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Living engagement

It starts with a simple conversation

by Alex Wray

Jan was devastated. She was used to being successful, but now she was failing. She had been with her organization for more than fifteen years and was widely respected as an expert in her field. Recently, her brilliance paid off; she was promoted to a senior leadership position.

During her first 360° review, she received considerable negative feedback from her direct reports. In addition, her team's results were lagging behind those of other business units. In an effort to support her, Jan's boss arranged for executive coaching. Jan's weakness with managing people quickly emerged as a core issue.

In their first session, the coach prompted Jan: "Tell me about your team." Jan listed their names. "There's Tim, Pat, and Sue." The coach continued, "But really tell me about each of them – what about their talents?"

Jan did not understand. "What do you mean? They're good at their jobs. We hire good people." The coach persisted. "But tell me, where do they truly excel?" Jan simply didn't know the answer. In an attempt to save face, she dismissed the discussion by tossing down her pen and exclaiming, "They're professionals. Why are we doing this?"

Jan's problem is not uncommon. Managers are often promoted because of their technical expertise, not their people-management skills. They are thrust into new roles as managers, and left to develop insights into employee performance and motivation almost entirely on their own, without any support, skill development, or even clear expectations.

This article presents one simple tool that new and experienced managers alike can use with their direct reports – improving not just the climate of the office, but also productivity and results.

Why bother to address weaknesses in people management?

In 1999, the world renowned research organization, Gallup, published the results of decades of research into the factors that drive exceptional performance. Their study confirmed what many already knew: an employee's relationship with his or her direct supervisor is the most critical factor in workplace satisfaction and productivity. We now call this engagement. The Gallup study also identified a direct link between the level of engagement and the bottom-line.

Gallup developed twelve questions to measure employee engagement. Of the twelve, they discovered that one in particular has the greatest potential to boost engagement: "At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day." In 2003, Benson Smith said in the Gallup Management Journal that "people's responses to that question link directly to their productivity, profitability, and customer-loyalty measures. The more people agree with the statement, the better their performance."

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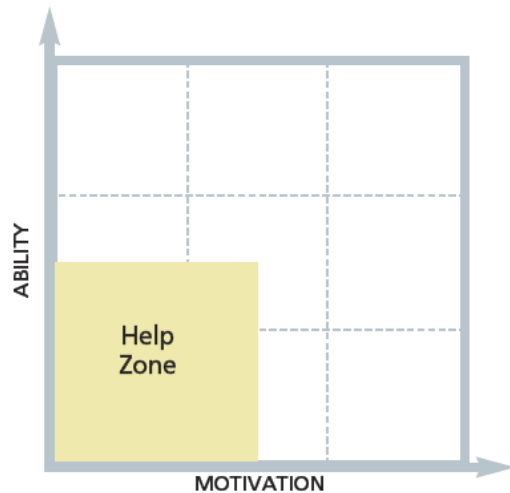
Workplace Applications

The Gallup research offers profound insights, but how can a manager like Jan capitalize on them? The Wray Performance Window™ guides manager and employee through a simple, focused conversation to identify exactly what the employee does best. However, the Window goes one step further, shining a light on not only what the employee does best, but also what he or she enjoys most. Armed with these insights, the Window guides a manager to capitalize on those strengths.

For any given task, an employee has a certain level of ability and a certain level of motivation. Together, these two elements create the Wray Performance Window™.

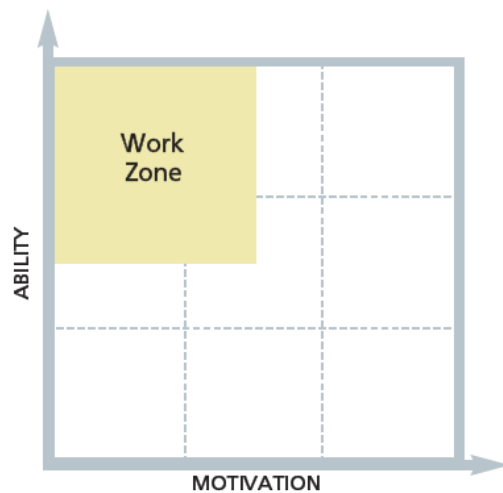
HELP ZONE – *Get this off my plate!*

We call the zone in which an employee has both low ability and low motivation the “Help Zone”. Employees tend to have low confidence when performing these tasks, and are generally happy to see them disappear. When managers discover tasks that live here, they should try to reassign them to other employees with higher ability and/or motivation on these tasks. When this is not possible, managers should provide enough support that the task eventually shifts to another zone, either through an increase in ability or an increase in motivation, or ideally, both. Left unaddressed, Help Zone tasks can become significant barriers to performance.



WORK ZONE – *This is drudgery for me.*

Tasks where an employee has high ability but low motivation are in the “Work Zone”. These “drudgery” tasks make work seem like a burden; the employee may be really good at them, but doesn't enjoy doing them. When possible, these tasks should be reassigned to another, more motivated employee. If that employee doesn't have the skills required, the original employee can act as a peer mentor. When reassignment is not an option, the manager has another powerful tool: empathy. By genuinely empathizing with the employee, acknowledging that the task isn't particularly engaging, and assuring the employee that whenever possible, he or she will not be assigned Work Zone tasks, the manager can still improve the manager-employee relationship. It is valuable to note that the manager can accomplish this without taking any action on the specific task assignment at hand.



