

Two Differing Assumptions behind Employee Engagement Theories The “Jackasses” and the “Partners”

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ABSTRACT

When we talk of employee engagement, what kind of an engagement are we talking about? One of building relationships or leading battles? Do we engage employees in loving ways to achieve common goals, or do we struggle to get things done? What would be the ideal way to interpret employee engagement? Which definition would be more scientific? Among the executives and workers, the ‘us and them’ attitude starts from the beginning of their service. The contempt grows and at a crucial moment explodes shattering the entire set up. Unfortunately, even today, Management Education is busy teaching Taylor’s theory which is built on the archaic assumptions that are inimical to the workers. Management students are not educated to treat workers as partners, but as a group to be controlled, using carrot and stick. Enlightened education should abandon the assumptions on which Taylor built his management theory and teach managers to treat employees as partners. The present day managers should find themselves on the side of employers as their agents, often, taking pride, in their ability to squeeze work out of employees. Employees who are not cared for by the employers and managers respond in kind. And, that is taken by employers and managers as a justification for their unequal treatment of employees.

Keywords: Employee engagement, Frederick Taylor, Engagement, Scientific Management Theory, Employees as partners.

INTRODUCTION:

Defining “Engagement”

The English Oxford Living Dictionaries give four different meanings for the word “Engagement” along with an example for each of them (2018). We will use the first and the last of the four meanings in this article.

1. A formal agreement to get married: ‘a good long engagement to give you time to be sure’
2. An arrangement to do something or go somewhere at a fixed time: ‘a dinner engagement’
3. The action of engaging or being engaged: ‘Britain’s continued engagement in open trading’
4. Fight or battle between armed forces: ‘the war’s most significant engagements were fought to keep these sea lanes open’

The primary meaning of “engagement” signifies the step one takes before (and leading to) the sacred relationship of marriage. And, the last (fourth) meaning of the word is almost the opposite of the first meaning: ‘a fight or battle!’ (the opposite of relationship building?)

So, these questions arise, right as we begin: When we talk of employee engagement, what kind of an engagement are we talking about? One of building relationships or leading battles? Do we engage employees in loving ways to achieve common goals, or do we struggle to get things done? What would be the ideal way to interpret employee engagement? Which definition would be more scientific? Also, which kind of understanding of employee engagement is the most popular one in use, today? More importantly, which one leads to greater productivity and profits.

TYPE 1 EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: THE JACKASS TYPE

Frederick Taylor is called The Father of Scientific Management and his book *The Principles of Scientific Management* is said to be 'the most influential' (Bedeian & Wren, 2001) management book of the 20th century; in that book, we find his assumptions about employees stated thus:

It is well within the mark to state that in nineteen out of twenty industrial establishments the workmen behave it to be directly against their interests to give their employers their best initiative, and that instead of working hard to do the largest possible amount of work and the best quality of work for their employers, they deliberately work as slowly as they dare while they at the same time try to make those over them believe that they are working fast. (Emphasis Added) (Taylor, 1911)

Since Taylor assumes employees will 'deliberately work as slowly as they dare' and he further assumes that employees would 'make those over them believe' that they are working when they are not working, we may safely conclude that Taylor uses the fourth meaning of the word engagement, where employers need to cox/manipulate/force workers to deliver than work together in a loving relationship of cooperation.

The assumptions that Taylor makes about workers perfectly fit the bygone era of slave trade. Slaves had to be led at gun point from the stage of acquiring (recruiting) them from African jungles, and had to be forced to go and serve owners who bought them in auction, and then forced by owners while extracting work from them.

By the time Taylor published in 1911, slaves and workers had gained their political freedom. Hence, Taylor did have the luxury to use guns to force employees to work. Taylor was forced to choose mostly the "carrot" of inducements as his instrument to engage his workers, and punish using threats, fines, suspensions and dismissals.

Thus, historically, employees find themselves trapped between the carrot of inducements and the stick of disciplinary actions or dismissal from work.

Dr. Edward Freeman, the Father of the Stakeholder Theory of Business, asks his audience during his Ted Talk, "What goes between a carrot and a stick?" and extracts the answer "Jackass!" Indeed, he informs his audience that an eminent Harvard Business School Psychologist Harry Levinson uses the same term Jackass. (Freeman, 2013)

Proving Taylor's Scientific Management Theory - The Pig Iron Experiment:

Taylor used an experiment on motivating a worker to load more pig iron on to wagons than what he usually did to prove his "Theory of Scientific Management." To the extent it was a theory on managing a workman do more work, we may call his theory "Taylor's Theory of Employee Engagement."

