



## Is Worker Engagement a Mistake?

Worker engagement sounds like a no-brainer. Studies show that engaged workers are more productive, more supportive of leadership, more committed to improving the organization, and less likely to leave. They identify with the company mission, seek to live its values, and serve as ambassadors inside and outside the organization. What's more, organizations with broad worker engagement tend to outperform other organizations.

So with benefits like that, the answer of whether worker engagement is a mistake should be a resounding “no.”

But that's not always the case. The road to an engaged worker is often a bumpy one, with lots of potholes along the way. Some companies are challenged with ongoing frustration and some give up before reaching the end.

It takes hard work to achieve worker engagement. There is, however, one issue that significantly raises the likelihood that an organization will be successful in mobilizing its employees: Safety. Indeed, we will go so far as to say that Safety is the key to creating an engaged workforce because if there is one value everyone in the organization shares, it is to go home without injury.

**This white paper explores three questions that are critical to determining how safety can mobilize employees:**

1

Why is it important to understand the difference between worker involvement and Engaged Employees?

2

How can organizations use safety involvement to increase levels of employee engagement?

3

How does cultural maturity impact safety involvement and what is appropriate?

## The Difference Between Worker Involvement and Engaged Employees

Determining how to engage workers requires management to distinguish between two terms that are sometimes used interchangeably but are quite different:

**Involved Employees:** Involved employees offer ideas, expertise, and energy to solve problems. Involvement usually *happens upon request of management* rather than on employee initiative. When implemented wisely, worker involvement leads to engaged employees.

**Engaged Employees:** Engagement is much different as it reflects the strength of the relationship between an organization, the leadership, and its workers. An engaged worker is enthusiastic about their work and is willing to take positive action to further the organization, its reputation, and its interests in an appreciative organizational environment. A measure of worker engagement is organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), or the extent to which an individual is willing to voluntarily contribute to the organization's success. Engaged workers contribute because they care about what they do.

There isn't just one path to how an employee becomes engaged. In fact, engagement can happen on Day One when a new employee finds that the organizational mission and values completely aligns with his or her own values. In this case the engagement level starts out high.

The second route is more gradual. An employee may experience a leader with a transformational leadership style that motivates them to move from disengaged to involved or

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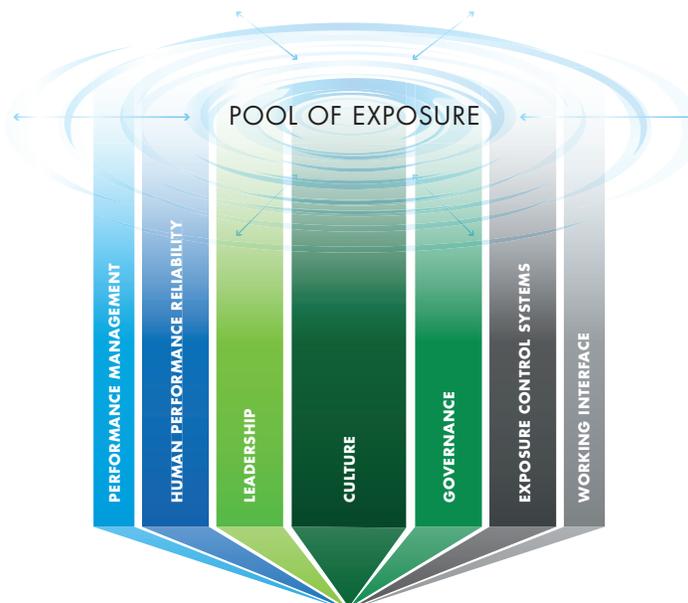
involved to engaged because the leader has demonstrated they value the employee as a person.

The safety implications of worker engagement are profound: Disengaged workers focus on their own safety. Involved workers are concerned with their own safety but are likely also concerned with the safety of their workmates and perhaps certain other people they interact with. Fully engaged workers are concerned with the safety of everyone around them and, without prompting, take proactive actions to help others.

## How Organizations Can Use Safety Involvement to Increase Employee Engagement

Consider the following: A friend asks you what it is like to work for your company. What thoughts come immediately to mind?

## DEKRA Exposure Reduction Model



7 FACTORS INFLUENCING LEVEL OF EXPOSURE

How you respond is based on three primary components: The work, the working conditions, and the workplace culture. The pivot point regarding how you phrase your answer likely has less to do with the job task you perform than with your perception of how the company, the leadership, and your peers treat you.

How you think about these relationships has a significant impact on your level of engagement. Relationships are based on social-exchange theory and the law of reciprocity. Social exchange theory explains how our perceptions of fairness enter into the relationship we have with another person. The law of reciprocity describes the social principle that if you do something for someone else, you expect them to reciprocate. When someone does something for us, we feel a need to reciprocate, that is, to do something in return. The more one does for someone else, the more the receiver feels the pull. Relationships break down when one side breaks this social exchange and there is no reciprocity. In business relationships, the reciprocity principle holds the same, however it is not a 50/50 relationship. Leadership must often stretch further to obtain reciprocity.

