The Role of Managers in Improving Employee Engagement

How your actions and words can encourage your staff to go beyond the call of duty

CONTENTS

Introduction

It is no secret that managers play a key role in employee engagement. At work, managers typically spend significant amounts of time interacting with their direct reports, be it through working together on projects or handling day-to-day tasks. How managers choose to behave, react and respond to their staff has a profound impact on the latter group's motivation at work.

As the Singapore Public Service constantly evolves to stay relevant and future-ready, we need engaged officers who can put in discretionary effort to meet the challenges of new work demands, and go the extra mile to meet citizens' needs. To strengthen staff engagement, managers must be able to effectively set goals, motivate, coach, and provide adequate training and learning opportunities for their troops.

Here are some ideas and practical tips on how you, as a manager, can better engage your staff.

What is Employee Engagement?

Before taking any steps to engage your staff, you have to first understand the rationale behind the action.

Employee engagement is what you see when your staff go the extra mile to deliver far and above what their roles require — and do so voluntarily, 'smartly', that is, finding the most productive way to do things, and even happily[1]. Employee engagement is therefore an active psychological state of being that involves having the necessary energy, passion, drive in doing one's job[2]. Employee engagement is also associated with high cognitive, psychological, emotional, and physical involvements, and with being resilient — trudging on despite challenges and adapting to changing contexts and environments.

In other words, engaged staff are committed and passionate about their work. They typically speak positively about the organisation and dedicate themselves to pursuing organisational goals because this pursuit brings meaning to them.

Not just about being happy

Employee engagement is more than just about feeling satisfied or happy at work. Staff may feel happy at work because of a light workload or good organisational benefits, but that does not necessarily mean that they are engaged. Engaged staff invest their full selves at work and are willing to do all they can to help their teams and organisations succeed. So while engaged staff are likely to be more satisfied and happier at work, the converse may not be true[3].

Likewise, employee retention does not necessarily indicate engagement. Many organisations confound the two[4] and interpret higher retention rates as higher engagement levels. However, people may stay on in an organisation for job security or fear that they will not perform as well elsewhere, and not because they are engaged in their work.

Going beyond performance-related behaviours

Employee engagement also goes beyond performance-related behaviours. Staff may take the initiative to do beyond what is expected of them, not because they want a better performance review, but because they see meaning behind each task that they do.

Examples include a counter service executive who decides to help a citizen even though his or her shift has ended. Or the communications executive who takes pride in writing a good press release announcing a new policy to the public.

Why Employee Engagement Matters

If achieving higher productivity, better working relationships, and staff's willingness to do beyond what's expected[5] is something that is important for you as a manager, then employee engagement will matter to you. Research has shown that employee engagement is strongly correlated with citizen satisfaction and trust[6] – something which matters to us as managers in the Public Service. In another study by Gallup[7], employee engagement was found to correlate with the following business outcomes:

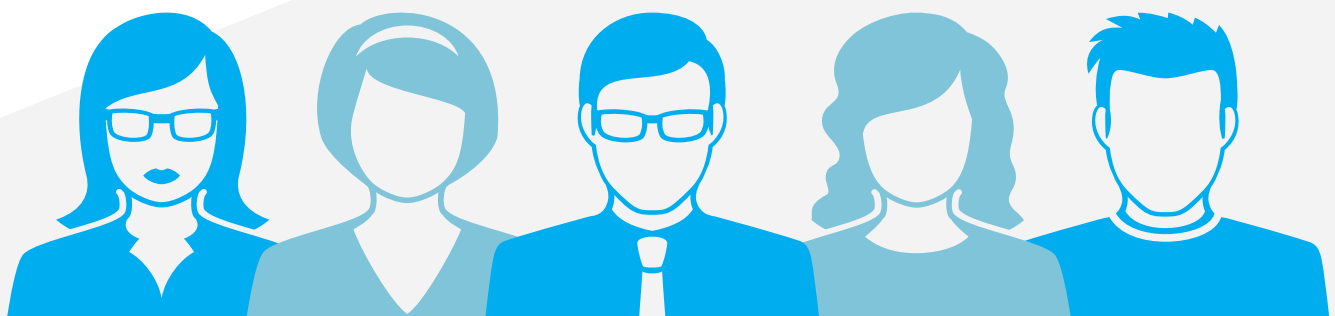lower turnover

lower absenteeism

higher productivity

higher profitability

higher customer metrics

How Can You Improve Employee Engagement Levels?

