



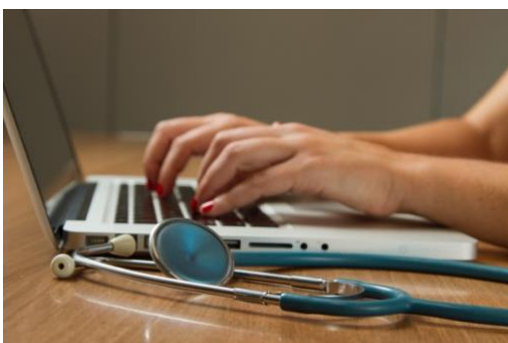
Understanding What Really Matters to Your Employees

The Covid pandemic and its associated disruption have been a good reminder of the importance of having employees who are engaged. Of course, many organizations were already aware of the value of this and work hard at creating an environment that supports engagement, for example, over \$1 billion was spent in the US alone in 2017 on staff engagement (Deloitte, 2017).



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A major part of this focus on staff engagement is its measurement, with most efforts directed towards measuring the level of individual employees' engagement (Attridge, p.385, 2009). Here there are a plethora of surveys where employees are asked to score themselves and their colleagues against a series of questions, which are then amalgamated into an overall rating for the organization. Some of the leading approaches here include The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), the Gallup Q¹² and various 'people analytic' surveys designed in-house, such as those applied by Google as part of its project Oxygen. These quantitative methods of measurement have become the go-to method for many organizations in their desire to understand employee engagement and they are now nearly ubiquitous.



Of course, employee engagement is a vital aspect of building a successful organization, however, the focus on engagement may lead to other more critical issues being hidden or completely missed. Fortunately, there are alternatives ways to gauge how people are feeling and more importantly experiencing working in an organization. Here I want to make the distinction between how employees feel and how they experience their work. Unquestionably, how people feel is an important issue and influences strongly their behavior and their decision-making at work. Understanding their experience on the other hand is a much more holistic notion, capturing not just the things

people like or do not like about their work, but all the activities, interactions, relationships and happenings that take place. Engagement surveys generally focus on the feeling aspect of employees, seeking to understand how they feel about their work, their colleagues, their manager and the overall culture. Investigating how employees

experience working at an organization can provide a far richer source of data for understanding what is going on and importantly what is happening. It is more than just a different approach to the engagement measurement narrative but a profound shift in focus, that can reward the curious organization willing to undertake this work with insights that can go far beyond simply improving the level of engagement of employees. To understand a little more what I mean here, I need to introduce the field of phenomenology.

What is the experience of work for people in your organization?

Phenomenology was developed in the early years of the twentieth century by Edmund Husserl, to make how we experience our world the center of inquiry. It is an approach to understanding the human condition by revealing and highlighting the phenomena that make up our lives, something Merleau-Ponty ([1962] 2010) explains in terms of trying “to give a direct description of our experience as it is” (Merleau-Ponty, [1962] 2010, p.vii). It does not seek to measure or quantify that experience, but instead it employs a qualitative method concerned with the “naturalistic or interpretation of phenomena in terms of the meaning these have for people experiencing them” (Langdridge, 2007, p.2).



The application of a phenomenological approach starts with targeted interviews of a representative sample of the employees. Doing this right takes skill and competence, and unlike some of the qualitative interview approaches used to gauge engagement, it is not as straightforward as simply asking a selected set of questions. However, when it is done correctly it provides a rich set of data that can be phenomenologically analyzed and the key themes that people are experiencing are revealed.

Trying to comprehend how someone is experiencing their work is a challenge ideally suited to using phenomenology. It is a way to achieve this without preconceptions nor misinterpretation. It answers the question what is it like to work here? However, when a phenomenological approach is applied the answers become much deeper and more comprehensive, providing a picture of the experience hitherto unknown. For an organization really looking to understand how their organization is functioning, the challenges the employees face and the things that really matter to them in their work it is perfect.

Given the benefits of this approach, one question that arises is why a phenomenological method is not applied more often? Here I have to speculate as there is little data to go on, but I would say that firstly there are few organizational development consultants that are familiar or have any skill in phenomenology. Phenomenologically trained consultants are a rarity. Secondly, many leaders are unaware of the phenomenological approach to understanding the experience of working in an organization and the benefits it can bring.

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To summarize, there is a lot of value still to be had in measuring employee engagement and for many organizations this may be sufficient. But for those looking to really understand what is happening, especially where there are concerns regarding staff welfare, attrition or low performance, then a phenomenological approach that is aimed at revealing the real experience of working is something that should be considered.

If you are interested in learning more what a phenomenological approach to understanding what it is really like to work in your organization then give us a call today.