

Two recent events have lead to this Post topic:

- reading [press reports](#) about a Gallup Study into global **workplace engagement**, and
- a colleague expressing their dislike for the 'politics' that happen in most workplaces.

I often hear comments about a dislike for 'politics at work'. My colleague's comment came at the same time that I read about the Gallup Study. This set me thinking about whether there was any connection between **workplace engagement** and **workplace politics**.

So, let's start with the [Gallup Study](#). This covers more than 140 countries, and was conducted from 2011 through 2012. Gallup CEO Jim Clifton's introduction begins with:

"The world economy isn't growing fast enough, and this is starting to cause some serious problems. One particular issue that comes to mind is revolution. Any number of countries suffering from low economic growth and high unemployment could explode in the next few years."

OK Jim, you have my attention!

Some details to ponder

The bottom line from the Study is:

- worldwide, only 13% of us are 'engaged' in our work,
- up to 24% of the global workforce are 'actively disengaged'.

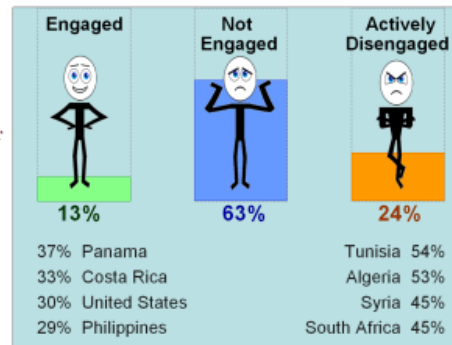
That means that +60% of workers are in the middle zone – they are 'not engaged'.

Employee Engagement

"... if organizations worldwide could find a way to double the number of engaged employees, it would dramatically improve their balance sheets and change the world's entire economic trajectory."

Source:
Gallup Global Workplace Report 2013

Global Engagement Levels



On a global scale, only one of every eight workers is engaged

- 'Engaged' means people who are committed to their work, who contribute to their organisation in a positive manner.
- 'Not engaged' includes people who have "checked out", they put in the time, but have no energy or passion for their work.
- 'Actively disengaged' people are emotionally disconnected, negative and potentially hostile about their jobs and organisations.

On a country-by-country basis these figures vary quite a bit:

- The Philippines has one of the **highest** 'engagement' levels (29%), close to the USA (30%), while Costa Rica (33%) and Panama (37%) take the **top** positions.
- The greatest levels of 'active disengagement' are found in South Africa (45%), Syria (45%), Algeria (53%), and Tunisia (54%).

Messages from the Study

The Study report "provides insights into what leaders can do to improve employee engagement and performance in their companies." Three particularly powerful statements that I noted in the report are:

- "... if organizations worldwide could find a way to double the number of engaged employees, it would dramatically improve their balance sheets and change the world's entire economic trajectory."
- "... **engaged workers** are at least 1.6 times as likely to be "**thriving**" in their overall lives as actively disengaged workers."
- "Great leaders know that the best way to get their customers engaged and spending more is to **ensure that their employees are engaged and aligned with their brand promise.**"

One of the messages from the report is that **workplace engagement is good for everyone** – workers, companies, customers, the whole world. Let's now move on to **workplace politics** (we will come back to **workplace engagement**).

Politics and people go together

Like it or not, we need to recognise that human beings "do" politics. It is a reality of human nature; wherever there are two or more people, someone will want to be the 'leader'. This not only happens in the workplace, it also occurs in families, in sports and community groups, and even amongst friends.

When it comes to **workplace politics** (or ‘office politics’), some of us shy away, while others are quite comfortable to participate. For many of us, how we react to **workplace politics** has a lot to do with our “**People Style**”. Personalities who are inclined towards competitiveness and risk-taking (Drivers, Expressives) may be more likely to participate than those who are inclined towards cooperation and avoiding risks (Genials, Analyticals).

Needs, Influence, Relationships, Culture

Workplace politics usually revolve one or more of the following:

- needs
- influence
- relationships
- culture

Let’s look at each of these, starting from the bottom.

Culture = “it’s how we do things around here”. It is another name for the ‘*unspoken rules*’ that apply in every workplace. Within an organisation, it is not uncommon to find variations of culture, as each team or workgroup can have their own behavioural characteristics.

Relationships are the links that we have with our co-workers, colleagues, contacts and connections. These networks generally apply at a personal level, although they can also work through another person. In the workplace, our ability to develop sound relationships can be critical to our success.

Influence is about our standing – our reputation – our ‘*personal branding*’. It is how we are seen, or thought of, by co-workers, colleagues, management, everyone. Influence can translate into ‘*power*’; depending on our personality we may (or may not) find this exhilarating.

