

# **THE AXIOLOGICAL ROOTS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

**Kevin Wolfe**

KEVIN WOLFE, a native of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, now resides in Chapel Hill, NC. Kevin has been in the entrepreneurial world for 36 years as a small business owner, the last 10 as the president of LeadersWay Inc. LeadersWay is a business coaching, leadership, and management development organization that specializes in the practices of talent management. Currently, LeadersWay clients work with coaches and trainers throughout North America.

Kevin is also an avid student of Dr. Dave Mefford. The selection and developmental practices of LeadersWay are centered around the concepts of Axiological coaching and development.

## **Abstract**

This article was written to identify a more transformative way of bringing out the best in people. Organizations have mined for years to find the golden nugget that would provide the secret to engaging the work force. Methods, practices, and systems have been developed that suggest a path to higher levels of employee engagement. Many, if not most, have fallen short over the long term.

Axiology and the practice of using the HVP as a structured approach to training and development provide the next dimension to bringing out the best in people. It is my belief that the future of organizations and their ability to achieve more with less lies in their ability to help their people do more and perform in their roles more successfully. Doing more begins with knowing more about self and the world. Accomplishing this creates the sense of “I am” that is healthier, happier, more self assured, and clearly more engaged in life and work.

The excitement that surrounds an axiological approach to employee engagement lies in the fact that we can now explicitly identify where a person is positioned on the developmental ladder. Knowing this provides the knowledge of the precise learning necessary to advance to the next rung.

## **1. Introduction**

Employee engagement is the most important topic of discussion in all business circles in North America. As is often true for many forms of language, the words themselves begin to lose the power they once wielded. Overuse, it seems, minimizes the importance of relevant concepts, which is unfortunate for those who need most to embrace them in their lives and in their businesses. So, to initiate this conversation, I would like to bring back the critical nature of the “Employee Engagement” concept by adding a complimentary word that will ultimately build a very important

relationship with axiological science. The word “*emotional*” completes the concept and becomes the separating factor that great companies enjoy over their competitors.

*Emotional Engagement in Employees* is the difference because it is the connection that unlocks the vast and largely untapped capacity of people in the work place. To consider systemically the more overused concept of “Employee Engagement” as a separating factor would suggest an agreement that extrinsic rewards (bonuses, awards, physical amenities) are sufficient to bring out the best in people, but they are not. Emotional Engagement in Employees moves beyond to create a more intrinsic connection with people that reaches to the deepest levels of capacity, commitment, and involvement. Moving through the unprecedented challenges in today’s very unstable economic environment will demand high levels of engagement in all of these areas. This is not a battle that organizations will win if they decide to stay and fight!

*“In a battle against you and the world; bet on the world!”-Kafka*

My practice at LeadersWay involves working deeply within the culture of business, which allows me to closely examine the very fabric of leadership decision making and thinking. Today, more than at any time in recent history, businesses face a test of belief that will in all certainty determine their fate and their future. Empirical evidence is clear and indisputable in supporting the thinking that it is in reaching to these deeper levels of human potential that organizations will survive and ultimately thrive in our new and challenging economy. I am often reminded of Abraham Maslow’s most powerful business axiom, “Challenge/Response.” The new challenge (though not really new) is in fact the same for every business and is that of creating “more with *less*.” Driving measurable results with less available resources is a challenge that only a select few organizations have accomplished; now it is the centerpiece of everyone’s strategic agenda. Leaders everywhere are being forced to make choices on how to meet this challenge. At 30,000 feet it is easy to observe that at a macro level there are two choices that can be made. One leads to greatness and the other to pain and suffering.

## 2. History

Although quite recent, the history of Emotional Engagement begins with a book, *First Break All the Rules*, by Curt Coffman and Marcus Buckingham. This is the first meta-analysis of its kind specifically designed to identify the systemic foundations of Emotional Engagement in Employees. The study, done by the Gallup Organization, consisted of an inventory of 100 questions asked of a 1,000,000 employees and 80,000 managers. Its purpose was to identify what high performers (qualified) in high performing work environments (qualified) answered positively. By

replicating these top factors in work environments, organizations could create conditions conducive to high levels of Emotional Engagement in Employees.

The result of the study is what Gallup refers to as the *Q12*, a collection of the top twelve questions to which high performers answered positively in the survey. Today, Gallup uses the Q12 annually to measure three levels of Emotional Engagement in fourteen different countries throughout the world:

*Engaged*—suggesting a high level of Emotional Engagement

*Disengaged*—suggesting an abdication of Emotional Engagement or a more “flying under the radar” level of engagement

*Actively Disengaged*—suggesting an absence of Emotional Engagement that produces the intent to undermine the people and processes of an organization.

