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HUMANATURE@WORK

STOP THE EMPLOYEE  
ENGAGEMENT  
MADNESS

David Lee | [HumanNatureAtWork.com](http://HumanNatureAtWork.com)

# Stop the Employee Engagement Survey Madness

David Lee

Millions of words have been written about employee engagement, and over a billion dollars is spent annually in the US alone on employee engagement surveys and improvement interventions. Yet the needle has essentially not budged in over fifteen years.

In The [Worldwide Employee Engagement Crisis](#) by Gallup, the authors state:

“Though there have been some slight ebbs and flows, less than one-third of U.S. employees have been engaged in their jobs and workplaces during these 15 years.”

“Employee engagement has barely budged in years”

“Measuring engagement isn't sufficient to improve it”

While there are many reasons why employers' attempts at increasing employee engagement fail, I see three major factors:

1. Execution Flaws
2. Paradigm Flaws
3. Courage Flaws

## Execution Flaws: The Classic Employee Engagement Fail

Put a group of Human Resource professionals in a room and ask them if they have been reluctant and frustrated co-conspirators to any of the following and you will get almost universal head nods:

1. **Employee Engagement Survey Results Remain a Mystery**—This has to be the most extreme and morale-damaging outcome to conducting an employee engagement survey. Not only does it communicate “Your input doesn’t really matter, nor do we care about you” it also fosters a sense of [Learned Helplessness](#), where employees stop even trying to make a difference or show initiative.
2. **The Results Are Reported, But Aren’t Acted Upon**—While not as overtly disrespectful as not even reporting the results, this employee engagement fail also fosters Learned Helplessness. In this mode, employees become less interested in speaking up about *anything*. They no longer bother to share ideas for process improvements or point out the presence of productivity-diminishing obstacles that could easily be removed if management were aware of them.

“Why speak up, it won’t make a difference?” becomes the mantra in organizations that do this.

3. **Improving Engagement Is Seen as an “HR Thing” rather than an “Everybody’s Thing”**—Seeing engagement as Human Resource’s responsibility and the HR department as the “Engagement Police” whose job is to hassle managers and keep them from their “real work” is a guaranteed way to ensure failure at increasing engagement.

Everybody plays a role in employee engagement, from the CEO to individual contributors. Each needs to understand their role, take responsibility for it, and be held accountable. Human Resources needs to be seen as a facilitator of engagement, not the driver.

- 4. “Solutions” Such As Fun Committees, Employee Appreciation Days, and Other Goodies, Gimmicks, and Gala Events are Seen as The Answer**—This is very much “The American Way” when it comes to just about any issue related to employee morale, motivation, or engagement.

[The default response](#) to problems in any of these areas is typically finding the latest flavor of the month management fad, or perk extracted from a Best Places to Work list, and applying it to their workforce.

To appreciate the folly of such an approach, consider this analogy from [Are You Really Serious About Improving Employee Morale?](#):

*Imagine the following scenario: a co-worker tells you his wife just told him she’s unhappy with their relationship. He does not remember the exact reasons she stated for her unhappiness, but he does remember her saying she’s unhappy and thinking about leaving.*

*“I’ve come up with my game plan,” he tells you, bursting with determination and optimism. “But, I need your feedback on which option is the best. I’m trying to decide whether to buy her a BMW, take her on a cruise, or remodel the kitchen. Which do you think would make her happier?”*

*Now, if those are his potential solutions, might you have some clues about why his wife isn’t happy?*

When HR and management respond to employee engagement survey results by establishing a “Fun Committee” or “Dress

Down Fridays” or organizing an Annual Employee Appreciation event, they not only waste time, energy, and resources, but they can even make the problem worse.

Throwing Goodies, Gimmicks, and Gala Event “solutions” at employee engagement problems communicates to employees:

*“Management just doesn’t get it.”*

*“Management isn’t really serious or sincere about doing anything about this issue.”*

To identify the real solutions to improving engagement—actions that will actually make a difference—requires recognizing the paradigm flaws that keep most organizations from addressing engagement effectively.

