

Annie McManus leads GP Strategies' employee engagement practice. She provides consulting on measurement strategy, data analysis, and partners with her clients to equip their employees to have more great days at work. Over her 13 years with GP Strategies (and formerly BlessingWhite), she has had many roles including intern, Client Services Manager for leadership and engagement programs, Employee Engagement Project Manager, Consultant, team lead, and now is leading the practice.

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