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GROWTH ZONE – *I would love to learn to do this better!*

Tasks for which an employee has low ability, but high motivation live in the Growth Zone. These are the tasks that the employee is very keen to learn, and are thus outstanding opportunities for development. When managers offer skill development or coaching on these tasks, employees migrate up to the Love It Zone (see below), again optimizing engagement.

LOVE IT ZONE – *I love my job!*

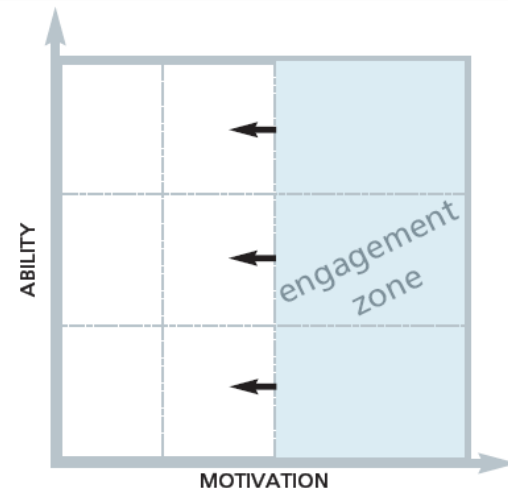
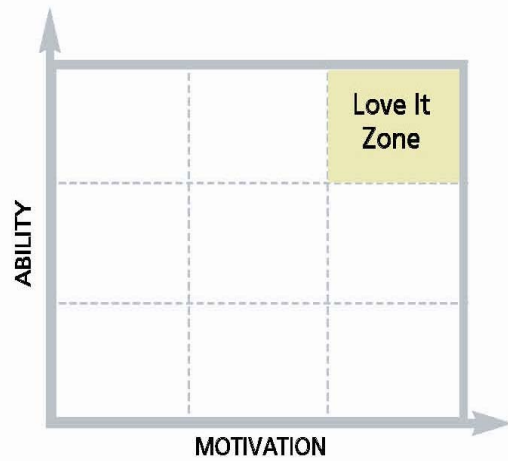
So-called “highly-engaged employees” identify the majority of their tasks in the Love It Zone. When an employee places a task here, the manager should seek to understand why, and then seek out future opportunities and tasks that meet the same criteria. This is the essence of great management. When employees feel both highly able and highly motivated, they love their work and are fully engaged.

This zone also holds opportunities for mentorship and peer coaching; the employee may be well-suited to teach others their Love It Zone tasks. The difference from the mentorship in the Work Zone, however, is that this teaching is not to escape the drudgery, but rather to champion learning.

ENGAGEMENT ZONE

Ideally, an employee's Window has very large Love It and Growth Zones, while the Help and Work Zones constantly shrink. As tasks in the Growth Zone are learned and mastered, they migrate up to the Love It Zone, and the Growth Zone tasks are repopulated as new interests and growth opportunities are discovered.

This simple tool guides conversations that provide managers with great insight into their direct reports. They come away with specific steps to increase engagement and foster genuine relationships. Even managers who worry about “people stuff” can excel at managing performance, whether formally or informally, when they have a clear framework for the conversation. The questions are given and the



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conversation is natural; the manager simply has to listen and then act accordingly.

This framework, however, is not to be mistaken for a script. The discussions that the Window evokes are genuine; there is no “technique-ing” here.

Once the Window has been introduced, the employee is also empowered to initiate conversations. The manager and employee share a common language and understanding of exactly how the employee views his or her work. This way, both can share the responsibility for constantly improving results through increasingly effective and meaningful work assignments.

Jan completed the Wray Performance Window™ with her team in two weeks. The conversations started easily, and Tim, Pat and Sue appreciated having “air-time” while Jan genuinely listened.

In the next coaching session, Jan remarked, “I was surprised at how natural and comfortable I was. My job as a manager just got a whole lot easier.”

Coach: “In what ways did it get easier?”

Jan thought hard, and then replied, “I now know how my people feel about their work. We’ve had an open and honest discussion about their abilities. By simply continuing to discuss their work through the Window, I know how to delegate and assign work to them. What’s best is that I know which tasks get them most motivated. When you know what makes people tick, it becomes a whole lot easier and more fun to lead them!”

Jan continued, “I’ve always wanted to develop people and be a good manager; I simply haven’t known how. I really feel that I’ve taken a big step forward.”

Alex Wray is the co-founder and principal of the Wray Group, an international management development and consulting firm located in Vancouver, Canada. Since 1993, they have supported clients, ranging from innovative niche players to members of the esteemed Fortune 20, to realize more of their potential. They achieve this through engaging people to the company priorities and objectives that matter most, and equipping each person to deliver results to the best of their abilities. Wray Group believes in focusing and optimizing the creative energy and spirit of people to achieve outstanding business results – transforming the “workplace” into a great place to work.

To learn more about Living Engagement and our training programs, visit our website at www.wraygroup.com, call us at 604-990-1321, or email clientservices@wraygroup.com.

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