



# Employee Engagement

*with Dr. Russell Robinson, EdD & Dr. Brad Shuck, EdD*

Dr. Russell Robinson, EdD speaks with Brad Shuck, EdD. Brad, a researcher at the University of Louisville and founder of OrgVitals, is an internationally recognized thought-leader in the areas of employee engagement, leadership and employee health and well-being. In this conversation, Brad shares recent research linking organizational culture, through bio-markers, to actual health outcomes. In addition, Brad shares tips to sustain mental health and well-being in the workplace.

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## ABOUT DR. BRAD SHUCK, ED.D.



Dr. Brad Shuck is an internationally recognized and sought after thought leader in the areas of employee engagement, leadership, and organizational culture. He is the author of *Employee Engagement: A Research Overview* (Routledge, 2020) and has published or presented more than 350 academic articles, book chapters, and invited presentations.

Dr. Shuck holds four US Copyrights and one pending trademark for his research-driven, intellectual property on employee engagement and culture management. His work has been featured in *Forbes*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *TIME*, as well as *India's Economic Times* and the *Hindu Times*, among others. In addition to his academic work, Shuck has given Keynote addresses on four of the seven continents including in China, Spain, Korea, India, Panama, and all over the United Kingdom and United States for some of the world's largest and most admired companies.

Dr. Shuck is a tenured Professor at the University of Louisville and Co-Founder of OrgVitals, a purpose-built technology focused on preventive care for the future of work. He is a member of the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels and holds advanced degrees in Counseling, Student Affairs, Human Resource Development, and Adult Education.

## ABOUT DR. RUSSELL ROBINSON, ED.D.



Dr. Russell Robinson is the founder of Amplified Research and Consulting, LLC, which provides research, analysis and consulting solutions regarding employee engagement, voice and silence, and talent management. Russell's focus is helping leaders create a culture of learning and listening.

In addition, Russell has spent over twenty years as a civil servant within the US Federal Government. In his current role as the Senior Advisor of Training & Engagement of an agency's component, Russell provides solutions to improve the workforce experience; and help leaders inspire and influence those within their span of control. Additionally, Russell is an adjunct professor at American University where he teaches graduate-level leadership classes.

Russell received his Doctor of Education (EdD) degree in Human Organizational Learning from the George Washington University. He received a Master's in Public Administration from American University's Key Program, and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degree from the University of Dayton.



**RUSSELL ROBINSON** So, I'm here with Brad Shuck, founder of OrgVitals, researcher at the University of Louisville, and all around employee engagement guru. Brad, how you doing today?

**BRAD SHUCK** Russ, I'm great, I'm better because I'm with you today man. I always loved spending time love spending time with you, man.

**RR** Tell the people little bit more about you and what you're doing.

**BS** So, I really wear two hats. The first hat. You talked about University of Louisville. I'm a full professor in Human Resource and Development there, I've been at U of L, now for about 12 years and I cut my teeth in the hospitality industry before I came to the University of Louisville and in corporate HR, and then I was fortunate enough back about 18 months ago in early 2021 to co-found a company called OrgVitals with two friends, Charlie Miller, Christina Rodriguez, both incredible professionals. Charlie comes from the innovation space Christina comes from tech space and I bring the research space into the company. We're really about merging the employee experience in employee well-being in ways that haven't been done before. Really, looking at...How does work really impact somebody? What does that mean? How do we even measure that? Get at that? What are the right questions to be asking? So, we're constantly collecting data.

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**RR** Speaking about collecting data, you've come out with this recent report on culture and wellness. Tell me about that research. What was the nexus of it? What you did and what you found out?

**BS** The article is really centered on like workplace culture and bio-markers of health risk. I think the origin story for this research really started for me about four or five years ago. I was at the gym. We had a gym at the University of Louisville, and they had a diabetes management clinic that was centered in the gym, and I would watch men and women come into that clinic and talk to the nurse. Spend about 30 to 45 minutes, and they leave. I started talking to the nurse one day, and she said, "you know, everybody that comes out here, talks about work." And I was like, "really, that's interesting to me. And she says, "they're coming in because they're having difficulties managing their diabetes." Look, diabetes will kill you, like it's a serious thing, it's not like having a cough. So, she said, "You know, people talk about work, hours of capacity or coworkers or leadership. And all these things impede their ability to manage their chronic disease."

