

Measuring engagement of community health workers to improve productivity, retention and quality of care

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The Context

Many African countries rely heavily on community health workers (CHWs) to provide basic essential services to the population. However, turnover among CHWs is often high, and there are not enough CHWs to meet needs, especially in rural areas to address the needs of the growing population of vulnerable children affected by HIV.

In Ethiopia, CHWs provide services to the over half million orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in the country. To address the problems of retaining and motivating CHWs, we collaborated with ChildFund to apply human resources (HR) concepts related to employee engagement to their Strengthening Communities and Safety Nets Project that have been validated in developed countries to the context of volunteers in OVC programs in Ethiopia. Worker engagement is defined as the extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for doing it. Evidence has shown that engaged workers perform better and are more productive than disengaged workers.¹

¹ Employee Engagement: The Key to Realizing Competitive Advantage. 2006. Wellins, Bernthal, Phelps, DDI

The Problem

How can we improve the engagement of CHWs working in difficult conditions?

- Majority of CHWs are volunteers, receive little to no compensation, are often poorly trained, lack the materials and supplies necessary to perform basic services, and often work in harsh conditions.
- CHWs are overburdened by the number of households they must visit and the psychological impact of their work, which leaves them feeling overwhelmed and sometimes unmotivated.
- Attrition rates for CHWs can be as high as 70% per year with community-supported programs, especially among volunteers. Turnover is costly because there is a high investment in identifying, selecting and training CHWs and it creates a lack of continuity in relationships with the community.
- Traditional approaches to improving motivation, productivity and retention, such as offering some financial compensation or other incentive, have failed to improve the engagement of CHWs and prevent high turnover.



Worker Engagement is: "The extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for doing it. The extent to which CHWs put discretionary effort into their work in the form of brainpower, extra time and energy."

Strategy for Change

- Research has shown that improving the engagement of workers results in increased productivity and an improvement of the quality of care provided.
- The tool was originally designed to measure engagement of health workers that are part of the formal health sector in Africa. It was then adapted for CHWs working with OVCs in Ethiopia.
- It is a 27-item questionnaire (excerpt in Figure 2) that community workers complete confidentially and anonymously every six to eight months. The statements in the questionnaire target the six key drivers of engagement illustrated in Figure 1.



Community Health Worker working with a vulnerable child in Ethiopia.

Figure 1. Worker Engagement



Implementing the Tool: Three Steps for Improving Engagement

1. Measure engagement

- CHWs should be brought together as a group (no fewer than 5 per group) and introduced to the tool. The questions should be read aloud and discussed as a group to ensure that CHWs understand the concepts in the questionnaire. The five-point scale should also be explained.
- The tool should then be read aloud a second time while CHWs are given a chance to fill out their questionnaires individually. When finished, CHWs can place the tool in an envelope place somewhere in the room to ensure that their responses remain anonymous.

2. Analyze and interpret results of engagement tool

- The tool can be easily analyzed by entering the data into an excel spreadsheet where averages can be automatically calculated.
- Scores range from 1-5 for the employee engagement tool. Data can be analyzed by site, by question, by engagement driver or by level of post.
- "Engaged" (scoring 4-5 on the questionnaire) CHWs have a higher level of productivity, are more loyal to their organizations, tend to perform better and are absent less often.

Figure 2. Questionnaire on Employee Engagement of Community Workers

Questionnaire on Employee Engagement of Community Workers		How likely are you to respond to the following statements?				
Item	Strongly Dislike	Dislike	Neutral	Like	Strongly Like	
1. I believe that what I do in my organization is important.						
2. I believe that I can succeed in my organization.						
3. I believe that I can advance in my organization.						
4. I believe that I can influence decisions in my organization.						
5. I believe that I can be supported in my organization.						
6. I believe that I can be recognized in my organization.						
7. I believe that I can be valued in my organization.						
8. I believe that I can be respected in my organization.						
9. I believe that I can be appreciated in my organization.						
10. I believe that I can be recognized in my organization.						
11. I believe that I can be valued in my organization.						
12. I believe that I can be respected in my organization.						
13. I believe that I can be appreciated in my organization.						
14. I believe that I can be recognized in my organization.						
15. I believe that I can be valued in my organization.						
16. I believe that I can be respected in my organization.						
17. I believe that I can be appreciated in my organization.						
18. I believe that I can be recognized in my organization.						
19. I believe that I can be valued in my organization.						
20. I believe that I can be respected in my organization.						
21. I believe that I can be appreciated in my organization.						
22. I believe that I can be recognized in my organization.						
23. I believe that I can be valued in my organization.						
24. I believe that I can be respected in my organization.						
25. I believe that I can be appreciated in my organization.						
26. I believe that I can be recognized in my organization.						
27. I believe that I can be valued in my organization.						

