Whether your teams are distributed, co-located, or a mix of both, the tenets of engagement are the same. Only the execution is modified.

Engagement with Distributed Teams

By Kathleen Lorey
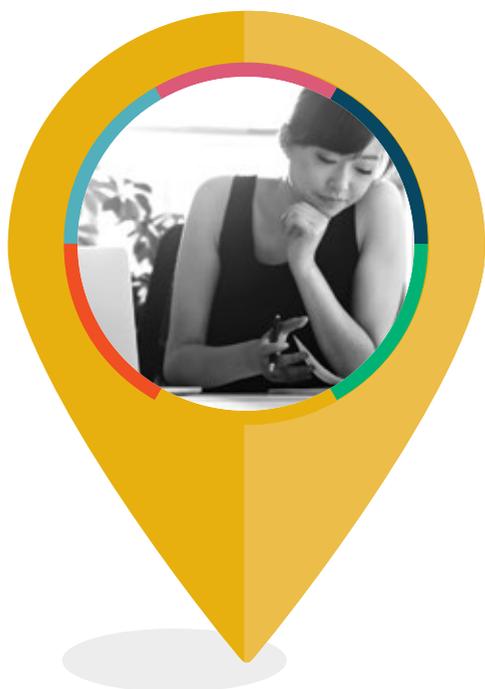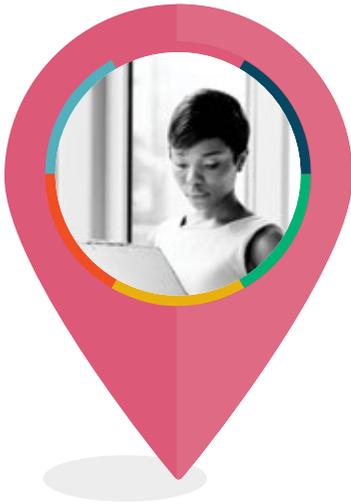
Jabian Consulting listens to the changing needs of our customers and looks to identify and develop best practices across multiple industries. More often than not, our customers are managing employees in multiple locations. Additionally, with new technologies, multiple languages, and varied time zones, the variables are ever increasing.

In the next three editions of The Jabian Journal, we will showcase employee engagement across distributed teams by defining employee engagement (this edition); managing employee engagement (spring 2018); and supporting employee engagement (fall 2018).

DEFINING DISTRIBUTED TEAMS AND WHY WE HAVE THEM
In the music video for Kanye West's song "Stronger," robots in a futuristic society assemble a mechanical Kanye with a visible bandage over his heart. The robots are preparing him to work for them. It's a far-fetched scenario, but in a sense, this is what we do as companies. We're looking for a way to make our resources as lean as possible, as quickly as possible, to achieve bigger and better accomplishments. Along the way, it is crucial that we remember our employees' heart—their energy, productivity, and happiness. That is their engagement.

As companies mature, the natural tendency is to cut costs and look for ways to reduce overhead. With the technological advances of the past 60 years, our employees can work anywhere. We as leaders can now even leverage resources from different parts of the world. In 1995, only 9 percent of employees had the option to telecommute. According to a Gallup poll, 20 years later, 37 percent of U.S.-based workers telecommute regularly.[1] How does a mature company manage the transition from a workforce where management can reach out and touch every day to one requiring check-ins and communication almost exclusively through email or messaging apps?

When we originally began working with companies to establish a plan for their teams with remote employees, it wasn't enough to call them "remote teams." In fact, we found that phrase left out an entire section of complexities. For our purposes, we will use the following definitions to describe different types of teams:

There are two ways to describe where employees work:

Distributed: Employees are not co-located with other employees in a central office.
Co-located: Employees work in the same office.

PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEES WITH THE OPTION TO TELECOMMUTE.

9%
1995

37%
2005

There are multiple ways of describing how they work:

Teleworking describes employees who are co-located and who work at an agreed-upon alternative location on a regular basis.
Remote describes employees who work anywhere and are not required to be in a certain location to complete their work.
One-site teams operate in a single location, and employees may telework at some point during the week.
Multisite teams are teams that are co-located at multiple locations.

1 Jones, Jeffrey M. Gallup Workplace. August 19, 2015. http://www.gallup.com/poll/184649/telecommuting-work-climbs.aspx

180º   140º   100º   60º   20º

80º

60º

40º

20º

0º

20º

40º

60º

80º

Some teams fall into multiple categories. For instance, an information technology company may have a central office where most or many of its teams are co-located, but its development team may be entirely remote to take advantage of lower costs. Even Pixar had to adjust when it moved its different movie teams into separate buildings.[2]

Many competing studies have produced differing results about whether employees are more productive remotely or in person, but either way, the distributed employee model is here to stay for a long time. It is important to note that not every industry can have a remote workforce.

ENGAGEMENT WITH DISTRIBUTED TEAMS

Whether your teams are distributed, co-located, or a mix of both, the tenets of engagement are the same. Only the execution is modified, slightly. Having happy employees is the easiest way to influence customer satisfaction scores. Having engaged teams is worth your time.

