

Putting Research to Work: How to Engage Employees

*Robert O. Patterson, JD
CEO/ Principal
The Center for Association Resources, Inc.*

Americans Actually Excel in Chaos and Crisis

Archetype studies of how Americans see the world provide important clues on how to engage employees during the wait-and-see of a slow economy and while facing the uncertainty of what military conflicts will bring. These studies, sponsored by industry leaders AT&T, Hewlett Packard and the American Society for Quality, contain the seeds for sparking greater initiative, creativity, collaboration and commitment. Every ingredient is built right into the American psyche – and awaits organizations that choose to tap into these inherent and uniquely American traits.

In the moments, days and weeks following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Americans sprang into action. They wrote checks, stood in long lines at blood banks and gathered with friends to raise money. They creatively added American flags to their cars and homes. Americans thousands of miles from the attack sites came forth to rally the country's spirits and support rescue workers.

The archetype research tells us this: Americans thrive when failure strikes. We are inventive in a crisis, we'll disregard squabbles we've had with coworkers and we'll work together to pull out of a tough situation. But organizations must first set into motion the climate that unleashes Americans' willingness to participate to help their organization weather uncertain times.

An archetype is an unconscious imprint of sorts. We act based on these unconscious ideas and beliefs. People with common experiences can share similar archetypal beliefs. The tricky part is that we're not always aware of either the archetype or how our actions might be influenced.



The research, in quick summary, found: Americans prefer big challenges – huge, actually – that seem insurmountable. We crave information about what's going on and what needs to be done. However, we don't want to be told how to get the job done; we greatly prefer to be set loose to try new ideas and beat the odds. Americans love the underdog – a popular movie and television theme – who's told he or she can't succeed because the odds are against them.

These key factors ignite the spark that sets the archetype in motion.

Strategies for Engaging Americans in Making a Difference

Most organizations are designed to maintain control and to use an orderly approach to solving business issues. Our businesses are highly compartmentalized and structured – the exact opposite of what brings the archetype into play.

To release the innate nature of Americans, we must break with these traditions to release the archetypal energy. By making some simple systems changes, organizations can tap into these forces, increasing employee commitment and engaging people even when the economy is stagnant.

To create greater involvement of employees during these times:

Communicate fully. Tell employees how the economy is affecting the organization. People need to know where the organization stands, the nature of the dilemma and the consequences faced. A commitment to bringing the voice of the member/customer to all staff doesn't require money, but an allotment of time is a definite factor. However, a failure to inform staff of the importance of the member/customer's reaction to the organization can undermine success.

Promote choice. Americans love choices. Allow people to choose new ways of working, saving money, streamlining customer-service processes and approaching new markets. One of the reasons flextime is such a popular workplace benefit is that it is rooted in choice.

Slash red tape. The archetype doesn't like delays and seeking approvals. Equally unappealing is lots of paperwork (particularly when it doesn't seem warranted) and a long time lags to implement sound ideas. Shorten the path from idea to action so people can respond quickly to the need at hand.

Change boundaries. Strict departmental structures don't serve members well and put a damper on the archetype. Allow people to meet freely with others to create solutions.

Test solutions first. Management will sleep better knowing there are some constraints. Provide opportunities to test ideas in smaller ways prior to organization-wide implementation. This also gives employees an opportunity to see results quickly, an essential archetype characteristic.

Raise the bar on expectations. Keep in mind that Americans respond to big, seemingly impossible challenges. Asking more is the only way to tap into the archetype. Allow people to set their own goals and then offer support for the bigger objectives.

Listen more than ever. Keep an ear to what people are feeling, their ideas for helping the organization and the barriers that keep them from becoming more involved. Resist the temptation to solve problems for them (a surefire archetype-squelcher), and provide support for testing new ways of working.

Retention Agenda

Some willingness to experiment is a prerequisite for senior management. Outcomes will be unpredictable; yet what actually is predictable in business? There will be both failures and successes.

However, the archetype research tells us that failure, for Americans, is the fuel for unparalleled success. These strategies require a new platform for leaders – greater openness, spending more time with staff and member-contact employees, a keen eye for subtle marketplace cues that may signal emerging opportunities, a willingness to risk experimentation in new service-delivery options and a minimizing of defensiveness to feedback from members, suppliers and employees.

Truly, your organization will be applying the archetype principles to the senior management team itself – to spark a renewed energy and commitment to travel a new road to meet the challenge of unprecedented business, economic and political terrain.

There is a downside to the archetype. American's don't like planning, we're reactive, and we shoot from the hip too often. (Though, we then enjoy fixing the mistakes we make). The challenge is to provide a balance of careful planning and a bias for action.

The Archetype

The research found seven cultural forces that Americans respond to and that bring out our greatest efforts and commitment:

1. **Insistence on Choice.** We have the inherent desire to choose what, where and who we want to be, just as the Pilgrims chose to come here and create democracy.
2. **Pursuit of Impossible Dreams.** We love to turn the impossible into the possible, despite the odds. Failing at a first attempt is part of the archetype as well. We then strive to overcome the failure and succeed beyond expectations.
3. **Obsession with Big and More.** We love super malls, even bigger SUVs. We also like bigger goals and greater success than might seem possible.

4. **Impatience with Time.** We like fast food, faster Internet, faster service, even faster weight loss. We're an impatient people. In our organizations, we're turned off by red tape, long approval chains, slow processes and unnecessary work. Our American customers, too, find these obstacles unbearable.
5. **Oops! The Acceptance of Mistakes.** The research found Americans often don't do things right the first time. However, we're good at learning from our mistakes and getting far better results the second time. Punishment for mistakes can be deadly, though, and stifle the archetype.
6. **The Urge to Improvise.** We value fixing more than we value doing it right the first time. We love creative breakthroughs and solving the seemingly unsolvable.
7. **Fixation with What's New.** Americans love new stuff, new strategies, new products... because they provide new choices!

Witness the Archetype

Watch an American-made film or television drama. Did someone tell the hero he or she would be at risk if they failed or that their odds for succeeding were limited? Did the hero have some support from a friend or colleague who believed in them? Was the obstacle big or dangerous? Were there setbacks along the way? Was there a tight deadline or time frame during which the problem had to be solved?

The archetype is easy to find. Now, of course, you'll never watch a film or TV show in the same way!

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