I started thinking could work impact us in ways that we don't know about yet. Like it's one thing to have a really stressful week or really stressful couple days where we can feel the effects on our immediate sleep, our eating habits right now, and those kinds of things. But what about long-term risk, like things that are amazingly expensive to manage for companies and organizations. Things like hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, depression, obesity. How do we help people? And what our study shows is that culture plays a part in someone's long-term risk for chronic disease and honestly, brother, like that should be ringing alarm bells across the organizational landscape.

**RR** We haven't defined engagement. So how do you define engagement? And, then link in culture, and then talk about how wellness holistically links.



**BS** So, the one other thing I'll note about the study is that I think what makes this research very different and then I want to get into the culture and engagement piece. And we collected actual bio-data? So, we collected "clean-catch" urine samples. So, a lot of the research out there will ask you, "tell me how you're feeling today? And, how you are sleeping?" And I think that stuff is terrific.

**RR** Very subjective.

**BS** Yes, very subjective. We wanted to look at the physiological level of the way someone's body is operating right now in these conditions, which I think makes this kind of unique. And when we talk about engagement, we actually measured employee engagement. We measured Employee Engagement using the Employee Engagement Scale<sup>®</sup>, which is scale that I developed with Tom Reio and Jill Adelson several years ago. We shrunk it down to six questions and showed all the psychometrics for it, which was great. We defined employee engagement as the maintenance effort and intensity of energy that somebody gives to something. In this case, it was how much effort and energy do I give to my work, right? Is that effort intense? What's the direction of that energy? I maintain that we get at it through those questions.

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Engagement is connected directly to culture. The wellness piece of it is core of what I think the conversation about where the Future of Work is right now. So, I think what we've seen over the last couple of months is people make different decisions about career paths that are directly related to the degree of wellness that they feel in their lives. So, for example, a job that is over taxing or over capacity or overworking, or maybe over engaged, or maybe there's hidden work that I didn't know about, and I'm taking all this stuff on. We've just seen people pivot and say it's not worth the cost. Look, it's not worth it. Now, this isn't worth my health, this isn't worth my family, this isn't worth my finances. This isn't worth a host of different decisions.

The degree to which someone is engaged is a lag measure of culture. How does it feel to work here? And one of the things around OrgVitals that we continue to say is that for three decades employee engagement was the gold standard. I mean, everybody wanted to know what's the number. How do I get it? Where do I rack-and-stack in terms of my Best in Class. I want to be at the top 10%. Engagement is an outcome of a really great culture, but it doesn't tell the whole story. It doesn't tell the whole story around purpose and belonging and inclusion and alignment and the kinds of things that I think really matter now at work. So, engagement is incredibly important. There's no question about it and it's a measure of how your culture is doing. But getting at culture and getting at how it feels to work here is a really simplistic definition that I think organizational leaders need to be paying attention to. Now not only because, when we pay attention to culture, we see performance improve, right? Our teams perform better...our individuals perform better...our company performs better...engagement goes up...all the things that we need. But now we've got data that says it's possible that poor cultures are contributing to risk factors that are actually making people sick in the long term, and that's an important piece of the wellness conversation. This data is empowering employees and a different way. We're able to have a different conversation now because of it.

**RR** I think this is so well timed. But when I talk to leaders about what's keeping them up at night. They talk about being overwhelmed, the need for resilience. You look, Gallup has put out a bunch of data on unhappiness is up, loneliness is up, and engagement is down. How do you look at this wellness component for a middle manager. How do you look at it as you the individual middle manager? And also, the impacts it has on the people under your span of control, and the how it impacts the well organization.



## When I talk with leaders about this first question I ask is, “Are you okay?” Because if they’re not, okay, their team is also not okay.

