



# Rules of engagement

**CAREER** Engaging the team goes far beyond Friday night drinks – although they help. So how can you ensure your team is fully committed both to their roles and to each other? **By Iwona Tokc-Wilde**

PEOPLE HAVE A choice to do a great job or a mediocre one. They exercise this choice based on the level of their engagement with their job, their team and their organisation – a kind of emotional connection, if you like. Unfortunately, a 2012 study by AON Hewitt estimates that 42 per cent of employees lack this connection and you're likely to have at least one of them on your team. If so, not only must you deal with poor performance; potentially you'll also have to incur the time and cost of recruiting their replacement as, according to research from Cornell University, disengaged employees are five times more likely to leave.

On a brighter note, engaged team members are the greatest source of creativity, quality and improvement within an organisation. According to a study by Gallup, they are also 18 per cent more productive and deliver 12 per cent higher prof-

itability. This has direct impact on a company's bottom line so it's part of your job as a PA to build and maintain a highly engaged team. But, how exactly do you achieve this?

## **RULE #1: THE WHOLE IS BIGGER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS...**

First of all, each individual must understand and put first the team's and the organisation's objectives so that everyone works towards a common goal. "The synergy created by the team is bigger than the sum of its individual components," says business psychologist Dr Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, author of *The Psychology of Personnel Selection* ([www.drtonascpc.com](http://www.drtonascpc.com)). "This is clear in team sports – for example, a football team can hire 10 stars but, collectively, they may not perform well," if their individual interests override the common objective.

## ❶ RULE #2: ...BUT YOU MUST ENGAGE INDIVIDUALS, NOT TEAMS

Everyone must also understand what part they play in meeting their team's and their company's objectives. They must have a say in how these objectives are set and agree to work towards them, too – you will not get their commitment unless you get them involved.

To engage your team further, find out what makes them tick. "Find out what people want from their jobs," says Cath Adam, management consultant at The Chemistry Group ([www.thechemistrygroup.com](http://www.thechemistrygroup.com)). "People have to get something from what they're doing, otherwise they won't be interested."

Then help them find a way to achieve this. "Once you understand aspirations, as well as the skills and experience of everyone on your team, you can create opportunities for people to gain experience that will help them move towards their personal goals," adds David Foster, Change Management expert and director at Rally Strategic Ltd.

## RULE #3: YOU ARE THE MASTER MOTIVATOR

To help your team meet their objectives and goals, sometimes you need to chivvy them along. "You cannot motivate everybody in the same way, though," warns Tomas. What drives and excites people is different for everyone. "You need to discover what that is for each individual before you can decide how to encourage them to do what they need to do," says Cath.

Get them focused, too. "One study into happiness shows that we are unfocused for 50 per cent of the day and that we are less happy as a result," says David. So help people understand how the right focus makes them not only happier, but more effective and efficient, too.

## RULE #4: TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION IS CRUCIAL


"Also, always encourage their input and ideas, and genuinely and frequently praise them for work well done," adds David. Such open and honest communication is a must for team engagement. "Lazy managers engender subservience in their team, but people managed in this way will soon stop thinking for themselves," says David. Good ideas, however, often come from lower down in the organisation.

You may have to encourage people to come out of their shells first, before they feel comfortable enough to start voicing their contributions. "Get people to share their skills, experience, personal goals and fears with the rest of the team," says David. "This creates tighter teams and trust. Also, help everyone to understand how each of their colleagues likes to receive feedback to avoid it feeling like criticism."

## RULE #5: YOU WILL BE JUDGED

Managers are there to manage so your employer assesses your performance on how well your team works together. "Judging a team's engagement and the level of staff morale is the best barometer for how well the manager himself or herself is performing," says Tomas.

Unfortunately, many managers fail to build and maintain staff morale, says Tomas, often because they act unfairly. "Many employees who hate their jobs complain their managers prefer some team members over others and don't reward performance fairly. Always be transparent and predictable – this will make you fair," he recommends.



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## RULE #6: LOW MORALE KILLS TEAMS

If the morale goes, you've got yourself a disengaged team. "Frequent petty disagreements, internal politics, management seen as 'them', constant fire-fighting, higher staff turnover – these are signs of an unhappy and under-performing team," says David.

Cath agrees that the first thing that goes with a disengaged

employee is their performance: "It's not really them doing something wrong, it's them not doing so many things right." Another symptom of a disengaged employee is reduction in their energy levels. "An engaged person is excited by their job, but if energy's lacking, they'll be lacking engagement, too," she says.

## RULE #7: MOST TEAM DYSFUNCTIONS CAN BE FIXED

We all act and behave differently. "Some people are naturally quiet and like working alone; others want to share and chat. Some make decisions in isolation; others need to confer," says Cath. "Their personality and working styles are different and each can annoy the other, even though neither style's wrong." People clash when their style preferences are at the opposite ends of the scale. "Ask your team to take a Myers-Briggs or Belbin personality tests, which will show you how they can better interact," recommends Cath.

It's true that sometimes people just don't fit in. "But you as team leader can often make changes that will improve the dynamics of your team," sums up Tomas. ■

### TOP TIPS

## Getting new team members on board

Business coach Janet Murray ([www.janetmurray.com](http://www.janetmurray.com)) offers advice on how to help new employees feel welcome and part of your team:

- We all have a schoolchild still lurking inside us. Reflect on how it felt to have 'the new girl/boy' arrive half way through the term.
- First impressions count – both ways. Consider putting flowers on their desk with a signed card.
- Ensure the team know the new person's arriving and who they are. Give the new hire a contact list and photos of the team.
- Designate a 'buddy' to help the new employee settle in. Too often new hires are plonked at their desk with an induction manual and left to their own devices.
- Secretaries are used to having a certain amount of autonomy in their working environment and may find being 'new' slightly humiliating. Take care you don't 'teach your granny to suck eggs'.
- Set modest and graded expectations over the course of the first couple of months and regularly praise the newcomer for achieving them. Don't expect miracles within the first two weeks, though.
- Don't let the new hire reorganise or 'improve' the systems he/she's responsible for in the first month. Such tasks are often undertaken as 'something to do' (rather than something useful) when the hire's left to flounder, which is why the buddy system and graded targets can be so effective.