



## GO Strategies, LLC

Building a Dynamic  
A/E/C Workplace

A 3-part series of articles  
published on LinkedIn in 2019  
by Kate Robinette, CPSM



# Building a Dynamic A/E/C Workplace

## Part 1 of a 3-part series

It's 2019 and finding and retaining staff is the top financial challenge in the A&E industry according to the most recent Deltek® [CLARITY](#) report. In their survey, 51% of respondents are dealing with staffing issues. It seems that no matter how much money and effort we put into recruiting, we cannot attract and keep the staff that we need. Why?

In America, we spend more of our time at work than we do anywhere else except [sleeping](#). We must ask ourselves, are our companies the kind of workplaces we want to inhabit? With good employees in high demand, they are in a position to be particular. They are in control of where they work, and the day-to-day work experience must measure up. When they are dissatisfied with the status quo, they vote with their absence – either by being disengaged or by physically moving to a new company.

How did we get here? How did we get to the point where we are not meeting the needs of our staff? I researched previous people management models widely used in A/E/C to wrap my head around the historic progression. With the help of the internet, a ton of books, and interviews with some colleagues in the industry, I've pieced together the A/E/C people management experience. These are broad brush strokes and certainly there are exceptions to every generality; overall, these are the historic practices I uncovered.

### THE ASSEMBLY-LINE MODEL



Hoover Dam – designed by 200 (unnamed) engineers.

Predominant people management practices of the Silent and Boomer generations came out of the factories of the 1920-50s and *emphasized best methods for efficiency, production growth, and profit*. There was little emphasis placed on workers. People were literally part of the assembly line, trained to do one very specific task and repeat it until their shift was done. Even the 200 engineers in the Bureau of Reclamation working on the Hoover Dam – one of the most ambitious and high-profile projects of this era – were a nameless [group](#). Each employee represented one step in the production, but they rarely saw or participated in any of the steps ahead or

after them. Their task was insulated – essential to the whole without being aware of the big picture.

### COLD WAR COMPANIES

In the 1960s and 1970s, companies carried the “us vs. them” attitude of the wars into a Cold War world. Economic uncertainty and stiff competition forced A/E/C companies to adopt a new model. Businesses met challenges like they were battles, employing American bravado and a “we can do anything we set

our minds to” mentality. Strong, ego-driven, visionary leaders existed, but were rapidly being outpaced by [automation/computers](#), and a large workforce that sought the same type of fulfilling work experience that their parents and grandparents had from working on Hoover Dam and other meaningful projects. The projects became the goal. Companies and organizations challenged what was possible to achieve in a race to achieve power (and market dominance). This was the era of JFK, the moon race, and the beginning of mechanical computers.



“We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.”

– John F. Kennedy, Rice Stadium, September 12, 1962

John F. Kennedy Image by [Wikimages](#) from Pixabay.

Leadership was equated with “boss,” and the position-based power structure of the factories was now ingrained. There were “ladders” to climb. Successful companies were populated by “[company men](#)” who planned to get promoted and stay in leadership positions indefinitely. Differences were not celebrated; sameness was rewarded. This manifested in the well-intentioned management claim that we could teach anyone the skills they needed to do whatever their job demanded. This one concept [anyone could do any job with the right training] dominated personnel and leadership practices for 35 years.

### RECESSION AND MANAGEMENT

In the recession of the 1980s, employees learned the hard way that there were no longer [jobs for life](#). [Middle managers](#) were faced with being cut or forced to “train up” to validate their existence. This was when the Peter Principle was widely discussed in A/E/C (though it was put forward in 1968 by Dr. Laurence Peter in his book [The Peter Principle](#)). Dr. Peter noted the tendency of organizations to elevate employees up the ladder until they reached the level of their respective incompetence. Competent, high-performing architects, engineers, and contractors were rewarded with promotions, without the training and tools to make them truly successful in the new managerial positions. Many in the A/E/C witnessed this in firms when leaders stayed on longer in their positions than they probably should have

and demonstrated little managerial talent. But these leaders had been with the company forever, so no one questioned their authority.

A generational hierarchy developed. Silent Gens commanded leadership, a glut of Boomers and early GenXers filled the workforce with fewer true promotion opportunities as “middle management” positions were cut and higher positions were filled with tenured individuals who may have been high (technical) performers but were ill-prepared for management. Training was available, but not widely offered. Craig Galati, FAIA, FSMPS, CPSM, President of LGA Architecture remarked that he never received training from the company as he advanced. He had to seek it out on his own. The company supported him but did not try to guide or prepare him internally for the leadership role he took on.

An “information is power” model became the new way to demonstrate value. Employees hoarded their institutional knowledge and expertise to gain security, recognition, and advancement. *“Oh, we have to keep Sally. She’s the only one who knows how to work with these old machines.”* Sally did not train a replacement, she did not mentor younger staff, she did not write a manual, and she did not share how she did what she did with her boss. Sally felt it was not in her interest to share, so she didn’t.