**BS** When I talk with leaders about this first question I ask is, “Are you okay?” Because if they’re not, okay, their team is also not okay. We are having conversations around individual levels of responsibility for making time to be well, whether that is going on a 10-minute walk, whether that’s getting your 10,000 steps in, whether that’s going to a gym, whether that’s changing your diet, whether that’s taking time in the morning to sit down and journal, which is something that I’ve picked up. And I’ve got my journal right here and it’s helped my mental health. We’re having really serious conversations around challenges that have been around for a very long time, we shouldn’t be surprised about this. COVID accelerated this, the social unrest around social justice accelerated these conversations. But they brought them to the forefront in ways that, man, it might have taken another two decades before we got to this space. My hope is that we don’t miss the opportunity around--you know what, inclusion isn’t just something that we should be talking about. It should be something that we’re doing as a core part of who we are. Because when people don’t feel included, and they don’t feel like they belong. They can’t engage and culture doesn’t feel good. This isn’t a place where they can see themselves. These are conversations that we should have been having for four decades, but I’m glad we’re having them now, and I hope that we don’t miss our opportunity to really change the way work is done.

**RR** I have a friend I was talking to about a year ago. And he’s type 2 diabetic and he said, “Just being in my office at home all day, my blood sugar scores were higher than before COVID because I was up walking around.” What I recommended to him was instead of scheduling hour long meetings, do 50 minute meetings, and get up and walk frequently. What rituals and you do to focus on your wellness at an individual level.

**BS** My hope is that we’re having two conversations at the same time. One, someone’s having a conversation with themselves. What do I need to be doing to make sure that I’m in a space where I and my best self? What are the things that I can control and influence within my whole life? Right, and then I think we’re also having a conversation at the organizational level of how are we promoting a sense of wellness and well-being within our teams and with our employees?

## We are collecting data that we didn’t know we could collect five years ago and we’re doing this in really unique ways. There are new tools out there for collecting this information.

Wellness is so much more than an EAP, right. It’s so much more than just having a hotline you can call. But that hotline can be really important for people. You need to have that. It’s much more than having a gym. It is also having conversations at the organizational level and the individual level of what is an acceptable level of stress. Like, at what point do we say, “Hey, we’ve got some alarm bells going off here, either in my own life, or at the organizational level.” That’s what we get into. We are collecting data that we didn’t know we could collect five years ago and we’re doing this in really unique ways. There are new tools out there for collecting this information. I might say the same thing around engagement, “What level of engagement crosses a line into being overworked. At what point do we cross a line over where it becomes exploitive; and that is a radical thing to think about like, what point are we too engaged like, what’s an acceptable level there?”

In terms of rituals, I had this conversation today when I went to the gym. So that’s routine that I have. So, I journal every day. I take five to seven minutes in the morning, I level-set my day. The journal that I have asked me how I’m feeling and asking for the top, three priorities asked me what my happy hour is, and it doesn’t mean like when I’m going to have a drink. It means like, when am I going to be the happiest in the day. And I’ll note that, and I go to the gym. I do that religiously and I go four to five times a week. There were days that I can only get 25 minutes in, but I go. And it takes me 25 minutes to drive there, but it’s important for me to go. So, I was having a conversation with a friend of mine who said he was overwhelmed. Those are his words “I’m overwhelmed at



work; I feel a lot of pressure.” He’s in a high volume sales role and he’s a sales leader in his organization. And he was sweating, and he was getting ready to leave because he was headed off to a meeting. And I said, “Hey man, but you paid yourself first because when you leave here, someone else is going to have an expectation of you. And when you come here and you pay yourself first, there’s an anticipation for the day, not an expectation.” I think that’s a different lens and a different philosophy. So, when I think about rituals, I think about the things that might work for individuals, not everybody wants to go to the gym. That’s fine. Getting up and walking, making sure you’re physically active, making sure that you’re mentally resilient and you’re doing things in your day that promote that sense of resiliency that allows you to get through the hard meetings.

