TURNING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT ON ITS HEAD

WHITEPAPER

The 10 Brain Science Truths
That Fuel Employee Engagement

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Introduction

What fuels and drives a customer experience that differentiates an organization from its competitors is an energizing employee experience.

This white paper demonstrates something surprising: although employee engagement is the primary strategy we've relied on to produce great employee and customer experiences, it hasn't delivered them.

There are three key reasons why:

1. We've failed to understand the organ that generates our experiences (the brain).

2. We have not created strong enough links between the customer experience we want and the employee experience that produces it.

3. We've focused on engagement and ignored energy—the fuel that drives the vital differentiators of the customer experience: passion, innovation, intuition, genuine human warmth, enthusiasm, "extra mile" helpfulness, and ingenuity.

The following 10 Brain Science truths will explain why employee engagement has failed to deliver, and provides links to cases that show how some organizations have shifted their approach in order to achieve superior outcomes.

EXECUTIVE BULLETS

- Energy -not engagement- is what powers the three things you need to create a great customer experience: passion, discretionary effort and innovative thinking.
- Energy is released when you deliver (not promise) a great employee experience.
- A great employee experience is a product of emotional engagement moreso than rational engagement.
- Emotional engagement is unlocked by skillfully stepping into tension.
- Partnering (not parenting) is how you pull innovative energy out of tension.
- Conversation is the operating system that powers up partnering.
- Short, frequent energy conversations draw out real-time intel, generate employee energy, and re-calibrate unhelpful beliefs that thwart self-efficacy.

Fossil Fuel, Clean Fuel

This white paper is best explained utilizing a metaphor of fossil fuel versus clean fuel. In order to create that context, I'd like to tell you a story of something powerful, something life-changing, that happened to me.

Fossil Fuel and Clean Fuel

The history of the world can be understood by the fuels we have used: clean fuel to fossil fuel and back to clean fuel.

For centuries we used clean fuel to propel our ships, grind our wheat and plow our fields. At some point, we discovered a fast-burning fuel that could boost our productivity by previously unfathomed multiples. A couple hundred years later we woke up, looked out our kitchen windows, and discovered that we had trashed our ecosystem. Today we are intent on utilizing clean fuel once more.

I've found that organizational life parallels this story. Carters made carts. Hoopers made barrels. Brewers made ale. These cottage industries were fueled by passion and pride. Then Frederick Taylor came along. An American mechanical engineer by trade, he instituted a more efficient way of working — a way centered on control. Fossil fuel had been discovered... it multiplied productivity and clean fuel was left in the dust.

For the next couple hundred years, organizations were fueled by fear, threat and control—until workers got fed up and revolted. Then the world of fossil fuel became more nuanced, manifesting itself in manipulation, guilt and shame. In the last several decades it morphed into an even more enlightened enterprise with incentives, rewards and recognition.

Whether you use fear, guilt or incentives, the effect of fossil fuel is always the same: it's a fast burn, gets an instant response from employees, and leaves a greasy residue. Let's be clear: fossil fuel always has an impact on your ecosystem.

You can pour jet fuel in your lawnmower. It will cover an incredible amount of ground for five minutes, but then it will burn out the engine. Fear and incentives, like fossil fuels, work similarly: people will work like mad for a short period of time—but then they'll burn out.

Engaged but not Energized: Fossil Fuel

My story echoes that of many others: I was active as a youth, was very sedentary between the ages of 25 and 45, and then had a wake-up call that got me active once again.

I wish you could have seen my first running attempts. I ran from one telephone pole to the next and was completely winded—having to walk for the next two. A real breakthrough happened on the day that I could run for two telephone poles, needing to walk for only one.

Time passed and my running improved. Then I got injured and had to diversify my training. I started swimming and cycling to eliminate some of the physical stress that accompanies running.

The upshot of all of this is that, several years after my wake-up call, I began training to do an Ironman triathlon — swim 4 kilometres, bike 180 kilometres and then run 42 kilometres. This was a serious challenge for a soft man in his fifties.

I trained for a year, fitting 15-20 hours of training per week into my life. It was all energized by clean fuel, the passion of achieving something big, the joy of learning and discovery, and the connection that I had with my triathlon community.

And so I showed up for the Somersault Ironman event in Ottawa, ready to engage in the challenge. I had a surprise waiting for me: something that would shift me from clean to fossil fuel. I was about to experience the consequence that fossil fuel has on performance.

On race day, I finished the 4 kilometre swim without any complications. The 180-kilometre bike ride was challenging, but certainly doable. The clean fuel of passion, joy and connection were energizing all the right things in me. Partway through the marathon, I heard some familiar voices greeting me. My son, his wife and their three children had made the long trek to Ottawa to surprise me.

This should have been a great bolster, but it wasn't—I switched fuels. I started thinking, "My grandchildren are watching me. I can't let them down. I have to show them that you never quit, no matter what. I can't disappoint my son and his wife after they've come all this way. Don't screw this up, Brady."

I switched to fossil fuel: the fear of failure, the fear of shame I'd experience if I did fail, and the weight of obligation to be an exemplar.

Fossil fuel always takes its toll. Although I was committed to the cause and determined not to fail, my energy slowly plummeted. Like millions of employees and managers, I was engaged but not energized. I dutifully plodded on, saluted those who cheered from the sidelines and said all the right things—but fear, shame and obligation had completely depleted my energy.*

**Just for context, this was not "Brady hitting the wall". I've run several marathons and have encountered that challenge. This was a depletion of a different sort.*

At 31 kilometres into the 42-kilometre marathon, I ended up lying on the side of the road, convulsing in shock. The medics came, put me on oxygen, hauled me away to the medical tent and declared, "You are not finishing this race!"

