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On Fire at Work

How Great Companies Ignite Passion in Their People Without Burning Them Out

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

What key question do managers and supervisors at Marriott Hotels ask their employees each day, enabling them to maintain a turnover rate that is one-third of the industry standard?

Why are there more than 500 “co-presidents” at a software firm that has twice been recognized as the best place to work in Minneapolis?

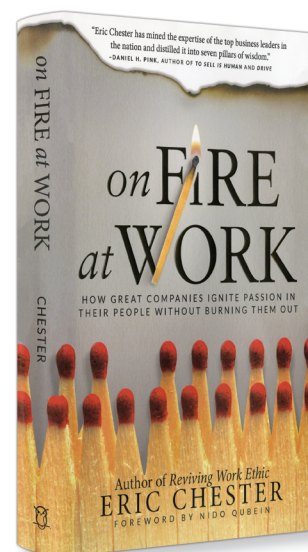
Why does a burgeoning healthcare consultancy firm in Philadelphia ban its people from sending business-related emails after 6 p.m. and on weekends?

The answer to these intriguing questions — along with many others — can be found in Eric Chester’s *On Fire at Work*. Chester reveals the *seven cultural pillars* that today’s leading employers focus on to attract and retain top talent: compensation, alignment, atmosphere, growth, acknowledgment, communication and autonomy.

On Fire at Work is a practical field guide that leaders in any organization can implement to build more than an engaged workforce, but rather a workforce that’s *on fire!*

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The seven cultural pillars used to attract and retain top talent.
- What sparks *on-fire* commitment to a job.
- Five ways to ensure core value alignment.
- The Four Ps of Recognition and Reward.



by Eric Chester

CONTENTS

The Old School and the New Deal

Page 2

Compensation

Page 3

Atmosphere

Page 4

Growth

Page 4

Acknowledgment

Page 5

Autonomy

Page 6

Communication

Page 8

THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: ON FIRE AT WORK

by Eric Chester

The author: Eric Chester is the author of six leadership books and is the founder of The Center for Work Ethic Development. As a hall-of-fame speaker, he has delivered more than 2,000 paid keynote speeches on three continents. His clients include Harley Davidson, McDonald's, AT&T and Wells Fargo. For more information, Visit OnFireAtWork.com.

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The Old School and the New Deal

Your success — and the success of your business — is tied directly to the quality of the people you attract to your organization, your proficiency in getting those people to consistently perform up to and even beyond their potential, and your ability to keep them on your payroll for as long as possible. And all of that hinges on one thing: your culture.

The Old School Deal

Today's Old School employers don't place much credence in buzzword-sounding mumbo jumbo like *employee engagement* and *workplace culture*. What's inherent in the Old School mindset is the assumption that the exchange of money for time and effort is sufficient. In other words, the financial deal that exists between an employer and employee — compensation for work performed — is the *only* thing that really matters. You took the job knowing what you were going to have to do and how much you'd be paid to do it, so keep your head down and your nose to the grindstone.

When jobs are scarce or the wage offered is above market rates, workers will grudgingly accept "the deal" and do what's asked of them, for fear of getting kicked to the curb. On the other end of the spectrum, when the economy improves and jobs are plentiful — or when the wage offered is nothing to write home about — Old School employers struggle mightily to attract and retain highly skilled people.

Unhappy Employees

Regardless of which study you point to, there's little question that an overwhelming percentage of people

aren't happy at work. They don't like their jobs or the company they work for. They can't envision the way up and out of the hole they're in.

Many if not most employees arrive to the job on day one fully engaged, which is to say they have a vested interest in meeting or even exceeding your expectations. The challenge facing employers isn't how to engage employees. It's how to keep the fires of passion burning once the honeymoon period is over.

Beyond Engagement = On Fire

Amazing things happen when either party in an ER(employer)/EE (employee) relationship begins to exceed the expectations set for them. For example, say an employee's exceptional performance allows her to advance faster than she anticipated. What often results is more than simple engagement — it's an ongoing cycle of *on-fire* commitment to the job, to fellow employees and to the company. When employees are on fire, their energy level increases, sparking a similar increase in productivity, motivation, creativity and performance. They're going to want to stick around a little longer, and you're going to want to reward, promote and invest more in them. This is the on-fire cycle.

Like all successful relationships, an on-fire employer-employee relationship requires commitment, focus and hard work. And that commitment, focus and hard work begin with you. Why begin with you? Because you can control what happens on your side of the ledger.

