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## A new way of approaching employee engagement research

# MEASURING THE ENGAGEMENT “SWEET SPOT”

There seems to be little overlap in how engagement is measured for employees and how leadership experts describe engaged leaders. Angela Sinickas proposes integrating leadership engagement concepts into employee engagement research.

Competing management theories have defined what employee engagement looks like. However, there doesn't seem to be enough connection between those theories and research conducted with company leaders about work experiences they remember as their “career best”. It seems to me that if employees look at their current job as their own career best, they too would be fully engaged.

Researcher Kurt Sandholtz interviewed thousands of people to find out what they described as a work experience where they felt highly successful and were making a significant contribution. John Zenger and Joseph Folkman then synthesized the findings into their COP “sweet spot” model to help leaders understand what made them feel so successful in the past in order to help them plan their careers more consciously.

### Elements of the sweet spot

The COP model says that these peak work experiences occur when three factors converge into the same job, which they describe as the sweet spot – like the best place on a tennis racquet to hit a ball:

1. *Competencies*: the skills and behaviors at which someone excels at the 90th percentile level or better. These would be the things that others would describe as your strengths during performance reviews or informal feedback.
2. *Organizational needs*: the employer

must feel a need for, and value, both the individual's competencies and what he's passionate about.

3. *Passions*: activities loved by the individual. For example, when you're doing it, you lose all sense of time.

So, those peak experiences occurred when leaders were working in an organization that needed and valued the competencies they excelled at and the activities they were passionate about. Might not engagement be just that simple for all employees? Many engagement surveys do ask questions about how well a job makes use of an individual's abilities, and how much an employee feels rewarded or valued overall, but there aren't any questions that directly address the convergence of the COP model's three dimensions.

### Quantifying the sweet spot

A useful measure of engagement might then include an indexed average of questions correlating opinions about these three factors. The survey could include a comprehensive list of skills, behaviors and activities, such as specific areas of knowledge/expertise-related to the organization's business and a list of

skills and activities (like writing, problem solving, number crunching, providing feedback, conducting meetings, negotiation, persuasion, etc.).

Using this list, employees would then place checkmarks next to each item in up to three possible columns. They select the ones they identify as:

- Core strengths of their own, based on past performance reviews and informal feedback.
- Things they feel passionate about.
- Things they feel the organization values based on how it recognizes and rewards people, financially and in other ways.

### Acting on the findings

Correlating the results from these three dimensions could diagnose the overall state of engagement within the organization. For example, two out of the three dimensions could be strong, but if one is not, the diagnosis would differ:

- Strong C and O, but weak P: Employees will be competent, but bored, lacking challenge and excitement.
- Strong O and P, but weak C: Employees will be motivated, but unable to perform well without additional training and development.
- Strong C and P, but weak O: The company is recruiting the wrong type of people, or its total compensation system is misaligned with the organization's current business.

In addition to using these questions as a measure of overall engagement within the organization, the questions could be made available to employees to complete again in their own time.

This type of assessment would keep the wrong people from being moved into management jobs that they're neither good at nor enjoy. Instead they'd be rewarded in other ways for continuing to do what they were doing so well when they were promoted. And then, just think how many employees will have a better chance to be fully engaged themselves when they're not reporting to a manager who hates what he's doing.



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