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# **Employee Engagement**

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## **Learn to:**

- **Boost employee engagement levels, productivity, and creativity**
- **Create and sustain an engaging culture**
- **Attract and retain the best people**

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## Chapter 10

# Brandy, You're a Fine Girl: Driving Engagement through Branding

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Looking at the relationship between branding and engagement
- ▶ Defining who you are through your employee value proposition
- ▶ Branding internally and externally
- ▶ Using tri-branding to your advantage

A few years back, I was retained as a consultant for a retail chain (let's call it "Company X") that was struggling to engage its employees. To kick off the gig, we held a three-day meeting with Company X's leadership team — the first two days focused on operations, and the last day on engagement.

During the first two days of the meeting, I was deeply impressed by Company X's diligence in and approach to understanding its customers' demographics and buying patterns. The company used external research consultants, video-camera focus groups, internal research, customer interviews, and more to better understand who its customers were and what and why they were buying. They analyzed *everything* — from the size of the shopping cart to what happens when you move coffee or produce from one aisle to another. They understood when customers bought, what they bought, and when they stopped buying. They even understood these buying patterns relative to where product was placed in the store. "Wow!" I thought. "This company really gets it!"

Then came day three. That morning, the leadership team presented its engagement challenges. It turned out, their employees — or "associates," as they called them — were disengaged. Retention was a real issue. In fact, Company X had much higher voluntary turnover than its competitors.

To get to the bottom of things, I asked the leadership team why they themselves work for Company X. They stumbled through their answers. Next, I asked them why any associates might stay. Again, they didn't know. Finally, I asked them about their employment brand. They admitted they didn't really have one. See, this firm, like so many others, invested all its time communicating its product brand — “what we do.” But it had invested virtually no time communicating its employment brand — “who we are.”

Ideally, “what we do” and “who we are” will be like two sides of the same coin. In other words, the product brand will be linked to the employment brand. Take Apple. Apple hires the most creative people to make the most creative products. Similarly, BMW hires people who are driving enthusiasts to build the “ultimate driving machine.” And Southwest Airlines, which has positioned its product brand as being all about fun, hires people who have fun in their DNA. All these companies are great at linking their product brand with their employment brand. Not surprisingly, they also enjoy excellent employee engagement, not to mention business success!

In this chapter, I explain how branding and engagement are connected, walk you through writing an employee value proposition (which basically says who you are and why people should work for you), explain how to communicate your brand internally and externally, and introduce you to the power of tri-branding.

## *Better Relate than Never: Understanding How Branding and Engagement Relate*

So, what does branding have to do with employee engagement? Well, a few things:

- ✓ Identifying and communicating your brand is vital to ensuring that you hire the types of people who can succeed and be engaged at your firm. (For more on hiring for engagement, see Chapter 12.)
- ✓ Generation Y, soon to be the largest segment of the workforce (if it isn't already), is all about branding (see Chapter 8 for more info). That attitude informs what they wear, where they shop, what device they play, and what company, or brand, they work for. Understanding and crystalizing your brand will position you to find, retain, and engage this key workforce group.
- ✓ Building and branding a culture that is unique to your firm will enable you to leverage social media to engage customers, employees, future employees, and other key stakeholders with your brand.



In the past, companies sought out good employees. These days, thanks to the emergence of social media, the tables have turned. If you want your firm to win the “war for talent,” you’ll need to make sure employees (and customers) are able to seek *you* out.

## Hello, My Name Is \_\_\_\_\_: Defining Who You Are

Odds are, your employees — excuse me, your “associates” (or, if you’re Disney, your “cast members”) — can articulate what you do, the services you offer, and the products you sell. But can they speak to who you are, and why you’re a great employer? For many companies, this is an area of real struggle — and this struggle can lead to a lack of engagement.

To rectify this, you must identify your company’s employee value proposition (EVP) — that is, who you are and why people should work for you. Think of this as your “employment brand.” An EVP consists of a clear and compelling story that describes, among other things, why people want to work for your firm, key points that differentiate your firm from its competitors, and a message that resonates with and engages staff. If your firm has an engaging, healthy culture, developing an enticing EVP is a breeze.



