

# Can Leadership That Drives Employee Engagement Be Learned?

## *One University-Based Program Is Dedicated to Proving It's Possible*

By Ed Lamb

Two growing bodies of data show, first, that engaged employees ensure organizational success and, second, that employee engagement remains chronically low and dropping at U.S. government agencies. Gallup reported on June 7, 2016, that organizations with high degrees of employee engagement accounted for 77 percent of organizations that ranked in the top quartile of performance on measures of change management. Gallup followed this revelation with a July 7, 2016, statement that “disengagement is costing state and local governments, conservatively, up to \$100 billion.”

The latter Gallup report is also the most recent to highlight the particularly low levels of engagement among government employees. Across federal, state and local agencies, a full 79 percent of workers feel disengaged. Lack of engagement manifests itself in high rates of absenteeism, higher rates of presenteeism, poor attention to detail, inadequate constituent service and significant staff turnover.

Researchers long ago identified ineffective front-line supervision and dissatisfaction with upper-level management as the reasons government employees become disengaged. Findings from IPMA-HR's 2016 Benchmarking Survey reinforce that consensus. The largest percentage of respondents who said they planned to leave their current government job within the next year explained that a poor relationship with their supervisor convinced them to seek a new position. This attitude was particularly prevalent among millennials and members of Generation X.

Even IPMA-HR Benchmark Survey respondents who plan to stick with government employment place great stock in interactions with supervisors and managers. The key finding in this regard is that “when it comes to interpersonal work relationships, government employees from all generations rank having a boss they can respect (97 percent) as the most important. This preference is closely followed by being a part of an organization that effectively communicates with employees to keep them informed (96 percent).”

So, leadership drives employee engagement, and leadership is not doing that in many, if not most, government organizations. The fix



may lie in training supervisors, department heads and executives to serve better as leaders. But what does such training look like?

The Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia offers one model. It operates the Senior Executive Institute (SEI) and LEAD (Leading, Educating & Developing) for city, town and county managers, department heads and senior staff from around the United States (<https://sei.coopercenter.org>). Participants in both courses learn from leadership experts, former and current government executives, and each other how to rethink their own approaches to leading, motivating and communicating with employees.

HR News spoke in August with SEI Leadership Development Director Tony Gardner in August. Asked to summarize the most important message about fostering and maintaining employee engagement SEI and LEAD participants receive, he said, “The real issue is how do you engage people to accomplish the goals you’re after. You can only do that in an environment that is trusting. If you want to get high-quality organizations, you need the people in senior leadership positions to show the vulnerability—give the trust—that gives people the opportunity to trust them back.”

## How SEI and LEAD Work

SEI and LEAD are designed around the principle of empowering employees by making government organizations function more like the democratic communities they serve. Participants are asked to embrace the goal of building high-performing institutions and to accomplish that goal by increasing employee engagement. When established, such engagement will take the forms of enhanced accountability, increased participation and greater innovation by workers.

A single 2-week SEI course is held each July, with a shorter eight-day version in the spring. Six 1-week LEAD courses are offered throughout the year. Both courses cover much of the same material in classroom and teamwork sessions, but LEAD materials are primarily pitched to division heads and other staff rather than city or county managers, agency directors or executives.

Learning and networking among participants and instructors continues long after the completion of any given course. Gardner said that social media enables former participants to establish their own collaborative groups once they return to their respective organizations. In addition, Gardner and his staff regularly visit agencies of SEI and LEAD alumni.

Gardner, who served for 10 years as county manager for Arlington County, Va., uses field visits to conduct one-day “refreshers” on program lessons and to collect examples of programs that demonstrate effective leadership in government organizations. “We learn constantly from various places and what they are doing,” he said.

Such fieldwork and follow-up has yielded one book—*Building High-Performance in Local Governments: Case Studies in Leadership at All Levels*—and may culminate in at least one more. A program is set for Charlottesville in the fall of 2016 to develop new case studies and gather information for improving classes and materials for SEI and LEAD.

## Embracing a New Approach to Leadership

Classes that focus explicitly on leading to increase employee engagement come early in the curricula of SEI and LEAD. Gardner explained that this schedule meets the needs of the large number

of participants who arrive from places where major organizational changes are already taking place or planned. “They come to learn how to manage change without sacrificing goodwill and productivity,” he said. “We need them to understand that engaged employees can bring about change.”

Gardner acknowledged that many SEI and LEAD participants start off being skeptical that leaders can do much to move the needle on engagement. Key to overcoming that skepticism are two videos that illustrate how reconceiving the function and practice leadership increases workers’ performance and commitment.

The first of these, “Greatness” ([https://youtu.be/OqmdLcyES\\_Q](https://youtu.be/OqmdLcyES_Q)), recounts narrator David Marquet’s experience of turning around a low-performing U.S. Navy submarine crew by refusing to issue orders. His insight consisted in seeing the need to devolve decision making all the way down to the enlisted submariners who actually had their hands on the controls.


Marquet summarizes this philosophy in the following terms: “If you want your people to think, don’t give your people instructions, give intent.” That means, let staff members know what needs to be accomplished but do not enforce a single way to accomplish it. Doing this transfers psychological ownership of decisions to workers. The leader sets a mission, and the employees take the actions to accomplish the mission.

Operationalized, Marquet’s leadership strategy rests on establishing clarity, granting authority and instilling competence. Performance researcher Dan Pink affirms the benefits of such a strategy in his own video, “Drive” (<https://youtu.be/u6XAPnuFjJc>). Pink echoes Marquet but uses the terms purpose, autonomy and mastery. He also cites real-world examples of how money alone cannot motivate employees to perform better while engagement alone can.

What Marquet and Pink agree on more than anything is that workers conditioned to comply with orders rather than solve problems on their own lose their will to do good, while also losing sight of why they do anything all. Gardner captured this foundational insight by saying, “When people have a clear sense of where they belong in the organization and are given the authority to make decisions, competence grows over time.”

Gardner went on to note that leaders at different levels in an organization have different roles to play in creating systems that encourage and sustain employee engagement. “Front-line managers’ main jobs,” he said, “are to help people grow in competence and autonomy. Executives’ role is to make sure everyone has a clear sense of what must be accomplished, and then to keep systems in place that foster competence and ensure autonomy.”

---

*Ed Lamb is a freelance editor and writer in Virginia Beach, Va. He can be reached via email at [thoroughcursor@gmail.com](mailto:thoroughcursor@gmail.com). —*