



ENERGAGE
Energize, Engage, Empower

489 Highland Crossing • Suite 204 • East Ellijay, GA 30540
770.321.0537 (Office) • 706.635.8064 (Fax)
www.energage.com (Website)



Sample of One

by Garold Markle

How many employees do you have to talk to in order to figure out how best to energize and engage a whole company? To phrase the root question in more scholarly terms, what sample size is optimum to make statistically valid logical inferences about a larger population? For example, if you've got a thousand employees, collecting data from ten would seem too small, but sampling 500 would clearly be too many. Larger sample sizes are said to increase precision, although they also greatly escalate costs of the query.

In graduate school, I remember spending a good deal of time studying sampling techniques. There was even a mathematical formula for calculating the proper proportion to sample for an empirical study. While it is not my intent to bore you with such details, here it is without explanation:

$$(\hat{p} - 2\sqrt{0.25/n}, \hat{p} + 2\sqrt{0.25/n})$$

The good news is that most of us in business are not really doing empirical studies with the purpose of publication in an academic journal. More importantly, I think the answer to the question posed above is optimally determined without a refresher in advanced mathematics. ***If your goal is to energize and engage individuals in any population, the correct sample size is one. Furthermore, the correct generalization pool is also one.***

Just because I was born a "Baby Boomer" does not mean I think in lock step with everyone else who arrived on this planet between 1946 and 1964. In fact, the whole idea of generational generalizations is almost comical, if you really think about it.



ENERGAGE
Energize, Engage, Empower

489 Highland Crossing • Suite 204 • East Ellijay, GA 30540
770.321.0537 (Office) • 706.635.8064 (Fax)
www.energage.com (Website)

In a recent cover story in *HR Executive*, columnist Will Bunch discussed popular strategies for “engaging Generation Y.” Also called “Millennials,” Gen Yers are normally considered people born between 1980 and 1995. That’s a fifteen year time span.

In the same article where he shared best practices for dealing with this new and growing segment of our workforce, Bunch also noted that a Towers Watson survey of more than 3 million employees showed that “in many key measures – including their interest in corporate social responsibility and desire for more training opportunities – the difference between Gen Yers and their older co-workers is minimal.” In other words, lumping fifteen years of people into a single pool makes observations about the class relatively meaningless.

While it is intuitively obvious that people born at different times think differently, it is also true that people born at the same time do, as well. The idea that you can motivate a very large population by treating everyone the same is bad advice. We would suggest quite the opposite. Treat everyone differently.

From a global HR strategy standpoint, perhaps this sounds scary and dangerous. My experience over the course of several decades, however, is that treating individuals as unique human beings is actually less risky than treating them as amorphous “human resources.”

While clearly HR cannot expect to get to know all individuals on a personal level, we can teach our managers how to do so. We can also help create and structure conversations between manager/direct report dyads that will greatly increase the likelihood that bonding will take place.

I’ve been using a system called “Catalytic Coaching” for nearly 25 years now. It is designed as a replacement for traditional performance evaluations. It involves the use of three short forms used in four kinds of meetings that take about five hours per person per year. No labels. No grades. Just a highly individualized, structured two-way dialogue between a direct report and an immediate manager/supervisor.

Catalytic Coaching is an employee development and engagement program that helps “speeds the pace of significant change” when there is a performance gap. The goal is to work performance problems faster and spend less time with bad employees so you can spend more time with good ones. The system is scalable to organizations of any size and easily auditable by HR and senior management.

Programs like Catalytic Coaching don’t rely on generational stereotyping. They motivate people by engaging with them as individuals. Each person is treated as one of a kind. Harsh realities and disconnects are quickly dealt with. Talented people are coached and challenged harder than their less ambitious but well-functioning peers. They need this to rise to their ultimate potential. Job assignments are distributed based on individual passion and strengths, while weaknesses are designed around. The



ENERGAGE
Energize, Engage, Empower

489 Highland Crossing • Suite 204 • East Ellijay, GA 30540
770.321.0537 (Office) • 706.635.8064 (Fax)
www.energage.com (Website)

whole organization performs on a higher plane when each individual is energized and engaged on a personal level.

So, how can you best leverage the many benefits of a sample of one?

- **Scrap Evaluations:** End the outdated practice of grading and labeling employees like school children. Consider a more empowering program like [Catalytic Coaching](#).
- **Common Sense:** Take generational studies with a grain of salt. Enjoy the collective wisdom without gaining a false sense of what it takes to motivate people as individuals.
- **Get Personal:** Teach managers and supervisors to both permit and encourage direct reports to discuss personal issues that inevitably overlap with their business lives. Help them do this both safely and compassionately.
- **Oversee Effectiveness:** Find a way for HR to audit career and performance management interactions between employees and those they report to. [Catalytic Coaching Online](#), for example, allows HR to assure that conversations are being staged and to get a good feel for the quality of those engagement attempts.



Garold Markle is author of *Catalytic Coaching: The End of the Performance Review* and *No More Performance Evaluations!* Gary is also founder and CEO of Energage, Inc. For more of his teachings go to Energage.com where this article was first published in June of 2015.