The dynamic I experienced during the Ironman in Ottawa parallels the experience of many individuals in today's workplace. Perhaps even *your* workplace, where good people are engaged but not energized. These managers and employees are limited by working within the popular definition of "engagement." They will "say, stay and strive": *say* good things about the organization, *stay* with you and even *strive* to do their best. But despite their loyalty, commitment and propensity to soldier on, they feel overwhelmed and are improperly fueled.

Varying forms of self-determination, like personal values or work ethic, drive them doggedly forward, without energy, focus, zest or that vital sense of passion and

purpose. In the long run, they are in danger of falling by the wayside.

You may wonder which fuel mix you burn in your personal life. What about the fuel you supply to your employees as a manager? Is it clean, energizing fuel or depleting fossil fuel?

You can usually tell what kind of fuel people are burning by how it impacts their lives. The incidents of burnout, stress leave, absenteeism, mental illness, workplace bullying and violence have not improved post 2008.

Personal and professional demands have left people maxed out, keyed up and red-lining on many workdays. There is just too much to do and not enough time and capacity to do it all. People end up working over the weekend and then come back Monday morning feeling depleted rather than replenished.

Engaged *and* Energized: Clean Fuel

There's a sequel to the Ironman story with a happier ending and an instructive lesson. In 2012, I ran the Boston Marathon. It was the second hottest race within it's116-year history. Thousands of people chose not to run, deferring to the following year. Hundreds of runners ended up in the medical tent that year, and there were lots of DNFs (Did Not Finish).

I had trained hard all year, driven all the way from Guelph, Ontario and paid a handsome price for my hotel room. I was going to run this race. It was a tough grind — a grueling four hours and thirty minutes. There were times I thought I'd have to quit.

Despite the struggle, I fell in love with Boston that year — the city, the devoted spectators, my fellow runners from around the world, and the Boston Athletic Association, who put on such a phenomenal race. Still, I found myself saying, "I'm never doing another marathon again—I'm done with that."

And then, in 2013, the bombs went off.

On that fateful day, my friend Stan was running the Boston Marathon and his typical completion time would have placed him right at the finishing line when the first bomb exploded. I was frantic. I madly texted him, inquiring about his safety. I breathed again when he texted me back, "I'm OK. I crossed the line and heard an explosion."

In the ensuing hours, I witnessed a horror: 22 victims, runners and spectators alike, mutilated by this abhorrent act of terror. It was the nature of the injuries that evoked such a strong empathetic response in me: most of the 22 victims had severe leg injuries. For someone who loves to run—lives to run—seeing that stolen from my fellow runners gripped my heart in a forceful way.

Something rose up within me in that moment—the same thing that rose up in thousands of runners around the world: "I am SO running Boston next year. I will NOT be intimidated by this."

I felt huge solidarity with the victims and their families. I felt huge solidarity with the city of Boston. I felt huge solidarity with the Boston Athletic Association, whose pristine race had been ravaged by such a senseless act.

So in the following month, with little time to prepare,

I ran a marathon, hoping to achieve a time that would qualify me for Boston in 2014. I was thrilled to come in under my qualifying time, but that was still no guarantee I'd get into Boston. I had to wait until the fall of 2013 when, like myself, tens of thousands of runners from around the world would sit poised by their computers, vying for a spot in what promised to be the most historic Boston Marathon ever.

I was ecstatic when my letter of acceptance arrived. I would have a chance to show my love for Boston: its victims, its runners and its fans.

I began training in earnest, but the Canadian winter of 2013/2014 was not a training-friendly winter. The temperature was torturous and the snow was deep. Because of the icy conditions, I ended up with a hip injury that threatened to dash my hopes of running Boston.

I tried everything I could to heal—physio, chiro, massage, rollers, sticks, balls—every form of voodoo you can imagine. But when race time came, my wife Theresa and I were left to deliberate. Should I bow out? Should we cancel our hotel and our travel plans? Eventually, we decided to go. Even if I couldn't run, I could cheer on my fellow runners and be part of the great crowd. And who knows, maybe my body would find a way to finish the race, injury and all.

But how would I express my sense of solidarity with Boston?

"I'll bring a Canadian flag," I thought. "That way I can declare; 'Canada supports you, Boston.'"

No. Support was not a deep enough emotion for what I felt. It was more like love. So I thought, "I'll put a Canadian flag on my shirt that says; 'Canada Loves Boston.'

No. Not personal enough. It's not just Canada: it's me that loves Boston. So I asked myself, "What is it that I really, authentically feel?"

The answer was immediate: "**Brady Loves Boston.**" I feel love for the victims. I love the city. I love the fans and I love the BAA. *Brady Loves Boston* is what I will print on a Canadian flag, on the front and back of my shirt."

Every runner knows that when you put your name on your shirt, spectators will call you by name. But I could never have predicted what sort of response my *Brady Loves Boston* message would evoke, and how that would transform my race.

I was only minutes into my run when I began to hear the cheering. Not general cheering —very personal cheering. One million spectators lined the road from Hopkinton to Boston. Fans were reading my Brady Loves Boston shirt and shouting, "Boston loves you right back, Brady." I was shaken. People were looking me right in the eyes and saying, "We love you too, Brady."

I was amazed and thought, "You don't owe me that. I don't deserve such a personal encouragement." I waved, even blew kisses to the people who cheered for me and said, "Thank you!"

My race was a series of hundreds of mini conversations:

Spectator: "Thanks for coming down here, Canada!"
Brady: "You're so welcome!"

Spectator: "Canada rocks!!"
Brady: "Yes, and we love you!"

Spectator: "We love you, Brady."
Brady: "Thank you!"

When complete strangers reach out to you, look you directly in the eyes and say (with feeling), "We love you Brady"—well, it does something to you.

I confess... I LOVED it. But I began to feel badly for the runners surrounding me—I was the only one getting cheered for and encouraged by name. I turned to the man next to me and said, "I'm sorry for this." He laughed and said, "No, you don't understand, my last name is Brady—I'm not leaving your side!"