## **Paradigm Flaws That Lead to Flawed, or Non-existent Results**

- 1. Engagement Surveys, Even With Comments, Give You Only the Tip of the Iceberg**—When employee engagement surveys are seen as the be-all-and-end-all source of important information, employers miss out on a huge amount of valuable, actionable information that can only be elicited through in-depth, one-on-one interviews. Furthermore, these interviews can enable you to:

- Target A-List Talent in hard-to-fill positions for intel on what's most important to them, and whether they are getting it in your organization.
- Gather useful information about managerial/employee moments of truth that are impacting employee engagement and productivity.
- Identify Bright Spots—i.e. examples of managers and departments where employee engagement is high—and identify what practices are creating these positive conditions, and spread these throughout the organization.
- Gather [stories you can use in your Employer Branding](#) and [new hire orientation](#)

**2. Employee Engagement is Viewed as a Statistic Rather Than an Individual Experience**—When conducting surveys and poring over the results, it's easy to see engagement in terms of organizational and divisional statistics. It's easy to think in terms of statistical averages rather than the fact that employee engagement is an *individual experience*.

For instance, if Justin doesn't feel a sense of meaning and purpose on the job, or believe his boss cares about him as a person, it doesn't offer him any solace to know that, on average, most employees in his organization feel this way. That statistic doesn't affect *his* engagement.

Also, each employee has their own [employee engagement recipe](#), including their own unique combination of engagement drives, de-motivators, and preferred feedback style.

The only way to create high engagement in each employee is to customize the engagement experience, which includes customizing one's management approach. As Marcus Buckingham puts it. When it comes to

managing people, [“Average managers play checkers, while great managers play chess.”](#)

In other words, great managers don't use a “one size fit's all” approach to management, they tailor their approach based on each person's unique personality and engagement recipe.

- 3. It's About the Conversation, Not the Survey**—Because employee engagement is an individual experience and each employee has their own unique employee engagement recipe, the answer to improving engagement is for managers and employees to have [employee engagement customization conversations](#) and [Help Me Help You Help Us conversations](#).
- 4. The Conversation Needs to Be Ongoing, Because the Employee Experience Is Ongoing**—Returning to the use of analogies in our personal lives...imagine having a once a year “Marriage Satisfaction Survey” where each partner fills out a survey form. They discuss their results, and then don't have another meaningful conversation until the following year's survey. How well would that strategy work?

It works just as well when it comes to employee engagement.

Engagement is a dynamic, changing phenomenon that needs to be addressed as such.

Furthermore, some of the most important data can *only* be accessed soon after the experience. So for instance, take an important Manager/Employee Moment of truth involving how the manager responded to the employee's idea or gave feedback, and how that affected the rollout of a project. Many nuances that could make a discussion of this helpful to both manager and employee will be forgotten after a few weeks, let alone months.

Making ongoing manager/employee conversations the primary source of engagement information also addresses two of the biggest sources of employee engagement—especially among Millennials:

1. Believing your manager cares about you as an individual.
2. Feeling your manager actively shows an interest in your professional development (i.e. they *work with you* on it).

## Courage Flaws That Lead to Hiding Behind Surveys

Most people find giving and receiving feedback anxiety-producing. Most managers would choose checking excel spreadsheets for errors over having to discuss difficult issues with an employee.

Anybody who has been in the work world for any length of time has witnessed, if not directly experienced, how letting fear trump doing what's right ends up resulting in toxic people and toxic cultures destroying morale and compromising productivity.

Hiding behind a survey to gather data rather than being willing to face one's anxiety about having candid conversations, is one example of [Conversational Cowardice](#) that has huge repercussions.

That being said, merely admonishing or requiring managers to have ongoing engagement conversations is not the answer.

People fear the things they don't believe they can effectively respond to or cope with. If managers don't have the skills required to bring up touchy issues in a way that doesn't trigger defensiveness, if they don't have the ability to manage their own discomfort or deescalate others, why would they willingly have

conversations that might evoke strong emotions and responses they don't know how to handle?

Thus, for managers and employees to have effective ongoing engagement conversations, managers need to have the training and coaching that will enable them to effectively facilitate these conversations.

Investing in helping managers have these skills that make these conversations work, might be *the* most important intervention an organization can make to improve employee engagement.

## A Brief Recap and Recommended Next Steps

You don't want another year to go by where you sink time, money, and social capital into another employee engagement survey followed by "solutions" that don't move the engagement needle, do you?

To "stop the employee engagement survey madness," share this article with your management team and use it as a conversation starter.

