

Increasing Employee Engagement Through Relationships

In this second piece of a nine-part series, we look at the next section of the Jabian Engagement Framework: How positive, plentiful relationships increase employees' engagement.

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Jonathan Haidt, a neuroscientist at the University of Virginia and author of “The Happiness Hypothesis”—a review of the ancient wisdom, philosophy, and neuroscience associated with happiness—concludes that a key ingredient to overall happiness is being in a close relationship with at least one other person.

Strong relationships, coupled with positive growth, the focus of our previous article in the Fall 2017 Jabian Journal, form the foundation for long-term happiness and engagement. The remaining four engagement drivers (autonomy, security, fairness, and well-being) are critical to round out our overall engagement and create focus, but growth and relationships are the only two drivers with unlimited upside.

We tend to think of relationships as intimate and romantic, but relationships can also be intimate and platonic, or friendly. Intimate and friendly relationships can result in “agape” love, or selfless love of one person for another without a romantic implication. This is the type of love we often seek and develop in our friendships. We can even develop these deep relationships with our professional colleagues; having close friends at work is a key factor in employee engagement.

The effect of positive a positive relationship on our brains is chemical. When we connect with another person, our brains release oxytocin, often

“
**WHERE
THERE
IS LOVE
THERE IS
LIFE**
”

– Mahatma Gandhi

referred to as the neurotransmitter of connection. We get a shot of oxytocin each time we find something we have in common with someone else, hold hands with a romantic interest for the first time, or accept a friend invitation on social media from someone we like or respect. The great feelings we get from relationships are the result of our brains being awash in extra doses of oxytocin.

Great relationships inspire us and bring us energy. The more energy we have, the more likely we are to give that extra 10 percent at work, to help out our colleagues, to finish that assignment early. However, like all of the drivers in our Engagement Framework, relationships can also be negative, bringing stress and conflict that decrease our engagement and willingness to give more.

As we mentioned in our summary article on The Jabian Engagement Framework, it’s the sum of all the engagement drivers that matter for engagement. So long as the net effect of the sum of all the drivers is positive, engagement will be positive. One of the best ways to compensate for people feeling a lack of security about the future, for instance, is to change the environment to help develop better relationships. Sponsored activities like a holiday potluck over lunch, happy hour, an evening outing, or an after-work group volunteer activity can go a long way to deepening relationships between people, which

increases engagement. That increased engagement from better relationships can help the employee through a difficult change, time of uncertainty, or job insecurity.

In our model, relationships aren't just about connecting to an individual. Connecting with groups of people also falls under our definition of the relationships driver. Relationships to others or groups of others are important in many areas of our lives and could involve our:

- BOSSES
- CHILDREN
- CITIES
- COMMUNITIES
- COMPANIES
- COUNTRIES
- DIRECT REPORTS
- FRIENDS
- NEIGHBORHOODS
- PEERS
- SPOUSE
- TEAMS

If you take a moment and consider each of the relationships in that list, you will probably be able to come up with at least one example for each category that increases and decreases your happiness or engagement. Our connection with our team, company, community, and even country can positively or negatively affect our engagement. We may have a great relationship with our spouse and kids, but if we can't stand our boss, or our company creates a product we

don't believe in, we're not going to be happy for at least the part of our lives dedicated to our work.

So, what can you do to positively affect the relationships driver and increase happiness and engagement at work? Here are a few ideas:

- Sponsor activities that allow people the time to get to know one another. It often takes a lengthy conversation to find things you have in common with someone else.
- Hire people whose values align to your organization's purpose. People whose values align are more likely to form positive relationships.
- Establish funding for your team members to take someone new out to lunch or spend a few hours volunteering together
- Work team-building and "getting to know you" activities into your team meetings.
- Sponsor fitness or other activities that bring people together for extended periods of time in non-work-related conversation.
- Create spaces in the office where people will gather to talk and get to know one another.
- Organize your teams so that the functions in the organization that require the closest relationships are on the same teams. If you are having problems with relationships in your organization, take a hard look at your organizational structure to see if you can influence improved relationships with a different reporting structure or changing the work environment so teams must sit with adjacent teams.

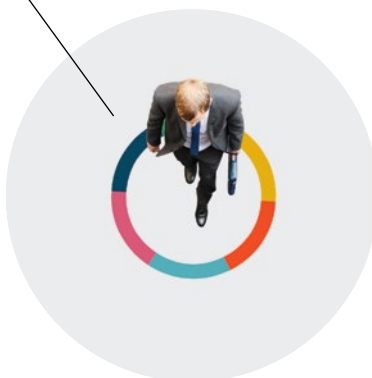
- Provide virtual work teams with video conference, chat, and collaboration tools (see the recent article by Kathleen Lorey for more ideas on building relationships in a virtual work environment).
- Communication is a key factor in any relationship. In fact, it's impossible to build a relationship without verbal and nonverbal communication.



- Train teams and individuals on tactics and best practices in building relationships, especially those who are less comfortable with this key skill. Skills in communicating effectively, whether that's written, verbal, or nonverbal communication, can also be taught. Assume that everyone has these key skills at your own peril.
- Rearrange your work space to place people who need to build relationships with one another near each other. Proximity to one another is a key factor in the quality of relationships.

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Relationships are a critical driver of engagement. These ideas are just a sampling of the many ways we can do a better job of connecting people and encouraging better and more relationships. It's also important to take a hard look at your organization to discover where relationships aren't that great, because conflict and stress can devastate engagement. Great relationships engender commitment to one another and loyalty to our organizations.

How could you improve your relationships to increase your engagement?

Next time, we'll spend some time talking through the autonomy driver. ●

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