Our strongest and deepest relationships are built on a foundation of safety. Not just physical safety but also psychological safety. If we come to believe that another person is interested in our physical or mental wellbeing, the foundation strengthens.

Leadership can use the power of safety to increase employee engagement. Getting employees involved in a safety activity that truly advances the cause of workplace safety helps build the relationship foundation that ultimately leads to an engaged employee.

## How culture maturity impacts safety involvement

An organization's culture falls along a continuum too. At DEKRA OSR we use the DEKRA Exposure Reduction Model (DERM) to describe this continuum. This model evaluates culture based on the value an organization places on exposure reduction and on how well the organization addresses the system factors that contribute to exposure.

The model has six levels grouped into three ranges:

- In the Avoidance range, most employees are disengaged and focused on safety of self.
- In the Compliance range, we see more of a bell-shaped curve of engaged employees with safety focus.
- In the Value range, we would see many more engaged workers with a focus on safety of others.

**Avoidance:** In this range it is hard to find an engaged worker for two important reasons.

First, the organization must take steps to involve the managers and front-line leaders in safety. For worker involvement to succeed, the leaders of the organization must consistently demonstrate their personal value for safety.

Second, leaders must find and enlist the support of a small core of workers who have a passion for safety. The involvement will most likely be limited to safety of self-focused activities like "hazard hunts" and participation on team activities such as safety awareness campaigns. It is critical at this stage to act on outputs from these activities to establish trust.



One major caution: In an Avoidance culture, employees may perceive they are at personal risk of being ostracized by their peers. Leadership must do everything they can to assure that what employees are doing does not result in reprimands or discipline. If a mistake is made, leadership must quickly address the problem.

**Compliance:** Within this range we see stronger worker involvement. Organizations are in an awkward phase where part of the organization may be at a Priority Level, while others are advancing toward the Goal Level.

The key in this range is for leadership to recognize signals that indicate workers are willing to take on safety responsibility for both themselves and their team.

When the right signals are transmitted, the organization should move toward “Safety of Others” programs. Here, workers get involved in communicating the concept of Approaching Others for Safety, taking on higher level training responsibilities and becoming engaged in looking deeply into systems that drive exposure and incidents.

**Values:** At this range we see employees willing to go above and beyond mere participation to demonstrate engagement behaviors.

Sophisticated processes like peer-to-peer coaching are accepted and workers conducting advanced training, leading safety meetings, and safety teams. These systems become an integral part of all safety processes and are integrated into the root cause evaluations of exposure. At this level many workers step up and help their peers and others to identify and control exposure.

In all three ranges, leadership must fulfill their roles and responsibilities and also be prepared for the redistribution of power that occurs. Any perceived abdication of safety can damage trust and credibility.

## What can companies do now to move the needle on engagement?

**The answer is simple: Invest in involvement.**

Consider the following: A leader decides to increase safety involvement. The leader tells the safety manager, “I want a safety involvement activity.” The safety manager finds a program they think will be acceptable. It requires a minimum investment, just the purchase of a video and the 30 minutes

for workers to watch the video. The video encourages people to take a stand for safety and help their co-workers be safe. At the end of the video every employee is asked to sign a commitment poster that says they will commit to taking a stand for safety. The leader says, “Great, let’s get this done!”

Yet, if you were to make a prediction, how much would safety involvement truly increase? How far would the needle move on really creating engaged workers?

Depending on the culture, this approach could backfire and result in less engagement than before.

### When implementing safety involvement activities, companies ultimately need to:

- Ask themselves, “Why are we doing this?”
- Define the benefits and set the objectives.
- Design or pick an intervention that’s right for the culture and in line with the objectives.
- Prepare all levels of leadership for redistribution of power.
- Enroll the employees.
- Recruit early adopters.
- Use discovery-based versus static learning.
- Roll out and support the system.

## Conclusion

We all would like to be able to identify the exact moment when an organization moves from involvement to engagement. The problem is that it isn’t like watching a light switch move from off to on.

Instead, it’s a gradual shift, starting with a few employees and expanding as leadership demonstrates caring and trust in the employees. When a company has demonstrated it values safety, workers will volunteer to get involved.

Leadership must carefully consider which safety involvement activity is right for their culture. When employees participate in a successful and rewarding involvement activity, their personal level of engagement will move upward. Leadership must then figure out how to expand safety involvement.

This isn’t done by demanding involvement. It requires purposeful planning and patience.

**Learn More** Interested in learning more about enhancing worker safety involvement? **Connect with us:**

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