1. Discuss candidly which execution fails you are engaging in.
2. Discuss which faulty paradigms you have built your strategy on.
3. Discuss if, and how, your leaders and managers are avoiding the conversations that need to be had, for engagement to improve.
4. Discuss candidly the cost of not having the level of employee engagement you would like and whether you are serious about enjoying the benefits of improved engagement, including:
  - a. Great productivity and value generated per employee
  - b. Better customer service

- c. Lower voluntary turnover
  - d. Greater ability to attract A-List Talent
5. Invest in getting in-depth interviews with both employees who hold hard-to-fill, ultra-competitive, high-value generating positions and interviews with your “Steady Eddies” who are the backbone of organizations and have a different “engagement recipe” than your high flyers.
  6. Invest in helping your managers develop the conversational and “interviewing” skills necessary to make it safe for employees to engage in candid Help ME Help You (Help US) conversations that provide the important feedback and information your managers and your organization need for you to have a highly engaged, highly productive workforce.

## About David Lee

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**Bio:** David Lee, the founder of HumanNature@Work, works with employers who want to improve employee engagement, productivity, and customer service through his consulting, coaching, and training. He has worked with organizations and presented at conferences both domestically and abroad.

An internationally recognized thought leader in the field of employee engagement and performance, he is the author of over 100 articles and book chapters published in the US, Europe, India, Australia, and China. He is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, published by MEMIC, and *Powerful Storytelling Techniques*, published by ATD Press. The second edition of the business classic, *The Talent Management Handbook*, features a chapter of his about the topic of Onboarding and the upcoming third edition will include a chapter of his on using storytelling to make onboarding more effective.

Much of David's work over the years has involved comparing employers and managers who know how to bring out the best in their people with those that don't, and extracting those core principles and practices. David Lee's work also focuses on helping managers and leaders benefit from the research on human nature that typically is not known in the business world. By translating this research into practical strategies, his work helps managers and leaders improve their ability to boost employee productivity, engagement, and overall effectiveness.

To capture the impact understanding human nature makes, David borrows from the popular TV show *The Dog Whisperer*, and explains "Understanding human nature helps you become a People Whisperer, and by doing so, dramatically improves your ability to get the best results from others (and yourself)."

Recently, his work on what makes organizations resilient and employees perform at their best has focused on the central role productive relationships and productive conversations have on these outcomes, with this being the take away message:

"Every better business result you want requires having a better conversation."

**For information about David Lee's diagnostic and consulting services around employee engagement and your ability to attract A-List Talent, call 207-571-9898 or email [david@humannatureatwork.com](mailto:david@humannatureatwork.com)**

## Comments About David Lee's Work

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"The value David provided our organization went far beyond the actual classroom experience. In addition to the wealth of information he provided during class, David provided a broad support system to further the development of our senior management team.

Specific elements included working with the team to articulate a behavioral vision, one-on-one coaching, individualized professional development plans, and a variety of other support services that enabled us to build a culture of teamwork, accountability, and excellent customer service. While everyone says they will help you be more productive and get better results from your people, David is the only one I've worked with who really helps you get there." - Eric Henry, CEO and Chief Investment Officer, Hershey Trust Company, PA

Thank you for doing such an outstanding job keynoting our conference. As you could tell by the response, participants loved both the content and the delivery of your presentation. - *Dr. Ian Gawler, Director, The Gawler Foundation, Victoria, Australia*

"Weeks after David Lee spoke to our college, people are still talking about the message he sent. One employee thanked our President and said it was a gift to employees to hear David speak. David took the time to get to know US before he stepped foot on campus. We didn't expect the level of service that he provided. He interviewed people, sent out surveys and dug deep to find out exactly what our college needed to go from good to great.

He then customized a program that fit what we needed and has been great with follow-up and feedback. It's clear he truly cares. David does more than give a great speech a la carte, he transforms the culture." - Deb Carlson, PhD, Director of Institutional Research and Communication, Nebraska Methodist College: The Josie Harper Campus, NE

"Having seen a lot of speakers, I can't tell you just how impressed I was by David. I even waited in line to talk with him... I learned a great deal and laughed my butt off in the process... When we have someone who is so genuine and so well prepared, we owe it to each other to spread the word.... I take it very seriously when I recommend someone else's work and... he's great! - *Naomi Judd*

"David Lee facilitated our senior leadership retreat recently. I was most impressed with how well and how quickly David engaged with the team, and the members with him. It provided for a very smooth and effective transition into what was an open, honest and valuable discussion.

David's facilitation skills put people at ease and at the same time allowed for broad participation. At the end of the day, there was unanimous agreement to bring him back for our next retreat!" - *Jim Donovan, CEO and President of Lincoln County Healthcare, ME*

"I recently attended a meeting at which David Lee spoke about employee engagement and retention, and could not have been more impressed by his enthusiasm, subject matter expertise and ability to draw the audience into his topic.