To whatever degree your authority reaches, begin with you. Make improvements where you can, and make those improvements early and often. If you want to create a legion of on-fire employees, making these improvements isn't negotiable. It's something you absolutely must do.



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service@summary.com

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Rebecca Clement, Publisher; Sarah Dayton, Editor in Chief; Ashleigh Imus, Senior Editor; Masiel Tejada, Graphic Designer; Beth VanWoert, Contributing Editor

SUMMARY: ON FIRE AT WORK

Employees expect seven things from their employer: compensation, alignment, atmosphere, growth, acknowledgement, autonomy and communication. These are the *pillars* of workplace culture that reflect the true identity of the company and the workplace community you've worked so hard to build. ●

Compensation

Counterbalancing This and That

Your objective as a business leader is to find the best way to compensate your employees. And while having the right compensation methodology in place for your people won't guarantee that they will be on fire for you, the wrong one will almost certainly ensure that you won't get on-fire performance from them, at least not for any length of time.

At a certain point, money ceases to be a motivator. The time at which that point is reached depends on a variety of factors, not the least of which is the job itself, but what's clear is that it's reached fairly early on. After an employee hits that point, then money alone won't tend to motivate the employee to go above and beyond.

Compensation Models

The most commonly used compensation models tend to be Old School paradigms that do not lay the groundwork for on-fire employee performance.

For example, while it would be far simpler for a business to pay all employees the exact same amount, it would be unfair to each of them — and it would also be unfair to the business.

Also, exchanging money for time is easy to calculate, but without any additional incentives or performance bonuses these time-based compensation models will disengage and demotivate your people faster than you can say “train wreck.”

Payroll trimming may often be standard operating procedure for businesses that compete solely on price, but it makes it extremely difficult to attract and retain a high-quality workforce.

And, the practice of assuring and promising bonuses or other perks to come to attract talent and effect high performance at bottom dollar is still commonplace. Even the best-intentioned ambiguous promises have no place in the compensation strategy of a great culture.

With all this in mind, here are three of the essential elements of today's most effective compensation models:

- **Strive for Transparency:** In many organizations, salaries and wages are a taboo subject, and in some organizations discussing what you make with coworkers is grounds for termination. Shrouded in secrecy, these cultures operate under a blanket of “don't ask, don't tell” thinking. The idea that what employees don't know won't upset them may have worked a few decades ago, but it's no longer the case. Employees now look for and expect sensible and uniformly applied compensation practices.

- **Pay People More Than You Have To:** A growing number of profitable companies spanning a wide range of industries attribute their sustained profitability and successes to the practice of paying some of the highest wages in their respective industries. Research from Towers Watson shows employees who believe they are paid fairly are 4.5 times as likely to be highly engaged employees compared with people who do not believe they are paid fairly.

- **Tie Employee Income to Employee Outcome:** People will support what they help to create. When employees have a selfish interest in the outcomes they create for their employer, they rejoice when company profits are high. They also feel the pinch when times are tight. Compensating employees in this manner eliminates the train wreck money-for-time models by aligning the motivations and goals of the employers and employees.

There's no question that compensation plays a significant role in how employees approach their jobs, how long they remain in their jobs and how they feel about their employers. But as crucial as compensation is to a company's workplace culture, there's no evidence to suggest that it can ignite and sustain on-fire employee engagement. It can, however, lay the foundation on which on-fire performance is built. ●

Alignment

Inculcating Core Values from the C-Suite to the Custodian's Supply Room

At a time when people yearn for the time-honored values and social mores of the past, words like integrity, excellence, service, respect and trust resonate. As consumers, we want to believe that these words mean something, that they're the foundational principles of the company that uses them. But the acid test of these claims is in how the company's employees live out those values.

The New School says that a company's values are much more than an expression of priorities or ethics; they're the markers by which a workforce and executive management

SUMMARY: ON FIRE AT WORK

go about the business of fulfilling their mission and making a profit. Alignment between employer and employee is key.

Five Ways to Ensure ER-EE Core Value Alignment

These days, employees and customers alike demand more than lip service. They want to work for and buy from companies that believe in something and live and act according to those beliefs.