Carla Thompson, FSMPS, CPSM, Senior Marketing Consultant with Zweig Group, said that this was a prevalent practice in some of the firms where she worked at the time. Institutional knowledge stayed with the titled leaders. When they retired or left the firm, the knowledge went with them – there were no systems in place to capture that knowledge and no motivation by the leaders to pass it on to others. That knowledge was what made them unique and valuable, so they kept it to themselves.

The negative effects on companies was staggering – lower returns, high training costs with little ROI, higher employee turnover, and disengaged employees (due to poor managers, few learning opportunities, and few advancement options). Companies competed to find and keep the best employees using pay, benefits, promotions, and training. Silent Gen/Boomer leaders were facing the possibility of *never* being able to retire because they couldn’t find suitable replacements. Organizations were coming to the harsh realization that people could *not* do everything that was needed for their jobs, no matter how much training they received.

By the late 1980s, early 1990s, many organizations had disgruntled employees and desperate leaders/founders who were ready to retire but feeling unable to do so. The problem was, no one really knew what to do about either problem.

The first glimmer of an answer came in a paper published by the Institute of Employee Studies (IES) in 1990 ‘*From People to Profits, the HR link to the service-profit chain,*’ which demonstrated how employee attitudes and behavior could improve customer retention and sales [performance](#). This was the first step toward addressing the employee experience and its effect on the bottom line.

In the mid to late 1990s, the Gallup Organization also began to research why some employees were high performers and why others were not. In 1999, they published their findings in [First, Break All the Rules](#) (Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman; rerelease from Gallup). In Part 2, we’ll look at Gallup’s findings and its influence on the people management model in A/E/C.

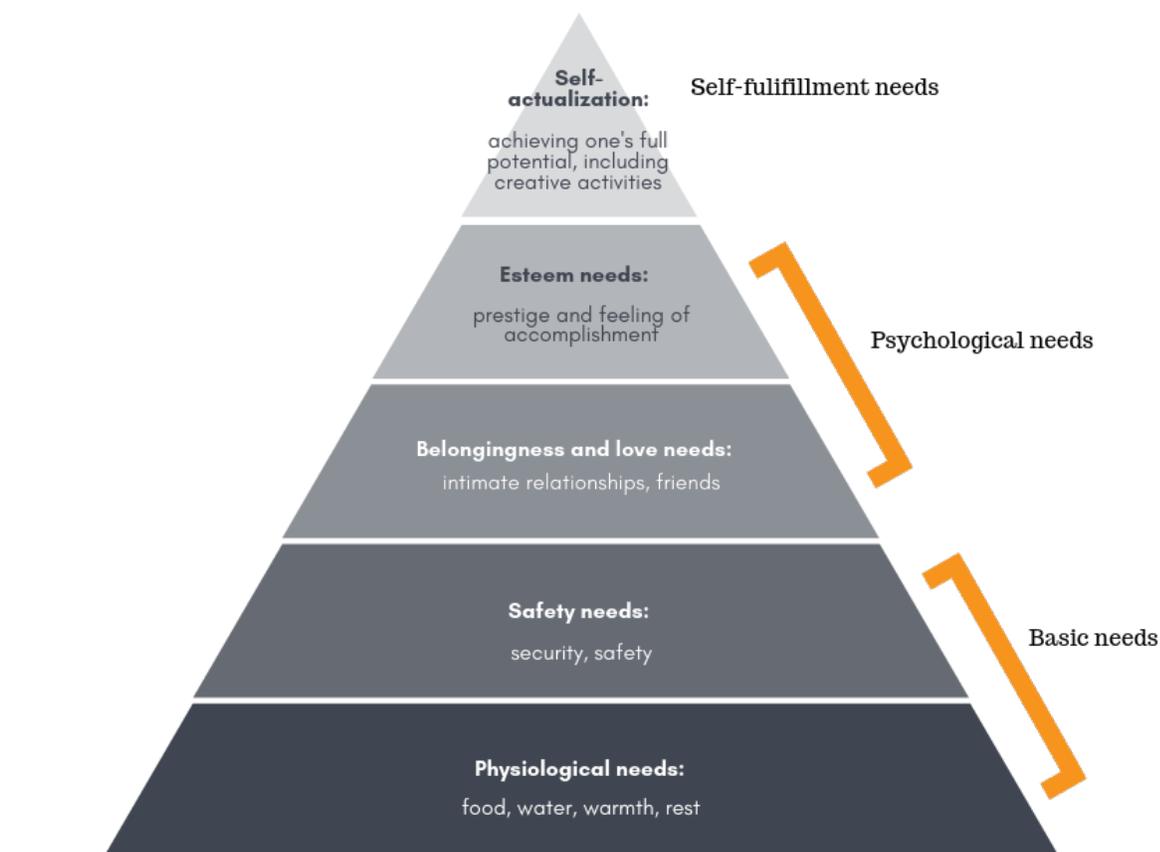
## Part 2 of a 3-part series

In the first part of this series, we examined the historic people management practices that laid the foundation of our current staffing, management, and culture issues in the A/E/C. You may recall that the most recent Deltek® [CLARITY](#) report stated that 51% of respondents are dealing with staffing issues. It seems that no matter how much money and effort we put into recruiting, we cannot attract and keep the staff that we need.

