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# Shades of Grey: An exploratory study of engagement in work teams

Dr Amy Armstrong, Sharon Olivier and Sam Wilkinson



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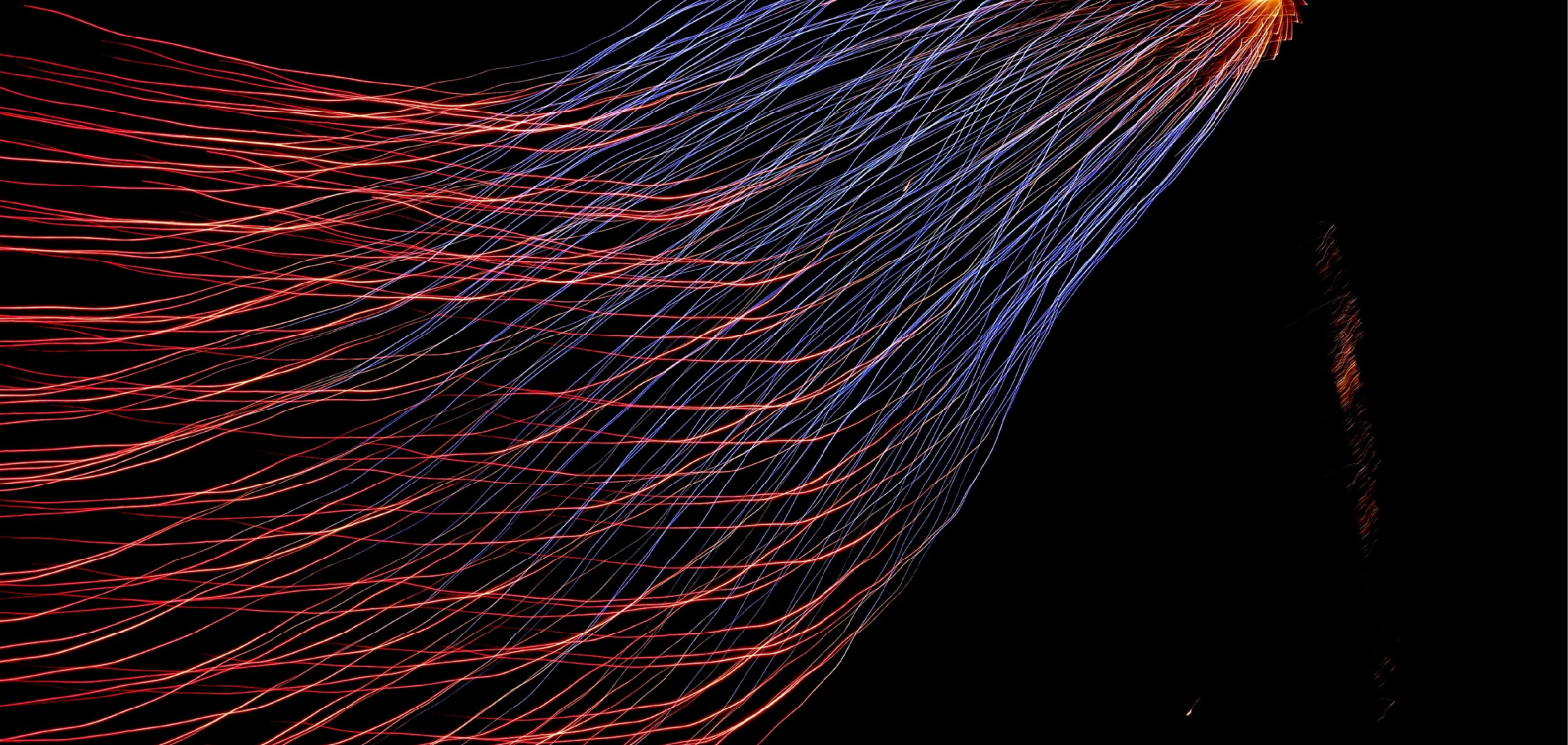
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# Foreword

It is now widely recognised that employee engagement is ‘a good thing’ and there is a wealth of evidence that suggests a link between levels of employee engagement and business performance. However, despite the general acceptance of this phenomenon, it does not appear to have translated into widespread improvements in organisational outcomes. National measures of performance and productivity remain stubbornly flat, which suggests that there may be issues concerning adoption or execution.

One factor to consider is the significant change to the world of work, brought about by the capabilities of new technology, such as the use of social media to promote a culture of sharing, connectivity and immediate feedback; the rise of the ‘gig economy’ and more flexible working arrangements; increased team and project-based work supported by methodologies such as ‘agile’ and ‘fast fail’ that promote rapid development cycles; and greater transparency of information with a focus on the use of data and evidence-based management.

These changes are challenging traditional models of leadership. Organisations are becoming less hierarchical, more egalitarian and collaborative, with performance now often being measured at the team level rather than that of the individual. As a result, the skills and capabilities of the team leader are more important than ever. Leaders need to demonstrate new skills, behaviours and ways of working that reflect the requirements of this new digital world.

Oracle is delighted to support this research. We believe that it offers a really valuable contribution to the debate about how to improve team and organisational performance as well as the working lives of employees.