Start by creating, revising or at the very least reviewing your organization's core values. If you're creating or revising them, make certain you involve employees from all departments and at every level in the process. Next, follow this five-step process:

1. **Interview and hire according to your values.** Corporate values have meaning only when they're internalized — believed — by the employees themselves.
2. **Train around those values.** Sure, your corporate values will be listed in the piles of new-hire materials that employees receive, but mention of and reflection upon those values shouldn't stop there. Talk about values throughout your employees' tenures, and give employees constant opportunities to internalize those values.
3. **Discipline employees who don't honor the values, and reward those who do.** One of the best ways to show that your values really mean something is to recognize and praise employees who honor those values and reprimand and discipline those who disregard them.
4. **Evaluate performance in accordance with core values.** Every employee review should include — if not narrowly focus on — how the individual is performing according to the company's core values. Doing so ties aspirational words and phrases on the walls of the corporate headquarters to the specific actions and behaviors of the people who are expected to live up to those values.
5. **Model behaviors.** No matter what all those plaques say, your employees will do as you and your managers do. Take your company's values seriously every single day, and your employees will follow.

It doesn't matter how impressive your company values appear when displayed in the lobby of your headquarters. The only thing that matters is how your organization actually functions, how it goes about its daily business, and, most importantly, what guiding principles serve as the

foundation for the important decisions made throughout your company each and every day. ●

Atmosphere

Ensuring Your Employees Are Safe, Well Equipped and Goofing Off!

Key employees in your business are perpetually pursued by headhunters, recruiters and competing employers. The bait most commonly used to lure them away is a sizable bump in pay. And if money alone won't get them to jump, an offer involving a better workplace atmosphere might just do the trick.

What one might consider a great atmosphere could seem dreadful or repulsive to someone else. One thing is certain: The atmosphere at your workplace is far too important to be left up to chance or happenstance. Atmosphere is a choice. It must be deliberate.

Generally, there are seven questions/issues that employees often ponder in relation to their employers:

- Is my employer doing everything possible to keep me safe?
- Can I be my authentic self while I'm at work?
- Do I have everything I need to excel in this job?
- Do I like, respect and trust my boss?
- Do I genuinely like the people I work with day in and day out?
- Does this environment energize me or make me want to find an escape hatch?
- Are we having any fun around here?

Because people are different, they'll reflect on these questions and your company's atmosphere at various speeds, intervals and sequences based on what they value most. However, it's doubtful that anyone who has options will ever be attracted to your company if any of these questions aren't answered "yes."

The trick is to never stop trying to create the best possible cultural atmosphere. ●

Growth

Grow Them Big or They'll Go Home

There was a time when an employee and his or her employer were in it together for the long haul. Back then, people tended to spend their entire careers at a company, and that company returned its employees' loyalty with secure jobs, reasonable pay and pensions. These days few companies can so much as guarantee a stable job with

SUMMARY: ON FIRE AT WORK

steady pay and benefits anymore. So if the companies can't offer loyalty, then why should they expect loyalty from their employees in turn?

And yet, many companies do demand loyalty, and the frustration of their leaders is almost palpable when employees don't toe the line. Leaders who think this way don't understand that employees won't give their loyalty unless they receive it first (and even then it's a gamble).

The reason why is simple. Because it's not really loyalty employees are after. What they really desire is a chance, a leg up. Another thing they want is mutuality. An employee who helps a company become successful expects to get a piece of the pie, a share of that success.

The larger problem isn't that employees aren't loyal anymore; it's that managers have realized that buying loyalty doesn't work and have, therefore, given up on trying to instill loyalty in those employees. Giving up on producing loyal employees doesn't help anybody. It certainly doesn't help you, especially if you don't see the value in investing time and money in ungrateful people who are going to leave anyway. And it isn't helping the employees who, if they weren't looking for the exit before, are sure to start once they figure out that the company's goals and their own goals aren't even remotely in sync.

Deloitte released a benchmark study in 2011 titled "Talent Edge 2020: Building the Recovery Together: What Talent Expects and How Leaders Are Responding." For those employees looking to bolt, Deloitte found that a majority rated their current employers' "efforts at creating career paths, developing leaders and retaining top performers" as fair to poor. Indeed, 53 percent looking to leave said that they would reconsider their decision if their current employers improved their job advancement and promotion prospects. As the research shows, most of those who are secretly looking to leave would actually prefer to stay — as long as you give them a compelling reason to do just that.

Giving employees the chance to show their stuff, build stronger skills and grow at the company — this is the solution or at least an essential part of the solution.

