

## LEADING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



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Good morning, Madame Past President, honorable Board Members, and valued SHRM colleagues. Thank you for inviting me today and for allowing me to visit Oklahoma again, if only virtually.

Under today's topic of creating Meaningful Employee Engagement, I like to address the issue of Leading Employee Engagement.

For those of you who were able to read my article from three years ago, it may be puzzling, because I have claimed since 2014 that Employee Engagement is failing, or at least not working the way it has been presented to us.

What we like to accomplish with your help, is to expand our perspective and to allow us to successfully lead our organization into the future and to do that with engaged employees.

But how do we do that?

The French-American author Anais Nin said: “We don’t see things the way they are, we see them the way we are!”

So, in order to learn we have to perceive things differently. We all experience that our employees come to us with a different set of perspectives, a multitude of values, and a wide range of performance norms.

In other words: we need to change our perspective to better understand their perspective, if we want to lead and influence them in a positive way.

In 2000 the cover page of TIME magazine caught my attention when it featured the 100 most prominent LEADERS in the history. It was a weird mixture: From Albert Einstein to Lao-tzu; from Queen Elizabeth to Aristotle, from Hitler to Charly Chaplin, from Shirley Temple to Josef Stalin, and from Pele, the Soccer Star, to Abe Lincoln.

It was very confusing to say the least.

As I was trying to better understand and define Leadership and the Leader, it opened my eyes how vast this topic really was and I like to share some of the thoughts with you.

What we like to accomplish today is threefold:

1. ... to explain, maybe even redefine with you the purpose of Leadership, because **all Leaders** have one common characteristic:

THEY ARE ENGAGED AND PASSIONATE.

2. .... while psychology shapes our behavior, the recent insights into neurology allows our brains to initiate and maintain an even higher engagement
3. ... by identifying 6 universal principles [R.E.W.A.R.D.] we can help our employees to create engagements that lasts a life time, and not just for their work.



1. What all Leaders have in common, regardless of their positive or negative impact in history, they are all very passionate and engaged through their leadership.
2. While there are so many different definitions about leaders, they were mostly treated as if they were born leaders. In other words, the descriptions were mostly what leaders do, not what makes a leader.

It is always interesting to me that most books on leadership always switch between management and leadership, as if they are the same. We usually end up with a list of traits, behaviors, and characteristics that make a leader, including the books of "Leadership for Dummies" or "The Idiot Guide for leaders".

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PREMISE

- If leaders are developed, not born, *there should be different levels of development* according to their strengths.
- If there are different levels of development and strengths, *leaders should be able to develop along their strengths*.
- If we are humans, i.e. of the same species, *we should have universally accepted brain functions*.



Most of us would agree by now, that leaders are developed and not born, and we have to ask these questions:

- If leaders are developed, not born, *there should be different levels of development* according to their strengths.
- If there are different levels of development and strengths, *leaders should be able to develop along their strengths*.

- If we are humans, i.e., of the same species, *we should have universally accepted brain functions.*

Fortunately, I discovered Jim Collins and his books “Build to last”, “Good To Great”, and later “How the mighty fall”.

By 2008 I also became a disciple of “Strength based Leadership” by Tom Roth and Barry Conchie

They helped me to take a different perspective at Leaders and Leadership.



If leaders develop, what would be their steps of development?

1. It would have to start with being a potential leader, and our job in HR should be to only hire potential leaders.

2. From there we can help them to develop into capable leaders, those who understand and embrace our culture and take actions through their work that have a positive impact on our work environment. In other words, they impress us by being ENGAGED!
  
3. The next step in their development would be to become contributing leaders. Their work output helps to build collaborative relations/teams and they are mindful about their work AND their co-workers.
  
4. The effective Leaders are not only able to make people, work, events, and work outputs meaningful,

but they are also able to show connections and help build a process between them. Their transparency in their action, and supportive processes, create a reliable work environment on which trust can be built.

5. The sustaining leaders maximize the relations between people, events, work, the personal and business goals, and it is their daily task to rise to that level of leadership.

This leads us to the distinction that Leadership influences people, and Management influences work performance.