Every firm should crystallize and document its EVP. An effective EVP includes the following:

- ✓ A clear and compelling story that describes why people want to work for you
- ✓ Key points that differentiate your firm from its competitors
- ✓ A theme that prompts candidates to self-select in or out (A strong EVP helps to ensure the “right” people seek out your firm and helps to discourage those who simply aren’t a fit from applying. Let’s face it, the Marines aren’t for everyone — which is why their EVP is all about being one of “the few.”)
- ✓ A message that resonates with and engages existing staff

That last point is key. It’s how you know your EVP is accurate. That said, the EVP doesn’t have to be based strictly in reality. It can be equal parts reality, aspiration, and inspiration.

So, how do you define your firm's EVP? Follow these steps:

**1. Create a committee of key employees.**

This committee should be a diverse group of people, representing marketing, HR, operations, and leadership. If you're a small organization, start with you and two or three of your key people.

**2. Make a list of high-performing employees who have excelled within your culture.**

**3. Identify the behaviors and traits that are shared among these high-performing employees.**

For help, read the section "Trait Up: Pinpointing Key Behaviors and Traits," later in this chapter.

**4. Conduct a series of interviews with these high-performing employees.**

Ask them such questions as the following:

- Why do you work here?
- Why do you stay here?
- What are the best things about working here?
- Why do people leave competitors to join us?
- What makes this firm unique? (For more info on this point, see the upcoming sidebar.)

Don't get too caught up in what your firm does. The idea is to pinpoint what makes you unique, what defines your culture, and why people jump out of bed to come to work in the morning.

**5. If you're feeling ambitious, conduct an employee engagement survey and/or pulse survey to help identify your EVP.**

For more info on employee engagement surveys and pulse surveys, see Chapter 3.

**6. Using information gathered in the previous steps, develop a draft EVP.**

Your EVP should also align with your firm's mission or purpose, vision, values, and strategy (see Chapter 5).

**7. Share your draft EVP with your leadership team, and work together with them to finalize the EVP.**

Here are a few examples of memorable EVPs:

✓ **Apple:** Think Different

✓ **Southwest Airlines:** Freedom to Travel Around the Country

✓ **Disney:** The Happiest Place on Earth



If your firm has an engaging, healthy culture — think Google, Apple, Nordstrom, Whirlpool, and so on — you'll find developing an enticing EVP quite easy. But what if your work is challenging or stressful? In that case, honesty is probably the best policy. Take this HELP WANTED ad, posted in 1914 by British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton, who sought men for an expedition to Antarctica:

Men Wanted for Hazardous Journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.

To say Shackleton's EVP was "not attractive" to many people is an understatement. But by being honest about the challenges — and about the possible rewards — Shackleton attracted 5,000 inquiries for the 27 positions on his vessel. Perhaps more important, Shackleton was able to use his HELP WANTED ad to frighten off those who were not fit for the journey and to attract those who truly identified with the role. Shackleton recognized that hiring the right kinds of people, with the right behaviors and traits (more on that in a moment), was critical to engaging a group of explorers to achieve success.

## Discovering what makes you unique

Although every company is unique in some way, most companies fail to identify their unique characteristics. Part of developing your EVP is pinpointing what makes your firm unique. One way to do this is to poll employees via surveys, exit interviews, and stay interviews. (For more on these, see Chapter 3.)

As you uncover what makes your firm unique, try to link your EVP to your firm's vision and purpose. If your EVP appears to be disconnected from your vision and purpose, you have a problem. Either you haven't captured the right characteristics or, well, you have the wrong vision and purpose. Figuring out the connection between your EVP and your firm's vision and purpose is important to establishing a line

of sight to connect and engage your employees to your brand.

**Remember:** Sometimes, merely identifying your uniqueness is not enough. Successful firms proactively *create* uniqueness. In the early days of Southwest Airlines, founder Herb Kelleher (no relation) created an EVP that was fun, and built his hiring and branding efforts around it. Even today, you will continue to see remnants of Herb's EVP on Southwest Airlines promotional materials, including the following passage:

Fun-LUVing Attitude: Don't take yourself too seriously, maintain perspective (balance), celebrate successes, enjoy your work, and be a passionate team player.