Andy Campbell  
HCM Strategy Director  
Oracle

# Executive Summary

This study examines engagement in work teams. In what we believe to be the largest UK study of barriers to team engagement to date, researchers from Ashridge Executive Education at Hult International Business School on behalf of Engage for Success and supported by Oracle worked with 195 participants from 28 teams across seven industry sectors. When comparing work teams, our findings suggest that there are ‘shades of grey’ when it comes to team engagement, opposed to teams simply being either engaged or disengaged. As a result, we have identified four zones of team engagement:

### Zone of Contentment

Where team members do the minimum work required, operate within their capabilities, and go home happy. They do not seek stretch or challenge, and many of them have been in the team or organisation for a long time and are ‘holding out’ for retirement. Some do not believe that their work is a context in which they would ever feel engaged, with these people finding engagement in ‘causes’ outside of work.

### Zone of Disengagement

Where the work is seen as mundane, teams are inward-looking, seeing themselves as victims of a system that is defective in some way, and where there are cliques and high levels of mistrust between individuals. In disengaged teams, the team leader does not empower or appreciate team members and is often seen as having ‘favourites’ or treating people unequally, which perpetuates a negative team climate.

### Zone of Pseudo-Engagement

Where team members play the system to serve their own needs, for example, by stretching workload to fill time, or putting a positive spin on the team’s engagement, which does not reflect reality. Team leaders in pseudo-engaged teams are more interested in integrating themselves to senior management than being available for their team. In pseudo-engaged teams, people may be engaged individually, however they pull in different directions and there is little evidence of teamwork.

### Zone of Engagement

Where teams are proactive and solution-focused. In these teams, there is a positive atmosphere. Team members support each other personally and professionally. They feel trusted, stretched, empowered and valued and are clear about where their team fits in relation to the bigger picture. In engaged teams, members value diversity, see conflict as inevitable and healthy, and use disagreements as a source of creativity and insight.

This research challenges traditional binary notions of engagement or disengagement and questions if engagement surveys present the true story when it comes to team engagement. Our findings show that the three most important factors regardless of which zone a team is located in are: ensuring people are given challenging and varied work; working with trusted colleagues; and having a team leader who is trusted and leads by example. Our findings have been translated into a team diagnostic and our aim is to develop leadership programs to help managers to successfully lead teams to raise their collective engagement and team performance. This tool is freely available online.





# Introduction

The weight of evidence connecting engagement to improved organisational outcomes is clear. Companies with high levels of engagement experience 40% lower staff turnover than companies with low levels of engagement. Companies with top quartile engagement scores achieve 12% higher customer advocacy and twice the annual net profit than those in the bottom quartile (Rayton, Dodge & D’Analeze, 2012). Yet, for many organisations, high staff engagement remains out of reach.

Employee engagement has been a focus of attention within the HR community and among leaders for well over a decade, and interest in the topic among scholars and business professionals shows no signs of abating. In Google Scholar, the term ‘employee engagement’ yields over 850,000 results and according to EBSCO, a leading online reference system, 480 academic articles have been written on the topic in the past three years alone, yet most organisations are still not engaging their people. In Gallup’s (2013) state of the global workplace report, only 13% of people across 142 countries were found to be engaged in their work and the UK has the highest proportion of actively disengaged workers across Western Europe. We know that actively disengaged employees are potentially damaging to organisations. These workers tend to have higher rates of absenteeism, monopolise managers’ time and are vocal about their unhappiness, creating

a deleterious effect on those around them. If we are better able to understand why engagement levels are so low, and uncover we might do to address poor engagement, we have the potential to transform UK productivity.

This study, which was carried out by researchers from Ashridge Executive Education at Hult International Business School in partnership with Oracle and Engage for Success, sought to find out what gets in the way of engagement in work teams and what might be done to address barriers to team engagement. This research project focused on engagement at the level of the team since most existing studies have taken place either at an individual level (i.e. examining an employee’s relationship to their work), or an organisation level (i.e. measuring the connection between individual engagement and organisational outcomes). To

date, few studies have explored engagement in teams (Bailey, Madden, Alfes & Fletcher, 2017) and there is a shortage of studies that directly examine barriers to engagement at team level. We know that engagement occurs at a team level (Salanova, Llorens, Cifre, Martinez & Schaufeli, 2003) and the superior performance experienced by engaged teams is related to higher levels of customer care and customer loyalty (Salanova, Agut & Peiro, 2005).

Furthermore, in their 2018 Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte cite team leadership and team performance as one of the most important issues for organisations to address: “managing the external environment’s macro trends effectively demands an unprecedented level of cross-functional vision, connectivity and collaboration... in which the organisation’s top executives play together as a team while also leading their own functional teams, all in harmony” (2018:4)

Despite the time and resources invested and the hundreds of millions of pounds spent on leadership and team development, there is little to show when it comes to improving engagement levels (Morgan, 2017). Team engagement, therefore, is a topic that cannot be ignored.

This report begins by defining the concept of engagement. The report then outlines our approach to data collection and analysis. We then present our key findings and close with some suggested steps to tackle barriers to team engagement.