As managers, you can influence the level of employee engagement in your staff and teams. You can do so by paying attention to the five psychological conditions that can influence employee engagement – safety, purpose, autonomy, connectedness, and expertise, or SPACE. (see side bar for elaboration)
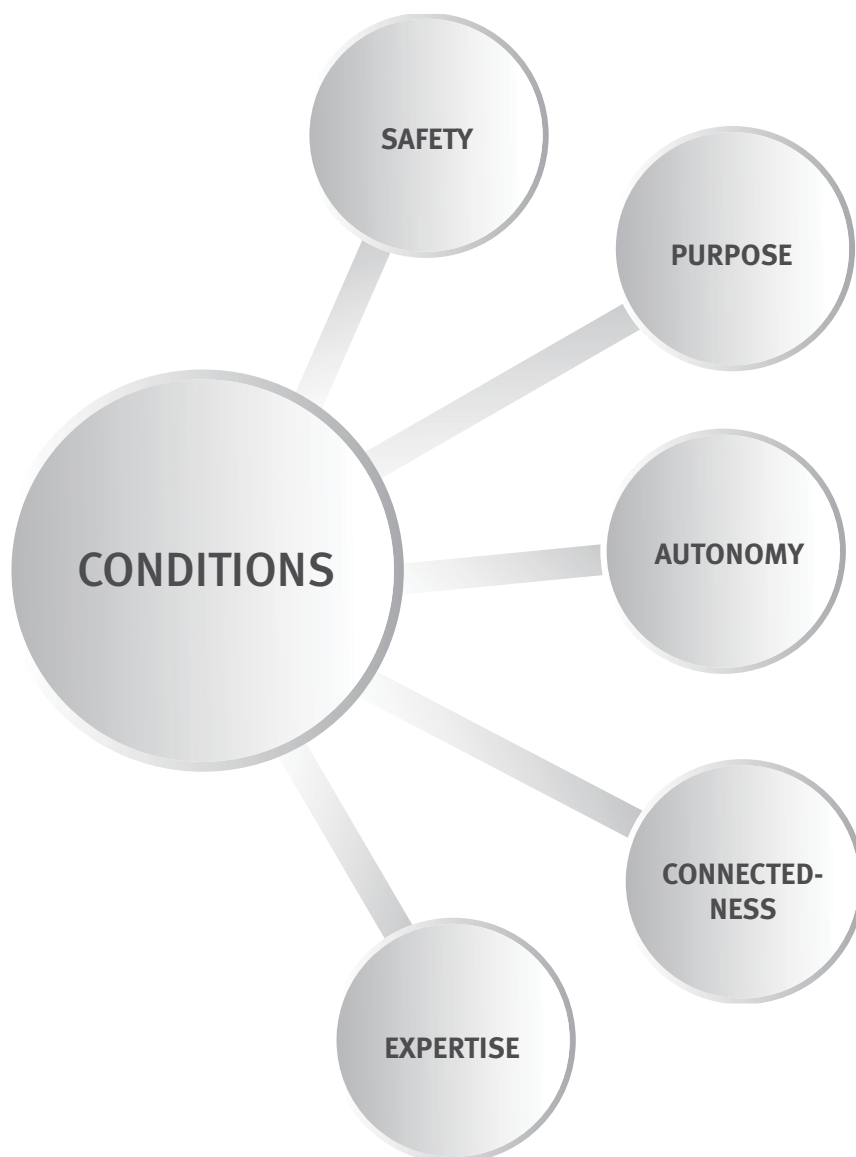
Theoretical Background to Five Conditions in SPACE

These five conditions are largely based off self-determination theory, which identified autonomy, competence and relatedness as key intrinsic human motivations. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), people have a need to be in control of their lives. People are also motivated to master skills that allow them to accomplish things. Lastly, people are motivated to build relationships and connect with others. These three basic needs are reflected in the autonomy, expertise and connectedness part of SPACE. These perspectives are also drawn from the job demands-resources theory which suggests that people need to feel that they have personal and external resources to do their jobs well before they can start to feel engaged at work.

The Conditions for Employee Engagement

SAFETY

Safety refers to a condition where staff experience trust – trust that they will not be taken advantage of, that they are valued and respected as a person and that the organisation and their supervisors will treat them fairly. This need for trust is why organisations should provide an environment where work and rewards are fairly distributed and the procedures used to allocate them are as transparent as possible, and recognition is given for the effort and contributions made by employees.

When staff perceive that they are treated fairly, they are more likely to reciprocate, for instance, by giving more of themselves. Conversely, if staff perceive that they are unfairly treated, they may withdraw and disengage from their work roles[8].