**QUESTION:**  
**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE  
OF LEADERSHIP?**

**ANSWER:**  
**TO DEVELOP MORE LEADERS,  
NOT MORE FOLLOWERS!**



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The counter argument to this proposition is: “We can’t have all leaders and no followers!

Yes, we have to. Our work environment has become so complex, so information saturated, so difficult to comprehend, that we need rotating team leaders whose strengths will help us to be successful for a certain portion of work, before they step back and the next leader with her specific skills will take the lead.

Anyone who has watched Geese fly in formation for thousands of miles can vouch how successful it is. Without rotating leadership their journey would barely last 100 miles.

LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT  
**MISUNDERSTANDINGS**



Western civilization, unfortunately, does not link knowledge and morality but rather, it connects knowledge and power and makes them equivalent.

(Vine Deloria, Jr.)

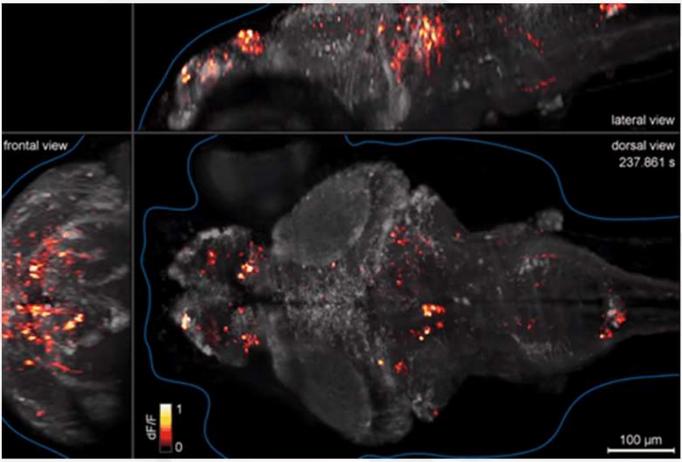


Since I started in Indian Gaming in 1995 [YES, last century] I studied and also taught at various Universities on the thought process of Western Civilization.

But I learned mostly from reading about and listening to Native American wisdom of the elders. For that I am grateful and this insight by Vine De Lori, JR is just one example.

Had we followed his insight 400 years ago we could have avoided many disasterous social, economic, and environmental developments.

**USING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS A PRESENT TREND...**



**...TO BETTER UNDERSTAND OUR BRAINS IS THE FUTURE!**

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Much is made about the increased use of Artificial Intelligence. It is often seen as the remedy for anything.

But Artificial Intelligence is a complex arrangements of algorithms that recognizes and compiles certain patterns. It has been the modern trend issue for the past 8 years and will continue its path.

Will it one day replace our brain? Not likely!

In her book “The three Pound Universe” the **NEUROLOGIST JUDITH HOOPER** makes this wonderful observation:

“If our brains were so simple, that we could understand them, we would be so simple, that we couldn’t!”

How very true. To come closer to A.I mimicking the capacities of our brain we have to wait until the already existing Quantum Computers are further developed. But this is a topic for another session.

There is, however, a reason why I like to point to the importance of our brain:

Until the turn of the century , we primarily used the language of psychology to understand, describe, and influence behaviors. This science started in the early 1920 century and served us well.

In the last twenty years, however, the technological advances of imaging brain activity *gave us ‘neuroscience’ as another language* .

By monitoring and recording certain brain regions, neuroscience measures and explains what motivates our thinking and causes certain perspectives, actions and behaviors. In short is helps us to UNDESTAND ENGAGEMENT!

Now, before you panic, let me assure you that we won’t need a degree in neurology.

Over twenty years of neurological research recognized and established six universal **PRINCIPLES** that impact the thinking of human beings and consequently our behavior.

By **UNIVERSAL** we mean that these six principles impact our thinking regardless of our location, culture, upbringing, or any characteristics that we HR people use to describe our protected groups.



Our brain is the most sophisticated software available to date:

It comes with 86 to 96 BILLION neurons, that operate several HUNDRED TRILLION connections through 10 TRILLION synapses at a speed of 220 MILES PER HOUR and performs upwards of 1500 calculations per second

What does the brain do?

On the **most existential level, our brain tries to make sure that we survive.** It constantly scans the environment to minimize threats and to maximize rewards. Our brain constantly takes signals from our senses. We call them stimulus .