By the halfway point, I was in a lot of pain and I thought I might have to give up. But the moment I'd think that thought, someone would shout out, "Boston loves you, Brady!", and my energy would surge.

Clean fuel makes all the difference in the world. A rich mix of gratitude, connection, belonging, passion, purpose and solidarity. I was *made* to burn fuel like this.

There are two things we know about energy in human beings:
1) Energy is finite.
2) Energy is renewable.

The renewable energy I experienced in Boston was like nothing I had ever experienced in my life. It even got me up Heartbreak Hill (actually a series of *four* hills, coinciding with the spot in the race where you "hit the wall"). I never stopped. I ran up all the hills fueled by the energy of the crowd I felt so connected to.

Meanwhile, back home, my kids and friends were tracking my progress online—following my little runner avatar on the BAA website. They were texting my wife Theresa who was waiting for me at the finish line; so when I completed the race, Theresa already knew my finishing time. (Most runners wear a watch so they can track their time, but I hadn't bothered to wear one because I felt I would do so poorly.)

Theresa and I had a tearful reunion, and I said, "Well, it was no great finishing time, but I had the time of my life."

"No, no," she said. "Your time was 3:48—three quarters of an hour faster than the last time you ran it. You ran a fantastic race!"

In the hours and days that followed, I compared my ill-fated Ottawa Ironman race to this fabulous Boston Marathon. In Ottawa, I burned fossil fuel and although I was engaged, I was not energized. In Boston, I burned clean fuel that both energized *and* engaged me. A life-lesson imprinted itself upon me. It is energy—not engagement—that fuels high performance.

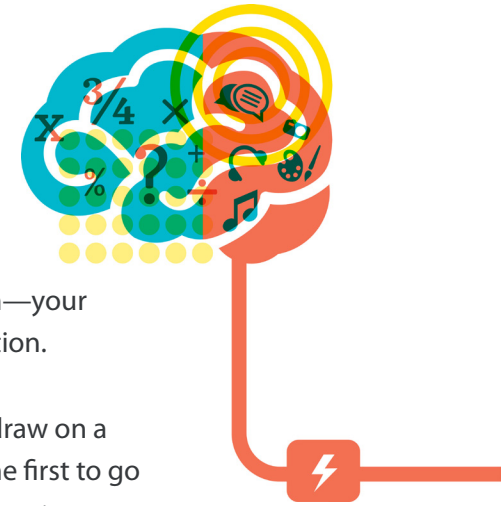
It is *energy* that deploys your strengths.

It is *energy* that drives execution: translating ideas into action.

It is your *energy level* that gets you through when everything inside you wants to quit.

The white paper you are about to read gives 10 reasons why it is time to leave the fossil fuel of engagement behind and learn how to harness the clean fuel of sustainable human energy.

The 10 Brain Science Truths That Fuel Employee Engagement



1 *Manage Energy,* not Engagement

What's the Brain Science?

When your brain is low on energy, the first thing you lose is your executive function—your ability to predict outcomes, focus your attention, regulate emotions and initiate action.

The executive function of the brain is metabolically expensive[1] and places a large draw on a person's energy stores. When people are low on energy, the executive function is the first to go and what suffers most, is value-creation and innovation:[2] primary drivers of a great customer experience.

Entropy is a given in nature, and the second law of thermodynamics guarantees the dissipation of energy. In common-speak, everything winds down unless it's wound up again. The normal challenges of organizational life will deplete people. Great leaders do not leave the generation of energy to chance. They build energy conversations into the lived experience of their managers and employees. (Read the Case: From Engagement to Energy)

How does this show up at work?

In today's knowledge-workers environment, results are no longer determined by *physical* energy (how much coal a worker can shovel in a day) but by *innovative* energy (how much innovative value an employee can create in a day).

Typical employee engagement initiatives don't focus on generating energy; they focus on unlocking discretionary effort—that is, getting people to go above and beyond the call of

duty. So good-hearted employees heed the call, come in earlier, stay later and try harder in-between. But they're exhausted.

These loyal, committed people make heroic dives to make sure things don't slip through the cracks—but lacking the executive function, they're not thinking innovatively about how to get to the root cause and fix systemic issues. This results in an organizational culture that rewards firefighting, duct-tape fixes, quick work-arounds and reactivity: the perfect ecosystem for energy depletion.

In short: ***effort without innovation just won't cut it.***

Why does this matter?

As debilitating as the cycle of depletion is for employees, there's something more at stake: the customer experience.

External branding experts create a compelling brand promise for organizations. Often it is peppered with words like "human," "intuitive," "personal," "refreshing," "helpful" and "easy to work with."

When the customer *experiences* these elements at an emotional level, the organization delivers on its brand promise and Net Promoter Scores go up.

However, the customer experience is entirely at the mercy of the other side of the equation: the employee experience. Employee engagement supplies loyalty, commitment and even discretionary effort, but it can leave people overwhelmed and under-supported, exhausted and depleted. In this state, the best they can inject into the customer experience is something impersonal and mechanistic. Transactional. Devoid of human magic.

Delivery of a customer experience that is "human," "intuitive" and "personal" happens in one way and one way only - through an energized employee. It's energy and passion that unlocks enthusiasm, zest, creativity, ingenuity, innovation, authentic human warmth, vigour, verve and vitality...the ingredients of a remarkable customer experience.

Engagement has gotten people to try harder and give more, but like fossil fuel, it corrodes the ecosystem. The ethos of energy is a clean, renewable fuel that yields all the effort and commitment of engagement, but goes beyond that and generates passion, vitality and innovation.

Go Beyond Engagement: Manage energy, not engagement.

2 *Deliver Experiences,* not Promises

What's the Brain Science?