As a manager, you can enable this Safety condition through the following:

| **Respect , recognise and honour** staff. | **1** | **Assign work and rewards** in a **fair** manner. | **2** | Conduct **performance review** sessions **with fairness.** | **3** |

PURPOSE

Staff experience a sense of purpose at work when they know that their work is contributing to something larger than themselves[9]. Staff typically find their work to be purposeful and meaningful when:

1 **The work they do matters.** They must be able to see how the daily tasks they engage in, no matter how small, contribute to the organisation's overall goals.

2 **Their work benefits a greater good** (for example, ensuring a robust health care system for all Singaporeans).

When staff feel a sense of purpose at work, they are more likely to invest their whole selves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in their jobs. When staff do not see the purpose in their job, they may feel disengaged or even burnt out.

To help facilitate this condition of Purpose, you as a manager can do two things:

1 Help staff see how the things they do fit into the **larger picture.**

2 Help staff see how the work they are doing **benefit their colleagues or society at large**.

The Conditions for Employee Engagement

AUTONOMY

Autonomy is the extent to which staff perceive that they have control over the 'what' and 'how' of their work. When staff feel a sense of autonomy at work, they are more likely to be satisfied at work, more committed to the organisation and less likely to resign[10]. When staff do not enjoy autonomy at work, they may feel powerless and a lack of control, leading to a sense of helplessness and subsequent disengagement[11].

As a manager, you can create conditions for Autonomy in the following ways[12]:

1 Explain why the **goal** that staff are pursuing **has value.**

2 Allow staff to **decide how they will reach that goal.**

3 If you have no choice but to dictate what the goals and the ways of getting there are, you can **create the feeling of choice** by inviting staff to make decisions about the more peripheral aspects of the task, for example, allow staff to decide on location and timing of meetings, or to conduct meetings.

CONNECTEDNESS

The condition for connectedness refers to the extent to which staff feel that they have a sense of belonging and supportive relationships at work. Based on the self-determination theory, which explores how human beings are motivated, the need to connect and relate positively to others is a core human need and motivation[13].

When staff experience supportive and trusting relationships at work, they are more likely to be psychologically secure and more engaged at work[14]. Conversely, when staff feel a lack of social support at work, they are more likely to experience burn-out[15].

There are different ways in which you can enable your staff to experience this sense of Connectedness at work, such as:

1 Help staff feel a **sense of cognitive and emotional connection** to others at work by investing in relationship building among staff.

2 Encourage staff to **voice their opinions** and **affirm their efforts** when they do so.

3 Foster a **sense of solidarity and openness** to each other by managing team dynamics.
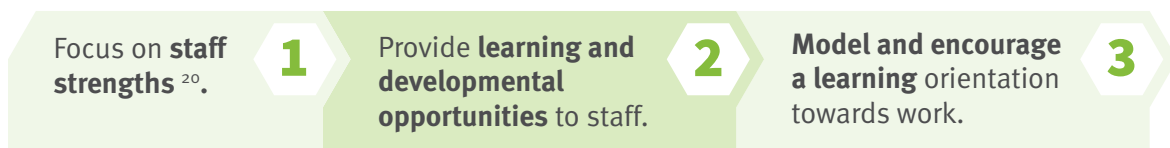
EXPERTISE

Expertise reflects the intrinsic need to master a skill[16], which is a core driver of engagement at work[17]. When staff perceive that they have the personal resources, which can come in the form of personal abilities or self-efficacy, to do their jobs well, they will be more engaged[18]. When staff believe that they have the ability to achieve their work goals, and that the outcomes of their work would be positive, they are more likely to be engaged[19].

Conversely, when staff do not feel that they have the opportunity to develop and use their strengths at work, they will be less likely to invest themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally at work.

As a manager promoting this condition of Expertise, you can:

| Focus on **staff strengths** [20]. | **1** | Provide **learning and developmental opportunities** to staff. | **2** | **Model and encourage a learning** orientation towards work. | **3** |

Some Practical Ideas
to Help You Get Started

Get started in improving engagement levels by:

**A.** Paying attention to your own engagement level;

B. Paying attention to individual staff's engagement level; and

C. Paying attention to your team's engagement level.

A. Paying attention to your own engagement level

To be effective in raising the engagement levels of your staff, you first need to be engaged yourself. This is because as managers, your engagement levels have been found to be highly correlated with the engagement levels of those you manage[21]. Paying attention to your own engagement levels also makes you a good role model to your staff and to the extent that they can take responsibility and action for their own engagement levels. Working on your own engagement levels allows you to discover how to stay engaged and be better positioned to offer practical advice to your staff.