Our people management experiences have evolved dramatically. We’ve moved from the assembly line to the charismatic leader; from visionary leader to the strong technical leader who is missing management skills. We learned that, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, not all aspects of a position are trainable. As a result, employees climbed up the company ladder unprepared for the leadership roles. Existing leaders looked for successors and could not find suitable replacements. The problem was, no one really knew what to do about it.

### THE EMPLOYEE-BASED MANAGEMENT MODEL

Back in 1943, Abraham Maslow wrote his psychological paper entitled “A Theory of Human Motivation” in his effort to better understand human’s innate curiosity. It was groundbreaking and became the basis in psychological studies about what motivates us. In the paper, Maslow introduced the Hierarchy of Needs:

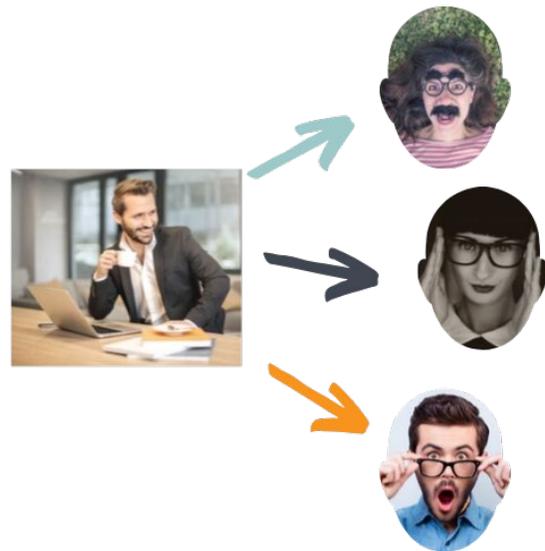


Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow asserted that every person develops from the ground up, meaning that as long as physiological needs are unmet, a person would focus primarily on those – food, water, shelter, etc. Once the physiological needs were consistently met and unthreatened, a person would seek out ways to meet their safety needs. When safety was secured, then the individual looked to achieve their social needs, and so on. Growth occurred when one level was secured and routinely satisfied, and the individual intentionally moved on to the next level.

Note that the emphasis was on the individual’s journey in getting their needs consistently met so they actively moved on to addressing their next level of needs. Self-actualization, considered the highest state of awareness and personal growth, only happened *after* everything else was fulfilled.

But as shown in my first article, Maslow’s information was not making its way into mainstream people management models. It wasn’t until the 1970s that a new model emerged that built on this concept of focusing on individuals and the team. The [Situational Leadership®](#) model (developed by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hershey) reasoned that there was no single "best" style of leadership. Effective management was *task-relevant*, and the most successful managers were those who *adapted their leadership style* to the performance ability and willingness of the individual or group they were attempting to influence. Effective management varied, not only with the person or group that was being influenced, but also depending on the task that needed to be accomplished.



*Manager’s leadership style tailored to individuals and situations*

The model had two fundamental constructs: leadership style (S1-S4) and the individual’s or group’s performance readiness level (D1-D4; or M1-M4 in current vernacular – “Maturity level”). If the manager could correctly assess the readiness level, they could apply the appropriate leadership style and achieve positive results. This was among the first systems that focused on the relationship between the manager and the employee/team to affect positive change in performance. It was also among the first training options that imparted *managerial* skills, versus operational or technical skills. Again, although formulated in the 1970s, it was not in widespread use in the A/E/C industry – Situational Leadership® was making waves in hospitality, manufacturing, and retail, but not in professional services.

Fast-forward to the 1990s. Gallup wanted to know what made some employees high performers. Was it a matter of meeting their basic needs, and then the employee would naturally progress to higher and higher levels of actualization (and therefore performance)? Was it something about the employee’s personal motivation? Was it about providing incentives? Was it about tailoring the leadership style to the tasks? What if the tasks were independent (like housekeeping in a major hotel)? What made some housekeepers amazing and others so-so?