The human brain is wired to pursue activities that promise reward, regardless of whether they deliver the experience of reward.

Researchers have discovered an area of the brain that is driven by the *promise of reward*. It governs our behaviours powerfully.[3, 4] When this area is stimulated with a tiny electric shock through a laser-thin electrode, a hit of dopamine is released causing feelings of euphoria and intense pleasure.

In fact, that dopamine is so euphoric and pleasurable that research shows that when rats were given a chance to self-stimulate with dopamine (by pushing a lever), they triggered the "promise-of-reward center" *every five seconds*.[5] Moreover, in subsequent tests, rats ignored their needs for food and water and pressed the lever without ceasing until they collapsed in exhaustion.

One might think that human beings, with our superior prefrontal cortex, would never act in such a manner. But a scientist named Robert G. Heath found out that we *do*.

Heath attached electrodes to the "promise of reward" centers of his patients' brains and discovered that, on average, they pressed that lever *40 times per minute*.[6] Hungry subjects shunned food as they self-stimulated with dopamine without pause. In fact, one subject kept pressing the lever over 200 times *after* the power had been turned off. The scientist administering the test finally had to order the patient to stop.

How does this show up at work?

When it comes to employee engagement, leaders do things that may be well-intended, but their actions clearly have more to do with the *promise* of reward rather than the *experience* of it.

To illustrate this further, here are some common workplace examples:

1. Leaders sell engagement

Managers meet with their teams to talk about scores from their engagement survey. They start out with the clear intention of listening to their employees' concerns—that is, drawing out what's most important to employees and learning what will help them feel more energized. Before they know it, those managers are selling the benefits of engagement and telling the team, "I know I can count on

you to help turn these scores around."

2. Leaders focus on Top 50 lists

A CEO talks to his employees about engagement in a town hall meeting. His communications leader and senior team have coached him and have carefully crafted his script, telling him: "The employees have to be able to see how this benefits *them*—how it impacts *their* experience here—not just how it benefits the company."

Carried along by the power of the moment, the CEO trumpets, "This year, with all your hard work, our company can make the Top 50 list of best-run companies!"

3. Leaders substitute stuff for substance

Two recurring themes Juice sees cropping up again and again on employee engagement surveys are that underperformers are not addressed, and high performers are not recognized.

Leaders gravitate toward elaborate recognition/reward programs and intricate performance management systems that hold the *promise* of fixing these issues once and for all but they don't provide that experience.

4. Leaders promise to fix the issue for employees

One of the most common responses to an engagement survey is that the manager looks at low scores and takes the burden on his or her own back—working even harder to fix issues like communication, work-life balance or recognition.

Managers who promise to do these things are well-intentioned and conscientious, but the approach is simply unsustainable. No manager can fix these issues without partnering with his or her employees.

5. Leaders create aggressive, but unrealistic strategies

After survey results come out, managers march with their HR partners to create aggressive plans of how they will fix the scores. These strategies may be robust but are impossible to deliver on—especially with an exhausted workforce that has little capacity to do more. Every manager's gut is telling her, "We'll never be able to execute all of this!," but the brain is tickled with the promise of reward: "If the plan is watertight and employees see that it's really thorough—*surely* it will be acted upon."

6. Leaders pressure employees

We've had to address situations where leaders blatantly ask their employees to give "fives" (top marks) when they fill out their engagement surveys. They say things like, "I know you guys are a great team. I know you're completely engaged. Let's give those fives that show everybody the good work we've done."

All the hustle and bustle of engagement activities that stop just short of an experience has a predictable outcome: *the absence of concrete, visible action becomes a fixation and employees begin to see engagement as a "con game."*

Why does this matter?

Today's workplace shows all the signs of an employee experience that promises much but delivers little —*vast tracts of managers and employees are engaged but not energized*. Undelivered promises corrode hope and eat away at people's passion and energy, spawning cynicism and apathy that are toxic to the customer

experience. An employee who is engaged but not energized creates a customer experience that is transactional, mechanistic and perfunctory.

This can be so different. When you manage energy you get the employee experience *and* the great engagement scores. (Read the Case: From the Bottom to the Top) Research clearly shows that the customer experience (and the numbers) flourish when organizations focus on delivering fulfilling employee experiences.[7]

Go Beyond Engagement: Deliver experiences, not promises.

3 *Target Emotion,* not Logic

What's the Brain Science?

Your emotional brain, not your rational one, tells you what is true.

Brain research shows that your limbic system—the emotional center of your brain—defines what you experience as reality.[8] This inner sensor works in the following way.

All data entering your prefrontal cortex (the logical, decision-making center of the brain) first gets filtered through the limbic system. The limbic system assigns meaning to the incoming stimulus (by cross-referencing millions of data points from your emotional history) and registers it as an emotion. It's this emotion that instructs you what is real—what is true. In short, you *feel* before you *think*.[9]

Mirror neurons in our brains make all of this possible. They detect and reflect others' actions, emotions and even intentions.[10] Mirror neurons enable us to recognize an emotion in other people neurally—providing us with an uncanny knack for recognizing care, support and respect; and also recognizing when care, support and respect are not present but simply being declared by the other person.

In other words, if you don't *feel* you're valued, all the assertions, declarations and assurances in the world can't make it true for you.

Our limbic system is "on" 24/7—which means that our feelings are the first and last things we remember about any experience.[11]

How does this show up at work?

We live and work in a "Feelings Economy," where feelings, not intellect, drive the behavior of employees. Research shows us that emotional engagement trumps rational engagement by a multiple of four. [12] *However, engagement strategies have traditionally focused on rational measures; it's now evident that the emotional ones help people offer their best stuff.*

The leader offers recognition, and his rational brain tells him the recognition is effective because he's clear that his intentions are good. The employee hears the recognition speech and her emotional brain tells her that the recognition is not valid because *she does not feel it*. That's because people only experience recognition, support and inspiration as authentic when they are *felt*.

