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# **“TREAT THEM LIKE VOLUNTEERS” – THE KEY TO EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

– CAM CALDWELL, MUSCAT, OMAN<sup>1</sup>

It is widely understood that highly committed and engaged employees are the key to high performing organizations and sustainable competitive advantage (Pfeffer, 1998; Woodruffe, 2006, Clifton & Harter, 2019; Jamali & Caldwell, 2023). Despite that acknowledgement, organizations and leaders are struggling to earn the trust, followership, and extra-effort of their employees in a world marred by minimal employee commitment and decreasing loyalty (Hoban, 2021; Smith, 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to propose that the key to increasing employee commitment and loyalty is to treat employees as if they were volunteers – individuals who willingly choose to work with an organization to accomplish an important purpose. We begin by briefly identifying the qualities of volunteers and their rationale for working in organizations. Citing from scholarly literature, we then explain why employees are similar to volunteers and identify eight ways in which leaders can increase employee engagement simply by treating those employees like they were volunteers. We conclude with a challenge to leaders to rethink their assumptions and paradigms about motivating and engaging today's employees.

## **Who Are the Volunteers?**

Volunteers are people who join an organization willingly because they believe in the goals that the organization is pursuing and seek to contribute to achieving its purposes (Bekkers, et al., 2016). Much like their charismatic leader counterparts, volunteers come into the organization already motivated, because they feel a “calling” to achieve the organization's purposes (Faletahan, et al., 2021). Volunteerism is voluntary, sustained, and ongoing because those who choose to volunteer have made a conscious effort and an accompanying choice (Snyder, Clary & Stukas, 2000).

Motivated by meaningfulness of the work to be accomplished, their personal responsibility for the work they perform, and a knowledge of the outcomes of their efforts, volunteers are highly motivated and are willing to go the extra mile to achieve desired outcomes (Zadra, 2004). Houle and colleagues (2005) suggested that the most effective way to work with volunteers is to match the tasks in which they are engaged with their personal motivations and individual preferences. Similarly, in their research about volunteerism, Milette and Gagne (2006) found that volunteers respond to the characteristics of the *Job Characteristics Model* originally developed by Hackman and Oldham.

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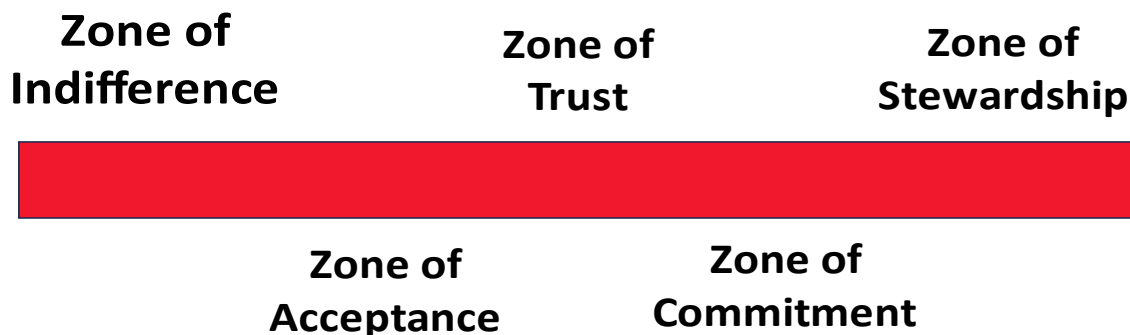
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Volunteers are intrinsically motivated and view what they are doing as fulfilling their individual identities (Musick & Wilson, 2007). Their willingness to contribute to the achievement of a noble purpose reflects their belief that what they are doing adds value and contributes to the greater good (Butcher & Einoif, 2017). Like other group members, however, when not given “voice” or the opportunity to be heard, volunteers can lose their commitment and make the decision to reduce their efforts or to discontinue their contribution (Allen & Mueller, 2013).

### **Employees as Volunteers**

More than eight decades ago in a presentation to the business students at Harvard College, Chester Barnard (1938) explained that every follower was really a volunteer and that

*Figure 1: Compliance-Commitment Continuum*



“authority” was simply the willingness of individuals to comply with a leader’s directives within a “zone of indifference.” The degree to which followers are committed to any leader was later addressed by scholars like Herbert Simon (1997) and Peter Senge (2006) and summarized in the compliance-commitment continuum developed by Hayes and colleagues (2015) which is shown below.

Followers in the Zone of Indifference accept a leader’s communications as authoritative 1) when the individual can understand the communication, 2) when (s)he believes that it is not inconsistent with the purposes for which the organization exists. 3) when (s)he believes that the communication is compatible with his/her personal self-interests, and 4) when (s)he is able to physically and mentally comply with that communication (Barnard, 1938). In the Zone of Acceptance, followers demonstrate “a conscious willingness” to follow a leader’s directive (Stutzman, 1985, p. 15) within an organizational, a personal, and a professional domain.