# Engagement – A Slippery Concept

There are a plethora of definitions and theories of engagement, yet there is still no universally accepted definition of what it means. One of the reasons for this lack of consensus may be due to its conceptual overlap with other concepts such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Saks & Gruman 2014). We know that engagement contains cognitive, affective and behavioural components, that is to say, it involves our attitudes and feelings towards our work and our behaviours at work. In this study, our aim was not to add further confusion by attempting to unpack the concept. Instead, we defined engagement in outcome terms as:

“An organisational climate where people choose to give the very best of themselves at work”

(Armstrong, 2013:2).

It is also important to distinguish between the concepts of satisfaction and engagement. Engagement is an active state that is related to productivity and innovation, where employees choose to ‘go the extra mile’ because they want to, not because they are asked. Satisfaction on the other hand can be seen as a passive state that is related to employee retention (Godding, 2017). Interestingly, of the teams in this study that were selected by their organisations as being ‘highly engaged’, 14% were in fact ‘satisfied’, and not engaged (see page 12 where we refer to this as the Zone of Contentment).

When it comes to team engagement, we know that both the way we are managed and our relationships with our colleagues are important. In their review of over 200 engagement studies, Bailey et al (2017) report that the extent to which we are supported, trusted and empowered by our manager; the support we receive from our colleagues; and how safe we feel to ‘be ourselves’ in our work teams are some of the strongest predictors of team engagement.



# What We Did

Over a period of two years, researchers from Ashridge Executive Education at Hult International Business School on behalf of Engage for Success and supported by Oracle led what we believe to be the largest study into barriers to engagement in teams by working with 195 participants from 28 teams across seven industry sectors. Organisations in the study spanned the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Private sector companies ranged from SMEs to UK-based multinationals within the transport, utilities, government, aviation, not-for-profit, chemicals and healthcare sectors. Consequently, we believe that the findings may apply to teams working in multiple sectors across Europe and beyond.

In each organisation, we compared up to four work teams; those that were perceived by their organisation to be highly engaged and those that were perceived to be disengaged. Teams were selected based on their engagement scores (i.e. teams that had achieved high or low engagement scores for at least two years). If engagement metrics were unavailable, we asked organisations to choose teams based on the presence or absence of the ‘four enablers’ (MacLeod & Clarke 2009). These being:

- ‘Strategic narrative’, (i.e. a clear organisational story that is understood by employees about where the organisation has come from and where it is headed);
- ‘Engaging managers’ (i.e. managers who take the development of their people seriously, provide stretch with support and give regular evidence-based feedback);
- ‘Organisational integrity’ (i.e. organisational values are reflected in day-to-day behaviours)
- ‘Employee voice’ (i.e. employees are listened to and their ideas taken on board).

To ensure we examined comparable teams, those selected were of a similar size, level and function. All of the teams in this study were ‘in-tact’ where team members work together on a regular basis. By focusing on the dynamics within comparable teams in the same organisation before comparing teams across organisations, we took steps to control for external factors such as organisation size or industry sector.

The research began in May 2016 with a pilot study among four teams in two organisations (these teams are not included within the 28 teams in the main data set). Following the pilot stage, the research approach was honed. For example, we ensured that in the main study we compared teams of a similar size, function and level so as to aid comparability. We also included new interview questions in the main study to allow us to better compare engaged teams with teams who faced challenges when it comes to engagement.

Data in the main study was collected via team meeting observations; face-to-face interviews with team leaders; focus groups with teams and self-report questionnaires. In the interviews, team leaders were asked to talk about their role and style when it comes to setting a climate for engagement and to discuss current engagement in their teams. In the focus groups, teams were asked to talk about their current levels of engagement, and what prevents them being more engaged as a team.



Teams were observed using a combination of the Johnson & Scholes (2008) cultural web and Laloux's (2014) levels of consciousness, as frameworks to analyse team climate. Five aspects of team climate were studied:

- Routines e.g. ways of interacting as a barometer of the 'emotional climate' within the team.
- Stories e.g. stories of success or failure which serve to reinforce team identity.
- Power structures e.g. evidence of status or hierarchy within the team.
- Systems e.g. internal measures and reward systems to drive and reward performance.
- Symbols e.g. language used by the team which may reveal underlying assumptions.

Despite its systemic approach, this study has several limitations. Firstly, teams were largely identified via their employee engagement scores, however it became apparent that the engagement survey data may not have been an accurate reflection of team engagement. For example, 14% of the teams that were selected by their organisations as being highly engaged were in fact found to be 'contented'. Approaches to data collection in this study also had their limitations. In some focus groups, for example, team members were reticent to talk openly in front of their colleagues. To tackle this concern, we refined our approach in the main study by offering teams the opportunity to speak to us on an individual basis. Given the scale of this study, data was collected by a total of six researchers. In order to ensure consistency and support, two researchers worked together in each organisation. All six researchers followed the same research protocol and de-briefs were conducted following each stage of the fieldwork. In the data analysis phase, all transcripts, as well as team observation notes, were shared across the research team.

Thematic analysis was conducted individually then collectively by the research team. Numeration (i.e. the frequency in which a theme appears across the interview transcripts) was the criterion that was used to pull together the final set of themes, since numeration is one way of indicating their relative importance (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Consequently, the themes that are presented in the following section are presented in order of prevalence.