The advantage afforded organizations who embrace this information lies in their ability to identify exactly how their culture measures up and then to work diligently to graduate to increasingly higher levels of Emotional Engagement. It is my firm belief that Emotional Engagement in Employees should be a primary target in business today, and focusing on this target has the potential to clarify the direction of resource allocation. I am also committed to the belief that spending time and resources in most other directions is a gross misuse of energy that will yield little or even damaging results. Business measures that were once considered competitive advantages (See: “The 4 P’s of Marketing”) should be considered as “table stakes” in today’s economy. The fifth “P” for “People” represent the only sustainable advantage in business today.

Supporting this belief is the observation of capital investors who use Gallup’s Q12 survey to support their decision making process. They now know without question that Emotional Engagement in Employees is the only measure of sustainability within organizations. In addition, examples surface daily *via* our newspapers and televisions. Industries that are thriving are doing so by focusing on building Emotional Engagement. Those that are dying (slowly and often painfully) remain committed to old and irrational beliefs about business and profitability. Examples are:

- Air Canada, compared to their people-centric peer Westjet
- General Motors, compared to their people-centric peer Toyota
- All major domestic US air carriers, compared to their people-centric peer Southwest
- Most major hotel chains, compared to their people-centric peer Ritz Carlton.

Through their continued work, the Gallup Organization has proven that organizations that operate above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in Emotional Engagement in Employees realize a 1.7 times greater return in revenue than their peer group. In addition, those organizations that operate above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in *both* Employee and Customer Engagement realize a 3.4 times greater return in revenue than their peer groups. These are not only big numbers; they also represent foundations for long term growth and profitability within organizations.

### 3. Today

The *Financial Crisis* of 2009 provides an exclamation point to a way of thinking around Emotional Engagement that proves it has always been the right business concept. I uncovered one of the biggest realizations of my business coaching career as I diligently observed this crisis, and, more importantly, how leading organizations responded or reacted to it. The alarming fact is that most organizations have been doing it the wrong way for decades, but they have gotten by on the back of a strong economic environment. Even more interesting is the fact that overstaffing, excessive waste in resources, and feelings of entitlement are striking characteristics of these ineffective and cumbersome organizations. Importantly, this crisis has brought to light all of those organizations that were committed to the “optics” of really being people centric, and not merely having the systemic concept, practice, or belief in it.

Why have organizations like Southwest, Westjet, the Ritz Carlton, and Toyota realized such phenomenal success over the past two decades? The answer lies in their agreement regarding the systemic drivers of revenue. Unlike their struggling peers, these organizations understand that *Emotional Engagement in Employees* is what drives *Emotional Engagement in Customers*. (An Axiological conversation is for another day.) Think clearly on this last observation, and it is easy to put the revenue chain in order once and for all. As leaders improve themselves and make choices within their organizations that go beyond the optics of being people centric, they build environments and practices that emotionally engage their people. We should all be clear that revenue growth (both sustainable and organic in nature) is a direct result of Emotionally Engaged Customers, and there is only one driver to emotionally engaging customers, Emotionally Engaged Employees. The path to success has never been clearer.

The leaders in their struggling peer groups (who often appear to be wise decision makers on the surface) frequently leave me in deep wonder as I observe them making mindless decisions like:

- Demanding higher levels of customer service from front line staff (e.g., Air Canada, Globe and Mail)
- Cutting wages, benefits, and bonuses

- Cutting large numbers of employees without any strategy of support
- Centralizing decision making down to a small group of people who spend little or no time at the customer level (See The Retooling of GM)
- Cutting training and development programs.

During these times, when unconscious leaders continue to drive their organizations deeper into recession by mindless decision making, their more successful peers are committed to something different, which is:

*Building relationships (emotional engagement) with the people who are building relationships with their customers.*

Clearly this new (yet non-negotiable) way of thinking about business requires an understanding of the impermanence of things and a willingness to embrace something dramatically different. Put succinctly, it is: letting go of a commonly held control-based hierarchy, and embracing a model of service from people in leadership positions. Hierarchical control structures do not create enough exposure to customers and leave organizations vulnerable to competition and innovation.