I guess we already know that our eyes, our ears, our mouth or our noses don't really see, hear, smell, or taste, They are merely sensors that transport and translate electro-chemical signals for the brain.

Depending on this activation of our brain circuitry the body and mind initiates actions that are either towards the reward stimulus or away from the thread stimulus.

As a backdrop for our conversations today we are using these principles in the acronym R.E.W.A.R.D.

LEADING THROUGH  
**RELIABILITY**



It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently.  
— Warren Buffett —



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**RELIABILITY:**

As we stated before: our brain constantly scans our environment to minimize threats and to maximize rewards.

That means that our survival depends on our ability of making predictions and calculations.

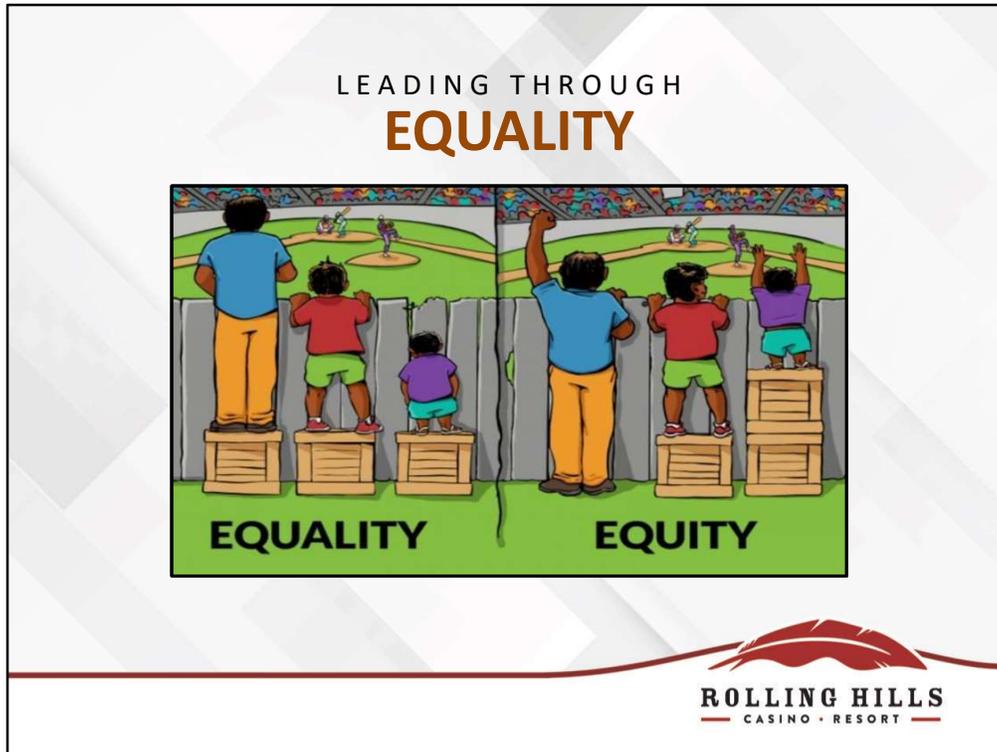
To make accurate and meaningful predictions and calculations , we, that means our brain, is looking for reliability.

That's why our brain has such a dislike for change. Change means to move away from what was reliable.

We already know that trust is the key ingredient of effective leadership, but it is reliability that lays the foundation for trust.

When employees believe that our information, our communication, our ambitions, our strategic and tactical goals, our reward system / compensation is not reliable

We are not allowing them to build TRUST.



**EQUALITY or EQUITY?**

*Aside from physical threads there are also social threads.*

We want to be socially accepted and having a certain status;

This status can be economical, political, intellectual, or spiritual.

By looking for equality our brain tries to decrease the ambiguity (lack of reliability) of social acceptance, i.e. it tries to minimize uncertainty as a threat.

Now, we frequently get Equality and Equity (= justice/fairness) confused. Equality means that everyone is treated the same, regardless of the anticipated results.

When employees complain about unfairness it is mostly that they want more EQUITY help to reach personal goals.

A global study of over 16000 employees and managers found that trust is highly correlated with employee satisfaction and productivity

– and that senior managers and front line workers aren't always on the same page about the state of trust at the company.