What [Gallup’s research uncovered](#) was that individual employee performance had little to do with what the *employee* was doing, and everything to do with what the *manager* was doing. Here’s why – outside

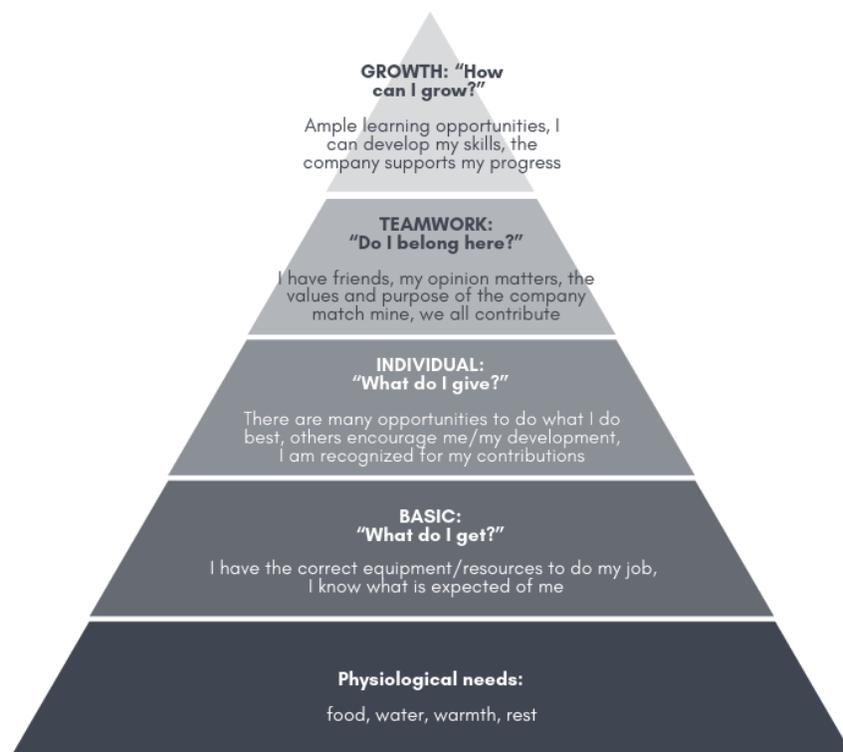
of the basic physiological needs (the bottom of Maslow’s pyramid), you need another person to help you fulfill your needs. The higher up the pyramid you go, the more you need someone in a position of influence (i.e. a manager) to help you achieve those needs.

Gallup learned that great managers not only made better, more productive employees; great managers actively moved poor-performing employees out of the organization and on to something that was a better fit *for the individual*.

The research showed that great managers did not hesitate to break virtually every rule held sacred by conventional business management wisdom of the time. They did not believe that with enough training a person could achieve anything he/she set his/her mind to. They did not try to help people overcome their weaknesses. They actively played favorites, focusing 80 percent of their energy on the *best* employees in their influence.

Gallup’s take on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs translated into an employee’s work experience. If employees were getting their needs met through their daily work experience, their performance was high. If their needs were unmet, their performance was low. Gallup determined that the employee’s performance could be anticipated by that employee’s answers to 12 questions (now known as the Gallup Q<sup>12</sup>, which are proprietary, but you can get a sense of them [here](#) or see them by reading [First, Break All the Rules](#).)

The Q<sup>12</sup> align with Maslow’s pyramid (ignoring the bottom level), with questions that ask about Basic Needs, Individual Needs, Teamwork Needs, and Growth:



*Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs through Gallup’s Lens*

What the data revealed was that employees needed to be free from stress by having the right materials, tools, systems, and processes to do their jobs. They needed to be cared about as people. They needed to be appreciated, heard, trusted, developed, and challenged. If they received this individualized attention from their managers (or others with influence), they prospered, and their performance soared.

Gallup re-emphasized *the individual employee and manager* as the functioning unit of the organization. They also recommended something extraordinary – focusing on individual’s *strengths* (natural talents that cannot be taught or trained) as the means to increasing performance. For the first time, managers were asked to examine their strengths and short-comings, not to shore up their weaknesses, but to find employees to fill in their short-comings with the employees’ own strengths. The assertion was that if the employee was using their strengths and being valued for using those strengths, the whole work experience would improve.

This shift in management skills – from training to correct weaknesses to focusing on strengths and having others help fill strengths deficits – *worked*. In the mid-1990s to early 2000s, engagement ticked upward a few points. Best management practices started tilting towards creating consistent outcomes by letting individuals find their own path and systems to get to the outcomes.

The promotion “ladder” started to branch sideways to provide options for highly proficient or self-sufficient employees who lacked managerial acumen to do something else that was valued in the company. This manifested in the A/E/C industry through positions like technical experts – individuals who had a specific knowledge or specialized in a particular building type, design, or construction method. We also saw the rise of the QA/QC manager, who developed and refined the *systems*, but was not necessarily responsible for managing people.