He found that load-men loading pig iron into wagons loaded 12½ tons on an average, each day. They got paid an average daily wage of \$2.15. But, he calculated that they can each load 47½ tons per day, if they can be scientifically engaged or managed.

Taylor believe that under scientific management, "Whenever the workman succeeds in doing his task right, within the time limit specified, he receives in addition of from 30 per cent to 100 per cent to his ordinary wages." (Taylor, 1911) (p.39)

That is more like a carrot he would dangle before the workman than an honest and 'scientifically' calculated reward he would offer for the work done, when he is planning to get many times more the work being done now.

Schmidt - the Guinea Pig of the Pig Iron Experiment:

To get someone to load 47½ tons and not the 12½ tons, that is, put in 3.8 times more work than what he does now Taylor needed a workman who would fall for his carrot. That is how he could create a scientific theory of employee engagement, that he chose to call "The Principle of Scientific Management."

Taylor could easily find a supervisor to follow the worker with a stop watch, ordering him to move for so many seconds, and rest for so many seconds before resuming work again.

But, Taylor, indeed, needed a rare guinea pig of a worker who would subject himself to this hard experiment on employee engagement – all for the carrot – which in this case was a promised increase to his income by a

princely 60 cents.

Such a worker, obviously, had to be one who would “place a very high value on a dollar” – An employee for whom “a penny looks about the size of a cart-wheel to him.” (p.44). After identifying and selecting one such penny-hungry employee, he set him up thus:

“...told by the man who stood over him with a watch, “Now pick up a pig and walk. Now sit down and rest. Now walk —now rest,” etc. He worked when he was told to work, and rested when he was told to rest, and at half-past five in the afternoon had his 47½ tons loaded on the car.” (p.47)

That was the story of the successful experiment on employee engagement, called the Theory of Scientific Management: Supervisors dictating to workers, literally, at each step they took inside the factory premises, using a stop watch, goading them to move or to rest at specific intervals.

The gain for the employer was an increase of production by 380 percent. And, Taylor paid this experimental employee whom he named “Schmidt” the promised extra \$0.60 over the \$2.15 that he usually earned, which is a 22.63 percent increase to Schmidt’s wages. That was a magical science of management for employers at the cost of workers. And, Taylor has scientific reasons why he chooses to pay a pittance as extra wages to labourers:

A long series of experiments, coupled with close observation, had demonstrated the fact that when workmen of this caliber are given a carefully measured task, ... and that when in return for this extra effort they are paid wages up to 60 per cent beyond the wages usually paid, that this increase in wages tends to make them not only more thrifty but better men in every way... When, on the other hand, they receive more than a 60 per cent increase in wages, many of them will work irregularly and tend to become less shiftless, extravagant, and dissipated. (Emphasis added) (Taylor, 1911) (p.74)

Govekar & Govekar tell us that to understand how Taylor has enlightened us on “how management should treat workers under scientific management” (2012) (p.77), we must understand the contexts of 1911 when he published his work:

Taylor was writing for the educated upper class. Individuals of this class would not even have considered talking to an individual like Schmidt in any other way than as Taylor recounts. Taylor even admits that taking a more reasonable approach would be counter-productive. (p.77)

Taylor’s engagement with workers shows that he does not treat them not as his equals; Not even as reasonable humans, who would be expecting to get paid extra in proportion to the work done. As if he treats them responsibly by paying them less, he, in fact, cheats them of their rightful share of profits.

For all the thousands of metrics he takes to measure each step they take, in its minutest details, he has no scientific calculation to show the contribution made by the workers, or for a basis on which he shares the benefit of the work in a fair manner.

By deliberately avoiding a reasonable treatment of workers, and deceiving them, his employee engagement strategy fits well the strategy of wars, as Sun Tzu explains in his “Art of War”: “All warfare is based upon deception.” (Tzu, n.d.)

Thus, this most popular way to achieve “employee engagement” is best explained by the fourth meaning of the word ‘engagement’ – as “fight or warfare” between contending parties. We may call this the Jackass Theory of Employee Engagement.

