



POSITIVE ACCOUNTABILITY:

AN ALTERNATIVE TO EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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2025

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We've got it all wrong. What is it? It's you. The employee. The manager. The organization. Since the early 1990s, we've believed the narrative that employees are disengaged at work. It tells us that it's the manager and organization's fault for not doing more to make us engaged. We've built a multi-billion-dollar industry researching, studying, and teaching us how to help others be committed and engaged at work. The result? We're still not.

According to Gallup, only 26% of employees rated themselves engaged in 2001. In 2023, over 20 years later, the percent engaged has only risen to 33%. And, while Gallup's Best Practice organizations clearly scored higher with the percentage of engaged employees, these organizations are but a precious few and for how long can they sustain the efforts and money needed to keep people engaged? What happens when they stop?

There is a saying that goes, "If what you are doing isn't working, maybe it's time you try something different." Why then, do we continue to pump billions of dollars into the employee engagement industry and expect different results? Perhaps everything we think is different is just the same thing repackaged and repurposed. The narrative doesn't make sense.

"We have urged leaders to be role models, have vision, be situational in their treatment of subordinates, and take responsibility for the well-being of those they lead," writes Peter Block in *Confronting Our Freedom: Leading a Culture of Chosen Accountability and Belonging*. "Our training of managers reflects this. We invest freely in techniques and skills that improve supervision, that train them to motivate and reward employees to achieve organizational outcomes. Employees have been defined as the problem and management as the solution."

All the how-to books have been written and yet, employees are still not engaged. As a former consultant in the field, I've read the books and taught the workshops. And, in all these workshops, there was always one critical element missing. The employee. They were never in the room or any room. Instead, it was managers learning how to solve the problem of employee engagement. And despite all this problem-solving, employees are still not engaged.

It is curious then why organizations don't do more to solve the underlying problem. If indeed it is the case that the employee is the "problem to be fixed," why aren't we doing more to help them "fix" themselves?

"Instead of overseeing, creating visions, becoming a role model for the sake of subordinates, and, in essence taking personal responsibility for the well-being of subordinates, a key task of management would be to confront subordinates with their freedom," says Block. "We would treat those who work for and around us as people who are free and who are creating the world within which they live. In contrast to this, we now treat employees as children. No wonder our organizations evoke feelings of helplessness and entitlement."

It's a sobering consideration that instead of making our employees enthusiastic about work, we have instead nurtured cultures of helplessness and entitlement. However, it makes sense. For if not, wouldn't we be more committed to our organizations by now?

Look at any employee engagement survey and notice the tone of the questions. Here are some examples:

- The leaders at my company keep people informed about what is happening.
- The leaders at my company have communicated a vision that motivates me.
- I receive appropriate recognition when I do good work.
- My manager has shown a genuine interest in my career aspirations.
- I have the opportunity to do my best every day.

None of these in and of themselves are "bad." Who wouldn't want to be informed, feel recognized and have the opportunity to do their best at work? They are, however, dependent on someone else doing something for you or to you. And when they don't, you are helpless in doing anything else other than being disengaged. There is no room for the idea that I, as an employee, can do for myself. For once I decide to do so, there is no one else to blame, nowhere else to hide and no one else to make me feel committed to the organization.

Herein lies the problem for organizations and managers. What happens when we stop seeing employees as the problem and invite them to be free? Free to ask what is happening at work, free to ask for what they want, free to chart their career and free to create a world in which they wish to inhabit. What happens when we move from doing things to and for our employees to by and with them? "Facing our freedom and the consequences of this is really the hard work," Block says. Not only is it hard, it's also not free. "There is a cost to an organization committed to the freedom of its members, and that is the anxiety and seeming unpredictability that this carries. We would have to confront our own need for control at a deeper level and, more important, confront our own lack of faith in the possibilities of people around us. We are each afraid of our freedom, and thus we are afraid of the freedom of those around us. Especially when we are in a workplace that has goals, deadlines, boundaries, and an infinite number of restraints."

Ultimately, it is fear that is making us disengaged at work. And, when we are afraid, we resist. We retreat. We relinquish our control and put it in the hands of others who are almost certainly bound to disappoint. It's why employee engagement, as we know it, isn't working. True, we can get a short-term boost of love for work, but eventually, all the gifts will never be enough. We will always be disappointed when we count on someone else to engage us.

There is an alternative.