I also think putting boundaries around things, like one ritual that’s new in my life, is on Fridays at noon I have a date with my wife. I have a standing date with my wife, I take her out to lunch, and she can choose where we go. Well, I had somebody write me at noon last Friday. Can you meet anytime? I can, but if I do that, then I’m not staying true to the boundaries that I set around my marital relationship and the health of that relationship. And so, I said, no I can’t. I could push my wife off, right. But when we do that, we’re making choices around the priorities in our life. And then we’re making choices about cost and benefit. For me in that moment, it was important for me to maintain that sense of a healthy boundary things around like picking up phones or check and text first thing in the morning. Those are the kinds of rituals that I think are really promoting a sense of well-being and wellness right now for individuals.

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**RR** Following up on what you just said. When I talk to managers, and they talk about being overwhelmed and being understaffed. What’s the first step they can do? Because, if they’re up till 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning sending and responding to emails, and they don’t have boundaries, then it is hard for them to model the behavior to employees.

**BS** That’s right.

**RR** If you’re sitting here thinking that you should be working out, and you should be eating better. What steps can you do to create this well organization? Where do you find that time and balance?

**BS** For the overwhelmed manager. I think I’d love to give two really practical ideas. The first is—and I see this all the time, and you mentioned this—alright, we have a middle manager, who is understaffed and overwhelmed. So, there are, there are only one of two ways to solve that problem and I’m going to lean back on the Job Demands Resources model that is around the burnout space. There are two ways to solve this problem. You either increase the resource or you decrease the demand. That is the only way to solve that problem. Here’s what I think, leaders need to do. They got to prioritize. We got to say, “Okay, we’re twelve people down from where we were six months ago, we need to re-evaluate our priorities and the kind of work that we’re doing. What are the two or three? Most important things that we could be focusing our time on right now.” When leaders don’t do that, they send a confusing message to their team that everything has to be done at the same level. And I just want to be clear, that’s not possible. That’s not possible without burnout. And I’ll give you it two practical examples of that. Look at education and look at health care. Two professions where people go to school for a long time to do these things. And we see teachers making different decisions because the demand stayed high, the resources stayed low, and we kept piling and piling and piling on. In same thing in healthcare, look at the nursing shortage that we have on our country. Now, it was at epidemic critical levels before COVID. Now we’re in a crisis where



we're paying people (travel nurses) a lot of money to be to just travel in for a little while. So, the best thing that I think leaders can be doing right now, and to think through is, how do we reprioritize? It doesn't mean that everything isn't important, and we need to think about that. But what are the two things we need to be focusing on right now? We got to get that stuff right first. Thinking through that, and helping employees and teams understand what's the priority now is one of the most important skills sets that a leader can have. And that leader needs to do that for their own life, too. She needs to sit down and say here are the three things that are most important to me. And I'm going to spend my energy and time focusing here and if I have a little extra, awesome, but I'm going to get these three things done.

**RR** So, when you talk to leaders and ask, "Are you okay" That assumes that if you're my manager or my supervisor, we've built a relationship where I'm comfortable telling you that I'm not okay.

**BS** Yeah.

**RR** From an engagement standpoint and you've done research on compassion and the need for emotional intelligence—the emotionally intelligent leader versus the technical expert leader. Talk a little bit about your research and the role trust has in asking these type of wellness questions in the workplace.

**BS** You know, the most frequent request that I get right now, our leaders who tell me they're lonely. They're just lonely, and there's a lot of research out there that would substantiate that. There are a lot of people who feel alone and isolated and not a part of... When I'm going into organizations, I'm asking them to tell me about a time that you felt most supported. When was that and when was a time that you felt most alive in your work? I want you to tell that story, I want you to write down as many details and think through that. We often times do these group discussions with leadership teams around this, and then we get into exactly what you're talking about. We get into compassion, and we get into trust. Both of those things go hand-in-hand with emotional intelligence and being able to be kind of situationally aware and then managing my own emotions which is something that I'm working, right? Even in my own life like taking time to be present in the moment and aware of how my actions are, impacting those around me. When we talk about compassion, we talk about, living above the line or below the line. It's a Leadership Model that we developed here at the University of Louisville, and it works where it's about five years' worth of research, which has compounded over time. We have been able to identify six real key behaviors of what we call Compassionate Leaders and one of those is dignity. The idea of treating everyone with a sense of dignity in those situations, or presence or authenticity, or honesty and those kinds of things. Well, imagine the opposite of those things. If you're not working from a place of dignity, you may very well be working from a place of humiliation. So, if I'm not giving you dignity, I may be coming from a place of humiliation where I'm using humiliation as a way to move you forward. That will never engage. Being dishonest and being detached and treating people with a sense of humiliation...those things don't engage us. We don't lean into those things.