# What we found

When we compared work teams across all organisations in this study, a more complex picture than teams being simply engaged or disengaged was revealed. (To re-cap, our study defined engagement as a team climate in which people choose to give the best of themselves at work, Armstrong, 2013) Our findings suggest that there are 'shades of grey' when it comes to team engagement, which challenges traditional binary notions of engagement or disengagement.

Of the teams that were initially selected by their organisation as being highly engaged, 14% of them were found to be merely satisfied, and 29% of them were found to be pseudo-engaged. The idea of pseudo-engagement emerged when studying teams who presented an illusion of engagement, that is to say, in the eyes of their organisation, and according to their engagement scores, they appear highly engaged, however, when studied in detail, a range of team dysfunctions (Lencioni, 2002) became apparent.

In this study, four zones of team engagement emerged (see Figure 1). These zones are the Zone of Contentment, the Zone of Disengagement, the Zone of Engagement and the Zone of Pseudo-Engagement. Each zone is contingent on two overarching factors. The first is the emotional atmosphere in the team and the second is the behaviours exhibited by team members. In the zones of engagement model (below), team climate is characterised by levels of trust; psychological safety (i.e. the extent to which team members can 'be themselves' without fear of judgment); support and care for one another. For example, a positive team climate (e.g. Zone of Contentment or Zone of Engagement) is characterised by informality; psychological safety; fun; high levels of support and care for one another. In a negative team climate (e.g. Zone of Disengagement or Zone of Pseudo-Engagement), the atmosphere is typically tense; there may be a fear of conflict; hierarchy is visible, and there is a lack of trust among team members. In the zones of engagement model (below), team behaviours are the extent to which team members are proactive or reactive in relation to their work. In proactive teams (e.g. Zone of Engagement or Zone of Pseudo-Engagement), solutions are actively sought and team members are outward-looking, accountable and customer-focused. In reactive teams (e.g. Zone of Contentment or Zone of Disengagement), members wait to be told what to do and are insular and siloed in their roles. Figure 1 outlines the climate and behavioural indicators for teams in each zone.

Figure 1: Zones of engagement

		TEAM BEHAVIOURS	
		REACTIVE	PROACTIVE
TEAM CLIMATE	POSITIVE	<b>ZONE OF CONTENTMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• TEAM LIKES SET WAYS OF WORKING.</li><li>• LONGER-SERVING TEAM MEMBERS CAN BE RESISTANT TO CHANGE.</li><li>• PROBLEMS ARE ESCALATED TO TEAM LEADER TO SOLVE.</li><li>• TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT IS OVERLOOKED.</li><li>• TEAM MEMBERS NOT ENCOURAGED TO STEP-UP OR TAKE ON NEW CHALLENGES.</li><li>• TEAM LACKS ENERGY AND ENTHUSIASM.</li><li>• SOME TEAM MEMBERS ARE HOLDING OUT FOR RETIREMENT.</li><li>• MOST PEOPLE ARE THERE JUST TO EARN A WAGE.</li><li>• LITTLE APPETITE TO DO MORE THAN THE JOB REQUIRES.</li><li>• TEAM MEMBERS ARE NOT CLOSE TO EACH OTHER.</li><li>• TEAM MEMBERS COMPLAIN IF ASKED TO WORK OUTSIDE OF CONTRACTED HOURS.</li><li>• TEAM DOES COME UP WITH NEW WAYS OF DOING THINGS.</li><li>• TEAM LEADER FINDS IT DIFFICULT TO STEP-BACK AND DELEGATE.</li></ul>	<b>ZONE OF ENGAGEMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• WORK TOGETHER TO SOLVE PROBLEMS.</li><li>• ACTIVELY LOOK FOR SOLUTIONS.</li><li>• CHALLENGED AND STRETCHED IN OUR TEAM.</li><li>• TEAM DIVERSITY</li><li>• POSITIVE ROLE MODELS TO LEARN FROM.</li><li>• MISTAKES ARE SEEN AS POSITIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING.</li><li>• TEAM MEMBERS FEEL EMPOWERED, VALUED AND SUPPORTED</li><li>• TIGHTLY-KNIT TEAM THAT HAVE EACH OTHERS BACKS.</li><li>• GO ABOVE AND BEYOND WHAT IS EXPECTED.</li><li>• FUN ATMOSPHERE.</li><li>• RESPECT DISAGREEMENT AND DIFFERENCE.</li><li>• SHARED BELIEF THAT TOGETHER TEAM CAN ACHIEVE ANYTHING.</li><li>• SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE SO KNOW WHERE THEY FIT IN</li></ul>
	NEGATIVE	<b>ZONE OF DISENGAGEMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• CLIQUES AND GOSSIP ARE RIFE.</li><li>• BLAME CULTURE</li><li>• LOW LEVELS OF TRUST AMONG TEAM MEMBERS</li><li>• THERE IS TENSION AND FRICTION AMONG TEAM MEMBERS.</li><li>• TEAM LEADER IS NOT RESPECTED.</li><li>• TEAM MEMBERS FEEL UNAPPRECIATED.</li><li>• WORK IS BORING (MONOTONOUS).</li><li>• TEAM LEADER IS TOO CONTROLLING AND DOES NOT LEAD BY EXAMPLE.</li><li>• TEAM MEMBERS DO NOT FEEL LISTENED TO AND FEEL UNABLE TO INFLUENCE.</li><li>• SOME PEOPLE ARE TREATED DIFFERENTLY THAN OTHERS.</li><li>• WE DO NOT ALWAYS GET GIVEN INFORMATION.</li><li>• MEMBERS DO NOT FEEL THEY CAN BE HONEST ABOUT EACH OTHER.</li></ul>	<b>ZONE OF PSEUDO-ENGAGEMENT</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• COLLECTION OF INDIVIDUALS WHO HAPPEN TO WORK TOGETHER.</li><li>• INDIVIDUALS SERVE OWN NEEDS RATHER THAN THOSE OF THE TEAM.</li><li>• INDIVIDUALS DO NOT GO OUT OF THEIR WAY TO HELP EACH OTHER.</li><li>• LITTLE 'TOGETHERNESS' (COLLEGIALLY).</li><li>• IN FEEDBACK THE NEGATIVES ARE STRESSED MORE THAN THE POSITIVES.</li><li>• TEAM MEMBERS CAN BE PLAYED OFF AGAINST ONE ANOTHER.</li><li>• POOR PERFORMANCE IS TOLERATED.</li><li>• WORK IS SO BUSY, THERE IS NO TIME TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS</li><li>• INDIVIDUALS SAY AND DO THE RIGHT THINGS TO GET INTO THE MANAGER'S 'GOOD BOOKS'</li><li>• TEAM LEADER IS MORE INTERESTED IN ENGRATIATING THEMSELVES TO SENIOR MANAGEMENT THAN CARING ABOUT US.</li></ul>