Needs come in a number of flavours:

- **Personal** needs are about recognition, compensation, engagement, and so on.
- **Career** needs include things like training, experience, qualifications, etc.
- **Job** needs (for a particular role) can include skills and knowledge, tools and equipment, and an ‘*effective*’ work environment.
- **Group/team** needs involve achievement of measures such as goals and targets.

Invariably, instances of workplace politics originate in the ‘*needs*’ area. Occasionally, they may arise from a breach of ‘*culture*’, i.e. someone, often a ‘newbie’, does not conform. Within some organisations, a culture of competition for opportunity and promotion can give rise to rivalries, which may morph into politics.

To Avoid – or Not?

Most commentaries cast **workplace politics** in a negative light. This is largely because of how some people go about addressing their ‘*needs*’ – using their influence and relationships in a self-serving manner to gain *personal advantage*. Because **workplace politics** can become unpleasant, many of us may choose to avoid becoming involved.

Another perspective is offered by the November 2011 HBR Blog Post “**Stop Avoiding Office Politics**”. The authors note that if we withdraw from the ‘political games’, we make ourselves less effective than we could or should be. They also say: “*The right approach is not to avoid the politics but to take part in positive ways for good ends.*”

Joining the game

Workplace politics is mostly about developing personal influence and forming strategic relationships and alliances amongst co-workers, colleagues, and contacts. While many of us may not be comfortable with how some people go about this, the points made in the HBR Blog Post are important to take onboard.

By being aware that some degree of **workplace politics** is normal human behaviour, and by being aware of what is often behind instances of **workplace politics**, we can afford to become engaged in the action. In fact, much of this is aligned with “**Personal Branding**” – our reputation – our influence. Our ‘*personal brand*’ will help us to form relationships; and relationships help us when we are endeavouring to meet ‘*needs*’.



Rather than ignoring politics, we need to understand how to join in

Culture will play a part in how we go about developing and applying our influence; also in how we go about forming relationships and who we form them with. When we act within the cultural ‘norms’ of the organisation, our behaviour is unlikely to strain our relationships or diminish our influence. When our behaviour is outside the cultural ‘norm’, we may well encounter problems.

For a free nugget that outlines seven **Key Points** on how to join in and play the game, check out [Workplace Politics : Guidelines for Joining the Game](#) [downloadable .PDF file] from ZAP Nuggets.

Are Engagement and Politics in the workplace connected?

My answer is ‘*maybe, but not always*’.

The negative aspects of **workplace politics** will definitely cause some *engaged* employees to become unhappy, even to become ‘*not engaged*’. At the same time, ‘*actively disengaged*’ workers are likely to be involved in negative activities, including office politics that destroy trust and collaboration.

The **Gallup Study** did not go into specific causes behind the levels of ‘*not engaged*’ or ‘*actively disengaged*’. However, in his letter, CEO Jim Clifton did note:

“Great managers build development plans around every employee’s strengths. When employees work from strengths, nothing motivates them to achieve more.”

And: *“The problem is, too many companies focus on fixing weaknesses, and this only breeds non-engagement or, worse, active disengagement.”*

Key ‘take outs’

The key ‘take outs’ on all of this are:

Engagement: When there is **employee engagement** in a workplace, we find a win-Win-WIN situation – customers, employees, and organisations all benefit. Engagement is primarily ‘*employer driven*’ in that the organisation must first create the necessary conditions; once these are in place, employees can respond.

Politics: When we choose to avoid **workplace politics**, we become a loser – it is possible to join the game on our own terms, we just need to understand how. Politics is driven by both employers and employees; the biggest factor is organisational culture, especially where internal competition is openly encouraged.

Worth a look

[Navigating Office Politics | Leila's House of Corrections](#) [video - 3min:16sec]

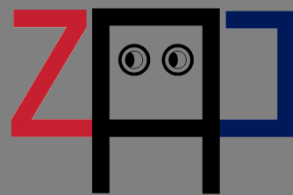
From BNET Video-- Uploaded on Mar 15, 2011

[Gallup poll: 7 of 10 Americans hate their job](#) [includes video - 2min:30sec]

From KING 5 News - Posted on June 25, 2013

Coming next: Building the New You – it’s about Personal Development

<http://freezapnuggets.com/wordpress/?p=686>



ZAPNUGGETS

Zap

A concentrated burst of energy or power.

Nugget

A piece of wisdom or knowledge that helps to inform, empower, motivate, or inspire.