Take these first steps before building an engagement plan around specific employee types:

1. The first step toward developing a plan is knowing your employees. A key question to ask: Should everyone who is working remotely be doing so? Sometimes remote workers are there because there was not an option to work co-located. If there is an opportunity to examine the working situation, do so quickly. Additionally, is your team filled with employees or contractors? Note that legal regulations may affect how you can engage them differently.
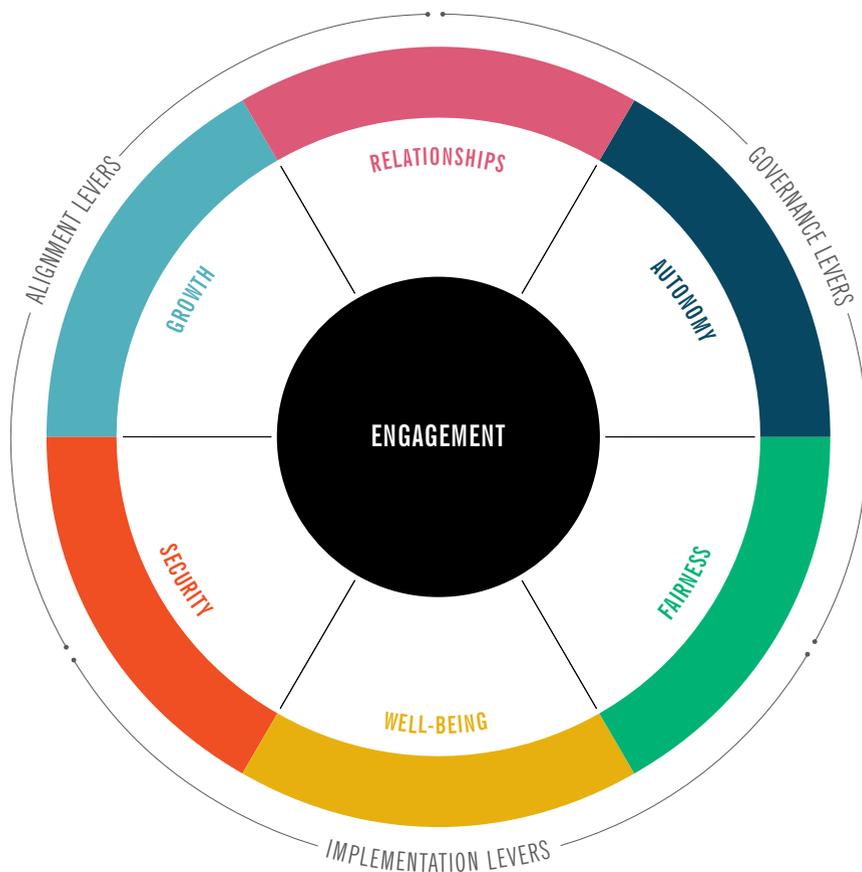
2. The second step is to ensure employee engagement aligns with corporate goals. A simplistic example: While everyone would like to take Friday off, that's not reasonable. Employees may like it, but you still must build widgets, interact with customers, and make progress on internal initiatives.

3. Review previous measures of employee engagement (we'll review engagement measurement techniques in part three). If a team already feels the company practices good ethics and treats everyone fairly, the role of engagement is to reinforce the feeling, not necessarily come up with new programs and change course.

Once these questions are answered, develop a full engagement plan around the pillars considering knowledge previously gained.

With engagement, our goal is to create an atmosphere of fair treatment and elicit a feeling of belonging among employees—whether they are distributed, co-located, or a mixture of both. It's hard to do! At this point, you're dealing with different personalities in addition to different working situations. Throughout this challenge, it's important to remember that engagement frameworks should consider the engagement drivers and provide employees opportunities to have growth, relationships, autonomy, well-being, and security.

2 *Creativity Inc.* Ed Catmull and Amy Wallace 2015.

THESE ARE THE LEVERS WITH WHICH WE CAN AFFECT ENGAGEMENT:

Growth refers to how employees view their status within the company, their ability to accomplish a project or objective, and their opportunity to learn and progress within and outside the walls of the company. They must feel that promotion is possible, and that their successes are recognized and celebrated by leadership.

Relationships are critical to employee engagement. Many millennials believe they don't work for companies; they work for people. With engagement, we want to focus on how we can build and foster those relationships. Leadership needs to be personable while maintaining control. Chat time with peers and team members, which initially may seem like a time waster, will actually make your teams more collaborative and encourage them to reach out when a hard problem arises. With strong relationships, loyalty is built naturally among colleagues and therefore is extended to the company.

Autonomy is critical, especially to distributed teams. Above all pillars, autonomy begins with the direct manager. While flexibility is inherent with distributed teams, the decision-making, control of programs, and freedom to perform their tasks with *trust* is crucial to an employee's satisfaction.

Fairness begins with the company and is enabled through stringent ethics practices and equality in all interactions.

Well-being defines your employees' personal lives. How are they doing? With distributed teams, it is important to establish the right pace. Do this by asking questions about their workload and reviewing capacity reports. A new employee may need more time to learn how to do a task because they don't have someone there to whom they can ask questions and get an immediate response. Their pace is going to be slower. Be sure you're providing them an opportunity to have fun, to be healthy, to avoid working until 8 p.m. every day, and to enjoy their activities. You will know this only through measured and continuous communication.

Security defines employees' comfort with their job. Human beings typically rebel against change; a job change is one of the biggest. By providing employees certainty, role clarity, and knowledge that their jobs are safe, you will earn their trust and ensure engagement.

With a carefully crafted plan around each of these pillars, you will lay the foundation for a truly engaged team. In the next edition of "Employee Engagement with Distributed Teams," we'll discuss developing and managing your engagement plan and how to begin engaging employees. 📖

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WITH ENGAGEMENT, OUR GOAL IS TO CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE OF FAIR TREATMENT AND ELICIT A FEELING OF BELONGING AMONG EMPLOYEES—WHETHER THEY ARE DISTRIBUTED, CO-LOCATED, OR A MIXTURE OF BOTH.