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# Zone of Contentment

Of the teams we studied, 21% were found to be in the Zone of Contentment. In this zone, a positive team climate exists, however, team members lack dynamism and proactivity. As one team leader aptly describes it:

“They don’t look for things to do. If they’ve finished their task, they’ll just sit.”

Team members in this zone tend to do the bare minimum, work within their capabilities, and go home happy. Most team members are there just to earn a wage. For others, it is convenience that suits them, such as the location of their team that enables them to balance work with parenthood. In contented teams, members do not seek stretch or challenge and some may be resistant to change or new ways of working. Many of them have been in the team or organisation for a long time and are holding out for retirement. In contented teams, problems are often escalated to the team leader to solve, rather than team members being encouraged to look for solutions themselves. The climate and behaviours in a contented team are akin to the concept of satisfaction. Despite not being engaged, it could be argued that these teams provide important stability within an organisation, since we know that satisfied employees are likely to stay in an organisation longer (Madan, 2017). The most prevalent themes in the Zone of Contentment are ‘Not going above and beyond’ and ‘Longevity of service’. These themes will now be explored in turn.

## Not going above and beyond

This theme is about team members being happy with ‘their lot’. Team members talk about being content and therefore do not stretch themselves:

“I really like the role I’m doing. So, I haven’t really gone on further.”

In these teams, if a team leader tries to encourage people to do more than the job requires, team members resist. In these teams, team members go to work to do a job from 9 until 5 and complain if they have to work outside of those hours.

Team members are simply focused on getting through their set workload and ticking off the ‘to do’ list. For many, work is a means of earning a wage. Not going above or beyond is also related to a lack of motivation among team members to take the company to the next level. Team members focus on current problems and fail to think about the future. There is not an appetite for knowing or doing more in order to make improvements:

"I think he just turns up, does a job, starts at half eight, finishes at five o'clock and complains if he has to do anything outside those hours"

## Longevity of service

Longevity of service in contented teams was prevalent, that is to say team members who have been in the same team (or organisation) for a long time and who are not interested in upskilling themselves or embracing new ways of working. The skills and capabilities of team members may have not kept pace with the changing nature of work:

“A couple of my guys are in their 60s. They rely on the younger guys to tell them where the information is. They’re shown a number of times and they’re not really picking it up and they’ve gone past the stage where they think ‘OK, I’ve got another five, ten, fifteen years to do that’, they’re talking one or two years maybe. They’ll use the youngsters to help them along, so they’re not going to engage with everything that’s new.”

One of the disadvantages of teams populated by long-serving members is that the opportunity for an injection of fresh ideas or new ways of working may

be lost. In contented teams where newer members work alongside long-serving staff, there may be a perception of unequal treatment, either with longer-serving staff feeling marginalised, particularly in terms of training and development, or newer team members feeling a sense of unfairness in that their ideas are not being taken on board and that poor performance in long-serving staff is tolerated.

“They may have been here a long time, and they may be older, but they're still the same level as us. But they don't treat you that way. Some people who've been here a few years, they think they run the ward, and it's not really fair.”



