

# Taking People to a **HIGHER** LEVEL



An Executive White Paper by  
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**Y**ou see it in every industry and almost everywhere you go – employees just going through the motions of their jobs, exerting just enough effort to reach the minimum standards of acceptable job performance. It's the retail clerk who regimentally mumbles, "Can I help you?" It's the office supervisor who says she's just "putting in her hours to go home." It's the colleague who constantly watches the clock, ready to bolt out the door at quitting time.

Ever wonder what they do away from work? Do you think they approach their personal lives in the same way they approach their work lives? No way! They enthusiastically build furniture and lead youth church groups. They eagerly head civic organizations and go on family camping and fishing adventures. They passionately run 5K's, play golf, and shoot basketball. They excitedly attend football games and parades and concerts. They willingly organize cookouts and fund-raisers and birthday bashes.

Our employees are dedicated, energetic, motivated, caring people, always bettering themselves and bettering the world around them – until they show up for work!

While facing lifelong job uncertainty and insecurity, limited upward mobility, people are searching for organizations that break the mold of "business as usual." They long for work environments that move beyond treating them as mere cogs in a machine. They desperately seek workplaces to which they can fully commit their hearts, minds, and talents.

Employees are ready, willing, and able to take our companies to a higher level of success and significance. So we need a fresh, dynamic approach to transform a traditional "work culture" into a higher level "engagement environment" that fully taps into the passionate results-focused commitment of every employee.

Here are the four keys to taking people to a higher level of engagement and productivity.

## I. Engage the Soul

Speaking to the American Management Association shortly before his death, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi, said that "Heartpower is the strength of your corporation." He's right. Look behind any of your company's greatest accomplishments and you will find that its driving force was not necessarily a brilliantly conceived strategy (although that helps) or a seamlessly executed plan (that would be a miracle). The driving force behind all great organizational achievements is that engage the very hearts and souls of the employees.

Everyday millions of employees filled with untapped heartpower go to work and wait for their companies to give them a reason to commit themselves, a reason to exert their best energies, a reason to excel. There are three key strategies to engaging the souls of employees.

To fully engage the heart and soul of employees, the environment must be purpose-driven. At the very core, a higher level company is a clear, concise, and compelling purpose. It's far more than just the knowing the "what" (mission) or the "how" (values). Employees must understand and align with the "why."

Higher level companies are also life-sensitive to their em-

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ployees. They move beyond work–life balance toward work-life integration, of aligning the work with and around the individual’s personal and professional life needs.

Additionally, higher level firms are spirit-filled. They intentionally integrate ways to unleash the zest, joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment of their colleagues.

## II. Build Connections

Think about the times you felt really connected to an organization. Remember how enthusiastic you were about being a member of the group? You felt you were an important part of the team. You jumped into major projects to which you freely contributed your time, effort, and ideas. Even in the tough times, the sense of connection helped you to recommit yourself to the company goals. You were at your best because you felt connected.

**One of my clients, a CEO of a Malcolm Baldrige winning firm, drives a “No Secrets Culture,” a workplace environment where nothing is hidden, avoided, or untouchable.**

Employees long for a sense of connection to their workplace, for a relationship with their organization that represents more than just a paycheck or benefits plan. They need to feel “in the loop,” plugged in to the company, with an understanding of what is happening throughout the company. They need to know they can speak up, be heard, and be told the truth as well as the confidence they will receive timely information on things that affect their work.

To grow connections, the first priority is that all management be available. From face-to-face discussions to teleconference calls, emails, newsletters, surveys, and blogs, leaders must be willing to actively listen to all employees. Relentless internal listening, (both up and down the or-

ganization) must be a priority. Real connection begins when the front-line customer-contact employees realize their opinions matter.

Next, leaders and the environment must be transparent. Transparency in most of today’s business literature denotes being honest, forthright, and open with no hidden agendas; willing to admit both organizational and personal strengths and weaknesses. One of my clients, a CEO of a Malcolm Baldrige winning firm, drives a “No Secrets Culture,” a workplace environment where nothing is hidden, avoided, or untouchable.

Last, leaders must be professional in how they think, act, and communicate with employees to build strong connections. They must view all those around them more as colleagues and partners (work with) rather than employees and staff (work for). Higher level workplaces embrace a servant leadership style where the leaders actively and enthusiastically serve the front-line employee first.

## III. Drive Learning

During a tour of his facilities, when I asked, “What are the keys to success in your company,” the very well respected and admired general manager replied: “Hone your skills to perfection and learn something new everyday.” Nothing startling here, until you realize that the manager is Seferjin Aretis, head of the Youza Bread factory (formerly known as Moscow Bread factory #19) located on a beautifully wooded hillside above the Youza River in Moscow, Russia. Startling? Certainly not today. The point is that Aretis’s bread and confectionary products plant was profitable and growing under the repressive communistic Soviet system. (FYI – I asked this question to Mr. Aretis in the fall of 1991 at the fall of the Soviet empire. His next step was to franchise his kiosks all across Moscow – what a visionary!)