Brad Thurman, PE, FSMPS, CPSM, and Principal with Wallace Engineering, remembered coming out of years of rapid growth and thinking “We don’t have enough leaders and internal growth opportunities!” His firm had been so focused on getting work out the door, they had not been able to address professional opportunities for their staff. Wallace Engineering intentionally created tiers within the firm to offer advancement that did not necessarily include managerial duties and identified possible leaders earlier in an individual’s career so they could provide training and mentoring to those individuals over time. This employee-based model – of the manager/employee unit and more career development opportunities – was their key to sustainable, positive change.

There was an explosion of books between 1998-2019 on the manager/employee relationship, emotional intelligence, and communication. The theories and advice were geared towards motivating and building teams and high-function groups within an organization – [Drive](#) by Daniel Pink, [Leaders Eat Last](#) by Simon Sinek, [Strengths Based Leadership](#) by Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, among others.



A quick internet search on books in this time period to help organizations and leadership relationships reveals very few sources. Managers could learn to excel one-on-one or with small teams, but the companywide management and overall leadership was on their own. What has developed is a leadership skills gap.

We watched as A/E/C leaders returned their focus to what they knew best: billable work, business development, and strategic planning, and away from accounting, operations, and HR. Professional services firms hired accountants, HR specialists, marketers, and a host of other overhead specialists. However, few of the Silent Generation and Baby Boomer leaders adopted the “new” management practices that emphasized individual employees.

The burgeoning leaders were struggling. They had not received leadership-specific training. Their managers had not emphasized their strengths and helped them to develop. New leaders were caught between the old and the new, with no obvious choices to educate and improve themselves or their organizations. Many in A/E/C saw this firsthand, where well-intentioned, kind leaders who had outlasted their peers were given the mantle, but lacked the understanding, skills, and training they would need to be successful.

So, what is available to current and developing leaders to help them *lead*? If the manager/employee relationships are the keys to improving performance day-to-day, **why are we currently struggling with recruitment and retention?** What is the people management model that will help a company long-term, through leadership succession? In the last part of this series, I’ll share what the research shows and why an employee-based model is not the final answer to solving the A/E/C industry’s recruitment and retention issues.

## Part 3 of a 3-part series

In the [first article of this series](#), we examined the historic people management practices that laid the foundation of our current staffing, management, and culture issues in A/E/C. We learned from the most recent Deltek® [CLARITY](#) report stated that more than half of respondents are dealing with staffing issues. It seems that no matter what we do, we continue to struggle to attract and keep the staff that we need.

In the [second article](#), we examined the rise of people management models that began the shift to an employee-based work experience. Managers who helped employees satisfy their basic, individual, team, and growth needs in the workplace saw marked increases in employee performance. We learned that manager/employee relationships that focused on strengths were the key to employee engagement and performance, but a crucial element for companywide success was still missing. The leadership mantle was handed to a generation of individuals who did not have the benefit of the new management models to develop and grow their strengths. Even the firms implementing the employee-based management model were still struggling with leadership succession, recruitment and retention, and long-term company growth. So, what was missing?

### When Employee-Based Leadership Is Not Enough

By 2013, some A/E/C managers had gone through training or self-improvement to become more emotionally and culturally aware. They were playing to their employees' strengths and beginning to build strong, compassionate, creative, and collaborative teams.

The business environment increased pace and intensity at the same time: large corporate mergers, overseas competition with lower labor costs, wide swings in funding, economic volatility, changing long-term client relationships due to retirements and turnover, and leaders retiring, even passing away, without a clear transition plan. Throw in [four strong](#)



"If you don't know where you're going, any road can take you there."