However, a disconnect occurs when either the employer or employee feels as if they're getting the raw end of the deal — giving more than they're getting. The trick is to stay in that Growth Retention Zone — as long as there's growth on both sides, harmony exists and balance reigns.

It's simple really. You want them to grow, and they want to grow. So, let's focus on a five-step how-to formula to ensure your employees remain in the growth and retention zone, which leads to long-time on-fire performance.

Five-Step Process for Staying in the Growth and Retention Zone

Step 1: Agree on a growth agenda. One reason couples often cite for a failed marriage is that the husband and wife discovered over time that they each wanted different things. The employment relationship works the same way — both parties have to be moving in the same direction. This sort of mutuality requires both parties to meet at the onset of the hire as well as periodically discuss, agree to and map out each of their future ambitions.

Step 2: Establish the timetable. Just as both parties need to agree on what new skills and abilities the employee is going to be learning, they also need to establish and agree upon the time frame. Without a timetable in place, one or both parties are going to eventually disengage.

Step 3: Individualize the learning methodology. It's critically important to figure out how each employee learns best. Knowing how each employee learns and designing the learning agenda around what works best for them are the keys to ensuring that they stay on course.

Step 4: Celebrate milestones and success. Many of us can recall when our parents charted our height on a doorway. Even a half-inch of progress drew applause and cheers. The same principles are at work here. It's important to chart the growth progress of each employee and let them recognize how much they're learning, how much experience they're gaining and how much more valued they are becoming to you in the process.

Step 5: Rinse and repeat. Every employee, from your receptionist to your EVP, needs to be on a growth trajectory — and they need to understand and agree on that trajectory. Once they get where they want to be, they're going to see a new future for themselves off in the horizon. That's a good thing for them and your organization. ●

Acknowledgement

What It Really Means to Put Your People First

A company that has made *Fortune's* "100 Best Places to Work For" every year since the list began in 1998 is Wegmans Food Markets. In fact, in 2012 and 2014 *Consumer Reports* named Wegmans the best supermarket chain in the United States.

People who go to work for Wegmans may initially arrive with a "just another job" mindset, but it doesn't take long until most realize they've found a career and never want to leave.

SUMMARY: ON FIRE AT WORK

What company wouldn't kill to have this degree of loyalty? Wegmans must be offering some serious compensation and benefits packages to foster such a devoted workforce, right? Yet according to *Fortune*, Wegmans pretty much pays equal to or better than the competition, without leading the market. The company manages to be the employer-of-choice in grocery retailing by taking a holistic view of Total Rewards, one that embraces all aspects of the employee experience without having to offer pay for sabbaticals, childcare or 100 percent of healthcare. What is it, then, that sets them apart?

In a word, Wegmans *acknowledges* its employees. It's engrained in their culture as deeply as it's engrained into Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In a world where everyone wants to feel like they belong and that they matter, Wegmans is the high-water mark for employee acknowledgement.

Notice the word acknowledgement, not *recognition*. That's because acknowledgement is really a higher order of recognition. To acknowledge something requires thought plus action, whereas to recognize something is often a neutral, passive act. You *recognize* the distinctive human forms in a Picasso painting. You *acknowledge* the painting's beauty and the artist's mastery.

That's not to say recognition isn't important. It's no secret that employees crave recognition. Far too many companies, however, treat recognition as just another form of compensation. However, compensation and benefits are negotiated terms, mutually agreed upon, expected at regular intervals and in many cases legally enforced. In other words, they're *expected*.

Recognition by itself doesn't carry enough force or mean very much, which is likely why so many employers fall back on Old School incentive programs.

With rare exceptions, incentive programs are just that — programs. Everyone is treated the same. Every action is treated the same. You're just another brick, only this time you're a brick with a bonus.

If all employers have are rigid programs or contests, then they're missing most of what it means to recognize an employee. Because acknowledgement isn't a program, it can't be automated, nor can it be impersonal. It requires caring, personalization and a human touch.

Recognition 101

The four Ps of Recognition and Reward are

- **Personal:** Regardless of the type of recognition, its perceived value escalates when it's individualized for the employee.
- **Proportionate and pertinent:** Any recognition or reward should always match the level of performance

being recognized and should always correlate directly with the employee's actions.

- **Prompt:** Celebrating an employee's "above and beyond" actions the moment you see them is far more effective than patting the employee on the back six months later during the performance review.
- **Public:** The value of a reward multiplies exponentially in the presence of peers and colleagues.

