

Accelerated Engagement for Finance Professionals

As a finance manager, your ability to both act as an internal business consultant and fulfill the duties of the finance team requires a significant level of engagement with your non-finance business partners. Applying the Accelerated Engagement Model will help you establish the rapport and trust needed for deeper engagement.

Imagine completing the month-end close smoothly and having adequate time to explain your financial results to the divisional general manager because your production and sales managers e-mailed you the inventory levels and sales forecast on Day 1. This let you review the reports in advance and prepare journal entries, leading to an easy month-end close. That's what can happen when nonfinance department heads are engaged in financial processes. As a divisional controller of a construction materials company, I have experienced uneventful month-end closes firsthand because of this increased engagement.

Engagement is the glue that holds everything together. As the level of complexity in an organization increases, there's an increased need for engagement, which can be achieved when

finance managers establish rapport and trust with their business partners. The role of a finance manager has evolved into a systems expert and internal business consultant. In this type of role, a finance manager needs to know how to work with cross-functional teams and engage them in problem solving to impact business results positively. The Accelerated Engagement Model (see Figure 1) is a simple model that can be applied to help establish speedy engagement.

Engage Within the Organization

Best-in-class companies have clear strategies to engage their customers, and the engagement experience within an organization starts among its employees. For example, the Boeing Company, a past recipient of the Baldrige Award, has a clearly defined engagement strategy and practice. Since finance managers are able to understand financial records, they can influence opera-

tions, sales, and maintenance in the optimization of serving customers. Remember that an organization that serves its customers well and operates in an efficient manner internally will maintain its existence in the extreme competitive environment. As the finance manager, you can set the example by engaging other departments and completing your work with minimal stress.

But engagement doesn't happen automatically. According to a 2013 Gallup research study, "State of the American Workplace," employees of a typical company focus on performing their job duties within their silos. Optimization of process results is a struggle be-

Figure 1: Accelerated Engagement Model for Finance Managers



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cause there's a lack of collaboration. In these companies, 30% of employees are fully engaged, 20% are actively looking for another professional opportunity, and the remaining 50% are on the fence. On the other hand, in best-in-class companies such as Southwest Airlines, 90% of employees are engaged. They perform their job duties, offer assistance to teammates, and focus process results across functions. Engagement at the workplace is like latent demand in a marketplace. It can be activated by two factors: organizational culture and effective leadership. As the finance manager in your organization, you can learn about the leadership component from the Accelerated Engagement Model.

Listen

Most human resource management experts agree that most organizational problems are caused by a lack of listening. As human beings, we're concerned with being heard first and then listening to feedback. Anytime you have conversations with other department heads, be prepared with a handful of questions. Ensure they are open-ended and demonstrate adequate specific knowledge of the department. Your purpose is to learn about the department's strategies while reflecting a perspective of appreciation for its efforts. Listening is like giving praise while acquiring crucial information. Listening at work helps me find commonalities with my team and with other departments. We build ideas based on what we agree on instead of wasting time on disagreeing.

Establish Rapport

People with rapport subconsciously synchronize their body postures. For example, I was eating dinner with my family at a restaurant when I noticed the body postures of four people at the table to our right. They sat close to each other, their arms were open, and their bodies were moving in a synchronized fashion. I heard them speak and laugh, and I saw them smile a lot. They had great rapport.

To build rapport with our colleagues, we need to learn their behavioral preferences. It then becomes easy to adapt our behaviors and language to match theirs. This way we establish rapport very quickly. For example, I remember speaking with a sales manager who was very detail oriented. I prepared a simple data sheet and offered him a brief analysis of the quarterly sales bonus. In addition, I explained my method to compute bonus amounts. By the end of the conversation, our body postures

were synchronized, and we had very nice rapport from then on.

Offer Help

A simple technique for increasing engagement that has proven itself very powerful is to offer help. "How can I help you with that?" is the easiest step in the process of engagement, yet many professionals fail to take advantage of it. Nelson Mandela once said, "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner." For example, if the production manager hires a new employee and payroll isn't set up right, take the opportunity to assist. Focus on this one issue alone until you resolve it. Make sure you ask questions in a positive manner until you have all the facts. A speedy resolution to this type of situation generates a huge amount of goodwill. In my professional experience, I've found that helping others is very effective. It ends up increasing collaborative work among the teams.

Empower

It's time to ask your coworkers how they can contribute in a way they haven't in the past. In this step of the process, share your vision and the challenges your organization faces. Explain to others that reporting accurate financial records is of the utmost importance because it's needed, among other reasons, to maintain the company's credit line with lending institutions and its status with shareholders. Remember that with integrated ERP systems, operations create most of the financial records directly. Build a simple

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task list to define who will do what and by when. Stick to it to ensure any desired change will be implemented.

Provide Feedback

Once these change ideas are put in place, ensure there's follow-up through verbal communication. In my experience, I've noticed a short meeting is very useful. I sit with my coworkers or team and discuss what worked and what didn't. Then we follow that up by taking actions accordingly. Additionally, you can write a case study to demonstrate how collaboration resolved key transactional issues related to the month-end close.

Implementing the Model: Turn the Idea into Reality

Process discipline is a finance manager's strength, in addition to financial and business acumen. You can apply these strengths along with the leadership skill of engagement to generate superior business results. The Accelerated Engagement Model is easy to learn and follow. It has been tested in real business environments many times. Try these tactics on a small scale first, and then implement them in your daily work. For additional detailed skills, refer to IMA's Leadership Academy courses at www.imanet.org/leadership. **SF**

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