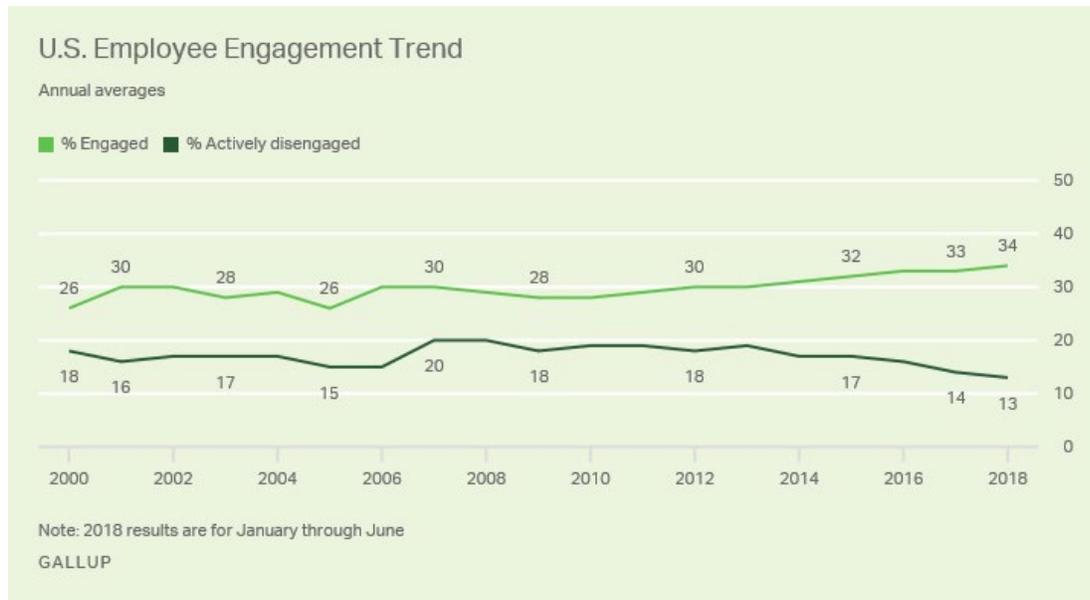
– Lewis Carroll

[generations in the workforce](#) with different workstyles, motivations, and stages of life, and you have a recipe for chaos. It was as if the compass was spinning with no magnetic north.

In 1990, Dr. Peter Senge published [The Fifth Discipline](#), among the first books to begin to address the “adrift” phenomenon at a company level. The book is most well-known for its discussion of the “learning organization,” where members at all levels of the organization were open to new ideas, were able to communicate effectively with each other, understood the organization, formed a shared vision, and worked together to achieve that vision. Dr. Senge’s construct was ambitious and complex, but what he realized was that even with the best employees adhering to his learning organization formula, **companies would fail without a clear, strong core**. As founders left, retired, or passed away, the passionate, emotional core also departed. As companies were bought and sold, the core took on the disposition of the new corporation, leaving the purchased employees and managers out of sync.

Craig Galati, FAIA, FSMPS, CPSM, President of LGA Architecture stated this clearly when he said that every job he left was in search of a better fit. “I left because I didn’t feel comfortable. If the firm wasn’t doing what I thought they should and there was no camaraderie, I left,” Galati said.

Emotionally aware and highly motivated employees felt disconnected from their work experience, and actively disengaged. No wonder employee engagement dipped below [30-percent and barely increased](#) for nearly a decade.



*And yet, some companies thrived. Why?*

### The Drive of Purpose

Individuals determine their own direction and purpose all the time, but they do it with a personal filter. Remember the [Hierarchy of Needs](#)? We manage our pursuits based on our own journey to achieve self-actualization.

Even the managers in the employee-based management model are tailoring their experiences around the needs of the individual and the team to work within a larger construct – the organization. We talk about getting into alignment, being on the same page, going in the same direction, so everyone’s efforts are focused on the same goals. Employee-based management models manage the *behaviors* to achieve the desired goals.

We saw in [Gallup’s research](#) that people function better when they know what is expected of them. If the *purpose* is clear, the work experience is more satisfying and productive. It does not matter if the manager/employee unit is solid if the *purpose* of the organization is not. Performance is uneven without direction.

What does that have to do with A/E/C companies? It relates to the leadership conundrum of a rudderless vessel. Purpose is driven and led by leadership to be manifested by everyone. It provides structure for a company, to guide decision-making and initiatives. Whatever the leadership focuses on *becomes* the *purpose*. And in struggling organizations, leadership tends to focus on the day-to-day.

The day-to-day changes at a rapid pace; we fight to stay ahead. It seems only natural that we would focus on the issues right in front of us and operate in the now. But [Len Sherman](#) of [Forbes](#) magazine says

that is a mistake: “It is precisely because of, not despite, the rapidly changing business environment, that a company needs an anchoring ideology to guide it.”

The research is clear that the *purpose* is not about making money. Employees who are focused on making money are focused on making money *for themselves*. They will never be motivated to make money for the shareholders, the leadership, or anyone else. If the employee’s primary motivation to work for the company is financial, then the employee will work at a loss. If the company’s focus is on the financial, then the employees will seek other opportunities that fit better with their interests and needs.

[William Craig](#) wrote in [Forbes](#) that “Mission-driven workers are **54 percent more likely to stay** for five years at a company and **30 percent more likely to grow into high performers** than those who arrive at work with only their paycheck as the motivator.”

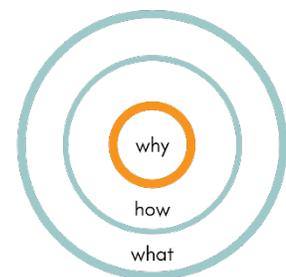
Why the company exists – its *purpose* – is more important than its bottom line in stimulating the success of every aspect of the company.

### The Purpose-Driven Management Model

A purpose-driven organization is guided by an inspirational and aspirational compass. It acknowledges that employees want to be there to fulfill their own Hierarchy of Needs and to make a difference. A purpose-driven organization taps into that “make a difference” motivator by providing a reason for the company to exist that transcends monetary gains. It is not to “save the world,” although certainly some non-profit organizations manifest that purpose as much as humanly possible. **A purpose-driven organization exists to fulfill a realistically achievable higher purpose**, one that resonates with its leadership, its workforce, and its customers. The purpose forms the structure to align every decision made, every training developed, and by which every manager/employee unit can be guided.