# Zone of Disengagement

32% of the teams that we studied were located in the Zone of Disengagement. In this zone, there is a negative team climate and team members 'firefight', often describing themselves as overstretched, stressed or burnt out. Rather than seeking solutions, team members wait to be told what to do. Disengaged teams contain 'cliques' and a high levels of mistrust between individuals. Team members tend to be inward-looking, working in silos and seeing themselves as victims of a system that is defective in some way. In disengaged teams, the team leader does not empower or appreciate people and can be seen to favour certain team members, which perpetuates a negative team climate. In many ways, disengaged teams in this study were found to be the antithesis of engaged teams. For example, the quality of team leadership, levels of psychological safety and the presence (or absence) of colleague support were found to be critical in engaging or disengaging teams. This confirms previous studies that suggests the extent to which we are supported, trusted and empowered by our manager; the support we receive from our colleagues; and how safe we feel to bring our 'whole selves' to work (Laloux, 2014) are some of the strongest predictors of team engagement (Bailey et al, 2017). The most prevalent themes to emerge from teams in the Disengaged Zone are 'Team leader mind-set and behaviours' and 'Lack of trust'. These themes will now be explored in turn.

## Team leader mind-set and behaviours

The most frequently cited barrier to engagement in disengaged teams was related to the team's experience of being led. For example, team members across disengaged teams talked about the destabilising effect of a team leader who was seen as emotionally volatile and unpredictable.

“One particular day she just didn't talk to anybody! And I walked in, and normally... I sit next to her and she's quite cheerful, and that one day, I just got a 'morning', and I got nothing the whole day and I'm thinking 'have I done something wrong?'”

In other teams, people talked about their team leaders being “up and down” or having “tantrums”, particularly when the work environment became pressurised. In disengaged teams, team leaders were either unaware of the effect their mood had on the team, or they were aware, but unwilling to change. As one team leader said:

“They always use my face as a barometer I'm afraid... I have a face that speaks a thousand words unfortunately. So, whenever I join a new team or start working with a new team I say, “let me tell you a story about my SVB face”. And they say, “What's that?...Stroppy volatile bitch.”

In disengaged teams, team leaders are often seen as poor role models. For example, when team leaders get

involved in gossip or office politics. Some teams saw their team leaders failing to lead by example because they do not make themselves available, either by separating themselves from the team physically or not operating an 'open door' policy (see Ashridge's Speaking Truth to Power Research, Megan Reitz). Others teams described their team leaders as not leading by example due to careless or sloppy work; by focusing on the wrong priorities; or becoming distracted and time-wasting. Some teams described poor role modelling by their team leader as 'weak' leadership. When team leaders are perceived to be weak or ineffective, they lack respect from their teams.

“We've got no respect for her and I don't think anybody else in the business has got any respect for her either.”

Leadership style was important in disengaged teams with some teams describing their team leaders as too controlling, with an inability to trust the team and let go. The result being that teams felt disempowered. For example, one team leader we observed was attempting to direct how and when the team would have fun that week!

## Lack of trust

A lack of trust between team members and towards the team leader and vice versa was prevalent in disengaged teams. In the absence of trust, the team climate is described as 'frozen', 'tense' or a 'stony silence'. In other teams, clashes of personality meant that unresolved conflict was also a barrier to engagement.

“There's a bit of conflict in the group. They don't get on well, for historical reasons, and that's a thing I've never really been able to get over with certain people. So there are times in the laboratory where people won't speak to certain people about certain things because of historical issues. So when I'm talking about barriers to engagement, I think something happened in the past that people can't get over... It just festers for ages, for years. So those people have worked together for decades, and they still won't communicate properly with each other.”

Team members in disengaged teams also talked about experiencing low levels of psychological safety. This is where individuals do not feel safe to speak openly or honestly for fear of negative consequences for their career. In these teams, individuals talked about being less open when the manager was present, and team members admitted to not disclosing their true feelings. In disengaged teams, some team members said that they did not feel trusted by their team leader and that decisions were being made for them. In these situations, team members were unable to innovate or contribute as effectively as they could.

“It would be nice if he took on board our suggestions, or even asked us our opinion.”



# Zone of Pseudo-Engagement

Of the teams we studied, 21% were located in the Zone of Pseudo-Engagement. To their organisations, these teams appear highly engaged, however, when studied in detail, a range of team dysfunctions (Lencioni, 2002) are apparent. The climate in pseudo-engaged teams could be described as Machiavellian. With low levels of trust and cohesion, team members are 'out for themselves'. They are proactive but to serve their own needs, for example by stretching the workload to fill time. Team members may be engaged individually, however they do not pull together as a team. There is little evidence of collegiality or support for one another. Team leaders in pseudo-engaged teams may be proactive in giving feedback, but it is often the negatives that are pointed out,

“You only get criticised about what you do wrong, you don't ever get praised about what you do right.”

The most prevalent themes in this zone are 'Lack of teamwork' and 'Managing upwards' which will each be discussed in turn.

## Lack of teamwork

Pseudo-engaged teams are merely a collection of individuals who happen to work together. In these teams, individuals may be highly engaged with their own work, however there is little evidence of mutual support and 'togetherness' across the team. People do not go out of their way to help each other.

“It's about 'I', 'my patient', rather than 'we're all in this together.'”

Pseudo-engaged teams were particularly prevalent in healthcare settings. One NHS leader we spoke to attributed this finding to some NHS frontline contexts in which employees are often targeted and rewarded at an individual level with teams rarely being rewarded for collective performance. Individuals in pseudo-engaged teams talked about feeling a pressure to perform, but with little team support. Talk of burnout was prevalent.