## Talking It Up: Communicating Your Employment Brand

Of course, it's not enough to develop your EVP, which you may think of as your employment brand. You must also communicate that employment brand, both internally and externally. If you commit to broadcasting to your employees and to the rest of the world why you're a swell place to work, in time, they'll come to believe it (assuming, of course, that it's true)! In this way, you can engage existing employees and entice the very best recruits, not to mention making the best possible impression on potential new clients!

Essentially, by communicating your employment brand, you foster pride in your company among your workforce. And trust me: That's no small thing. Indeed, according to a 2012 report by researchers at Dale Carnegie, "What Drives Employee Engagement," pride in one's organization is one of the top three drivers of engagement. (The other two, in case you're wondering, are satisfaction with one's immediate manager and trust and belief in senior leadership.)

Unfortunately, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, most employers spend the majority of their time crystallizing, branding, and communicating what they *sell*, not who they *are*.



Your organization's marketing team should be working hand in hand with your staffing and HR teams to publicize messages about your employment brand, both internally and externally.

### Branding internally

Early in my career, I came across a survey that ranked employers by "Best Employee Benefits." Surprisingly, the companies that boasted the best employee benefit programs were not the companies with the best employee benefits. Instead, the companies with the best programs were the ones that did the best job of communicating the benefits they *did* offer.

This study made a lasting impression on me about the power and impact of effectively branding a benefit (or message, initiative, idea, and so on). This is why I make a big deal about companies who conduct an employee engagement survey taking time to communicate to their employees their plans for revealing the results. Essentially, these companies are "branding" their efforts to disseminate the information. (Sadly, if employees don't hear updates, they tend to become a tad bit cynical and assume nothing is happening — which can lead to a lack of engagement.)

Repetition is key. There is a reason we connect Clydesdale horses with Budweiser, or talking geckos with Geico. We've seen these brands advertise so often that the animals have become synonymous with their products. The same goes for other types of branding as well — including your employment brand.

Sadly, many organizations spend countless hours on their external product branding efforts that they fail to communicate their employment brand on the inside. They underbrand their culture and EVP, while perhaps overbranding their services and products to the outside world. But the fact is, you must continually remind your employees of your firm's employment brand, or EVP. Engaged companies will practically scream "We're great!" over and over to their employees (even if that message is more aspirational than reality based). They know that employees and leaders both want the same thing: to work for a company whose culture rocks.

## *Branding externally*

You've identified who you are. You've effectively communicated that message internally. Now it's time for that message to reach the outside world.



This can happen in any number of ways. One is the traditional route — using mainstream marketing and advertising tools to publicize your employment brand. For example, a recent Walmart commercial focuses on a young employee, named Nathaniel, who views his job with the firm as an opportunity to move up in the world, noting that at Walmart, 75 percent of store management started as hourly associates. He goes on to say that he can use Walmart's education benefits to obtain a college degree. The ad ends with the tagline, "Opportunity. That's the *real* Walmart." Whatever your feelings about this corporate behemoth, there's little doubt that the ad effectively communicates an important aspect of the company's employment brand!

Other avenues for external branding include leveraging "Best Place to Work" surveys and awards and using social media. For more on these tactics, read on.

### *Leveraging "Best Place to Work" surveys and awards*

I know what you're thinking. "Best Place to Work" awards are akin to popularity contests. And you're not the only one who believes that. I once heard an executive announce at an employee meeting, "We don't want to win a 'Best Place to Work' award. We want to *be* a 'best place to work.'"

Although I admire this executive's thirst for authenticity, I also think he was missing the point. The fact is, companies that pursue "Best Place to Work" status receive many tangible rewards . . . even if they don't win.



Here's one: The simple act of filling out a "Best Place to Work" survey provides companies with a quick snapshot of what's working and what isn't. Essentially, this acts as a benchmark for the firm's engagement efforts, and helps illuminate where you should be focusing your energy.

Here's another: Even if you know you have a lot of work to do before you reach top-50 or top-100 status, just the application process itself can become the push that the leadership team needs to embrace your engagement efforts. Indeed, "Best Place to Work" surveys, which are usually brief and inexpensive, often prompt a full companywide survey to gauge the pulse of your employees.