Wegmans tops the charts as a destination grocery store chain because it has reversed the Old School "customer is always first" model. Industry leaders like Apple, Firehouse Subs and Wegmans put employees first. In doing so, they gain harder-working, happier employees who then treat their customers the way they should be treated.

Acknowledging your people doesn't take anything out of your pocket, but it's sure to work better than an expensive incentive program. ●

Autonomy

Building an Army of Intrapreneurs

Remember the day you got your driver's license? Remember the excitement? For many of us, it was our first real brush with freedom. Looking back I can understand the anxiety my parents had watching me take the car out. It's the same fear most parents feel. The question for parents is whether their children will return their trust with thoughtful, responsible action.

No matter how well we think we raise our children, we can never answer these questions for certain. That's kind of what trust is all about. It's the absence of assurance. In this way, trust is a lot like faith. You can have faith in people only if you don't try to control their actions. The moment you begin to monitor their every move, out goes that faith.

So it's no surprise that many employers don't *really* trust their employees. After all, it's the employer's business, their department, their division at stake. It's their butt on the line if something goes wrong.

Trust is the foundational element of any healthy relationship. For the relationship to work, both sides need some independence — some autonomy — lest they suffocate from too much smothering.

Where the problem comes in is when leaders want their employees to give their all while doing exactly what they're told — no more, no less.

In this day and age, some companies still expect employees to be humbly submissive and overly dependent on their managers' orders and oversight. The way they

SUMMARY: ON FIRE AT WORK

see it, employees are like children: watched so they don't misbehave. Halted in their tracks before they ever make a mistake. Employees arrive late, take long lunches, slack off, don't care about what's good for the company, and take every opportunity to exploit any chink in the carefully constructed corporate armor so they can kill time and goof off. Then to top it all off, they leave early if no one's watching. The way the managers see it, they have to crack the whip in order to keep the place from becoming a freewheeling fun fest or a sea of inertia.

Let's be clear: Employees who behave and act this way do exist. Want them to do the jobs they were hired to do instead of breaking their backs to get the hell out of Dodge? Leaders who are seeking on-fire performance from their employees need to be the ones to lead the charge. They need to show trust in order to earn trust.

Autonomy Means Different Things to Different People

On-fire employees — the kind you're looking to hire and keep — are looking for some latitude to make decisions in the workplace. The best companies in the world, in turn, trust and empower these employees to think and act on their own — everyone wins!

Say you're willing to step up to the challenge and give your employees your trust ... what then? Well, the next step's a big one, but it's critical to the success of on-fire employee engagement: You foster a company-wide culture of autonomy where the employees work on behalf of your business while also working for themselves.

That's the essence of intrapreneurism. Take the best elements of entrepreneurship — independence, creativity, passion and a desire to succeed — and match them with each employee's day-to-day responsibilities. Then build a workplace environment where all of those employees perform as if it's their own company.

A culture of autonomy involves not just trust from the employer but also accountability from the employee. It's a two-way street. Telling employees they can start working in the way that fits them best without providing any guidance or overarching goals is like giving them permission to jump out of a plane without a 'chute. Cultures that promote autonomy need employees to work toward targeted, concrete objectives — priorities and deadlines set by the company or manager.

Think of it like establishing the rules of the game before the players take the field. The employees have the opportunity to use their strategic skills and creativity to score

more points, but they also recognize that they need to play within the rules to win.

Following are 10 ways to cultivate a culture of autonomy for on-fire performance:

- **Share your vision.** Help employees feel part of something bigger than themselves. Communicate your missions and visions to them early and often so they see what you see and are committed to working toward that result.

- **Involve employees in goal setting and planning activities.** Seek out their ideas, knowledge and insights, and invite them to help make important decisions. At the very least, let them see your process for making difficult decisions.

- **Explain the why.** Don't just tell someone what to do without making absolutely certain they also understand why that task needs to be completed and why you've selected that individual for the job.

- **Let them choose the how.** Whenever possible, let your employees decide how to achieve the task you've assigned. Agree upon what constitutes a successful outcome; then let them chart their own course.

- **Delegate authority, not just work.** Give employees a leadership role in some of the meetings they attend. Leadership skills develop over time, and they require practice.

- **Trust them before you have to.** Eventually, you'll have to trust them, but sometimes it's worth the risk to trust them before that point to make a decision or step into a role that pushed them to the limit. Your trust in them will give them confidence, and that confidence is crucial to their personal development.