At Juice, we call this the *felt* gap: the distance between what is intended by the leader and what is experienced by the employee.

Why does this matter?

When there is a gap between what is intended and what is felt, employees end up feeling unfulfilled and leaders end up feeling unappreciated. This changes dramatically when leaders learn how to shift from rational to emotional "pay-checks." (Read the Case: 1.5 Employees in One Body)

Go Beyond Engagement: Target emotion, not logic.

4 *Seek Tension,* not Harmony

What's the Brain Science?

Your brain requires tension to innovate and do its best thinking, yet it avoids tension at any cost.

We would never learn or grow without tension. Our brains are energized by it, interpreting it as a fascinating novelty...a puzzle to be solved.[13] Cognitive tension is brain fuel. When your brain senses dissonance, or realizes something is missing, it goes to work to find it. In fact, if you never experience tension, you'll never come up with a good idea.
Entrepreneur Guy Laliberté used this form of cognitive tension to release innovative energy and

subsequently came up with an idea that has today made him worth an estimated $2.6 billion.[14] The tension Laliberté sought to harmonize resided between the fun and laughter of the circus, and the intellectual sophistication of the theatre.

What emerged was an outlandish idea: the brilliant, beautiful and eminently successful Cirque du Soleil—a perfect blend of fun, laughter and intellectual sophistication that now travels the globe.

We've been taught that necessity is the mother of invention. It's not. *Tension* is. That is because innovation is spawned by tension—not necessity. It's the tension between the *current* way of doing things and the *desired* way of doing things that sparks innovative thought. In short, creative tension is clean fuel and is required by the the human brain to think inventively.[15]

How does this show up at work?

Epic tensions emerge from employee engagement surveys. For example:

- Employees want better wages and benefits—but managers need to cut expenses
- Employees want more work-life balance —but managers need more discretionary effort from employees to drive business results
- Employees want to know underperformers are being held accountable—but managers are often muzzled and can't share the corrective actions they've taken.

Because the natural response of the brain is to interpret tension as a threat,[16] leaders become uncomfortable when these concerns emerge and will do everything in their power to remove the tension from the system.

With training, leaders and managers can step into these places of tension and draw out innovative solutions. A diagnostic can be helpful: a simple tool that helps managers gain awareness of how they are showing up in their relationship with an employee.

A drive to meet your own needs is valid and healthy (red arrow). It's also valid and healthy to want to help meet the needs of your employee(s) (blue arrow). Partnering is choosing to step into the tension between your needs and your employees' needs, and doing the good work of drawing out the innovative solutions that harmonize your competing needs.

But in tension-filled situations, managers go binary and fulfill one of these drives at the expense of the other:

- The manager who is all about her needs and doesn't consider the needs of her employees has slipped into "overpower" mode.
- The manager who is all about meeting the employee's needs at the expense of getting her own needs has slipped into "comply" mode.
- The manager who does not focus on her own or her employee's needs has slipped into "avoid" mode.

These three reactions bar the one element required for breakthrough innovations: creative tension. Engagement solutions to surveys are simplistic, pendulum-swing, black-and-white fixes that create unintended consequences in other parts of the system.

Why does this matter?

'Avoid', 'overpower' and 'comply' reactions are all forms of fossil fuel that produce a crisis of belief in employees: "Will anything meaningful ever come out of this engagement thing?"

This changes when leaders learn to pull the "treasure" out of the tensions: a surprising innovation that harmonizes competing priorities and creates sustainable solutions. (Read the Case: An Army of Volunteers)

Go Beyond Engagement: Seek tension, not harmony.

5 *Practice Partnering,* not Parenting

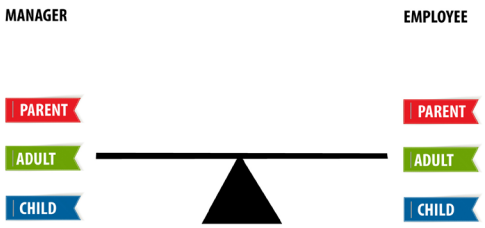
What's the Brain Science?

The emotional brain perceives "shared responsibility" as a threat and will trigger people to become under-responsible or over-responsible.

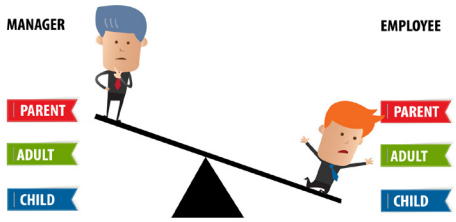
There's a fixed amount of responsibility that can be assumed in any relationship, so when one person becomes over-responsible, the other will subsequently become under-responsible.

How does this show up at work?

Responsibility can be seen as the see-saw, an illustration of transactional exchange. An employee and a manager can show up as a parent, an adult or a child in their relationship with each other. The goal is for employees and managers to be consistently functioning in adult-to-adult mode.



But employees can sometimes feel stuck and powerless and begin to think like victims. When an employee's under-responsibility causes them to slip from adult thinking to child-like thinking, it triggers over-responsibility in the manager and before he knows it, he has slipped into parenting.



How does an enlightened, well-intentioned manager turn into a "parent" in the workplace? The answer is in the brain, which interprets *shared responsibility as a form of threat* and naturally avoids it.[17]

When leaders share responsibility with employees, they may experience:

- A loss of control
- A lack of certainty
- The fear of failure
- The conflict sparked by competing needs

Sharing responsibility with someone else means relinquishing some ownership and control, and that can feel like a risk to you. So the brain has a simple solution: go binary. Either you take all the responsibility, letting the other person off the hook but giving you ultimate control over the results; or

you give all responsibility over to them, relinquishing control but getting off the hook with regard to risk.