Here are three ways you can pay attention to your own engagement level:
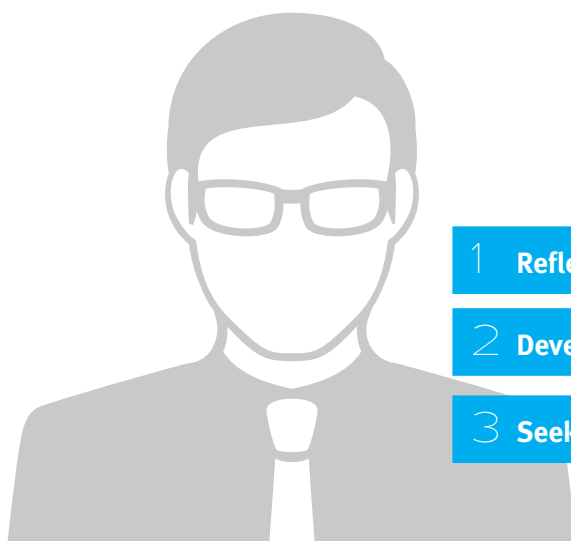
1 **Reflect on What Keeps You Engaged**

2 **Develop Your Emotional Intelligence**

3 **Seek Support From Your Own Manager**

1 Reflect on What Keeps You Engaged

Take time to step back from your work and busy schedule to reflect on your state of engagement and what might be influencing your engagement levels. For example, how are you experiencing the five conditions of SPACE?

You can also reflect on the following questions drawn from Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz's book, "The Power of Full Engagement"[22]:

- How do I feel at work?
- What takes energy away from me? Is there a way for me to change the situation?
- What gives me energy at work? Can I do more of this?
- What is the ultimate purpose of my job?
- How does my job serve my personal aspirations and long-term goals?

2 Develop Your Emotional Intelligence

You can enhance your emotional intelligence by becoming more self-aware of your own emotional states. You can do this by observing and analysing your mental states, thoughts and feelings[23].

Here are some practical tips on how you can develop your emotional intelligence:

- Improve my self-awareness by keeping a journal of my feelings — write down what happened; how I felt; and how I reacted.
- Practise emotional self-regulation (i.e. not react impulsively) by recognising triggers and situational cues that may give rise to negative emotions.
- Predict ahead of time when I might react emotively and be intentional in developing healthier default responses when those moments occur.

3 Seek Support From Your Own Manager

Just as you can influence the engagement levels of those reporting to you, your engagement levels are influenced by your own managers. Knowing this, you can improve your engagement levels by proactively seeking support from your own managers.

You can do so by:

- Cultivating a good working relationship with your manager. This allows you to feel more comfortable bringing up problems and challenges to your manager, and seeking support or resources from him/her[24].
- Clarifying your manager's expectations of you, sharing your own expectations of the work - and do so regularly. By clarifying expectations, it helps align your understanding of your work with the vision and direction of your leaders, and helps you get a better appreciation of the meaningfulness of your work.
- Seeking your manager's support for your developmental needs so you can grow your competence and gain expertise.

B. Paying attention to individual staff's engagement level

As a manager, you also perform the role of Reporting Officer for the individuals under your charge. As stated in the prior section, you can, in turn, influence the engagement level of those reporting to you by: (1) developing a good relationship with your staff[25]; (2) providing clarity in the expectations you have[26]; and (3) offering developmental support to grow their competence and expertise. Related to these three ways of improving your staff's engagement level, you can consider the following:

1 **Coach Your Staff**

2 **Offer Feedback to Your Staff**

3 **Empower Your Staff**

1 Coach Your Staff

You can start by:

- Listening deeply, which is crucial when holding a coaching conversation[27]. One practice of deep listening is to ask follow-up questions regarding staff's opinions and feelings.
- Asking questions, and not telling. This requires you to refrain from the temptation of providing answers, and to instead ask open-ended questions that allow staff to discover their own solutions. When this happens, staff can become more empowered and engaged in their work.[28]

2 Offer Feedback to Your Staff

Praise and affirmation can be a huge source of motivation for staff[29]. Constructive feedback, while displeasing to receive, can be a source for growth and development[30]. As a manager, you need to know how to navigate giving both positive and constructive feedback properly so as to engage staff. Here are some tips on how to give feedback[31]:

- Be specific when providing positive feedback and do it publicly (e.g. at a team meeting) where appropriate – this will help enhance the impact of the feedback.
- Be sensitive when providing constructive feedback and do it privately; be mindful not to embarrass staff and make them feel demotivated[32]. In providing the feedback, it should also be framed as a means to enhance their growth and development[33] and this might spur them to take on positive actions to increase their performance.