Simon Sinek talks about this in his famous TedTalk of 2009, “[Start with Why](#) – how great leaders inspire action.” He calls it the Golden Circle. Companies are fantastic about talking about *what* they do and *how* they do it, but not great about explaining *why* they do it. He says blatantly, “People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.” Sinek has since gone on to prove that communicating your “why” attracts the employees who want to work on achieving that “why.” This is backed by science – biology, not psychology. Answering the “why” appeals to our limbic brain, which is responsible for all feelings, all behavior, and all decision-making – on an intuitive level, since the limbic brain has no capacity for language or reason.

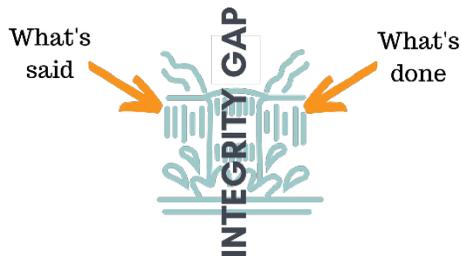
### Simon Sinek's Golden Circle



Leaders can either put forward an intentional purpose or one will develop organically. That is the nature of purpose; either we respond to a purpose presented to us or we create one for ourselves that may or may not be reflected in the greater whole. Kip Tindell, CEO of the Container Store, says in his book [Uncontainable](#) that what we tell ourselves is what we tell each other. Our perception of reality is what we share – good or bad; informed or misinformed. Leaders of an organization can let employees do one of two things:

- a) Tell the leaders’ version of the truth, or
- b) Tell the employees’ version of the truth

To tell the leaders’ version of the truth – and create a company purpose – leaders redefine their mission, vision, and values. This is a great place to start. It addresses the “adrift” phenomenon from a recommitment to the brand/company, to ownership of the vision under new leadership, to a renewing of enthusiasm and direction. So, while we don’t need words to determine how we feel about where we work and why we work (remember, the limbic brain doesn’t use language), that’s the vehicle we use to promote the company’s purpose.



The difficulties come when the *actions* of the leaders and company do not mesh with the *words*. An *integrity gap* develops when the adopted mission, vision, and values conflict with the daily reality.

For example, a company might have the value of “Everyone’s voice is important” but they have no easy ways for employees to interact with the leadership or provide input. Employees see

and feel the mixed messages and start to disengage. Employees will instinctively withdraw without being able to articulate why they don’t trust or like the place where they work.

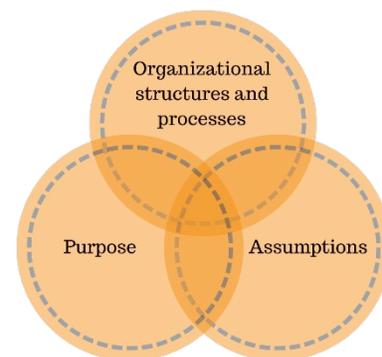
The common mistake is in creating a purpose without understanding the needs of the workforce and the customers. The purpose must resonate with the employees’ experience of the company (no integrity gaps), fulfill the customers’ needs, and achieve the company’s tangible targets. The purpose is only viable if it is more than words on a page. It must be actionable. It must be sincere and genuine – from the employees’ and clients’ points of view, -- as well as the leaders’. A clear mission, vision, and set of values is only part of the solution. In successful purpose-driven companies, something else underlies action, eradicates integrity gaps, enhances decision-making, empowers individual agency, increases engagement and retention, and attracts the right people to the right positions.

It goes beyond the employee-based model and the manager/employee units. It even precedes purpose-driven models. It already exists in every organization, for good or ill, and it is feeding the *purpose*, *behaviors*, and *results* whether it is acknowledged or not. It is **culture**.

### Culture-Based Management Model

Most employees know what a toxic culture feels like. Employee engagement is low, demonstrated by empty offices at 5 P.M. and poor [attendance](#) or application during the day. Advancement may come through open and covert [competition](#). No one knows how the company is doing or how [decisions](#) are made. This is the antithesis of a thriving company, and we know it intuitively.

Culture has three building blocks: organizational structures and processes, purpose, and assumptions (the underlying beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of the organization). Companies can still struggle even if they have good organizational practices and a sincere and actionable purpose that the employees and customers embrace. The difficulty is likely with culture – the underlying assumptions – which tend to develop on their own and can



*The Three Building Blocks of Company Culture*

undermine the very structures, processes, and purpose the company values.