Depending on the situation, a manager could slip into parenting behaviours that are too directive with one employee, too supportive with another, and too hands-off with yet another. These three types of parenting behaviours, mentioned in the section above, are known as overpower, comply and avoid.

When managers share responsibility and choose to partner with their employees, this places each person's reputation in the other's hands, making managers feel vulnerable. Taking an either/or binary approach to responsibility seems much safer to the managerial brain.

Why does this matter?

Managers who have become self-aware of their natural parenting instincts and have shifted to partnering report that doing so:

- Cultivates decision-making capability among employees;
- Grows people's talents;
- Calls people to higher levels of accountability;
- Unlocks employee performance and results; and
- Helps employees own and manage their own engagement.

(Read the Case – The New Time-Off Policy)

Go Beyond Engagement: Practice partnering, not parenting.

6 *Pull Out the Back-story,* not the Action Plan

What's the Brain Science?

Conversation is the operating system of your brain.

Brain operation: neuron A transmits information to neuron B, and neuron B receives it.[18] That's the basic unit of communication. In this way, neuronal conversation provides the two-way communication interface between the brain and the body.[19]

Your brain is a network of 100 billion neurons and each one has conversations with up to one thousand of its neighbours.[20] These conversations are how your brain ***organizes and controls your "hardware" and "software," so that the device it lives in (your body) behaves in a flexible but predictable way.***[21]

The first and foremost priority of the human brain is social cognition—or, according to renowned psychologist Matthew Lieberman, "making sense of other people and ourselves." In his book *Social*, Lieberman says "this is what our brains were wired for: reaching out to and interacting with others."[22]

Reaching out to, and interacting with, others is precisely what conversation is all about. It's our native wiring—the perfect operating system—and is the basic equipment we need to connect, understand and harmonize with others.

How does this show up at work?

If conversation is the operating system (O/S) of our individual brains, it shouldn't surprise us that conversation is also the O/S of our organizations. In other words, the organism shapes the organization.

And just as the neuron is the basic unit of the brain, the employee is the basic unit of the organization. As neuronal conversations are the way the brain gets things done, employee conversations are the way the organization gets things done. That's because conversation is the O/S that enables the "apps" in your organization to work: fantastic apps like customer service, sales, feedback, coaching, strategy and innovation. Remove conversation from customer service (or any of these other apps) and what happens? They crash.

However, leaders fail to realize that conversation is the operating system of the brain and the organization—so they forego conversations with employees and respond to engagement survey results with broad-brush, global solutions.

But implementing an action plan without having conversations fails to honour how the brain operates; being presented with a solution devoid of conversation practically guarantees employee non-adherence or even covert resistance to any engagement initiative.

Why does this matter?

Any engagement activity that is devoid of conversation runs the risk of coming across to employees as parenting, not partnering.

When it comes to responding to employee engagement survey results, conversation is the O/S that enables managers to pull out the back-story behind the results, so they don't entirely miss the mark.

Short, simple energy check conversations honour and utilize our native wiring. These types of conversations power up the apps that drive results: sales, customer service, innovation, coaching and feedback.

Everything changes for the better when leaders use simple conversations to get to the back-story and draw out what matters most to employees. It produces a powerful impact: employees begin to manage their own engagement. (Read the Case: Yum! Energy)

Go Beyond Engagement: Pull out the back-story, not the action plan.

7 *Focus on Sticks,* not Carrots

What's the Brain Science?

Your brain responds more to sticks than to carrots.

The human brain shows curiosity towards opportunities but pays strict attention to threats. *The Gift of Fear* describes this in an articulate way:

> *"Nature's greatest accomplishment, the human brain, is never more efficient or invested than when its host is at risk. Then, intuition is catapulted to another level entirely, a height at which it can accurately be called graceful, even miraculous."* [23]

The limbic system of the brain is hyper-sensitive to any sign of danger—either physical or psychological. Anything perceived as a threat to our belonging, security or status will send us into a hyper-vigilant, protective state[24] and short-circuit our ability to perform complex tasks.

At Juice, we refer to these forms of threat as interference. The amount of human energy depleted by interference is difficult to calculate, but one thing is certain—energy is depleted.

Science explains why. When the brain experiences interference, its sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is triggered and the fuel-hungry fight/flight response rapidly depletes your energy.[25] But when the brain senses interference being removed, its energy conservation system, the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), kicks in and your energy stores are conserved and rejuvenated.[26]

How does this show up at work?

Here are a few interference examples—that is, subtle, psychological forms of threat—that happen to employees in everyday organizational life:

- Working in fear, due to the threat of being bullied
- Self-doubt stemming from feeling judged or evaluated
- Unresolved conflict, team tension, and/or being ostracized or excluded
- Feeling unappreciated or unduly criticized
- Carrying more than their share because underperformers are not being dealt with
- Being in "overwhelm mode"—juggling too many competing priorities
- Lack of clarity around what is being expected from them

Because the human brain is hypersensitive to threat, negative events at work have five times more impact on employee performance than positive events.[27]

Leaders underestimate the powerful impact of interference and gravitate to cheerleading activities (or "carrots") like recognition and reward programs, incentives, inspiration and training to boost motivation. If you're not dealing with interference, these things act like fossil fuel: they produce a fast burn, a short spurt of momentum and a corrosive ecosystem.

Why does this matter?

If interference is not removed, it won't matter how hard employees try to fuel themselves: their energy will simply drain out faster than can be managed. Moreover, motivational tactics will begin to be viewed cynically by employees as pay-off bids. The result? The highly engaged become the highly suspicious and highly frustrated.

Entropy is the enemy of energy. So the first principle of energy management is to identify energy leaks and patch the holes.

Big gains occur when managers learn how to partner with employees to identify and remove the interference that short-circuits performance.
(Read the Case: 30-Minute Conversation - 7 Million Dollar Impact)

Go Beyond Engagement: Focus on sticks, not carrots.