- "Disengaged" (scoring 3-3.9) CHWs are less productive than engaged CHWs, are less loyal to their organization and are not having all of their needs met.
- "Actively disengaged" (scoring 1-2.9) workers have low levels of productivity, have high rates of absenteeism, feel compelled to spread their disillusionment with other colleagues and are not loyal to their organization. To ensure high rates of efficiency and productivity, providers need to be engaged in their work.

3. Discuss results and plan actions for improvement

- Once scores have been analyzed, CHWs, program managers and other key staff meet together as a group to review the results and discuss reasons why scores may have been low and brainstorm ideas for improving engagement.
- Focus groups can also be conducted with CHWs to find out why certain components had low scores.

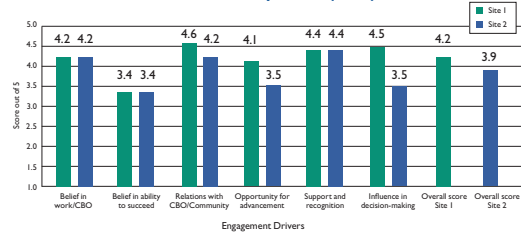
Applying the engagement tool with CHWs in Ethiopia

- Administered to 50 community workers, both volunteers and project staff, in two project sites that are part of the Strengthening Communities and Safety Nets Project in the Oromiya region of Ethiopia as part of a baseline assessment.
- Based on the results of the tool, the ChildFund sites developed action items in conjunction with CHWs to improve engagement.

Baseline Findings on Engagement

- Site 1 had an overall average engagement score of 4.2. A score of 4.2 means that overall, employees are fairly engaged in their work. (see Figure 3)
- Site 2 had an overall average engagement score of 3.9. A score less than 4 means that overall, employees are disengaged.
- Overall average scores based on engagement drivers help pinpoint areas where engagement needs improvement
- Scores for belief in ability to succeed were fairly low (3.4). The average score regarding opportunity for advancement was also low (3.8).
- CHWs in Ethiopia were very enthusiastic about the tool and felt empowered to work in cooperation with their supervisors/ project officers to find practical and sustainable solutions to HR issues
- CHWs felt the tool allowed them to look internally at their own performance, helping them to identify basic gaps in problem-solving skills.

Figure 3. Average score per engagement driver and overall score per site (n=50)



Actions for Improvement

Result were discussed with CHWs and project staff as a group to determine why certain scores were low. Based on the results from the engagement tool, the sites decided to undertake the following actions to improve scores in the following areas:

Driver of Engagement	Reasoning for low score	Actions for improvement
Belief in ability to succeed	CHWs in the program did not feel they had the tools they needed to do their job well nor certain skills	1. Arrange training on basic tools like psychosocial services, facilitation skills, community management 2. Establish a method of transportation to referral facilities for emergencies
Relations with Organization/Community	While the average score was fairly high for this driver, ChildFund thought there was room for improvement since CHWs did not feel they always worked closely with the community Communication between different levels of staff i.e. CHWs, project officers and management needs improvement	1. Develop a contact schedule and increase frequency of contact with community members 2. Hold a workshop for team-building skills and training for staff on communication skills
Opportunity for advancement	No opportunities	1. Conduct discussion at different levels to increase opportunities for further learning

Lessons Learnt

- CHW engagement can be measured and quantified
- Engagement concepts are relevant to the work and problems faced by CHWs in Ethiopia
- The tool offers an impetus for action planning to develop practical and sustainable solutions to address HR problems

Message for Others

Engaged workers are loyal, have a lower rate of absenteeism, and provide a higher quality of care. The experience in Ethiopia proves that the employee engagement methodology can be successfully applied to CHWs. By focusing on worker engagement, an atmosphere of improvement, teamwork and open communication is fostered in the program.

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