In the Zone of Trust, a follower is willing to cooperate and to relinquish the ability to make independent choices to the leader in the expectant hope that the leader will also honor duties implicit in the psychological contract that exists between the parties (Caldwell & Clapham, 2003). The Zone of Commitment reflects the energy, passion, and purpose of a follower in support of the leader and demonstrates the ability of the leaders to create a personal relationship with the follower (Senge, 2006). In the Zone of Stewardship, however, followers exhibit extra-role behavior and act like true “owners and partners” who are fully engaged and completely committed to the leader and the organization (Block, 2013; Hernandez, 2012). The commitment-compliance continuum applies to volunteers and to all followers and reflects the degree to which individuals are engaged and committed to a leader and an organization.

## **Increasing Commitment**

By treating employees as if they were volunteers, organization leaders have the opportunity to improve their relationships with those employees and engage them more fully in the pursuit of outcomes that benefit the organization. Research about employee commitment confirms that each of the following eight leadership behaviors strengthens the employer-employee relationship and increases follower motivation.

### **1. *Emphasize the purpose.***

In their research about long-term sustainability, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras (2004) found that organizations that emphasized their mission and purpose were more successful than companies that focused solely on making a profit. Research about employee engagement emphasizes that individuals who are committed to their organization's fundamental purpose are consistently more engaged than people who lack that focus (Shuck & Rose, 2013).

### **2. *Keep them well informed.***

Internal communication within organizations increases employee understanding about the importance of their roles, the contribution that they make to organization success, and their impact on achieving desired results (Ruck, 2015). Markos and Sridevi (2010) found that companies which emphasize keeping employees informed generate revenues that exceed their industries' averages.

### **3. *Invest in their development.***

Today's employees want to work in an organization that is committed enough in them to invest in their professional development and treat them as valued partners (Block, 2013). Deslandes and Rogers (2008) noted that training volunteers to be successful is a basic requirement for their success and making that same investment in employees simply makes logical sense (Gerber, 2001).

### **4. *Provide personalized feedback.***

Traditional annual performance appraisal systems are inadequate for working with volunteers and make little sense in the fast-changing modern organization (Marr & Gray, 2012). In their research about employee engagement, James Clifton and James Harter (2019) found that personalized feedback on a regular basis was a key motivating factor that increased employee engagement.

### **5. *Recognize outstanding achievements.***

Hahn and colleagues (2004) noted that organizations who worked with volunteers found that recognizing their outstanding contributions to the organization increased both commitment and retention. Similarly, Campbell-Allen, Houston, and Mann (2008) found that employee commitment and innovation also increased when employers recognized their outstanding achievements.

### **6. *Create personalized relationships.***

Employees have a more positive feeling toward their organizations when they experience a personalized relationship with their leaders (Ferguson & Carstairs, 2007). Just as volunteers want to be acknowledged individually, employees also want a relationship with their leaders on a personal level (Straiter, 2005).

### **7. *Express appreciation.***

The importance of saying, “Thank you!” to employees was described as a vital task of every leader, according to Max DePree (2004, p. 11). Brajer-Marczak (2014) found that expressing appreciation to employees was especially important for leaders who sought to implement continuous improvement projects. Similarly, Vance (2006) found that expressing appreciation to employees directly influenced both commitment to the organization and employee engagement.

#### **8. Celebrate successes.**

In their best-selling book about the most effective leaders, James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2023) emphasized the importance of celebrating successes – a leadership practice undertaken by leaders of volunteers when great achievements occurred (Karl, Peluchette & Hall, 2008). Recognizing outstanding accomplishments builds commitment and communicates to employees that their role in the organization is vital (Tracey & Flinchbaugh, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

In his thoughtful description of the role of the artful leader, Herman Miller’s Max DePree (2004, p. 11) expressed his belief that “The first task of the leader is to define reality. The last is to say, “Thank you.” In between the two, the leader must be a servant and a debtor.” DePree has widely been acknowledged as a consummate leader and his company has historically been the recipient of the award for the best company to work for in its industry (Shipper, et al., 2014).

Great leaders and outstanding organizations understand the value of people in organizations and recognize the truth in DePree’s insights. The challenge to leaders meshes well with the insights of De Pree and others like him who strive to treat people so well that they come to recognize their greatness and strive to achieve it (cf. Covey, 2005, p. 98). Though today’s employees may receive a paycheck for their work, their hearts and their commitment are earned by those wise and caring leaders who treat them as valued partners – as if they were volunteers.

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## About the Editor

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Dr. Caldwell obtained a Ph.D. in Organization Behavior from Washington State University where he was a Thomas S. Foley Graduate Fellow. He has written more than one hundred scholarly papers about leadership-related topics. His book, *Moral Leadership: A Transformative Model for Tomorrow's Leaders*, was published by Business Expert Press in 2012 Leadership. He co-wrote *Touching Lives* which was published by Nova Science Publishers in 2020. Prior to earning his Ph.D., Dr. Caldwell was a municipal manager, human resource professional, and management consultant for more than twenty years. He can be reached at [cam.caldwell@gmail.com](mailto:cam.caldwell@gmail.com).