

If you have ever asked yourself the question,  
“How do I get someone to care about what I care about?”, then you are not alone.



How to get people  
to care about  
what you find important.

by Dick Axelrod

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# Everyone knows that engagement is important.

Engaged people are more productive, have less absenteeism, and provide better customer service compared to their disengaged counterparts. But many organizations pursue engagement strategies through big fancy programs that take years to implement. Engagement doesn't take years – it can occur in minutes.

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- **How to create meetings where no one looks at their Blackberry**

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# HOW TO ENGAGE PEOPLE WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE TIME



How to get people to care about what you find important.

## Getting others to care about what you care about is important in all parts of life.

In the world of business, leaders are always trying to get employees to care about the company's latest initiative because they know that an employee who cares about the initiative will give it more attention and effort. In the community, activists know that when people care about an issue, they show up, and when they show up, change happens. In sports, we often talk about one team "wanting it" more than the other team. In families, parents want their children to care about the same things they do.

This eBook contains some of what I've learned in thirty odd years about how to get people to care. You might want to know how I came to this information.

My father had a factory that produced model airplanes, and he had his own management development program. I started helping out by sweeping the floors. This gave me a different view of the world of work.

My father was always concerned about his staff. He often stayed way past midnight making sure the machines functioned well so that people would have work the next day. He cared about his employees and was often puzzled by the fact that many of

them did not care about the work. We'd talk about this over the dinner table and in the car as we drove back and forth to the factory.

My own experience and the experiences of my coworkers gave me a different point of view. They'd say things like "I have ideas, but the bosses don't listen." I'd even see uncomplimentary graffiti about my father on the bathroom wall. That's shocking at any age.

My experience in the model airplane factory planted the seeds for my life's work. I wanted to help make workplaces better for employees and bosses.

In subsequent jobs I learned firsthand what it means to only care about how long it is to the next break. And, I had other work experiences where I was so engrossed in what I did that I never once looked at the clock.

Much of what I'm going to share with you is a result of lots of trial and error — seeing what works, what creates autonomy, and what makes people's voices count while getting the job done.

This eBook easily could have been written from a number of perspectives: public schools, hospitals, neighborhood organizations, home. I chose to use examples from factories and offices because I have the most experience in those arenas.

## This eBook Has Two Parts

**The first part identifies three faulty assumptions** many people have about getting people to care, and the **second provides three rules of thumb** for creating conditions that *might* get people to care.

Notice I say "might" — **people are always free to choose.**



# Part 1

## Faulty Assumptions

# Part 1 : Faulty Assumptions

## The First Faulty Assumption

### *Get People to Care by Creating a Burning Platform*

The “burning platform” is a metaphor based on a supposed true story: In the North Sea, an oil platform had caught fire and was burning fast. On it was a lone worker. He had a decision to make:

*Certain death if he stayed, probable death if he jumped.*

When managers first heard this story, they couldn’t believe their good luck. They could use this tale to get employees to see that they had to take fast, decisive, total action, or the whole enterprise would go up in smoke.

When managers invoke the burning platform it sounds like this: “If we don’t make this change, we will have to close our doors in six months.” “If we don’t get the new product in three months, our competitors will eat our lunch.” “If you want to have a job, you’d better get on board.”

To an extent, the strategy works because people want to survive. People will act when faced with a burning platform; however, it is hard to predict how they will act. Some will get on board, others will panic, and others will jump ship. Some will try to make themselves look good, others will try to make their coworkers look bad, and others will hide bad news.

**When faced with a burning platform, people often choose self-preservation over the common good.**



# Part 1 : Faulty Assumptions

## The Second Faulty Assumption

### *Get People to Care by Creating Buy-In*

Like the burning platform, “buy-in” is a metaphor. It comes from the world of sales. It’s the language of commerce. In the wrong hands it creates distortion.

Faults are hidden. Features are highlighted. Objections are turned into benefits.

Conventional wisdom tells us how to create buy-in by:

1. Presenting a strong case
2. Presenting it well
3. Creating clever presentations
4. Making sure employees understand what’s in it for them
5. Closing the sale by asking for employee commitment

Sounds reasonable, doesn’t it?

The problem is that style and flash often take precedence over substance as leaders jab their point home, all the while forgetting the real people in the audience — people who walk into the presentation predisposed to go along with what needs to be done but who are turned off by the lack of honest conversation.

People can see through these kinds of distortions.



# Part 1 : Faulty Assumptions

When leadership asks for increased commitment from an overworked workforce and in the same breath refuses to reduce the amount of work on everyone's plate, employees end up being more resistant than when they walked in.

*Is it any wonder that when leaders ask for questions at the end of their sales pitch, they hear silence?*

People hate coercion. They resist being sold what doesn't make sense to them — what they don't want, don't need, or can't understand.

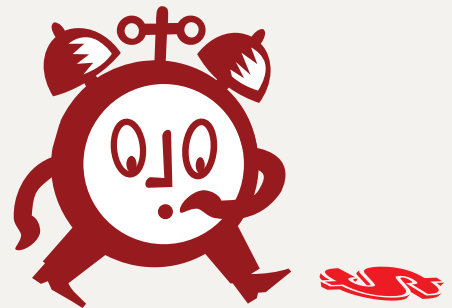
They turn off.