8 *Meet Needs,* not Scores

What's the Brain Science?

Your brain makes decisions for emotional reasons, and then justifies them with rational ones.

The emotional brain acts as the inner arbiter in every decision we make. You may think that reason is in the driver's seat and emotion is in the back seat - offering a preference here and an opinion there - but nothing could be further from the truth.

Over 20 years of science shows us that, when it comes to decision-making, emotion is in the driver's seat in ways you could hardly imagine.[28] It's not that reason isn't involved, it clearly is, but simply to defend and justify the conclusion that emotion has already decided.

How does this show up at work?

Employees have emotional needs that drive their decisions[29] —needs that feel as vital and urgent to them as their need for oxygen. As such, employees' behaviours can best be described as an attempt to get their emotional needs met.

Employee behaviour is the result of Five Driving Needs:

1. **Belonging**—acceptance and inclusion, identification and "insider-ness," relatedness and intimacy, connection and fit.

2. **Security**—safety and protection, predictability and control, consistency and clarity, order and structure.

3. **Freedom**—autonomy and independence, mind and psychological "space," decision-latitude and support, variety and change.

4. **Significance**—respect and value, affirmation and acknowledgment, success and achievement, challenge and growth, efficiency and productivity, excellence and distinction, power and status.

5. **Meaning**—purpose and making a difference, understanding and connecting the dots, justice and fairness, altruism and service, creating positive change and inspiration, moral and ethical correctness.

Every score on your employee engagement survey is simply an indication of whether your employees feel these five needs are being met or not. The challenge (and the opportunity) is that every employee has one or two needs that matter most to them in a specific situation.

Current engagement strategies focus more on fixing scores than discovering the unmet needs of employees. Unmet needs trigger a predictable reaction: de-energized employees with a stunted executive function act out in unskillful ways to try to get those needs met.

Why does this matter?

When managers stop focusing on engagement scores and learn how to help employees get their driving needs met, this releases energy and pre-empts the interference that:

- Depletes employee energy
- Spawns frustration
- Short-circuits employee performance
- Erodes employee experience
- Corrodes the customer experience
- Consumes the manager's time

When employees' felt needs (vs. wants) are met, this generates a cycle of healthy decisions, reduced interference and sustainable energy that powers up performance.

Go Beyond Engagement: Meet needs, not scores.

9 *Trust Conversations,* not Surveys

What's the Brain Science?

"High-performance hormones" flood your brain when you have meaningful, face-to-face conversations.

The emotional centers of our brains are electro-chemical conduits through which we relay emotions to each other. So if strong emotional currents of value, respect and care are truly present within one person, those currents are emotionally telegraphed to another—priming positive emotions that release a flow of three high-performance hormones: dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin.[30]

These hormones boost the brain's processing power because they form an energy cocktail of connection, calm, concentration, creativity and curiosity—basically Miracle-Gro for the brain.

I said earlier that the executive function of the brain drives innovation, and it runs at full capacity only when it has an ample supply of energy. The generation of human-to-human energy is neither ethereal nor mysterious. In fact, it can be mapped inside the brain. Energy is generated electro-chemically, as hormones are released through quality conversations.

Your circulatory system is a closed-loop system. If it wasn't, things would be very messy. Meanwhile, your limbic system (the emotional center of your brain) is not as tidy: it is an open-loop system. This means that your emotions can be affected and even regulated by others. Someone's tears, smile or disgust can trigger an involuntary sympathetic reaction in you.

Daniel Goleman cites studies in which scientists measure the heart rates of two people as they have a good conversation. At the beginning of the conversation, their bodies are functioning at different rhythms, but 15 minutes later "their physiological profiles look remarkably similar—a phenomenon called *mirroring*."[31]

Put people together in face-to-face conversations, and they regulate each other's emotions. This happens because our brains are equipped with mirror neurons that detect and reflect the actions, emotions and even the intentions of the people with whom we are interacting.

Our mirror neurons facilitate the open-loop system through which we imprint each other with emotions.[32] They provide a portal of rich connection, a wide-open conduit of unconscious human

interaction. This emotional super-highway enables us to trigger a flow of high-performance hormones in each other that can draw out people's best thinking.

How does this show up at work?

Many of today's leaders don't recognize that it's *conversation and relationships*—not surveying, presenting data and unveiling action plans—that create chemistry and energy.

Instead, leaders rely on the employee engagement machinery (the survey, the strategies, the town halls, the newsletter, and the departmental action plan) to track the health of their human capital. But by the time the data are published, the information is at best a lagging indicator of employee energy levels.

To compound this, by the time leaders hash out their engagement strategies and present them to employees, they are serving up a "reality" that is nine months old. Stale intel causes employees to turn up their noses and tune out.

However, the issue is bigger than the real-time integrity of your intelligence. You're trusting in your engagement strategies to boost engagement, yet they seldom do. Engagement is an inside job and it is generated one conversation at a time.

Why does this matter?

Engagement concerns that are reported and talked about at survey time—but left unaddressed throughout the remainder of the year—fester and simmer until they turn into "crucial," "fierce" or "difficult" conversations. By the time these issues become calamity-based, there's so much residue associated with them that a multitude of energy, time and mind-space have been sucked from everyone in the organization.

There's a much better way.

Leaders can garner vital real-time intelligence from having short, simple, systematic, energy conversations with their employees on an ongoing basis. Drawing out the leading indicators from these conversations is only half of the benefit—they're also instrumental in unlocking insight and possibility within employees' minds. This generates energy, fueling a great customer experience and great results.

Go Beyond Engagement: Trust conversations, not surveys.

10 *Challenge Beliefs,* not Emotions

What's the Brain Science?

Your brain does not allot you the resources to do something until you believe you can do it.