Cultivating a Culture of Positive Accountability

We can embrace an “entrepreneurial mindset” where we ask employees to take responsibility for their own actions and their own unit and to create an organization of their own choosing where we encourage decisions from within the team. In lieu of being the expert, managers contract with employees as the ultimate source of what actions will best service the business. And, as such, managers contract with themselves, as an employee first, dedicated to creating an environment where such actions can thrive. In lieu of employee engagement surveys, perhaps we regularly and routinely ask questions of ourselves such as these from Block’s book, *The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters*.

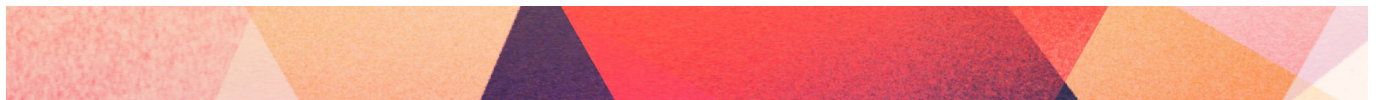
Questions designed to set us free.

- What refusal have I been postponing?
- What commitment am I willing to make?
- What is the price I am willing to pay?
- What is my contribution to the problem I am concerned with?
- What is the crossroad at which I find at this point in my life/work?
- What do we want to create together?
- What is the question that, if I had the answer, would set me free?

Organizations can create a setting in which people put passion, energy, excitement, and motivation into their work. In *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work*, Block writes, “More time than we would like to admit, managers talk about lighting a fire under their employees. As if motivating employees were a special task of management. It is not. People have within them the capacity to want to be self-motivated. The managerial task is to support this occurring.”

We can stop talking about what we have to do and instead talk about what we want to do. When we ask people to make choices and to take responsibility for their actions, they are required to state their own wants. To create an organization that values choice and interdependence, we ask people to choose, to express their wants directly and simply. “Committing ourselves and doing what we want to do is not an act of self-indulgence or entitlement,” says Block. “We have to believe that people care about the organization, they’re committed to its goals and purpose, and their deepest wish is to contribute something meaningful.”

To realize this vision or any vision of possibility, we need the support of those around us. We do nothing alone. Convene, don’t just meet. The need for interdependence and cooperation is ideally expressed by the idea that we are all partners in creating the business. Decide to build an organization on the positive view of human nature. People who do not want to take responsibility will find ways to avoid it but let them find that someplace else.



Instead, show up the way you want the organization to operate. Be authentic in your transactions. Instead of hedging your position for fear of being disapproved, make a point to let others know where you stand. Say no when you mean no. Share as much information as possible and stop hiding behind the notion that you are protecting others. Use language that describes reality, be vulnerable and avoid repositioning for the sake of acceptance. People need to hear both sides of the story – our certainty and our doubt.

An Act of Courage

“To commit ourselves to a vision of greatness, to live out that vision, and to claim our freedom in the process is no easy task,” says Block. “In almost every case it requires an act of courage.” Our choice to move ahead with a new mindset about work and what it means to be engaged at work is an act of courage.

It will require us to face the harsh realities of what hasn’t worked and when hit with these realities seek not to find refuge in “the way it’s always been done.” We must accept our own contribution the problems that we have helped to create by asking ourselves, “What have I done to get in the way?” And finally, we need to have the courage to say what needs to be said to those who need to hear it. This means putting into words what we see happening. Block explains, “Our caution in making direct statements hurts us much more than other people’s resentment at what we have to say. We often claim that top management is not communicating enough to us. They are not clear about where we are headed or facing the reality of what we are up against. It is not that they are not communicating; it is that they do not know. They don’t know because we don’t tell them.”

Ultimately, every act of creation is an act of faith, an act of courage. With this act of faith, perhaps we can begin to look at engagement differently, more courageously and with a greater sense of agency where we have control in our lives, the capacity to influence our own thoughts and behavior, and have faith in our ability to handle a wide range of tasks and situations.

As Block reminds us in *The Empowered Manager*, with this new mindset, we are empowered.

- We are the architects of our organizations, choosing their form and future. We are not just laborers, following another’s plans.
- We set goals that are unique and that no one else has achieved before in the same way.
- We choose the path of high resistance and live with the anxiety that it creates.
- We risk all we have. Not for the thrill of it, but because there is no safe path.
- We may be nothing more than a possibility. And that may be enough.
- We are interdependent and rational creatures. We do nothing alone and there are others with the same visions who are waiting for us right around the corner.

We are not a problem to be fixed. We are possibility.



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