Understandably, this will be challenging for the poor souls who have worked a lifetime to “get to the top” where they can be in positions of power and control. Unfortunately for them, the new concept of leadership is based on service, not control. It is a matter of supporting, coaching and developing, telling but not demanding, and performance through compliance. The challenge in the new world is clear and is best communicated through what we at LeadersWay call “*The 3 Non-Negotiables*”:

1. *Bringing Out the Best In People*—Finding any and all ways to help people blossom into *being* their best by finding out where their natural strengths and talents lie.
2. *Creating a Crusade*—The conditions where everyone in the organization is committed to *pulling* in the same direction. This is one of the most definable characteristics of great organizations, one that will allow them to navigate challenging times. This represents the 4<sup>th</sup> of the 4 human needs, which is, as Steven Covey writes, “*To Leave a Legacy.*” Today more than ever, people want to be part of something bigger than they are.
3. *Dipping Into the Well of Human Potentials*—This phrase, so eloquently expressed by my coach and mentor, Dr. Dave Mefford, identifies the systemic driver of employee engagement and the context for the rest of this discussion. Tapping untapped capacity is the only viable response to our new

economy and to meeting the challenge of “more with less.” This means constructing the best and most effective ways of “dipping into the well” of potentials. These will be the strategies that will separate the average and struggling organizations from those who are great and thriving.

#### 4. The Roots of Emotional Engagement

As organizations transform their thinking (often driven by bouts of pain and suffering) to align more closely to *Emotional Engagement in Employees*, new and more important questions float to the surface. “How can we engage people emotionally?” and “What conditions and practices must be in place?” are by far the most critical. To these ends, I would like to discuss an exercise we use at LeadersWay to create clarity around these questions. Previously, I noted that organizations are making one of two choices in responding to the current financial crisis. One leads to growth and prosperity, and one leads to pain and suffering. The one I would like to discuss is what we, at LeadersWay, refer to as the “*Right Exercise*,” and it looks like this:

*Right People*—Foundational to organizational success is asking the question, “Do we have the right people?” It is self evident that meeting the demands of the new economy will not happen if we have the wrong people. Developing a scientific approach to selecting (as opposed to hiring) is critical to making better decisions regarding people. Do people have the right qualities to do the job, and, from an axiological perspective, do they have the cognitive “horsepower” to perform at a superior level? In all my training sessions since the financial crisis began, I have asked senior managers, “How many of you can identify the wrong people in your organization?” Consistently, a minimum of 80% of managers respond positively to that question. The “Right People” in the “Right Company” will be more emotionally engaged than their peers.

*Right Position*—The second and equally important question we must ask is, “Do we have the right people in the right positions?” I have discovered an interesting fact through my work in talent management, which is that *the “right person” in the “wrong position” will appear no different than an underperformer*. Many times in my work, I have been confronted by decision makers who question the validity of the HVP’s more systemic and more scientific approach to selection. For example, consider a candidate who has high and balanced clarity scores on the HVP, yet still under-performs. We always discover that the person who isn’t performing up to expectations has been put in a job that is a gross mismatch for his or her natural qualities. In

these cases, the person has to adapt too much in order to meet the qualities the job requires, creating undue stress on the employee and poor results for the company. In addition, the mismatched role is often not rewarding in ways that are intrinsically motivating for the employee. The “Right People” in the “Right Positions” will always be more emotionally engaged in their roles.

*Right Reinforcement*—The third question we must ask is, “*Are people receiving the kind of reinforcement that will increase their level of emotional engagement?*” Missing from most organizations is the practice of R+ or Positive Reinforcement. Unfortunately, most leaders and managers operate from negative reinforcement. A laser focus on discovering what people are doing wrong seems to satisfy an inner (egotistic) need in most leaders and managers, but it results in emotional disengagement and abdication among employees. Behavioral science and the more specific practice of behavioral shaping requires a day to day commitment to reinforce the positive behaviors that move people in the direction of higher performance. Employees who receive regular doses of R+ will always be more emotionally engaged in their roles.

*Right Support*—The fourth and final question we must ask to improve emotional engagement is, “*Are people receiving the specific training, development, support, and coaching they need?*” At LeadersWay, our efforts have been diligent when it comes to helping organizations take quantum leaps in their abilities to select more of the “Right People” and then place them in the “Right Positions.” We were in one of the first groups of pioneers engaged in using the HVP to measure cognitive development and emotional biases in candidates. We discussed cognitive capacity or “horsepower” with our clients. We discussed clarity of decision making and attitudes as well.

Clearly this was new thinking for most. Admittedly, it blinded us to what was next until the gaps became blatantly obvious. With respect to selection and placement, even the best organizations continued to fall short in the areas of performance. When researched, the answer to this challenge came from realizing that *strikingly few organizations have any structured program for training and development*. As Dr. Dave Mefford would say, this is the practice of “*dipping into the well of human potentials*” and we realized that it would be the next, and clearly most important, step in raising levels of emotional engagement in employees.

