A significant gap exists between the real and desired states of employee engagement in many organizations. Leaders have their work cut out for them to bridge this gap, to overcome switched-off employees and to reinspire their resolve to be active players in the safety process, both individually and within their work group. After all, safety culture is comprised of the interactive and cumulative effects of every company member, from CEO to line worker. Further, leaders’ additional challenge is to set a positive participative tone so that future hires start off on the right track.

But, there is good news. Numerous companies have gone from cultures where workers historically ignore to actively embrace safety; from employees moving from resistantly opting out of safety leadership positions to actively seeking to serve; from declining to try out new safety procedures, training or PPE to expressing interest in applying these to chosen tasks at both work and in personal activities.

In the U.S. workforce, Gallup estimates this cost to be more than $300 billion in lost productivity.

This survey, which involved more than 17 million workers, revealed that in “world-class” organizations, compared to “average” organizations, “there are approximately five times as many self-reported engaged workers as disengaged ones.” (Actual reported statistics: world-class = 957 engaged workers for every 100 who are disengaged; average = 183 engaged for every 100 disengaged).

Clearly, disengagement is rampant (statistically, there are always many more “average” organizations) and associated with less-than-stellar results.

Other studies consistently illuminate low levels of employee trust in organizational leadership. Specific to safety, employee disengagement often shows as either passive withdrawal or active resistance.

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Real turnarounds are possible. Often, determined leaders can brush aside the charred surface of disengagement and discontent to find embers of interest still burning, or at least smoldering. Then, they feed and fan these suppressed sparklets into a roar of strongly ignited interest, application, culture and results. Here’s how: methods that have worked in the real world and in companies throughout the world for unleashing and sustaining significantly higher levels of worker safety engagement.

Start by enlisting what we call “the power of negative thinking” by identifying blockages to engagement. Change guru Kurt Lewin, in his pioneering work on force field theory and analysis, demonstrated that any state, such as the level of employee engagement, is dynamic, not static.

Actually, the present state is the resultant of opposing forces operating on it: 1) those that drive it to its current level; and 2) those that block it from improving. Further, Lewin demonstrated that in the real organizational world, sustaining improvements are much more likely to come from lowering forces in a system. You can apply this powerful principle by identifying and reducing forces that block engagement.

Identifying Why Workers Disengage
Organizations frequently report that once-engaged, or at least neutral, workers will become disillusioned and disengaged over time. Consistent with the method of recognizing then reducing blockages to engagement, let’s again apply parallel thinking by considering some possible reasons one member of an engaged couple goes from in love and excited to breaking off the engagement.

• **Feel taken for granted?** This can happen if one is not given the same attention and concern that was applied to when s/he was won over (when the theoretical commitment was made). The same dynamic may occur for consumer companies that entice new customers while playing hardball with existing ones, which often results in difficulty retaining the latter. Ask yourself and your team: To what extent do employees feel their safety compliance is taken for granted?

• **Cold feet?** Maybe one is afraid of the consequences of committing to do something that is important or time-consuming. Or afraid that the relationship or intervention is doomed and s/he doesn’t want to be part of a losing team or even blamed for its likely failure. This is a type of buyer’s remorse in advance. To reduce this
potential blockage, assume that rather than winning workers’ commitment just once, it must be periodically rewon through reassurances that they have made a good decision, and that they can and will be able to make a real difference.

- **Better offer?** Whereas another potential mate might sweep an engaged person off his/her feet, in companies, the enticement to stray usually comes from fellow employees amidst an existing culture of disenchantment. “Get involved with safety and you’re just playing into management’s plans to squeeze more profit.” Or, “you’re a fool for believing the latest snake oil claims.”

Sometimes the better offer is that of saving time or energy by not participating in a thankless or seemingly hopeless safety cause. (So, how can leaders convince safety committee members and other somewhat engaged workers that their efforts are indeed meaningful and appreciated?)

- **Didn’t get what they expected?** To avoid turning off workers’ potential safety commitment, it’s essential not to bait and switch or misrepresent. Monitor for early employee perceptions that management has a secret agenda or that rather than winning potential blockage, assume that rather than winning workers’ commitment just once, it must be periodically rewon through reassurances that they have made a good decision, and that they can and will be able to make a real difference.

- **Growing apart?** Workers come to believe that original values and interests espoused by leaders have shifted. Or that a leader is more interested in taking credit for any positive movement than in nurturing change. As the expression goes, “It takes two to tango.” If employees perceive leaders to be less engaged in safety, it’s likely they will pull away as well.