Dr. Shlomo Breznitz is an expert on how beliefs drive behaviours. His large-scale study of elite soldiers revealed that performance is determined more by beliefs than skill, talent or experience.

Groups of soldiers tackled a challenging 40-kilometre march across the desert in full battle gear. All of the soldiers had successfully completed this distance in previous training. All of them were in peak condition. All of them were highly motivated. Despite all these commonalities, a vast performance gap was created when researchers messed with one variable: the beliefs of the participants.

A quarter of the soldiers were led to believe that more was being demanded of them than they could deliver. Despite their skill, experience and peak condition, a full third of this group dropped out of the march at 10 kilometers—*a distance they ran before breakfast each day*.[33]

Dr. Breznitz summed up the study:

> *"Our physical strength is not accessible to us if the brain does not believe in the outcome, because the worst possible thing for humans to do is to expend all of our resources and fail. If we do not believe we can make it, we will not get the resources we need to make it. The moment we believe, the gates are opened, and a flood of energy is unleashed."*

David DiSalvo, author of Brain Changer, says it this way:

> *"Despair is the belief that our situation cannot improve, and when we embrace this form of belief our brain responds by diverting energy away from action to improve our circumstances (because we believe it's hopeless) and into an eddy of negative rumination, fueling the downward spiral….Hope is the belief that our situation can and will improve no matter what, and when we fully embrace it, our brain responds with a deluge of mental energy to enable reaching the hopeful outcome."* [34]

Think of your brain as a Dragon's Den or a Shark Tank judge. It demands a sure bet and only doles out resources when it senses a high degree of confidence. If the brain detects doubt and uncertainty, it sends you away empty-handed.

How does this show up at work?

This brain truth helps us understand why employee engagement has failed to deliver. When managers and employees set out to execute on the strategies emerging from employee engagement surveys, they face roadblocks, set-backs, time constraints, priority shifts, information overload and change-fatigue. If they are low on self-efficacy they will lack the agency required to overcome these challenges.

The cure for low self-efficacy lies hidden in an unexpected place: your beliefs. It's not your capability that produces self-efficacy, but your belief in your capability. There are all sorts of capable people who fail to do what they're capable of doing because of self-doubt, second-guessing and frayed confidence; they simply don't believe they can.

Engagement initiatives don't stall because managers and employees don't care or aren't good-hearted. They stall because people are low on self-efficacy—they lack the agency required to follow-through and go the distance on engagement strategies. [35]

When managers have one-on-one and team energy checks with employees, they quickly uncover where agency is lacking in the organization:

- Employees feel disrespected and bullied by a talented but toxic leader but seem incapable of challenging this behaviour.
- Two VPs won't communicate and it creates a bottleneck; employees can't seem to figure out how to get the information they need.
- Priority creep leaves employees overwhelmed and they don't know what they can or can't take off their plate when an urgent timeline has to be met.
- An under-performer enjoys immunity and protection from a senior leader. Team members feel the injustice of this but are at a loss as to how to address the situation.

When removal of blockages requires influence that extends beyond someone's authority, will they take an initiating stance or wring their hands in hopelessness? The answer to that question is decided by self-efficacy: the belief that one is capable of achieving the task.

Why does this matter?

Everything I've said about conversation as an operating system comes to bear here. Energy check conversations create a natural entrée to challenge and shift the unhelpful beliefs of employees and to nudge them to higher levels of self-efficacy.

Managers need to become skillful at challenging people's beliefs, not their emotions. Employees can't change the way they feel—our emotions are a natural physiological response, hard-wired to our beliefs about a situation.

If your employee believes that the questions her co-workers are asking her in a meeting are intended to make her look stupid, emotions of defensiveness will automatically register in her body and her mind.

She is not responsible for how she feels—she *is* responsible for how she responds. And (surprisingly enough for some employees) she is also responsible for what she believes.
So when managers do energy checks one-on-one or

with their teams, they become increasingly skillful at acknowledging emotions and challenging beliefs. They:

- Partner with their employees;
- Step into each other's world;
- Draw out what matters most;
- Identify common ground and;
- Pull out a bigger reality—a belief that's more reliable than either the manager's belief or the employee's belief in isolation.

We've explored the energy check as a short, systematic way of identifying an employee's driving needs. Drawing those needs to the surface and harmonizing them with your own needs requires some conversational skill.

But while it's necessary to harmonize competing needs, it's not enough. Getting *Beyond Engagement* requires that you learn how to harmonize competing beliefs as well. Why? Identifying needs without increasing the self-efficacy to get them met will only lead to frustration.

This final brain science truth brings us full circle. The first brain science truth revealed that the power tools of the brain cease to function without energy. Now you know that it's not only people's energy, but their beliefs that unlock those valuable (and metabolically expensive) resources.

Go Beyond Engagement: Challenge beliefs, not emotions.

CONCLUSION

For many organizations, it is time for a survey sabbatical. The machinery of employee engagement has promised much but delivered little. Organizations can achieve what they started out to do by taking a more humanizing (and more sensible) approach. Short, simple energy conversations provide the human magic that makes employee engagement sustainable. These energy conversations are the operating system of the organization:

- Drawing out the real-time intel about what's working and what's not
- Generating energy by meeting felt needs and removing interference and
- Re-calibrating the unhelpful beliefs that thwart the vital sense of agency.

If the thoughts in this white paper have been provocative and intriguing for you, we ask you to forward them to your colleagues and begin a dialogue about this topic amongst your fellow leaders.

Does your workplace need some "energy" (Juice)?

We would love to partner with you! Contact us at ***www.juiceinc.com***.

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Juice Inc. clients think of Juice as their performance partner. Juice believes energized and engaged employees fuel great customer experiences and better business results. That's why Juice focuses on ideas, skills and tools that people can put to use immediately. The organizations Juice partners with get committed people who own the results!

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