Though it did not leave the areas of selection and placement, our focus shifted, and we moved more fully to the area of training and development. Then we uncovered the important connection between the practice of Axiology and realizing the

Emotional Engagement in Employees. We knew we must get better at helping people *do* better in their lives and in their work if they were going to *feel* better about their lives and their work. To that end, we designed programs, both personal and interpersonal, that would challenge how people think and feel about what they do each day. Today, we deliver training programs and coaching sessions that teach people:

- How to resolve unresolved issues
- How to be direct with people the right way
- How to master the practice of Performance Management
- How to move from telling to coaching conversations
- How to embrace the practice of R+ or positive reinforcement
- How to use the results of Axiological assessments to better understand self and others
- How to use the results of Axiological assessments to develop specific programs of development, and
- How to use Axiological assessments to measure cognitive progress and development

### **5. The Connection Between Axiology and Emotional Engagement**

After thousands of hours of coaching and training across every part of North America, it has only recently become evident that there are many drivers of emotional engagement, but *one* stands apart from the rest. The process of developing potentials by first identifying developmental needs, then applying this new information to those areas of need, is clearly the centerpiece of Emotional Engagement in Employees. Evidence shows that among many differentiators, this developmental process is the most significant separator consistent with performing organizations. Results confirmed with respect to these organizations are exactly what our research has concluded. Consistently, Toyota, Westjet, Southwest Airlines, and The Ritz Carlton maintain an unrelenting commitment to training and development.

In our business coaching and development practices, we regularly introduce people to new and often challenging concepts that will make them rethink what they have agreed to. In a sense, and we often use this metaphor, we are *upgrading* the operating system so that the software runs more smoothly. We all know that everyone is happier when the software runs more smoothly. In our practice at LeadersWay, there are two very distinct connections between Axiology and Emotional Engagement, and we treat them as two different practices.

First consider the Axiological approach to Emotional Engagement in Employees within organizations:

*Systemically*—The commitment that organizations make to coaching and development increases the exposure their people have to new ways of thinking and to new concepts. It is our mission to provide new and challenging information to people primarily at the leadership and senior management level. This information is always focused on the most important issues of their work and more specifically how they can improve (extrinsically) their practice of emotionally engaging the people for whom they are responsible. The list in this area is far too extensive to provide in this discussion, but suffice it to say the lessons are both pressing and proximate to today's business world. For example, at an increasing speed management experts are rethinking the practices of leadership and management. They have proven that most of what has been agreed to (developed largely by people born before the Civil War) is conceptually now irrational and no longer works in practice. It is the role of LeadersWay to transform these new concepts of leadership and management into information that can be introduced systemically to our clients. As old and irrational concepts are challenged and displaced, we begin the process of replacing them with new and more rational concepts that better meet the demands of today's work environment.

*Extrinsically*—The leaders and managers we are working with practice these new concepts in an effort to etch them into muscle memory through the extrinsic practice of role play and coaching. Over time their new practices begin positively impacting what they are *doing* as they interact with the people for whom they are responsible. This impact has a collective effective on the workforce and begins slowly yet consistently to improve the overall performance of the group.

I am suggesting there is an implication that increases in overall performance are connected to revenue gains. Also note that time in this instance is relative. What people are *doing* in the workplace today is more challenging in every area, be it mental, emotional or physical, than it was just ten or fifteen years ago. Without new ways of *doing* their work, people are pulled into a vortex of negative outcomes too big to list fully here, but they include:

- Work-life imbalance
- Relationship challenges
- Family challenges
- Health and wellness challenges
- Concentration and focus challenges
- Financial challenges.

Group and individual leadership and management training is designed to help people who influence people improve their ability to:

- Bring out the best in people
- Create a crusade by getting everyone “pulling” in the same direction
- “Dip into the well of human potentials.”

*Intrinsically*—The manifestation of the systemic investment in learning and the extrinsic commitment to practice results in a collective increase in overall workplace *happiness*. Business coaches and trainers can become so caught up in understanding the things that make people different that the things universal to people get lost. It has been our practice at LeadersWay to balance this thinking by renewing our commitment to what all people in the workplace need and want in order to feel better about what they do. The idea that all humans want to do well, that all humans feel better when they are doing well, and that, given the choice, all humans want to be (by their definition) successful, is in fact fundamental to the human spirit. Not only is it fundamental to the human spirit, it is the headwaters of Emotional Engagement in Employees. The collective or cultural approach to raising Emotional Engagement has now been discussed..