- **Conflicts over power?** In already charged environments where trust is uneven at best, there can be posturing between employee leadership and management over positioning. During one period of tense labor contract negotiations, the bargaining unit leadership of one Fortune 500 manufacturing company proclaimed it would fine any of its worker-members $500/day for participating in any safety-related activity (e.g., incident investigations, safety committee meetings).

Strategists understand that every situation has both positive and negative aspects, that there are times (e.g., during logjammed negotiations) when temporary disengagement can actually help reduce conflict. But in general, engagement is a clear sign of success in safety. Experience shows that as companies move toward higher levels of safety culture, engagement in safety rises on all organizational levels. This can be a chicken-and-egg function. (For more detail, see Robert Pater’s articles on cultural leadership in the March and April 2012 issues of PS.)

- **This is the way it’s always been around here. Nothing will change.”**
- **“The problem’s not me. All safety problems are only the result of the work environment/tools/management/others.”**
- **“Safety is just boring.” “Safety only gets in the way of my doing my job.”**
- **“You’re pressuring me to do more in less time and at the same time put up all these stupid safety rules.”**
- **“I’m too busy.” “Getting involved takes up too much time.”**
- **“You stick your neck out here and it just gets chopped off.”**
- **“Who cares?”**

**Workers’ Personal Blockages to Engagement**

The previous section focuses on reasons that once-engaged people eventually become disillusioned or distance themselves from previous interests or commitment. Sometimes, in addition to these organization-related reasons for being disengaged, blockages to engagement can arise from personally limiting views that can block active safety participation.

- “Don’t need it”/“Doesn’t affect me”/“There’s no value”/“Who cares?”

**Workers’ Personal Blockages to Engagement**

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**Blockages to Leaders’ Effectively Engaging Workers**

On the part of the engager/leader, blockages to elevating engagement may include:

- **Looking for the on switch or magic bullet to make others become engaged and buy in. Quick-and-dirty answers usually become more muddy than efficient (e.g., back belts to solve all lower back injuries).**
- **Writing off engagement as impos-
sible. These situations usually have an underlay of blaming others for being recalcitrant, impossible or unsupportive. Sometimes, would-be leaders disbelieve benchmarks of other organizations achieving higher levels of engagement. It’s almost as if attacking these other companies’ results diverts attention away from their own lack of success. Regrettably, the same people who bemoan “lack of personal responsibility for safety” rarely look at their own role in taking personal responsibility for this lack of improvement, where they might be obstructing change.

- Dismissing engagement as too time consuming or not believing that there would be a payoff. This stems from undervaluing the returns from engagement. A safety-engaged workforce aggressively identifies risks at earlier levels, takes personal actions to reduce risks, watches out for coworkers, communicates more quickly, accurately and less defensively about close calls/near-misses and incidents, and supports safety change. While growing and sustaining higher levels of engagement require time and effort, we’ve seen significantly leveraged returns on these investments from heightened safety performance and culture.

- Attempting to force engagement. This can run the gamut from calling on workers to answer during safety meetings to “volun-telling” employees to serve on safety committees. At best, you can make someone show up, but you can’t force them to be interested, engaged, participative or supportive.

During the Korean War, singer Jack Crosby (son of the more famous Bing) went public about his strong intent to enlist in the U.S. Army in order to fight, not sing. But after Crosby enlisted, the Army placed him in Special Services as an entertainer. The press flocked to Jack, asking about the big point he made about wanting to fight and not sing. What was he going to do? Jack’s response: “They may be able to make me sing. But they can’t make me sing good.”

Nor can any manager force a worker to be engaged or participate “good.” And it’s a lot easier for workers to quit their job outright or add to the statistics of presenteeism—going through the motions, working at only a fraction of their abilities—than it was for Jack Crosby to separate from the Army.

When asking someone to become engaged, the desired indicative answer has to be “Yes!” To break through from disengagement to higher levels of active participation and buy-in, leaders must identify their and others’ reasons for being disengaged, then help reduce the number or, at least, the magnitude of those blocking forces.

In our follow-up article in next month’s Professional Safety, we’ll focus on identifying strengths and limitations of seven prevalent approaches to engaging employees and how to elicit “yes” through 10 keys for engagement, how leaders can reduce blockages to engagement, and how one utility, with a long-standing workforce that was under significant pressures for change, was able to engage employees and interests in safety within a relatively short time and resources.

Real and substantial improvements in safety engagement are not only possible, they are happening right now in companies throughout the world. And with the right approach and discipline—that includes leaders being engaged themselves in propelling safety engagement—it’s possible for companies to achieve significant and growing results.