And if you win? What a branding opportunity! It's a well-known fact that companies that receive "Best Place to Work" status receive more résumés from qualified candidates than other firms in their peer group. Indeed, firms that make *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" list receive *twice* as many applications as firms that are not on the list. And how about this statistic: Edward Jones — which earned the top spot on *Fortune*'s list in 2002 and 2003 and, as of this writing, has been on *Fortune*'s list for 14 years running — now receives ten times more applications than it did before being named to the list! Moreover, according to Wayne Cascio and John Boudreau, authors of *Investing in People* (FT Press), these companies' employee turnover levels are less than half those of their competitors.

Being named a "Best Place to Work" also offers irrefutable evidence of your claim that you are, indeed, an elite employer. With "Best Place to Work" status in your back pocket, you can prove to employees and to the outside world that you're something special.



Bain & Company, a management consulting firm, has won several "top employer" awards. How do I know? Because Bain has rather intelligently featured this accomplishment on the main page of its website ([www.bain.com](http://www.bain.com)). It's literally *the first thing you see*. Clicking the link leads to a separate page ([www.bain.com/about/what-we-do/awards](http://www.bain.com/about/what-we-do/awards)) that lists the awards Bain has won — including, as of this writing, #1 "Best Firm to Work For" by *Consulting* magazine, #4 "Best Places to Work" by Glassdoor, #1 "Best Firm to Work For" and "Vault Consulting 50" by Vault, "Best Companies 2012" by *Working Mother* magazine, and "Best Places to Work for LGBT Equality" by Human Rights Campaign for Equality. What's particularly interesting about Bain is that its focus on "who we are" even takes precedent over "what we do."

### ***Accelerating your employment brand using social media***

Companies that can articulate their employment brand can take advantage of a great branding accelerator: social media. Enlightened organizations use this new technology to tweet, post, and blog about job openings, new hires,

internal thought leaders, company news, and how swell the company is to work for. Yesterday, a company could get away with telling the world what it does. Today and tomorrow, companies will be able to accelerate their branding by telling the world not only what they do, but also who they are . . . in 140 characters or less!

Of course, the use of social media isn't just limited to companies. Rank-and-file employees use it, too. For more on galvanizing your employees to use social media for the good of the firm, read on.

## *Tri-Angle: Understanding Tri-Branding*

One summer Saturday, I became irked with my kids. They were too busy with friends and other activities to hang out with their mother and me! In a huff, I headed to our local camping goods store, and \$3,000 later, I returned home with two new kayaks, oars, life jackets, and a roof rack for the car, with the goal of paddling the waterways every weekend with my wife. So, what if the kids no longer wanted to spend time with dear old Dad? I had a new hobby. Their loss!

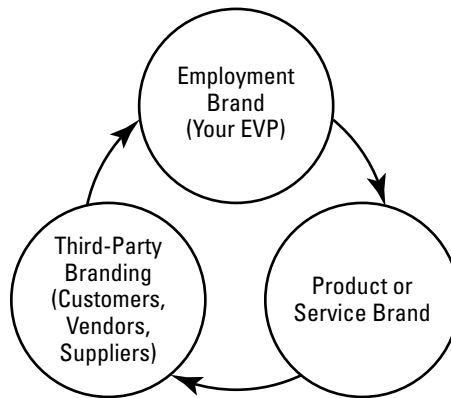
Naturally, this decision was made with my heart — but not so much with my head. I failed to factor in my wife's level of interest . . . or lack thereof ("You bought what?"), New England's short kayak season, the difficulty of getting the kayaks on and off the roof of the car, and so on. But I was engaged with the idea of kayaking. Ultimately, I taught my wife to kayak and worked through the logistic and seasonal issues, and today, we consider kayaking one of our favorite pastimes.

This example illustrates what happens when we make decisions from our hearts. Clearly, decisions made in this way aren't entirely rational or logical. So, what does this have to do with branding? Simply put, branding is a lot about capturing someone's heart. Consider Apple. Although Apple's star shines brightly today, it wasn't so long ago that Apple was on the brink of collapse as PCs were killing Macs in the marketplace. But Mac users had such a strong emotional tie to the Apple brand that they essentially kept the brand alive until Steve Jobs could launch iTunes, the iPod, the iPhone, and the iPad. Apple truly succeeded when its products captured both the hearts *and* the heads of consumers.