They tune out.

They hang up.

Care cannot be bought or sold like a bar of soap.

*The term “buy-in” is in the language of buying and selling, not the language of motivation, care, and commitment.*



# Part 1 : Faulty Assumptions

## The Third Faulty Assumption

### *Get People to Care by Finding the Right Combination of Incentives*

Thanks to the acclaimed American psychologist, B. F. Skinner, we now know that we can shape behavior by finding the right combination of rewards and punishments. Skinner found that by giving a rat a piece of sugar every time the rat pressed a lever, he could get the rat to press the lever. If he didn't want the rat to press the lever, he would introduce a loud noise every time the rat pressed the lever. Soon the rat stopped pressing the lever.

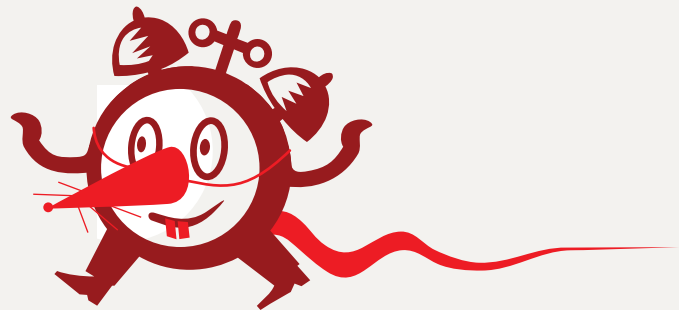
*The problem is, people are not rats.*

This system only works if the rewards are important to the person, or if the punishments are punishing. And, while this system can shape behavior, it does not produce care.

In some telephone companies, directory assistance operators are rewarded based on the number of calls handled per hour. Predictably operators rush through calls so they can handle more calls, often cutting off customers.

At one level, the incentive system works because the number of calls handled per hour increases. On the other hand, it squashes the employees' natural desire to provide quality customer service and work only toward achieving more and more production.

*This system inevitably produces more rats.*





## Part 2

Rules of Thumb for Getting People  
to Care About

What You Find Important

# Part 2 : Rules of Thumb for Getting People to Care about What You Find Important

## The First Rule of Thumb

### *Find Out What is Important to the Other Person*

In workshops I ask participants to discuss with the person sitting next to them the following question: what do you care about at work and why? When the four minutes are up, people do not want to disengage from the conversation. They find it so interesting.

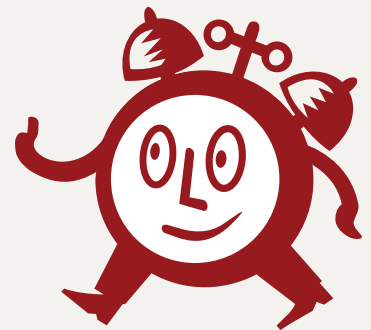
### *What happens during these conversations?*

First, people discover what they have in common. They learn they care about similar matters. Second, the act of listening strengthens their relationship. This makes it easier for them to take action on things each of them finds important.

At a global manufacturing company, a business unit leadership team conducted interviews with their employees. During the interviews, the leaders asked, “What do you care about at work and why?” At the top of the list was the ability to learn, grow, and develop on the job.

Months later, when leadership announced the organization’s goals for the year, employees were astounded. Right near the top next to cost reduction, sales, and profit goals were goals focused on supporting employees’ desire to learn, grow, and develop on the job.

This business unit went on to be one of the organization’s most productive business units that year.



# Part 2 : Rules of Thumb for Getting People to Care about What You Find Important

## The Second Rule of Thumb

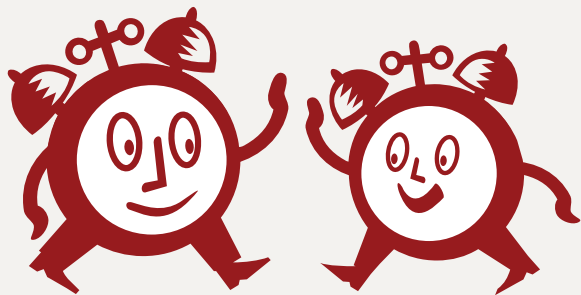
### *Support Others in Achieving Their Goals*

Support comes in many forms. Provide people with time and money to do the work. Make others available so they can help out. Answer important questions. Save frustration by helping people navigate the bureaucracy. Provide the necessary training. Make sure people have the right systems and tools to do the work. Acknowledge them with thank yous and pats on the back. Don't abandon people once you've asked for their help. Ask them what support they need from you. Then meet their needs.

Put the same time and energy behind helping others achieve what they find important as you would put into doing something you care about. Treat employee goals as if they were your own. What you will find is that when you ask your employees to support your goals, they will be more likely to join in. You will be surprised how in many cases, supporting what they want will help you achieve what you want.

When I was a young manager, my boss, Ed, brought me into his office and said, "Now that I've hired you, my job is to make sure you are successful." You can imagine my shock and surprise. No one had ever said that to me before. What I had always heard from bosses was criticism.