In non-healthcare settings, individuals also talked about feeling overstretched as a result of a lack of teamwork and team support.

“If you're responsible for that job and you don't get any help, you get on with it and you go home. And when you come back from holiday, there's two weeks of work waiting for you.”

## Managing Upwards

In pseudo-engaged teams, an illusion of engagement is presented, whereby team members say the right things in order to get into their manager's 'good books'.

“Are her team members trying to be her best friend and trying to be part of the in-group? They know that's how they can get in [her good books] by showing her loyalty.”

Some team members pretend to be motivated because that is what their team leader wants to hear. In turn, team leaders in pseudo-engaged teams are more interested in integrating themselves to senior management in support of their own career as opposed to being available for their own team.

“So the people above me think I'm doing a really great job, the guys in the lab say I'm not visible enough.”

Members of pseudo-engaged teams are challenged by group tasks and struggle with team diversity. They also find it difficult to form natural relationships with each other, so team leaders end up creating 'organised fun' which feels artificial and inauthentic.

“We went out as a team, we slept over, we had dinner, beer together, but it still didn't work.”



# Zone of Engagement

25% of the teams that we studied were located in the Zone of Engagement. These are proactive and solution-focused teams with a positive team climate and a shared collectivist language. These teams are fun, high-status within an organisation and contain a climate of growth where close-knit team members trust and support each other both personally and professionally. In engaged teams, team members use disagreements as a way of leveraging value from difference which generates creativity and insight. Team leaders are positive role models, being open, fair and honest and by allowing team members autonomy and freedom. We know that ‘engaging managers’ are a driver of engagement (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009), and in our research, the personality and behaviours of team leaders was one of the strongest drivers of engagement or disengagement in teams. The most prevalent theme was the team’s experience of being led. Engaging team leaders possess certain skills, attributes and attitudes that create a climate of engagement where people choose to give the best of themselves at work. The second most prevalent theme was ‘Team connectivity’. Each of these themes will now be discussed in turn.

## Team leader skills and attributes

Engaging team leaders possess certain skills and attributes that create a climate of engagement. Team members talked about feeling trusted and empowered by their manager and being given autonomy and flexibility to manage their own time, performance and results. Team members talked about their team leaders challenging and stretching them with leaders also echoing the importance of giving team members opportunities to learn and grow, to help them achieve their full potential. In engaged teams, the team leader has high standards, sets the bar high and is always looking for ways to improve performance. Team members in engaged teams talked about team leaders being good mentors and role models who ‘walk the walk’.

“I would hope that they would say that they see leadership by example. I practise what I preach; I wouldn't ask them to do anything that I wouldn't feel comfortable in doing myself.”

On a personal level, team leaders in engaged teams are seen as genuinely caring and compassionate. One team member talked about how much she appreciated being contacted regularly by her team leader to ask how she was feeling when she was absent from work for an extended period. Engaging leaders are also seen as fair and honest, treating everyone in the team equally. Team members appreciate team leaders being straightforward with them. Teams talked about the importance of being given regular constructive feedback to help them learn or improve. Other important attributes of engaging team leaders are openness and transparency, approachability and being a constant safety net.

“I know that I can make decisions and that my boss will back me up. He does stick by you, he will back you. He will go in your corner for you.”

## Team connectivity

Engaged teams gel exhibiting a togetherness or connectivity that creates engagement. Team members talked about a deep commitment to one another.

“The engagement of the team is because we all work and we understand each other very well, and you can pick up the phone to any one of us, to anybody, within this group at any time, and we all help each other out.”

High levels of trust exist within engaged teams with all members relying on one another to achieve their goals. A collectivist language pervades, with use of 'we' and 'us' rather than 'I' and 'my'.

“If you have that bond with the people as well it’s not just the work you’re letting down if you’re not giving your best it’s also other people in the team that are relying on your work and relying on you to perform so I think it has that extra level of motivation.”

Team members talked about how they all support one another and rely on each other, have diverse skill sets, communicate well and take shared responsibility for performance. This included team members leading on certain Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and then rotating leadership every few months, which generated a sense of distributed leadership.

## Implications

By examining engagement across 28 work teams, this research has sought to stimulate thought about the climate and behaviours that are present in teams across four zones of engagement. Given the critical role of the team leader as a ‘maker or breaker’ of engagement, it is hoped that by reading this research, team leaders will be encouraged to become more attuned to the impact of their skills and style. This research may also spark the HR community to re-evaluate the kinds of team leader attributes that are recruited for and developed in teams. The four zones of engagement that have emerged in this study challenge traditional binary notions of work teams simply being engaged or disengaged. Furthermore, we would suggest that organisations who use engagement surveys use them circumspectly, since they may not present the whole picture when it comes to team engagement.

Our findings show that the three most important factors regardless of which zone a team is located in are:

1. Ensuring people are given challenging and varied work.
2. Working with trusted colleagues.
3. Having a team leader who is trusted and leads by example.

These findings support previous research that suggests the strongest predictors of engagement include the quality of leadership (e.g. manager support; empowerment; feedback and opportunities for development) and team factors (e.g. a climate of trust and psychological safety; colleague support), Bailey et al (2017).