**We get into compassion, and we get into trust. Both of those things go hand-in-hand with emotional intelligence and being able to be kind of situationally aware and then managing my own emotions.**

But what I'll tell people about trust is trust is about knowing the patterns of behavior that are coming. Trust is just I can predict that I've got a really bad work environment. Or I can trust that my work has my best interest at heart. And, and that's their focus. And so, for me, trust is about the character behaviors that people see. It's not about getting it right. It is oftentimes saying I'm sorry or apologizing, I got this one wrong. I'll take responsibility for that. I don't see that a lot in organizations, but I also don't see people using words like joy, hope, optimism, love, and care. But I'm hopeful that those become words in our vocabulary. I think people



need to hear that stuff. People need to hear words like hope and dignity and authenticity and presence. And when we can get to a vernacular like that, we begin to change the way that worked feels in some ways. And then we can lean in and trust that. But for me trust is about being able to predict the behavior that I'm going to see.

**RR** So, somebody's listening to this conversation and they're in. They understand that you have a strong culture to have engaged employees to create this well organization. But they've never done it before. They've never listened, they've always had to have the answers. They've never had experience at being a being vulnerable. Where do you recommend starting?

**BS** I'm going to go back to emotional intelligence. It starts with self-awareness and as a leader if I'm like, "Yes, this is what I want. I want to get better at this. I want to try this." There are some psychological safety things we need to talk about. An easy one, is the journal or finding time to read or just to sit to just be self-reflective. The second is to raise your hands sometimes, and say "Hey, here's how I'm feeling about this. Like, I'm not sure where I am. My sense of self-worth is not grounded in how someone else response to me." Now, am I responsible for pieces of that, for sure. But I want to make sure that I'm putting myself in a place and I'm trusting the best of intentions. I'm not assuming the worst of...but I'm leaning into what could be and what that future might look like. But I would recommend for a leader who's interested in growing in this space is to start on a journey of self-awareness and self-reflection. That starts with disciplined writing, like journaling, listening to podcasts, and hearing things that help fill you up again—anticipation vs. expectation. There's a sense of anticipation here where some things take from us, and there's a cost for that. And so, I would encourage those two into those things that fill them up.

**I would recommend for a leader who's interested in growing in this space is to start on a journey of self-awareness and self-reflection.**

**RR** Last question, What's the next piece of research you're looking at in this work? What's the next thing you want to explore?

**BS** One, we really want to explore the origin story of compassion and why some for some people compassion is an accessible option for them and why? For some people it's not. What is it that spurs someone to be compassionate and where does that come from? And we're beginning to understand that for a lot of us, there's an origin story that helps us move in a certain direction where bitterness or judgment could be an outcome but instead compassion is the outcome and we're trying to understand how that happens. And a lot of times it's around role models that we've had someone in our life, or we've seen that.

The second piece is really continuing along the line of work on the work/health connection and collecting more data, I would love to do a ten-year longitudinal study, where we have folks, who are giving not only a year and a blood samples but we're taking their blood pressure, we're tracking their way, we're tracking their mood and their sense of depression, we're tracking their work experiences and building a significant database of information that helps us understand how people are working and living today and for the next 10 to 15 to 20 years. So, we're hoping to really hammer that work/health connection in objective ways.

**RR** Brad, thanks for joining me. Great conversation, as always.

**BS** Always a pleasure.