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Creating a Full-Tank Culture

By John Brubaker,
The Sport of Business, LLC



Employee engagement is currently at an all-time low in the United States and costs companies an estimated \$370 billion dollars annually. In this time of improving return-on-investment (ROI) and profitability, it's ironic that the key to every company stimulating profitability is the very thing that so many organizations neglect.... enhancing employee engagement.

Leadership focusing solely on tangibles such as finance or information technology will not enhance organizational performance. More often, the INtangibles lead to game-changing performance. In corporate America, the central intangible is teaching managers how to relate to and coach their teams. We are a society of relationships and, increasingly, a society of social networks. Performance is achieved by developing effective meaningful relationships between individuals and in teams.

Dr. John Gottman, relationship expert, theorizes there is a formula to successful relationships—marriages are more likely to be successful when the interactions between the couple are 5:1 positive to negative. Similarly, Jim Thompson, a thought leader in the field of athletic coaching philosophy and CEO of the Positive Coaching Alliance, theorizes that there is a magic ratio of feedback in coaching athletes,

also 5:1 positive to negative. As a manager, are you aware of your current ratio? If so, are you near Gottman's 5:1 benchmark? If not, let the charting begin. It's time to raise your ratio because organizational culture never takes a day off.

Furthermore, your team's culture is a reflection of you, and consequently, developing a culture of competitive excellence begins with you. I believe enthusiasm is a force multiplier in any endeavor. Therefore developing teams with enthusiasm and a culture of excellence is contingent on you demonstrating these characteristics in word and deed.

Creating a culture of competitive excellence can best be done by engaging in the practice of filling the emotional tanks of your people; a coaching strategy I learned from Thompson. The strategy served me so well on the field as a college coach that I began to utilize it across all areas of relationships in my life: as a consultant, professor, husband and parent. I will show you how to build a full tank culture and I encourage you to incorporate these strategies beyond the walls of your organization as well.

Filling the E-Tank

Like cars have gas tanks, we all have emotional tanks that make us run. An employee's emotional tank impacts his

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Full Tank...

or her energy, attitude and engagement level at work. The needle on the fuel gauge of our emotional tanks moves up and down from interaction to interaction depending on the quality of that interaction. When our emotional tank gauge reads “F” or full, we are high performing and efficient vehicles. We are present in the moment, enthusiastic, receptive to feedback and learning as well as confident and composed. Conversely, when our emotional tank gauge is reading low or on “E”, much like a car, our mileage and performance suffers.

Every member of your organization has the ability to be a pump or a siphon. Pumps help fill the emotional tanks of their colleagues and siphons serve to drain others’ e-tanks. When we share positive feedback and emotions, or pump up someone’s e-tank, it has the effect of not only uplifting the recipient but also fueling our own performance with positive energy. At the same time, siphons in the workplace are sabotaging their own performance because every time they make tank-draining comments, their focus on the negative impacts them as well.

What’s Your Ratio?

Is your workplace communication at or close to Gottman’s 5:1 ratio benchmark? Ten years ago I recognized mine was not. I noticed during the 2001 lacrosse season that my ratio hovered around 2:1. To consciously improve this ratio, I began carrying 5 dimes and a penny in my left pocket. After sharing a positive comment with a student-athlete I moved a dime to my right pocket. I did not allow myself to share the penny or “critique”

components of my feedback until I successfully transferred all five dimes. Over time that year I noticed a marked improvement in communication and coach-ability of what appeared to be previously uncoachable or “difficult” team members. It’s amazing that I didn’t recognize the actual “difficult” team member prior to this. After all, I had been looking at him in the mirror every morning.

This was a veteran team and we were playing essentially the same schedule as the year prior. Yet in 2001 we were able to reach a new level of performance with a winning season, a 100-point club member, and falling just one game shy of a championship in our league. To what do you attribute the improvement? I believe there is no doubt my improved ratio and the value of the positive tank-fillers shared accounted for the corresponding improvement in individual and team performance.

While you may not choose to go to the extreme of moving change from pocket to pocket, do not allow your team to operate on a praise deficit. Use your own positive emotional currency to demonstrate to your staff how much you value them in a concrete and well-defined way. Genuine praise and positive feedback are the two least expensive, yet undervalued and underutilized, tools for recognizing and appreciating the talents of your people. Positive affirmations, positive feedback, a high-five, shared laughter, and being a good listener all serve as "Tank Fillers," which help meet employees’ emotional needs and ultimately fuel better

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Full Tank...

attitude, teamwork and performance.

Using Full-Tank Culture to Coach Your Team:

There are steps to gauging engagement level with teams before commencing a meeting or project. Amy Nakamoto, Executive Director of D.C. Scores, a nonprofit located in the nation's capital, holds maintaining a full-tank culture as one of her top priorities as a leader. Her initial daily gauge reading of her staff consists of taking note of interactions among staff members, tone of voice, body language, mood and posture. At the beginning of each interaction with an employee or group of her employees, Nakamoto asks them each to share what their gauge reads (on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being full and 1 being empty).