- **Encourage them to solve their own problems.** Listen to their problems, but don't bark out the answer. Instead, ask probing questions that will lead them to determine the right answer.

- **Hold them accountable.** Remember that employer trust and employee autonomy is a two-way street. Holding employees accountable for their work and for meeting established goals and deadlines motivates them to achieve better results.

- **Provide constructive feedback.** Regardless of the results, let them know how they're doing, and give them the coaching they need to improve.

- **Acknowledge them on the spot for stepping up.** A few seconds of genuine one-on-one acknowledgement and recognition can go a long way toward reinforcing an employee's willingness to step up and stand tall. Show you appreciate their above-and-beyond commitment with a reward that matches the result. ●

SUMMARY: ON FIRE AT WORK

Communication

The Inextricable Link Between Transparency and Trust

Bad things happen to good companies, and even when employees aren't to blame and can't really do anything to right their ship, they still want to know what's going on. When management chooses not to disclose the extent of the difficulties they're facing, trust begins to erode, and the workplace culture is fractured.

Without straightforward information from the upper ranks, employees are left guessing, speculating as to what has really happened and what it means to them. Even if they don't quit, workers may begin to disengage and lose confidence in their company, feeling that their employer isn't looking out for their best interests. A bunker mentality develops as they shift into survival mode. Rumors circulate.

Regardless of the company or industry in question, there are three specific types of information that are controlled by management:

What Employees Need to Know: Employees must have some information in order to do their jobs effectively (e.g., job training, safety precautions, etc.).

What Employees Should Know: Employees should have a basic working knowledge of the company that employs them. This includes the company's history, ownership structure, management hierarchy, basic product/service lines, etc. In addition, employees should know anything that Wall Street knows about the company, as well as anything that is being reported about the company by the media.

What Employees Want to Know: In the employee version of a utopian universe, employees would be privy to everything their CEO knows about their company. Naturally, this is not possible or even plausible. Nor would it be wise for any company to share all of its information with every employee. But suffice it to say, employees want to know what's really happening, not only within their industry but also regarding all of the developments, changes and updates that are taking place within their company — especially those that can have any impact at all on their jobs and their future.

No matter what the situation, employees feel a stronger connection to their leaders and their company when they feel they are kept accurately informed and continually updated with any and all developments.

When leaders share current and future change with employees, they reinforce a culture of transparency. Rather than treating employees like cogs in a wheel, companies treat them like they have a stake in the game — which they do. Savvy employers recognize that employees

deserve to know — and need to know — simply because they work at the company. They are part of the team.

A transparent company is one where information between employer and employees flows freely. As Warren Bennis and Daniel Goleman write in their book *Transparency: How Leaders Create a Culture of Candor*, “An organization's capacity to compete, solve problems, innovate, meet challenges and achieve goals — its intelligence, if you will — varies to the degree that the information flow remains healthy.” In other words, transparency isn't just good for engaging your employees; it's just plain good for business.

When was the last time you asked your people what they needed to better perform their jobs? Employee surveys can be useful tools, but by themselves they're not enough to truly know what your people are thinking.

There's no survey and there's no digital app in the world that can take the place of a manager finding a few moments of quiet, pulling one of her employees aside and asking questions like, “Hey, how are you making out around here? Do you have all the tools and resources you need? What can I do to support you?”

And once her employees start to open up, the most important thing she can do is to shut up, listen, take notes and then take action.

When you go beyond what your workers expect, you'll build a workforce that will surprise you in ways you didn't think were possible. You'll find that they increasingly display a positive attitude, reliability, professionalism, initiative, respect, integrity and gratitude.

Live the seven pillars day in and day out — compensation, alignment, atmosphere, growth, acknowledgement, autonomy and communication — and you'll go further than that. You'll create not just an engaged workforce but a legion of loyal employees who are on fire. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *On Fire at Work*, you'll also like:

1. ***Make It Matter* by Scott Mautz.** Mautz reveals that fostering meaning at work by giving workers a greater sense of significance is the key to motivation and engagement.
2. ***Why Motivating People Doesn't Work ... and What Does* by Susan Fowler.** Fowler's Optimal Motivation process shows leaders how to help people meet their needs for autonomy, connection and competence for long-lasting motivation.
3. ***Full Engagement!* by Brian Tracy.** Business-success expert Brian Tracy shows managers how they can supercharge their employees' efforts.