Hone your skills to perfection and learn something new everyday should be the mantra for every worker and every company today. To take your company and your people to a higher level, we must not let our employees fall behind in their knowledge and skills. A former CFO of Microsoft once said, “The only way to compete today is to make your intellectual capital obsolete before anyone else does.”

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With an entire staff of excited, brain-in-gear, cutting-edge thinkers, any company is in a position to go to a higher level. Without an entire staff of excited, cutting-edge thinkers, any company is, at best, playing catch-up to its competitors or frantically hanging on for survival.

First and foremost, you must ensure an interactive learning environment, one that fully engages the learner. The days of “talking head trainers” are forever buried (yeah). Whether through dynamic interpersonal experiences or digitally-based programs, today’s learners expect an interactive, two-way environment.

Today’s employees also demand that the learning be individual to their unique learning styles and preferences. As I discussed in detail in my book **Management Excellence**, there are many no and low-cost options available to individualize the training that best meets the employee’s learning preference.

Also, learning must be considered a life-long focus and not a temporary quick fix. Higher level firms move beyond offering an employment guarantee (“We promise you a long-term job here) to an employability guarantee (“While working here we promise you the opportunity to develop skills and talents that will serve you well with us or a future company”).

Employees are far more likely to invest their total effort and energy in a company when it helps them to grow, and to experience new and exciting learning, and potential professional development beyond their current job description.

## **IV. Emancipate Action**

Ever seen a caged eagle? A beautiful, powerful, highly-

skilled creation that when free can soar, hunt, and prosper. Yet inside a cage, it can never live up its potential.

How many eagles do companies cage today? Far more than we care to admit. How many times every day across the world do managers say “You’re empowered, you’re empowered” only to slam shut the cage door with “be sure and follow all the checklists [slam] and don’t spend any money [slam] and be sure and get my OK before you do anything [slam] and remember to get me a report by 3:00 [slam] and...”

Regardless of its talents or potential, a caged eagle can at best only perform to the dimensions of its cage. But when it is released, no need to shout encouragement to it to soar, no one need hang motivational slogans on its nest exhorting excellence. When unleashed from the shackles of bureaucracy, when freed from the confines of an operational prison, eagles study their surroundings, spread their wings, and fly!

It’s time to take traditional empowerment to a higher level – to the emancipation of people.

Emancipation simple means giving people the freedom to succeed. It focuses on giving people the protection they need to excel, the power to control their own destinies, and then getting out of the way. As management guru Peter Drucker loved to say, “Management’ job is to find out what it’s doing that keeps people from doing a good job, and stop doing it.”

To create an environment that emancipates action, first give people the freedom to innovate. Henry Ford once said that “If I would have asked the people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.” Imagine all the potential innovations alive inside the minds of employees but are never brought to life from that are never tested. Higher level firms get these ideas out of their people’s brains and out on the table for review.

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Next, give people the freedom to initiate. Encourage opportunities to experiment, test, and try new ideas, ways, or methods.

Finally create an environment that gives people the freedom to celebrate not only their success but also their failures. A man once visited a successful high tech manufacturing facility with a higher level emancipation environment. While chatting with a top manager, the guest heard a thunderous boom. Jumping out of his chair, the guest shouted, "What was that?" The manager calmly said it was the plant's cannon being

fired. Glancing at his watch, the guest asked, "Do you always shoot off your cannon at 3:41 P.M. on Thursday afternoons?" The manager said, "No. We shoot the cannon to let everyone know that another one of our experiments just blew up, that we failed; but to us, hearing that cannon means [holding his thumb and first finger an inch apart] we're that much closer to success!"

## The Journey to a Higher Level

Walt Disney once said: "You can dream, create, design, and build the most wonderful place in the world...but it requires people to make the dreams a reality."

The journey to growing a higher level engagement environment must always be about your people. For people are the literal heart and soul of any firm.

Come join the journey to a higher level.

It's a great ride!

### About Dr. Jim Harris

Dr. Jim Harris is founder of The Jim Harris Group and To a Higher Level LLC, international consulting, speaking, and coaching firms dedicated to guiding leaders and their teams to a higher level of success and significance.

An award winning author, professional speaker, and seasoned business executive, Dr. Jim is internationally renowned for his transformational approach to leadership, business, and people excellence. His clients include such world-class firms as Best Buy, Walmart, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, and State Farm, as well as hundreds of associations, healthcare, and services companies.



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