

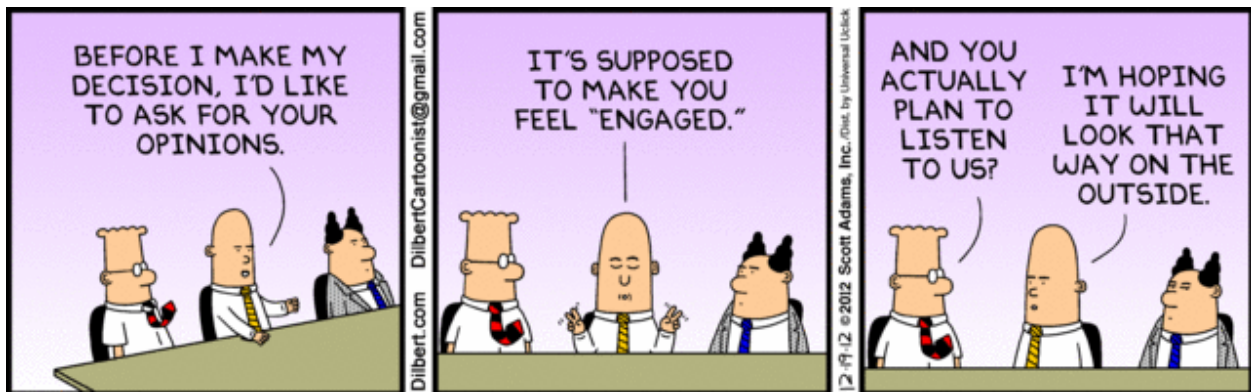


## Employee Engagement: Words are Good, Deeds are Better©

May 2019 EEC Subscriber Exclusive

*Employee engagement has emerged as a priority for utilities in recent years. Managers have come to recognize that an important class of assets — employees — walk out the door each night. How can they be convinced to return the next day? A lot of it, but not all of it, comes down to communication.*

Raise your hand if the Dilbert cartoon below has the ring of truth at your utility.



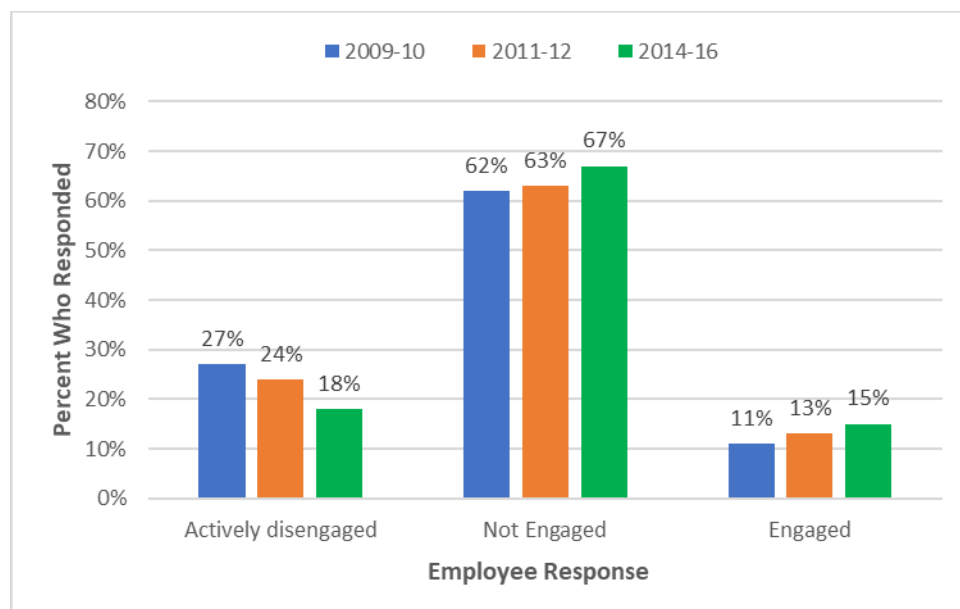
Credit: Dilbert Cartoons

Employees are feeling beaten down. Can you blame them? Their commitment to their organizations is being sapped by salaries that barely keep pace with inflation, repeated staff cutbacks, infrequent or ineffective communications, organizational inertia and reorganizations that seem to have no end. High-skilled employees depart, opting to pursue more rewarding work elsewhere, leaving fewer quality employees behind to do more work.

But that's not how you would characterize life at your utility, would you?