Is the Present Day Different from the Time Taylor Lived?

What Govekar & Govekar observed about the distance between the educated elite and the workers at the time of Taylor has not changed even today. In his case study on the strike at Maruthi Suzuki’s Manesar Plant (in which the HR Manager was burnt alive) Lt. Col. Dr. Prasad confirms this divide between the educated managers and the less educated workers being prevalent, even today:

Among the executives and workers, the ‘us and them’ attitude starts from the beginning of their service. The contempt grows and at a crucial moment explodes shattering the entire set up (Emphasis added) (Prasad, 2012).

With the world of managers and the workers remaining the same, between the time of Taylor and us, it is natural that modern managers swallowed Taylor’s style of engaging workers, literally, at the Manesar Plant. A study report on the Manesar strike published from Brussels, Belgium. (2011) confirms this for us:

They (the workers) expressed their discontent over the amount of work, which left them no time to breathe. The break period wasn’t enough for them to walk the 400 metres to the canteen to have their meal. And they needed permission from the supervisor to go to the toilet.

This report also lists out fourteen different strikes in fourteen different Indian automobile and related industries between 2009 and 2011 (p.19) confirming the pervasive use of Taylor’s “Scientific” methods.

THE TYPE 2 WAY TO ENGAGE EMPLOYEES, AS PARTNERS

Peter Senge gives us a modern definition of a businesses as:

...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (Smith, 2001)

In Senge's understanding of a business organization, there are no different 'classes' in it, but only 'people.' A company is where the 'collective aspiration is set free' and where people are "learning to see the whole together." Senge seems to make an assumption that there is no unwilling class of workers who cheat their employers. Even if there should be a conflict between the interest of an employer and his employees, he still believes they can be and must be aligned into the common vision and mission of the Company.

Stephanie Cato and Jean Gordon of Walden University, quoting Senge and three others categorically state this fact thus: (Cato & Gordon, n.d.)

The results of this study supported previous literature that having the organization's goals and objectives aligned with the vision for the future is considered one of the most important components in increasing employees' productivity.

Typically, the merging of vision and mission is an engagement close to the first dictionary meaning of the word 'engagement.' Marriage merges the vision and mission of a man and a woman. Though they each belong to two different and opposite sexes, they realize they are not 'complete' without the other. Hence, they engage to form a complementary (in the sense of 'completing' what is lacking) relationship of a life-time, called marriage.

Belonging to the 'opposite' sexes does not set them on a war path, which appears to be the most natural thing to happen. They don't compete for control or establishing superiority of one over the other, but realize that one needs the other, to become compete. One without the other is incomplete. Thus, they complement each other. This complementary relationship leads the two to come together, and become productive in the process, they beget children. Being alone, both will remain sterile whatever their individual potential be.

Similarly, the aspiration of workers and owners are divergent or opposite of each other: One seeks to maximize wages, and the other looks for ways to maximize profits. Paying more wages appears to imply a reduction in profits. And making more profits appear to imply workers getting less salary. They appear to be competing and opposed to each other, just like the case of the opposite sexes. But, as a matter of fact, they are not competing by complementing. One without the other can't produce.

One without the other will remain sterile. Production is possible only through a union of mind and hearts of employers and employees.

Just as in a happy marriage the wife takes care of the husband and the husband his wife, in a relationship that a company enters into with its workers, the company works for the welfare or success of its employees, and the employees in turn make sure the company succeeds. Let us proceed to check if this is true in real life of companies. We need to check if this understanding of employee engagement is all utopian or romantic or if it does make true business sense.

Does caring for employees' interests augur well for companies?

When all the airlines in the world were making loss after the twin tower collapse, Western Airlines was the only one that was making profits. And this is how their CEO explain the way they are engaged with their employees: "Our first customer is our employees," acknowledges Barrett. "Second is our passengers and third are our stockholders. If employees are happy, then the passengers are happy. If the passengers are happy, they come back and that makes our stock-holders happy." (Baldoni, 2004)

This is the "virtuous cycle" that ensures the success of the organizations. Employers work to make their workers happy and keep them happy just as partners in a successful marriage do to each other.