Next, consider the specific or personal application of Axiology to Emotional Engagement in Employees. Before launching into the practice of this specific approach to Emotional Engagement in Employees, it is important to acknowledge the significance of this Axiological advancement to training and development. LeadersWay is a practicing business coaching organization, and we are in the midst of working business cultures every day of the week. We see and experience what organizations are doing, and, more importantly, what they are not doing. I mentioned earlier that few (likely less than 10%) organizations have any structured approach to training and development. So, consider the financial consequence of what most organizations do today:

- Thousands of dollars spent recruiting
- Thousands of dollars spent selecting/interviewing
- Thousands of dollars spent on-boarding
- Little or nothing spent from the on-boarding process forward

The *after*-on-boarding process is what I would like to expand on now. The fact is, training and development programs in most business organizations are either non-existent (being thrown into the deep end) or random at best. Consider the connection of axiology to the personal aspects of Emotional Engagement in

Employees. Without axiology, there is no way to measure the development of specific training programs for people. It is either the “shotgun” approach (expose people to everything, and maybe something will work), or an intuitive/subjective approach designed by HR or the manager. Axiology and the HVP change all of this and offer a quantum leap in effectiveness by providing a bull’s eye target for each and every employee. This is what Dr. Dave Mefford refers to as “*Fast Track Coaching*,” and I would add “*Fast Track Development*.” No longer do we have to muddle through months of hit and miss conversations, or exercises designed to find out what people really need, in order to improve their performance. No longer do we have to go through the frustration of non-performance by seemingly high potential people.

The real gift in this process is best explained using the metaphor of a developmental ladder. If we know (and we do through the results of the HVP) which *rung* on the developmental ladder the person is standing on, we can also know exactly what the next rung is. With that knowledge we can provide the learning that is specific to a targeted approach to training and development.

*Systemically*—Through the interpretation of both the World and Self views, we are able to identify the valleys of cognitive thought. Each valley is defined by information, or in most cases a lack of specific information, that people need in order to see themselves or the world more clearly. Through coaching, training, and specific paths of development, we are able to expose our coaching clients to the concepts they individually need in order to realize their true potentials more fully. At LeadersWay, we have developed structured and specific systems that leverage those results of the HVP that provide persistent and consistent approaches to learning.

*Extrinsically*—Repeating and applying the new concepts consistently and persistently over time works to replace old practices with new and more effective practices. Finding that *ideal* role, and practicing new and better ways of *doing* things are hallmarks of this extrinsic dimension of Axiological Coaching. Our clients work to improve how they prioritize their time, and how they interact with others at home, work, and play.

*Intrinsically*—The manifestation of this individual *upgrading* process is self evident, and it is likely the most holistic Axiological connection to Emotional Engagement in Employees. Feeling more whole and satisfied in one’s primary role because of a richer understanding of self is the spiritual bridge to self-assuredness, self-appreciation and love of self. Understanding the world more fully in ways that improve effectiveness in day to day *doing* becomes the bridge to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the people in that world.

Whether it's the broad perspective or the specific, the path to Emotional Engagement in Employees is clear. Collectively or personally, people who learn more about what they do feel better about themselves and the people with whom they live and work. I suggest that every other approach to Emotional Engagement in Employees is a treatment for the acute, not the chronic. Axiology then becomes an alchemy of sorts as it conceptually, analytically, and spiritually provides the information and the path to higher levels of realization of the human spirit and human potentials.

### 6. Closing Thoughts

By definition, Emotional Engagement in Employees is, in fact, an intrinsic valuation. There is no way to fully describe the qualities involved. There is also no way to fully communicate the true depth of what Emotional Engagement in Employees is and the value it brings to the organizations committed to experiencing it both collectively and individually. Finally there is no need to expend additional resources on trying to describe it or to defend practices that create the space for it to *be*.

- The Ritz Carlton is evidence.
- Toyota is evidence.
- Southwest is evidence.
- Westjet is evidence.

Axiology, then, is the window, the systematic approach, through which we can see into the depths of human potentials. This approach is not for everyone. Those who are not comfortable with looking into the deeper reaches of the human spirit will continue to limit their development to lessons and practices. My intent is not to discount this approach but rather to illustrate its limitations.

The clear and definable difference between Employee Engagement and *Emotional Engagement in Employees* is Intrinsic. It's the realization of ALL properties: systemic, extrinsic, and intrinsic. That's the difference created when leadership commits to: *Building Relationships with the People Who Are Building Relationships with Their Customers*.

### Works Cited

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