3 Empower Your Staff

Staff that are empowered experience feelings of competence, control and sense of impact from one's actions and are likely to feel more engaged[34].

Here are some ideas on how you can empower staff[35]:

- Create a good job fit between the staff's natural abilities and interests and requirements of the job.
- Equip staff with sufficient resources to accomplish the assigned task by ensuring staff have the necessary materials, information, stakeholder access, equipment, etc.

C. Paying attention to your team's engagement level

Team dynamics can have a significant impact on the engagement levels of the team members. As the manager playing the role of team leader, you can help foster the engagement level of the team by paying attention to the following:

1 **Ensure that your team has clear goals, roles, good processes and interactions (GRPI)**

2 **Conduct Productive Team Meetings**

3 **Invest in Team Bonding**
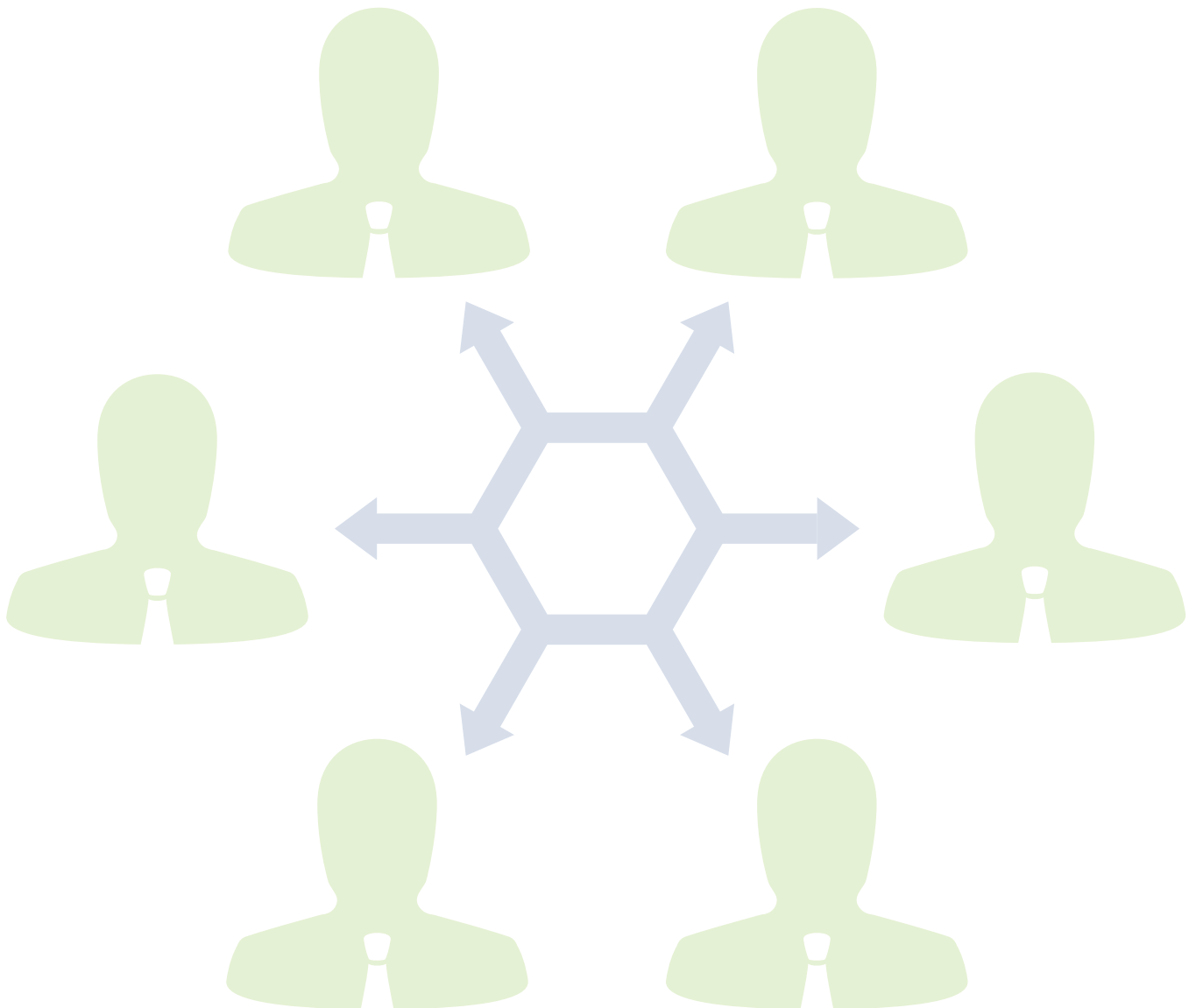
1 Ensure Your Team Has a Strong GRPI