**Trust levels make the difference for the employee experience** – and as a result, the organization's productivity.

Employees at high trust companies are more engaged, more productive, and experience less stress and burnout than their counterparts at low trust companies. Specifically, employees at high trust companies were...

**40%** less likely to experience burnout, which leads to costly turnover

**74%** less stressed

**50%** more productive

**106%** more energized at work



**WELL-BEING:**

I actually mean Well-Being and not Wellness and we really should make a distinction between the two.

We know Well-being also as the pursued of happiness. It is a basic human right, while wellness relates mostly to health, diet and physical fitness.

When our brain scans our environment, it triggers a huge variety of emotions. Many of these emotional responses are initiated before their signals can reach the prefrontal cortex, where we make our decisions. It is only in the prefrontal cortex where we can communicate our response mentally and consciously.

To balance our emotions and mental states it, therefore, requires us to be also physically and spiritually balanced. Therefore, the **Well-being** is at the center of the six principles.

“Employees in high-trust organizations are more productive, have more energy at work, collaborate better with their colleagues, and stay with their employers longer than people working at low-trust companies.” Paul J. Zak, Professor of Neuro-Economic at Claremont University

**Employees at high trust companies reap the benefits even after they leave the office.** These employees were found to have a **29%** increase in life satisfaction.

I purposely chose the medicine wheel which represents the required balance of emotional, physical, spiritual and mental much better than any Western Symbol of well-being.

## LEADING THROUGH **AUTONOMY**



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### **AUTONOMY:**

Since our brain seeks and prefers certainty it also values autonomy: *A sense of being in control of circumstances, of our destiny, and enjoying freedom.*

Our brain actually makes a distinction between freedom **towards** possible rewards, and freedom **from** existential threats.

Put most simply: to be autonomous is to be one's own person, to be directed by our own considerations, desires, and characteristics.

This is where autonomy allows us to also be authentic.

Traditional Employee Engagement initiatives, are commonly based on the autonomy of the team, competition between individuals, multitasking for the benefit of the organization, all of which are counterproductive.

LEADING THROUGH  
**RESPECT**



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**RESPECT: (= To look back, to look after, to care)**

We are social creatures, and our ability to survive depends on our ability to live, work and communicate effectively with other humans.

The brain perceives threats to our status and social standing – called: social injury- similar to the way it perceives physical injury and pain.

When we are disrespected, or even worse, ignored, we suffer. But when we are given respect, it makes us feel valued.

Respect gives us a sense of appreciation and being valued. Respect, however, goes even further and show care, concern, consideration and feelings of appreciation not just for humans but for everything in creation.

Respect is the one of the essential three “Rs” for employee engagement: Respect, Relations, Reciprocity.



**DINSTINCTIVENESS:**

Distinctiveness is what makes you and me different, unique, and atypical from others.

Aside from the physical requirements for survival, such as air, food, water, sex, and shelter, we realize that our brain may perceive different things as rewards.

Next to the obvious rewards, there is a list of psychological and social factors, like social acceptance, a sense of being right or knowing answers, opportunities for advancements, mastery of skills, novelty, and creativity.

These less obvious rewards shape our individuality and distinctiveness.

**Interestingly, leaders were found to overestimate the trust level at the company** compared to front line workers. This discrepancy between senior managers and front line workers has huge implications.

When asked to score the phrase, “Leaders here are sincere,” which is highly correlated with trust, senior managers’ average answer was **21% higher** than the average for front line employees.

Summary:

- Employee Engagement is a Leadership development and not a Management initiative.
- Closely linked to Employee Engagement is the Leadership purpose to develop more leaders not more followers.
- This leadership development should follow a distinct and carefully planned process
- Employee Engagement is not about employee feelings, employee behavior, or tangible employee rewards.
- Employee Engagement goes through the brain and its 2 main functions to avoid threats and maximize rewards.
- Employee Engagements needs
  - the foundation of reliability,
  - the support of Equality
  - the freedom of autonomy
  - the holistic concern well-being, not just wellness
  - the power of caring for everything
  - the individualistic approach for each distinctly unique person.

- - - THANK YOU - - -

**YOUR ATTENTION & FEEDBACK  
ARE GENUINELY APPRECIATED**

**QUESTIONS?**

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