The rationale is that to best relate to and coach an employee, you need to know where they are at that moment in order to meet them there and to tailor your communication to get them to a higher level of engagement. By performing this check-in, you can then adjust the intensity and structure to the level of their tanks. This process is the management equivalent of physicians reading their patients' chart and vital signs while rounding in the hospital.

Using Full-Tank Culture to Coach Individual Employees:

Taking a gauge reading of staff members' emotional tanks also allows you to interact on an individual level more effectively. For example, if in your staff meeting 20 people report their gauges being at or near a 10 and two individuals' gauges are reading at a two or a three, this quick check-in will let those two members know everyone else's level is high and their work as a group will be tailored to a higher level. You can then invest more time one-on-one with these individuals to elevate their levels during the course of your group's work and the course of the day.

How to Build a Full-Tank Culture:

Nakamoto incorporates emotional tank instruction into the on-boarding process for new hires. She explains the purpose and use of the practice to all new hires, and has created an in-depth description of the DC Scores e-tank rating system. Explaining what a one rating feels like all the way up through a 10. Her use of this practice is truly masterful, as it serves to teach mindfulness and self-awareness in the workplace as well as sets the proverbial bar high on team members consistently having a full tank. Frequent gauge

readings help you teach your staff how to read both themselves and each other better. The benefits are improved teamwork and office dynamics, as employees are able to be on the lookout for symptoms of a low tank.

Filling your teammates' and colleagues' emotional tanks isn't just a nice thing to do for people. In the moment, it is a seemingly little thing that makes a big difference over the course of a day, week, month, quarter, etc. It is powerful fuel that energizes your culture and serves to reward as well as reinforce important contributions team members make to the organization. Additionally, when we are filling emotional tanks we are also reinforcing and recognizing behaviors we want to see repeated. Coaches like to say, "that which gets recognized gets repeated."

To create a full-tank culture, you need to exemplify the behavior you want to see in your team. They won't buy it if you don't own it yourself. In other words, if you behave like a siphon you will never develop a team full of pumps. Among every leader's goals should be modeling the behavior to create a full-tank culture where coworkers fill each other's tanks. Teamwork and engagement rise to the next level when

colleagues work for each other not simply with each other. Boston Celtics great Bill Russell said it best when analyzing his own performance: “The most important measure of how good a game I played was how much better I’d made teammates play”. It’s easy to be a tank-filler when things are going well; it’s much harder when adversity strikes. Coincidentally, it is also most important to be mindful of filling your teammates’ tanks when the chips are down. Winners are at their best when the circumstances are not. Your role is a conscious daily choice, so ask yourself frequently, are you being a pump or a siphon?

About the Author: John Brubaker is a performance consultant, speaker and author of the forthcoming book *Overtime Victory: Success Strategies From The Locker Room To The Board Room*. He can be reached at www.coachbru.com or 207-576-9853.

If you would like to receive a copy of the Full-Tank Culture Daily 10 Point Inspection and an E-Tank filler practice script, please email john@coachbru.com

Veterans...

abilities you have attained.

What employers want

Prospective employers have one important question: What can you do for us? The answer is often found in your portable, transferable skills. These also influence how you prepare a top-notch resume and cover letter, conduct your job search and convey your talents in an interview. As you recognize and reveal these skills, you will also get a boost of self-esteem about your own achievements.

Identify your transferable skills

Start by reviewing your past or current educational, work, military and life experiences. Did your experience teach you to analyze data and write reports? Supervise others? Work as a team? Make quick decisions or meet deadlines? Organize and implement projects?

If you can analyze, write, plan, organize, lead others and work with a team, you have just identified six highly valued skills you can place on a resume, discuss in a job interview and put to use in a new work setting.


“Veterans may not realize the many exceptional transferable skills they have acquired through their military service,” says Maribeth Gunner Pulliam, the career services coordinator at Excelsior College. “Veterans are trained to lead by example, work respectfully and

collaboratively, and accomplish tasks on time - even when facing adversity. They understand the importance of dedication and perseverance. These are all skills employers seek."

When starting a military transition job search, you can also identify your transferable and work-content skills with online career assessment tools and career guidebooks. Keep this list updated over time, as you progress and evolve in your career. This "skills package" record will be a valuable resource for your future, and a reminder of how far you have come.

Trouble getting started?

If you are like many, taking inventory of your various skills and categorizing them may seem like a daunting task. There are several online tools you can use to get started. Excelsior offers free advice at its site (www.excelsior.edu/military-resources) as do many other colleges. The most important thing is to take your time to reflect upon all that you have done. Consider also talking with your friends, family and coworkers to discover more about the valuable transferable skills they believe you exhibit. They may be able to provide helpful observations that you may not see. These small steps will help you better prepare for a job search and feel more confident in your ability to convince employers that you are the person they've been looking to hire.



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