When teams have clear **g**oals, **r**oles and good **p**rocesses and **i**nteractions, they are more likely to be effective and engaged[36]. In team meetings, the team can discuss the following:

- Goals: Who are our stakeholders? What do you want them to say about you and what do you need to do in order for that to happen?
- Roles: What are the roles of individual team members and how does this contribute to the team's goals?
- Processes: What processes and norms (for communication and decision-making) do you need to help you play your roles well and achieve our goals?
- Interactions: What are each of our preferred working styles and habits that would be helpful for the team to know?

2 Conduct Productive Team Meetings

Team meetings can be productive when the team feels that they are performing, working towards a goal, learning or being validated. In team meetings, you can:

- Pay attention to the achievement of both work goals and people's needs.
- Explore options to support the team's journey, such as getting a team coach or learning about conflict management techniques.
- Honour and validate each team member's contributions to the team regularly.

3 Invest in Team Bonding

When team members see each other as people worthy of compassion and concern, and not merely co-workers sharing a workplace, they begin to bond, raising their individual engagement levels[37]. Managers can take certain actions to create bonds between team members.

As a manager you can:

- Create rituals that facilitate team bonding, such as celebrating birthdays and key project milestones. These rituals generate positive emotions and allow team members to share positive feelings with one another, thereby increasing their engagement levels.
- Invest in time-out sessions like team retreats where team members can collectively reflect, plan, and decide on key issues facing the team. It may also be a good practice to conduct team "re-launch" sessions to ensure that the goals, roles, processes and inter-personal interactions stay relevant and useful to the team.

Conclusion

Managers can raise engagement on three levels: the self, the staff and the team. When the conditions of safety, purpose, autonomy, connectedness and expertise are met, staff are more likely to feel engaged. The practical ideas offered in this paper speak to these different conditions. Practising some, if not all, of these ideas can lead to greater engagement levels and drive higher performance.

Practical Ideas for the Manager

THE SELF	
Recommended Practice	**Tips**
#1 Reflect on what keeps you engaged	a) How do I feel at work? b) What takes energy away for me? Is there a way for me to change the situation? c) What gives me energy at work? Can I do more of this? d) What is the ultimate purpose of my job? e) How does my job serve my personal aspirations and long-term goals?
#2 Develop your emotional intelligence	a) Improve self-awareness by keeping a journal of my emotional triggers b) Practice emotional self-regulation c) Predict ahead of time when I might react emotively and be intentional in developing healthier default responses when those moments occur
#3 Seek support from your own manager	a) Cultivate a good working relationship with my manager b) Clarify my manager's expectation of me as well as share my own expectation of work and do so regularly c) Seek my manager's support for my developmental needs so that I can grow in my competence and gain expertise

THE STAFF

Recommended Practice	Tips
#1 Coach your staff	a) Listen deeply by asking follow-up questions regarding staff's opinions and feelings b) Ask questions and not giving answers
#2 Provide feedback to staff	a) Describe the situation where observed behaviour occurred b) Help staff understand exactly the behaviour you're talking about c) Share with staff the impact of the behaviour on you or others who were present d) Share positive feedback publicly e) Give constructive feedback privately
#3 Empower your staff	a) Create a good job fit between staff's natural abilities and interests, and requirements of the job b) Equip staff with sufficient resources to accomplish the assigned tasks

THE TEAM

Recommended Practice	Tips
#1 Ensure team has strong GRPI	a) Clarify goals and roles b) Set in place good processes for communication and decision making c) Communicate different working styles and habits
#2 Conduct productive team meetings	a) Pay attention to achievement of work goals and people's needs b) Explore options to support team's journey such as getting a team coach or learning about conflict management techniques c) Honour and validate each team member's contribution to the team regularly
#3 Invest in team bonding	a) Create rituals that facilitate team bonding b) Invest in time-out sessions like team retreats

Recommended Readings

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How?

What?

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