## Next Steps

A team diagnostic has been developed as a result of this research, which is freely available online. If you would like to find out which zone your team is located, please complete this tool. At Ashridge Executive Education, Hult International Business School our aim is to develop leadership programs to help managers to successfully lead teams within each of these zones in order to raise their collective engagement and team performance. As a first step, we suggest five possible actions for leaders and teams in each of the zones.

### Teams in Zone of Contentment

1. Conduct honest conversations with team members to acknowledge that they are in this zone and explore whether they have the potential for higher engagement. You may decide as a result of these conversations not to invest in their engagement and instead see these teams as a stable ‘backbone’ to the business.
2. Reserve contented teams for back-office and support functions which favour routine and set-ways of working.
3. Tackle complacency by varying work or introducing new projects.
4. Hire new recruits who bring energy and new ideas to the team.
5. Rotate team members or leaders between teams to expose them to different leaders, competencies and contexts.

### Teams in Zone of Disengagement

1. Recruit for team leader emotional stability and strong people skills.
2. Interview team members to establish reasons for disengagement, and take the right action.
3. Make trust more overt by giving people autonomy around how they achieve their objectives.

4. Ensure regular and consistent feedback, recognition and praise (monetary and non-monetary).
5. Demonstrate care and concern to all team members.

### Teams in Zone of Pseudo-Engagement

1. Set both individual and team targets.
2. Explicitly reward teamwork and team output.
3. Co-develop a shared purpose that brings meaning to the team.
4. Introduce social activities to build team social ties.
5. Discourage individuals from trying to ‘look good’ by stressing how interdependence is key to success (there is only so much we can achieve on our own).

### Teams in Zone of Engagement

1. Encourage team churn.
2. Set new challenges that will stretch and excite.
3. Share and rotate leadership on specific KPIs to foster distributed leadership.
4. Ensure regular individual and team feedback for growth.
5. Celebrate successes regularly and consistently.



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# Researcher Biographies



**Dr Amy Armstrong**  
BA (Hons), MBA, PhD

Amy is Senior Faculty at Ashridge Executive Education, Hult International Business School. She teaches and researches the topics of resilience; engagement and compassion at work. She is particularly interested in how crucible experiences in our personal lives, such as bereavement or critical illness, shape who we are and how we lead. Amy's new book, 'The Human Moment' (forthcoming in 2019) argues that organisations must find ways of becoming more compassionate in an age where our workplaces are becoming increasingly de-humanised.

Amy works across undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral and executive education programs and spends half of her time supporting Hult London with faculty recruitment, development and engagement. Amy leads the research into barriers to engagement for Engage for Success (E4S), a UK movement which is seeking to improve levels of engagement across industry. This is the second E4S commissioned research project that Amy has led and builds on her earlier work that examined engagement through the eyes of the CEO (2013).



**Sharon Olivier**  
MA Org Pshyc. NLP, PNI

Sharon teaches, researches & consults in Career/Competencies Architecture; HR Business Partnering; Leadership & Team development, particularly in Inter-Cultural Intelligence, Engagement, Polarity Management, Spiritual (SQ) Intelligence; Talent identification, Personal Resilience and Team Wellbeing. Before Ashridge, Sharon spent 20 years as a Senior Manager/ OD consultant/Learning Facilitator/Coach/Speaker. She started her career as HR Manager in the Motor Industry, then led Human Capacity Building in a large consulting company, after which she established a successful consulting practice (Impact Consulting) in South Africa. Clients have included Audi, BMW, Land Rover, De Beers, Anglo, Sage Life, University of Johannesburg and Sasol.

Sharon holds a MA in Industrial Psychology and a Management Advanced Programme Certificate. She is a Master Practitioner in NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) and a PNI practitioner (psychoneuroimmunology). She has established a track record as an inspirational speaker at conferences and is an accredited Laughter/Levity facilitator. She has co-published a book on resilience "Diamonds in the Dust" and a chapter in the latest Ashridge leadership 2017 book "Inspiring Leadership" on ego and eco leadership intelligence.



**Sam Wilkinson**  
BSc (Hons), MSc, MBPsS, Trainee Occupational Psychologist

Sam is a Trainee Psychologist who was the Research Specialist on this Barriers to Engagement project. Her research interests also include Virtual Learning, Chronic Illness in the Workplace, Diversity and Inclusion and Mental Health at Work.

Sam is now in the Products team at Ashridge Executive Education, as a Product Development Manager, where she is working on various projects to keep our programmes, at Ashridge and Hult, continuously innovative and relevant. One project Sam is working on is creating the Diagnostic tool together with Engage for Success and Oracle, on the back of this latest piece of research.

Sam has a Honors degree in Psychology, and a Masters degree in Occupational Psychology, where she studied at the University of Worcester. She is also now a Trainee Occupational Psychologist on the doctorate level BPS level 2 qualification, working towards becoming a Chartered Psychologist.







#### **Hult Research**

Ashridge Executive Education at  
Hult International Business School  
Berkhamsted  
Hertfordshire HP4 1NS  
United Kingdom  
T: 01442 8413491  
E: [research@ashridge.hult.edu](mailto:research@ashridge.hult.edu)

[hult.edu/research](http://hult.edu/research)

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