He is truly passionate about what he does, and it shows in his ability to engage participants across different levels of an organization, which made his seminar extend far beyond the bounds of a traditional presentation.

He is a fantastic listener and is attuned to the interests and issues faced by his audience, quickly shifting gears to address individuals while still holding the attention of the larger group - no small task! His break-out sessions were also terrific; well executed and thoughtful, without seeming like run of the mill icebreakers. I could not recommend him more for a fun, innovative approach to employee onboarding and engagement!" - *Sarah Canapari, Human Resources Generalist at Nixon Peabody LLP, MA*

It's an educational privilege and pleasure to learn from David Lee! When he's presenting to audiences large and small his insights about workplace dynamics, leadership, and striving for our personal best resonate with everyone. David provides invaluable aha moments that translate into actionable takeaways. He always exceeds expectations, leaving participants wanting more. Equally impressive are David's small group and team facilitation skills. Having participated in several of David's sessions with my C-suite colleagues, I've witnessed David's strong listening skills and ability to synthesize information and appropriately direct (and re-direct) conversations. Because he has the ability to build trust and rapport quickly, it affords him the necessary gateway for a deep dive into pertinent issues. His presence and unique coaching style lead to worthwhile learning for everyone. Five stars for David Lee!" - *Lisa Drew McIlwain, MaineHealth, Portland, ME*

David Lee's presentation at the 2016 SHRM Conference "Why Your Employee Engagement Survey Doesn't Cut It: It's Time to Customize the Employee Experience", was one of the best of the conference.

I especially liked his "Help me, help you, help us" approach to managers having engagement-building conversations with employees. Also, the fact that it was spiced up with up-to-date research and examples from the field made it both interesting and useful.

Altogether, his presentation gave me a lot of valuable insights that I can use.

I would definitely recommend Mr. Lee to any organization who wishes to keep learning HOW TO GROW THEIR PEOPLE. - *Naftali Tooly Ungar, founder, ZeOved, Israel*

# **Professional Development Programs By David Lee**

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## **Engagement, Motivation, and Leadership**

**Bring It On!: How to Create a Culture with a Resilient, “Can Do” Spirit**

**Inspiring U: How to Bring Your A-Game to Work and Help Others Do the Same**

**Why Your Employees Are Just Not That Into You...And How to Change That**

## **Professional Development for All Employees**

**Hack Your Awesome: Tools, Techniques, and Practices to Perform at Your Best and BE Your Best**

**How to Be a VIP at Work—Valuable, Influential, and Promotable**

## **Coaching and Constructive Conversation Skills**

**Help ME Help YOU Help US: Manager/Employee Conversations That Customize the Employee Experience and Optimize the Value Each Employee Provides**

**How to Give Feedback So They Want to Hear It...and Act On It**

**Let’s Talk for a Change: How to Engage People in Productive Conversations About Difficult Issues**

**For information on consulting services or leadership coaching, call 207-571-9898**

# Is Becoming More of a Talent Magnet Important to Your Organization?

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**Overview:** This self-assessment will help you get clearer on whether focusing more attention on becoming a Talent Magnet would be helpful to your organization. Any area that you score lower than a 3 should be addressed. If you have positions that are extremely hard to fill, you would be wise to address any area you score lower than a 4.

**Directions:** For each item, please use the following scoring system.

- 1 – Strongly Disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Agree
- 4 – Strongly Agree

1. We deliver the kind of work experience A-List Talent wants.
2. We know how to communicate what makes us *the* employer of choice for A-List Talent, in a way that makes us stand out from our competitors.
3. We are satisfied with our current ability to attract A-List Talent.
4. Our employees are our best recruiters.
5. We have a clear, deep understanding of what our key talent thinks about working in our organization, what they like best about working here and what areas we need to improve upon to keep them and to make us a Talent Magnet.
6. Our A-List Talent is committed to working in our organization; they are not taking recruiters' calls.
7. Our managers know how to identify each employee's unique Engagement Driver Recipe, so that they not only know how to fully engage each team member, but also how to facilitate each employee doing their best work.
8. Our managers know how to engage employees in Help Me Help You conversations that uncover key factors, such as:
  - Each employee's unique Engagement Recipe
  - Managerial practices that bring out the best in them and those that don't.
  - Feedback on how to improve your organization's ability to attract, retain, and engage talent
9. Our managers have the knowledge and skills to bring out the best in the new generation of employees.