Brené Brown, noted author on vulnerability and leadership, points out how dangerous this is: “In the absence of data, people will always make up [stories](#).” It’s in our biology to think of the worst-case scenario and to protect ourselves. If a client hasn’t responded to our meeting request, we assume they have gone with another consultant. Or if the client does not call us at the appointed time to tell us that our interview was successful, we quickly dream up all the good and bad things our competitors might have done. We do this kind of reasoning all the time. The information in our head is a fabricated story, not fact-based at all. It may not be truthful nor beneficial to the company. But it becomes what we tell ourselves, and, as Kip Tindell noted, what we tell each other. The story becomes the truth and we act on it – it becomes our shared company culture.

A culture-based model takes an active role in defining and embodying its culture and orienting its workforce to the underlying assumptions, while providing clear structure, policies, and purpose. In a dynamic culture:

- 1) Employees are expected to make behavioral choices and decisions, independently (without direct intervention);
- 2) Those decisions and behaviors are reasonable (logical), beneficial (win-win), and resourceful (creative and practical); and
- 3) Those decisions and behaviors appropriately represent the company, because the employees believe in and live the culture of the company.

With an attuned culture, the employees are empowered and expected to be self-sufficient, and the leadership is secure in the knowledge that the employees are doing the right thing. Not just some of the time, not with constant supervision, but all the time and on their own. You have seen attuned cultures in LL Bean’s famous customer service reps who handle product returns without fuss, or The Container Store’s employees who spend as much time as necessary with a customer to understand their storage needs and to recommend the best product in their budget.

TEECOM, a technical engineering company (IT) within the A/E/C community, demonstrates their culture in every stage of the employee experience. From its candidate application platform that provides real-time progress for the applicant, to the two-week robust on-boarding program, to the in-house training available at every step of development, the company exerts a conscious effort to hire the right fit, provide the right tools, and empower the individual’s choices. The employees embody the values of the company and behave accordingly. And the company attracts individuals who “get” the culture of TEECOM.

The absence (or lack of understanding) of a culture can be challenging to the A/E/C industry’s recruiting and retention efforts. What makes a company stand out and be able to successfully recruit and retain good employees? From this article series, you’ve learned that employees are motivated by and attracted to having:

- 1) Their basic, individual, team, and growth needs in the workplace fulfilled;
- 2) Manager/employee relationships that focus on strengths (versus shoring up weaknesses); and
- 3) A clear, genuine, attainable, inspirational, and aspirational purpose that is talked about and acted on with the same level of integrity across the company.

An attuned culture does guess about these things. It collects data to benchmark and review how well it is functioning, how well it is meeting employee and client expectations, and how it can improve. TEECOM sends out weekly pulse surveys to the entire staff and reviews them weekly at the leadership level. They use the information to gauge progress on their strategic initiatives, to become aware of and address new concerns, and to check on the employees' experience at work.

Through TEECOM's quick review and response to the survey information, it builds trust. It communicates frequently and with transparency on progress, new projects, finances, recruiting, goals, strategy, and so on. It empowers autonomy and vulnerability. It adjusts and adapts. It also meets its growth goals year after year.

To realize the economic, mental, and emotional benefits of an engaged workforce and a reliable talent base, having a strong culture is essential. A dynamic culture has the information it needs to communicate to the talent pool in a way that will attract desired candidates and keep the best employees.

How do you build a dynamic culture? [The Culture Solution](#) by Matthew Kelly is one of the most recent books on the topic of organizational culture and has solid, practical steps that can be taken at all levels of an organization to affect culture. Kelly's book acknowledges that building (or changing) a culture sounds herculean and offers some sage advice: ***make culture a priority and take small steps.***

For example, to determine why an A/E/C company is struggling with recruitment and retention, it is worth examining the assumptions that are hampering the company's ability to meet expectations.

- Has the company asked what employees want?
- Has the company acted on the employees' input?
- Do the managers have the training to develop their staff?
- Do the hiring managers know how to talk about the needs and the company in a way that gives candidates a clear picture of both the skills required and the culture fit?

In the research, the steps for building and maintaining a dynamic culture are similar:

1. Secure leadership buy-in, support, and resources
2. Conduct internal research
3. Review options for change in the processes/structure, purpose, or assumptions
4. Implement small changes over time, especially to achieve a larger goal
5. Evaluate frequently to confirm progress and adjust
6. Repeat

That sounds straightforward but focusing on culture is an iterative process. It requires critical and objective analysis, trust, empathy, momentum, frequency, adaptation, and positivity. An intentional culture-based management model enfoldes the best elements of the employee-based model and the purpose-driven model into a cohesive whole. It blends the learning organization of Dr. Senge with a meaningful "why." It meshes the words of the purpose with the actions of the leadership, management, and employees. This is a dynamic workplace – the kind of place we want to come to work to do amazing things.

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*Links and books referenced in the article connect to the original sources. The assertions in the article are conclusions of the author based on her independent analysis of the source materials and interviews.*