## Employees Feeling Disengaged

You may be kidding yourself. The Gallup organization regularly prepares a [State of the Global Workplace](#) survey. In the three most recent editions of that survey, less than two in 10 workers said they felt “psychologically committed to their jobs and likely to be making positive contributions to their organizations” (see graphic below).



Credit: Gallup

If you're a "glass half full" person, you might note that those who were engaged have been rising, albeit modestly. If you're the type that wants to quibble about the data, you might say the survey is too dated to be of use.

Well, the bad news is that more recent surveys don't tell a better story:

- In a 2019 survey of 1,000 workers across industries 80% said [they felt stressed](#) because of poor workplace communication.
- In a different study conducted this year, [just 2 in 10 workers](#) said they felt "very engaged."

## Employee Engagement A Big Challenge for Utilities

I could go on, but I think the basic point is unassailable: As a general statement, workers across industries (and countries) are not feeling particularly engaged or committed to their employers.

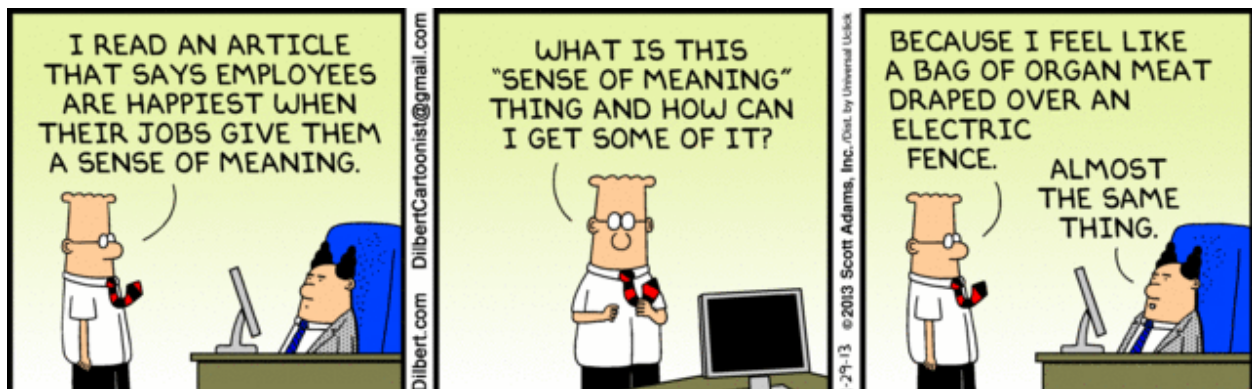
I have no reason to think utilities are immune to this general trend. In fact, the two surveys EEC conducted of utility communicators, in [2015](#) and [2017](#), showed employee engagement was one of the top issues facing communicators.

I have blogged on employee engagement before. Like [here](#). And [here](#).

A number of utilities have gone through “employee engagement” initiatives in recent years, and there’s every reason to think more will be on the way this year and next. It’s not unusual for me to hear a utility communicator say its organization has made improving employee engagement one of its top priorities.

Despite the best intentions of corporate leaders, efforts to improve employee engagement often fall short. Frederick Herzberg explains why in his classic article in *Harvard Business Review*, [One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?](#)

If you don’t have the time or inclination to read Herzberg’s article, this Dilbert cartoon strip gives a fair summary:



Credit: Dilbert Cartoons

## Better Communications Only Part of the Solution

“The factors involved in producing job satisfaction (and motivation) are separate and distinct from the factors that lead to job *d*issatisfaction,” Hertzberg writes. His article details nine myths of employee motivation, including the idea that increased or improved workplace communication can, by itself, improve employee satisfaction.

Poor quality communications can lead to extreme employee dissatisfaction, Hertzberg acknowledges. So improving workplace communication can lead to a **less dissatisfied** workforce, a necessary first step on the road to more fulfilled and engaged workers. But improving workplace communication will not, on its own, result in employees who are more satisfied (i.e., engaged, motivated, committed, to use today’s vernacular). Instead, Hertzberg asserted, based on considerable quantitative evidence, job satisfaction comes from achievement, recognition, performing quality work, and advancing in your career.

*HBR* published Hertzberg’s article five decades ago, yet it remains highly relevant today. The article bears reading (or re-reading), in case your utility is considering an employee engagement initiative.

If utilities fail to provide employees with challenging, satisfying work, they will not have engaged, committed employees. Utilities will get the best out of their employees to the extent that they create and sustain an environment where employees can be challenged to perform meaningful work, grow professionally and advance. Communications can help, but deeds are more important than words.