Employee engagement occurs when an organization is able to capture its employees' heads *and* their hearts. And how do they do this? By branding their EVP and effectively linking the firm's purpose, vision, values, and strategy to the firm's brand. This emotional connection is why an employee becomes a brand advocate for his or her employer.

In recent years, our society has become very brand conscious, thanks in part to the proliferation of social media on such sites as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Indeed, social media is an extremely effective tool for driving brand engagement internally, externally, and via your external stakeholders. This is at the foundation of what I call *tri-branding*. With tri-branding, companies link their product or service and employment brands, and then leverage employees, customers, and other key stakeholders to sing their praises (often via social media) or “live” their brand (see Figure 10-1).

**Figure 10-1:** Tri-branding means linking your employment brand, your product or service brand, and third parties.



Take my favorite case study, Apple. As mentioned, Apple excels at linking its product brand with its employment brand, and hiring the most creative people to make the most creative products. But that’s not all. Apple also excels at getting employees, stakeholders, and particularly customers to sing its praises and live its brand. Me? I’m a Droid user. But I’m consistently amazed by how many of my friends swear by their iPhones, and take particular delight when some feature on their phone trumps the same feature on mine. These people actually *live* the Apple brand. They’re both logically and emotionally attached to Apple.

Still don’t understand? Try asking your teenager if working at Burger King is cool. Odds are, she’ll say no. Then ask if it’s cool to work at Starbucks; I’m guessing you’ll get a different answer. Not to pick on the Burger Kings of the world, but why is Starbucks considered “cool” when other fast-food places, which pay similar hourly rates, aren’t? Simple: because of branding. This brand connectedness helps firms find and retain talent, while also boosting engagement levels. Whole Foods, Rackspace, Zappos, Southwest Airlines, Virgin Atlantic, Salesforce.com, HubSpot, Warby Parker — all these firms ooze coolness in their respective markets. They’re not just cool to their consumers; they’re also cool to their employees and to other key stakeholders. This linkage is what defines tri-branding.

## The growing importance of Klout scores

Not sure who your connectors are? Fortunately, there's an easy way to find out: checking your employees' Klout scores. A Klout score is a statistical score from 1 to 100 that ranks people on such variables as how many people they reach through social media, how trusted they are, and on what topics.

As noted by Klout CEO Joe Fernandez, "Influence has really become the currency of

the social web, and Klout is the standard measurement for that." Don't believe him? Consider this: Recently, when advertising for a community manager position, Salesforce.com listed "a Klout score of 35 or over" as one of the desired skills. Clearly, there is a shift underway. *Fast Company* put it this way: "The line is quickly blurring between the value of what we know and who we know."

## *Enlisting your employees as brand ambassadors*

Sure, it's great when your company uses social media to broadcast its employment brand. But what's *really* great is when a company's employees use these technologies for the same aim — particularly when those employees are what author Malcolm Gladwell calls "connectors" (see Chapter 2).

According to Gladwell, connectors are people "with an extraordinary knack of making friends and acquaintances." If the whole "six degrees of separation" thing is true — that is, the notion that everyone on the planet is connected to everyone else by six degrees — it's in part because of connectors. These people often have very large social and professional circles. And when they tweet or post good things about your company, a lot of people will see it. In effect, an engaged connector becomes a brand ambassador of sorts.

Think about it: Including nieces and nephews, there are about 30 Kellehers in my family. Counting them, my neighbors, and my friends, my inner circle reaches approximately 100 people. Back in 1995, if I liked (or didn't like) my employer, my boss, the restaurant where I just ate, the movie I just saw, or the store I just visited, my reach to communicate those feelings was limited to this 100-person circle. Today, my reach — and your reach, and the reach of your employees (as well as your customers and key stakeholders) can be in the thousands or tens of thousands. And if someone is a connector, that person's reach might be in the hundreds of thousands or even in the millions!

Of course, in order for your firm to leverage your connector employees' networks, those employees must know your employer brand, or EVP, inside and out. That's another reason your internal branding efforts are important: They

enable you to clearly communicate this information. The internal piece is necessary to ensure consistency and accuracy when tackling external branding.