Let us consider one more case of a fast growing company, the Starbucks. Its management calls its employees 'partners' and truly make them partners by giving them shares. Their website declares this fact loud and clear:

We call our employees partners because we are all partners in shared success. Every partner at every level of the company is eligible to receive an annual grant of company stock through our Bean Stock program. (2013)

And, how much care Starbucks takes of its employees is seen here:

We (Starbucks) offer our partners a fair and competitive wage, and one of the most comprehensive total pay packages in the retail industry. Our total pay package includes affordable health care, company stock, eligibility for merit increases every six months, tuition reimbursement, paid vacation, free coffee and a 30 percent in-store discount on beverages, food and merchandise. (Ibid)

All these, obviously, spell greater expense to Starbucks. Yet, it is an affirmation of the care the company takes of its “partners.” Remember, “partners” is the word used to identify people engaged in a marriage engagement/relationship. Starbucks’ CEO reports that this relationship is highly productive for Starbucks whose “past five years of performance...saw a doubling in market value and topline revenue growth from \$14 billion to \$23 billion.” (2018)

This end result at Starbucks shows a high level of engagement of workers in promoting the aims and objectives of the company. The relationship is very close to the primary meaning of the word “engagement.”

Is Peter Senge the inventor of this kind of employee engagement?

Peter Senge does advocate setting free the collective aspiration of people engaged in an organization. But, his predecessor and guru Peter Drucker reminds us that these lessons are more than two millennia old.

Drucker cites the Emperor Cyrus the Great of Persia who lived some 2500 years ago, and how Cyrus rejected the ‘carrot and stick approach’ (Cohen, 2010) (p.125). In his book “Drucker on Leadership,” Cohen narrates the teaching of Cyrus to his son:

Cyrus’ father agreed that one way to gain obedience was by compulsion, but he told Cyrus that there was a far superior way to get human beings to obey and “with great pleasure.” ... Cyrus’s father explained that the method wasn’t complicated. He only had to take care of his subordinates better than they took care of themselves, and to ensure that he took care of them even before himself in every situation. Who will not want to follow and obey a leader who looked to one’s interest more than one would or could do personally?...

Maxwell Taylor, an American General said, “A reflective reading of history will show that no man ever rose to military greatness who could not convince his troops that he put them first, above all else.” (Cohen, 2010) (p.125-6)

A military leader can get the cooperation of his troops to obey his commands even at great risks to their lives, by taking care of them better than how they will care for themselves, and before he would take care of himself. Successful organizations such as Starbucks or Western Airlines do confirm this. Workers or soldiers, when engaged in a caring and trusting relationship, will return the trust and care by working for the victory of their organizations.

Partner Type Employee Engagement – a guaranteed and proven way to success:

Germany’s Witness:

The German Government passed a law in 1976 called the “Codetermination Act.” The Wikipedia on this Act says that in companies with less than 2000 employees, one third of the Governing Board Members must be elected by the employees of the company. And, in Corporations with more than 2000 employees, the Governing Board has to be constituted by an equal number of representatives of employees as the number of representatives of shareholders, and with an additional neutral person in the board, as its head. (2018)

If the strength of the German economy is any indication or evidence, trusting and treating employees on par with investors is, surely, a wise way to build industries and the nation, too.

The Indian Constitution, too, directs States through its Directive Principles of State Policy that Laws must be enacted to ensure the participation of workers in the management of industries.

CONCLUSION:

Unfortunately, even today, Management Education is busy teaching Taylor’s theory which is built on the archaic assumptions that are inimical to the workers. Management students are not educated to treat workers as partners, but as a group to be controlled, using carrot and stick.

Enlightened education should abandon the assumptions on which Taylor built his management theory and teach managers to treat employees as partners.

But, the lure of Taylor’s assumptions which help produce huge margins for employers, at the cost of employees, keeps Taylor’s theory alive in management education.

And, the managers find themselves on the side of employers as their agents, often, taking pride, in their ability to squeeze work out of employees. Employees who are not cared for by the employers and managers respond in kind. And, that is taken by employers and managers as a justification for their unequal treatment of employees.

In the end, we may have employers making millions, and the managers getting a fat share in the cake produced. But, we produce starving millions of workers, and companies that perform far below the benchmarks set by Western Airlines or Starbucks, and nations performing much lower than the benchmark set by Germany.

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