The Cost of Uncertainty

In this fourth piece in a nine-part series, we look at the next section of the Jabian Engagement Framework: How security is essential to employee engagement.

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What happens when we are uncertain about the future? What happens when we feel vulnerable or unsafe? When our future is uncertain, or our security is threatened, we become distracted and have difficulty focusing on the here and now.

Any time we shift our attention to an uncertain future, playing out the "what-ifs" and imagining the unfavorable scenarios that could develop, our engagement is affected. In fact, our engagement can decrease to the point of unproductivity and inefficiency.

On the flip side, when our future is predictable and seems like a sure thing, we can shift our focus to growth and accomplishment, to improving relationships, to improving processes and reducing tedium.

Security is the fourth engagement driver we cover in this series on the Jabian Engagement Framework. Security is about certainty, clarity, and safety. Our need for security, like the other engagement drivers, varies by individual. Some people are very comfortable with ambiguity and an unclear future. Others want to know exactly what's going to happen next in their lives.

Once we get to a comfortable level of security, however, more of whatever it was that made us more secure (e.g., clarity, safety, money) doesn't increase our security further. Security has a limited upside once we get to "secure enough." It is up to individuals to determine what "secure enough" means to them. Insecurity, on the other hand, has an unlimited downside. In fact, its downside is perhaps the most distracting and even the most paralyzing of all the engagement drivers in our framework.

Security is covered in the foundational layers of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. First we need food and shelter. Then we need to be healthy and safe. After that, anything that makes life more predictable and certain enables the top layers of Maslow's hierarchy, which focus on things related to autonomy, growth, and relationships.

Luckily, there are lots of ways we can improve our security. Anything we can do to make our outlook more predictable and comfortable will help. We outline some of those ideas here.

> THE MORE FREQUENT AND CLEARER WE CAN BE ABOUT OUR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION, THE MORE WE CAN TAKE INSECURITY OFF THE TABLE.

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Clear Purpose and Goals: Understand the 'Why'

Without clarity around what we're striving to accomplish in our work and in our life, we lose focus and wallow in the ambiguity that comes with ill-defined purpose and goals. Leaders who provide their teams with clear purpose in their work—setting clear, achievable goals—are more likely to ensure that their people will stay focused on their work and secure in their roles. Similarly, individuals who take the time to plan and manage their time to focus on what's most important will create for themselves a sense of security that allows them to grow, get things done, and build relationships that enhance their overall engagement.

Role Clarity

Lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities will affect security. Over time, the changing needs of the business or organization will necessarily drive changes to the documented and communicated role descriptions within the organization. The changes often creep into the roles across teams within the larger organization, muddying any clarity that differentiated the functions of each role or team and its contribution to the success of the department or organization.

Without role clarity, work that is critical but less interesting and engaging will always be set aside for more interesting tasks. This leads to conflict between people and teams about accountability and who is responsible for what, creating stress and anxiety.

If people are saying things like "That's not my job" or "It didn't get done because I didn't want to step on any toes," there is probably a problem with role clarity. We can help everyone feel more secure by stepping back to review the organizational design and role descriptions.

Transparent Communication

Satisfaction with internal communication consistently ranks toward the bottom of virtually every employee engagement survey. This is a manifestation of the security engagement driver. People rank communication low because they have a sense of insecurity that results from not being "in the know," not knowing what's coming, or not understanding where leadership is headed.

What feels like over-communication to executives will still feel like too little to employees, but the more frequent and clearer we can be about our internal communication, the more we can take insecurity off the table and drive engagement. As a leader, if your people are feeling insecure, assessing how well and how often you're communicating is a great place to start.

Skill and Knowledge

Tremendous insecurity can result when we feel like we don't have the requisite knowledge or skill to perform our roles. Even when our peers and bosses think we have the skills we need, we still often suffer from "impostor syndrome," the feeling we get when we feel like we're having to pretend we know more than we do to perform our jobs.

In fact, though, anytime we grow and strive, we're stretching to step into something we have never done before.

The stress we feel is natural and normal, but it still generates insecurity as we become more adept at new skills. Classroom training and certifications can always help, but simple things like reading books and articles or watching online videos that cover the topics we're insecure about can help supply the background knowledge and language that allow us to build the skills and confidence we need to perform at the next level.

Clear Policies

Every organization has mavericks who are happy to break rules to get things done or make their work more engaging, but every organization has a high number of compliant rule-followers who just want to be told exactly what they must and must not do to stay out of trouble.

High-compliance people prefer specific guidelines and prescriptive policies. Leaders must balance specificity with flexibility and align that balance with the desired culture of the organization. Either way, clarity is necessary.

For example, organizations often choose not to have a prescriptive work-at-home policy, preferring to leave the decision on the appropriateness of working from home up to each manager. To address the insecurity associated with a lack of policy, a briefly worded policy that says working from home will be handled on a case-by-case basis with the decision lying with each manager in the organization. That clarity provides a framework for the discussion each employee who wants to work from home can have

with their manager. Note, however, that the engagement risk with distributing that decision-making shifts to fairness, the engagement driver we will cover in our next article.

Live in the Moment

Mark Twain once said, "I have lived through some terrible things in my life, many of which actually happened." We often make ourselves miserable thinking too much about what might happen, and our bodies physically react the same just imaging a bad outcome as they would if we actually lived through that negative experience.

But how many times have we worried ourselves sick only to have things turn out perfectly fine? One strategy is to prepare and overprepare (without stressing yourself out!). Although that approach is simple, preparation is only half the battle; anticipating the reactions and questions to your big presentation will make you feel less anxious and more secure in the work you present.

Another strategy is to develop the skills required to "live in the moment," focusing on the here and now, not worrying too much about things that might happen. Practicing meditation, learning not to catastrophize, and training ourselves to have a positive and optimistic outlook can do great things to improve our feelings of security.

Trust

Trust is an interpersonal quality that is highly dependent upon security; in fact, it's a combination of the relationship, security, and fairness engagement drivers. Trust

is an outcome of accountability and predictability; you are more likely to trust people when they follow through in their actions and when you can predict what they will say or do. Trust also requires a relationship, or at least a relationship by association (e.g., I trust Susan, and Susan trusts Steve, therefore I trust Steve, even if I don't have a direct relationship with Steve).

Benefits of Security

Providing an environment where your employees and loved ones are secure creates loyalty, which precedes engagement. Employee retention can affect bottom-line numbers and is more likely to be stable if employees understand the "why"; have role clarity; receive frequent, substantive communication; and have the support to gain the skills and knowledge they need to grow. By eliminating the distraction caused by insecurity, we can drive higher engagement through growth, relationships, and well-being, the drivers with unlimited upside for improving engagement.

In our next article, we'll address fairness, an engagement driver that can distract us from virtually everything else. ?

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