Incredibly, many companies fail to see how valuable their own employees are when it comes to social media. Some even go so far as to prohibit its use. Why? Because they're afraid of employees saying the wrong thing, badmouthing the employer, inadvertently sharing information that should remain private, and so on. These concerns are legitimate — after all, employees can and sometimes do say negative things about the company they work for, especially if they work in a toxic culture — but the fact is, social media is not going away. Particularly if you want to engage Gen Y employees, you'll need to put on your big-kid pants and deal with it.

If you're over 50, you may remember when companies locked employees' rotary telephones so they wouldn't "steal" company resources by calling their friends and relatives. Those over 35 probably recall restrictions on e-mail use, the concern being that employees might steal the company's intellectual property. Nowadays, these concerns seem silly. Odds are, in time, the same will be true of concerns over the use of social media.



Even if you don't embrace and leverage social media, your departing employees probably do — and they may well rake your organization over the coals when they leave!



Your employees can either be brand ambassadors or brand naysayers. As the war for talent continues to heat up, it will be increasingly difficult to find good people. Those select firms that have a sea of employees singing their praises will be in a far better position to hire and retain the best. Employees who are engaged are more likely to "brand" you as a great employer. And employees who aren't engaged? Well, you get the picture.

One more thing: Employees don't just communicate with people outside your company. They also communicate with each other. In the mini-society that is the workplace, attitudes, be they good or bad, are infectious. If your brand has negative connotations internally, you are facing an uphill battle in engaging employees. Your employees are the first-line consumers of your message, and their perceptions and emotional responses are profoundly important!

## ***Making sure your customers sing your praises***

Earlier, I mention that Apple is great at getting customers to live their brand. But it's not the only one. BMW, Southwest Airlines, Harley-Davidson — these are all companies whose customers live their brand.

What's their secret? In a word, it's *engagement* — but in this case, customer engagement. Just as employee engagement is more important than employee satisfaction, so, too, does customer engagement trump customer satisfaction. A satisfied customer will supply a positive review of your company if asked, but an engaged customer will go out of her way to “brand” her satisfaction with your product. As an extreme example, a person who owns a Harley-Davidson motorcycle may be satisfied. But a person who has a Harley-Davidson tattoo on his forearm? That guy's *engaged*.



Here's an example of the power of an engaged customer. A few years back, a passenger on a Southwest Airlines flight made a video recording of an airline flight attendant singing a country song as part of her “buckle up” spiel. The passenger then uploaded the video to YouTube. Since then, millions of people have watched the video. Think of the marketing benefits, not just from a product branding standpoint but from an employment branding perspective. In addition to showing how fun it is to fly on Southwest, the video demonstrated that working for the company is so great, people sing on the job! And it didn't cost Southwest a dime.



Of course, disengaged customers are equally powerful. Take Dave Carroll, who spotted a United Airlines bag handler mishandling his guitar, causing it to break. Carroll sought reimbursement from United, but he received only denials and, ultimately, a rejection. Frustrated, Carroll wrote a song titled “United Breaks Guitars,” created a video for it, and uploaded it to YouTube. Soon, close to 13 million people had watched it. Carroll subsequently appeared on several major media outlets, released follow-up videos, and even published a book. United, on the other hand, faced a PR nightmare. In the end, United was forced to offer an apology and reimburse Carroll for his loss. Oh, and the company now includes “United Breaks Guitars” as a customer-service training video.

The point? Social media is not going away . . . and if you don't take control of it, it can take control of you!

## ***Leveraging other stakeholders in your tri-branding efforts***

In addition to leveraging engaged employees and customers in your branding efforts, you should also leverage your organizational stakeholders. These include vendors, applicants, the media, contractors, former employees, the government, colleges and universities, local civic organizations, and the community as a whole.

For example, if you want to rehire a former star employee, are you making an effort to stay in touch with that person, perhaps via an “alumni newsletter”? Are you showing your best face to applicants who don’t get hired but may someday be customers? Are you a good corporate citizen and neighbor? Do you engage your vendors and consultants and treat them like true partners?

If you answered “yes” to these questions, then you may well be the beneficiary of effective tri-branding. If not, you may never know how your brand is being tarnished — and how that affects your employees’ levels of engagement.