Ed provided me with all the encouragement, training, and resources to be successful. And he didn't hold back when it came to criticism. But I always knew he was in my corner. The result was I performed better in that job than in any of my previous work assignments.



# Part 2 : Rules of Thumb for Getting People to Care about What You Find Important

## The Third Rule of Thumb

### *Share What You Care About*

Stop telling people why they should change. Start talking about what is important to you. Be honest; *speak from your heart*.

Several recovering alcoholics, doctors, and nurses were talking about how to improve treatment services. The conversation began with the usual ideas — making the community a better place, helping people. The conversation was flat. Eyes began to glaze over. They had had this conversation before. Then one person got up and told his story, how when he was in need, people listened to him. They answered his plea for help. They got him into treatment. They cared about him when there wasn't much to care about. His goal was simple. He wanted to give back to the community; to care for others in the way people cared for him.

Howard Gardner (*Changing Minds*) says, “When all is said and done, then, the most important ingredient for a story to embody is truth, and the most important trait for a leader to have is integrity.” No matter how compelling the facts, how dramatic or memorable the presentation, the most important trait a leader needs is honesty.

Honesty begins when you move from telling people why something is good for them to why it is important to you.



# Part 2 : Rules of Thumb for Getting People to Care about What You Find Important

Tony Simons (The Integrity Dividend, forthcoming) provides the foundation for integrity: “align your words and actions in a way that employees see, keep your promises.”

When leaders behave in this manner, employees are willing to go the extra mile. They end up caring about what you find important.

## A simple question...

If you are not willing to put your wholehearted self behind what you care about, if you are not willing to tell the truth, then why should anyone else care?



# A Final Word

## People are free to choose

People choose to act on what they find important. Caring cannot be forced, it cannot be managed. It is not a commodity that can be sold.

To care or not to care is a fundamental human choice.

When leaders and employees choose to care about the same things, energy is aligned.

Leaders behave differently when they come to recognize that getting others to care is not something that they can force upon people.

They know that their job is to create the environment where people are likely to join them. Leaders do this by asking others what they care about, supporting them in achieving their goals, and talking from the heart about what is important to them.

## About The Axelrod Group

The best way to make change happen within your organization – indeed, the only reliable way – is for leaders and employees to come together, understand each other’s positions, and use the unique knowledge in the room to help drive the company’s effort.

The Axelrod Group can help you make that happen.

**We design collaborative systems** that enable leaders and employees to jointly construct a company that is both profitable and worthy of pride.

Some have called our practices “organizational barn raising,” because the focus and energy demonstrated by participants reminds them of the old fashioned community barn raisings during which neighbors would erect a sturdy building within a weekend. We like that comparison.

When a company is focused and the working environment encourages spirited involvement, remarkable things can occur quickly.

Visit us at [www.AxelrodGroup.com](http://www.AxelrodGroup.com) or contact us directly at [847.251.7361](tel:847.251.7361) or at [info@AxelrodGroup.com](mailto:info@AxelrodGroup.com)



# The Axelrod Group Workshops and Coaching



**HOW TO ENGAGE PEOPLE  
WHEN YOU DON'T  
HAVE TIME**

## **The How To Engage People When You Don't Have Time Workshop**

A client recently asked me to put together a workshop on engagement for her organization. When I presented my outline for the workshop, she said, “this is great, but it’s too ambitious. People will complain they won’t have time to implement your ideas. You know how busy we are.”

So I set about developing a workshop that faced the “no time” issue head on.

I realized many leaders think employee engagement requires some big complex change program that lasts months or years. The more I thought about this issue, the more I realized that meaningful employee engagement doesn't require months or years, in fact it can often occur in minutes.

What we teach in our workshop is everyday engagement: things you can do to engage others in very brief periods of time.

We also take on the most overlooked fast track engagement opportunity of all: energy sapping meetings. Participants learn first aid for meetings and how to design meetings that matter.

Participants leave this workshop having developed engagement skills they can use immediately.



## **Coaching**

Interested in this energizing work, but prefer a one on one coaching approach? Our engagement coaches help you hone your engagement skills, skills you can use immediately. Whether you are interested in bringing our engagement workshops to your organization, or individualized coaching, we are easily reached at 847.251.7361 or [info@axelrodgroup.com](mailto:info@axelrodgroup.com).

**We look forward to hearing from you!**



## About Dick Axelrod

Dick Axelrod co-founded The Axelrod Group, Inc., a consulting firm that pioneered the use of employee involvement to effect large scale organizational change. He brings thirty years of consulting and teaching experience to this work, with clients including Boeing, Coca Cola, Harley Davidson, and Hewlett Packard.

Dick is faculty in Columbia University's Professional Program in Organization Development and the University of Chicago's Leadership Arts Program.

Dick authored *Terms of Engagement: Changing The Way We Change Organizations*, and co-authored *You Don't Have to Do It Alone: How to Involve Others to Get Things Done*, which the N.Y. Times calls, "the best of the current crop of books on this subject."

