



# Challenging Employee Engagement

By Jason Wang

*“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”*

—George Bernard Shaw



Improving employee productivity is a challenge dating as far back as the first agreement between two people to compensate someone for doing work on behalf of another. This challenge involves both stick and carrot—including corrective action, employee handbooks, fair and consistent human resources practices, alternative schedules, improving physical work environments, valuing others, compensation bonuses, and other workplace perks, to name just a few.

Managers and supervisors can provide incentives to encourage productive behavior or dole out punishment to deter bad; however, often this merely funnels human behavior toward minimally acceptable performance set points rather than sparking intrinsic motivation that transcends performance expectations. It is important to note that true motivation, which lifts employees to full engagement and high performance, comes from within. Managers and supervisors can assist employees by providing environments, coaching, and programs that inspire engagement (Loehr and Schwartz, 2003).

Playing organized sports demonstrates the most important aspects of developing a team: having a shared set of values and understanding a common goal. The 1986 movie *Hoosiers* was based on a 1950s' Cinderella story in which a small-town team wins the Indiana State high school basketball tournament against a larger, stronger, and better-funded rival (Daly, 1986). The values expressed for the team in the movie are: focusing on fundamentals; having structure; respect; and hard work. The team's primary goals were to play together as a team and to win. These factors are transferable and true in other genres as well, including the military. However, military teamwork and engagement are often associated with having a common enemy in addition to a common goal (i.e., to win).

Demonizing university management or departments for their lack of knowledge or understanding of the complex work we do as facility, energy, and construction managers can be a frighteningly common experience when attempting to build a facilities team against a common "enemy." Yet, this approach inevitably damages relationships, demonstrates disrespect, and often becomes more important than positive organizational goals. While this is often done unconsciously and can make individuals feel good, as facility managers and leaders we share a responsibility to confront and stop such detrimental behavior and focus instead on positive team-building efforts.



## CSU'S CHALLENGE COIN INITIATIVE

The remainder of this article will focus on positive engagement, as I review a recent initiative within the California State University (CSU) system with military origins dating back to ancient Rome, and finish with a short list of employee engagement reminders—principles that we can easily forget in the harried world of facilities management.

According to one story, the modern “challenge coin” originated during World War I:

During World War I, American volunteers from all parts of the country filled newly formed flying squadrons. Some were wealthy scions attending colleges such as Yale and Harvard who quit in mid-term to join the war. In one squadron, a wealthy lieutenant ordered medallions struck in solid bronze and presented them to his unit. One young pilot placed the medallion in a small leather pouch that he wore around his neck. Shortly after acquiring the medallion, the pilot's aircraft was severely damaged by ground fire. He was forced to land behind enemy lines and was captured by a German patrol. In order to discourage his escape, the Germans took all of his personal identification except for the small leather pouch around his neck.

In the meantime, he was taken to a small French town near the front. Taking advantage of a bombardment that night, he escaped. However, he was without personal identification. He succeeded in avoiding German patrols by donning civilian attire and reached the front lines. With great difficulty, he crossed no man's land and eventually stumbled onto a French outpost.

Saboteurs had plagued the French in the sector. They sometimes disguised themselves as civilians and wore civilian clothes. Not recognizing the young pilot's American accent, the French thought him to be a saboteur and made ready to execute him. He had no identification to prove his allegiance, but he did have his leather pouch containing the medallion. He showed the medallion to his would-be executioners and one of his French captors recognized the squadron insignia on the medallion. They delayed his execution long enough for him to confirm

his identity. Instead of shooting him they gave him a bottle of wine.

Back at his squadron, it became tradition to ensure that all members carried their medallion or coin at all times. This was accomplished through challenge in the following manner: a challenger would ask to see the medallion; if the challenged could not produce a medallion, they were required to buy a drink of choice for the mem-

ber who challenged them. If the challenged member produced a medallion, then the challenging member was required to pay for the drink. This tradition continued throughout the war and for many years after the war by the surviving members of the squadron. (Source: <http://www.coinforce.com/challenge-coin-history.htm>)

Directors of Facility Operations in the CSU system, led by Dana Twedell at CSU Los Angeles, began a challenge coin initiative in August 2016. Seven of the 23 universities in the system have followed, and while the CSU challenge coins may never need to be shown to save a life, they are intended to do the same as the original coins—to show membership and instill pride.

**Figure 1: CSU Northridge Challenge Coin**



Each coin (Figure 1) recognizes unique aspects of the individual campus on the front side, shows commitment to working together to support university values, and most importantly demonstrates that employees are part of something special—something larger than themselves. The back of the coin is shared by all 23 universities of the CSU system. The triangle on the back features CSUEU, SETC, and MPP—which are acronyms for two of the collective bargaining units (who work in facilities in the CSU system) and management personnel. They are listed on each of the three sides of the equilateral triangle to show that all are of equal importance and that all are valuable to each other. The triangle also signifies that we are all one, working toward a shared common goal, and that this goal is accomplished by communication, transparency, and teamwork.

## WE'RE IN THE PEOPLE BUSINESS

The coins are carried to recognize great work and remind us of why we are here—to serve something bigger than ourselves. We are not here because we are in the maintenance, grounds, custodial, logistics, financial, postal, delivery, or asset management businesses. Rather, we are in the *people* business. Everything we do serves people—students, faculty, staff, and each other. The coins remind us of the importance of our call: to transform the environment, equipment, and people; all as



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part of the institution's important goal of graduating students. Education is a shared and noble calling, and every one of us plays a vital role.

In the CSU system, the coins come with two challenges. The first is to carry them every day to remind us of why we are here, even when it is difficult and sometimes cumbersome. The second is to for us to challenge each other to show that we have our coins with or near us. To do so, the challenger first shows their coin; those challenged must respond by showing their coin in return. If you challenge someone and they do *not* have their coin, they owe you a cup of coffee. The military has other traditions associated with their challenge coins, but the point here is both to have fun with them and to carry them with honor and pride.

### FOUR ACTION ITEMS

Our employees are our organizations (Bolman and Deal, 1997; Bolman and Gallos, 2011). We cannot change the cultures of our organizations without first engaging and changing ourselves and our employees (Bergquist, 1992). Below are four key action items that will help you with employee engagement and give initiatives such as the challenge coin a lot more punch.

**Have a clear mission statement** that is broadly shared and understood. If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time. A crucial part of your statement should be that colleges and universities exist to educate students. There are some institutions that may wish to emphasize or add research, service, or state their philosophical or ecumenical approach to education, but without the students, colleges and universities simply would not exist.

**Develop and share departmental values** that drive action toward the mission. Your specialized approach toward the mission can be defined during this process. Values should describe and encourage behaviors that support the mission and the institution's individual character. Once established, ensure that both your values and mission are clearly and regularly articulated and rewarded.

**Engage in initiatives** appropriate for the unique work environment. Challenge coins are one way to engage employees, but there are many others. The quote at the beginning of this article encourages “unreasonable” innovation. Be willing to think innovate, and act outside the box.

**Collaborate with employees** from all levels of the organization. Beyond demonstrating respect and value in employees for

their voice and opinions (Ury, 1993), there is significantly more support for an organization's mission, values, and initiatives if employees feel involved in the process (Kotter, 1996).

The work we do every day in the college and university facilities management field transforms lives that will echo into eternity. Dwell on that concept for a moment. To believe otherwise is to cheapen and diminish the nobility of our work. Any means by which we can remind employees of that idea shows them the value of their work and encourages their engagement. ☛

### RESOURCES

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