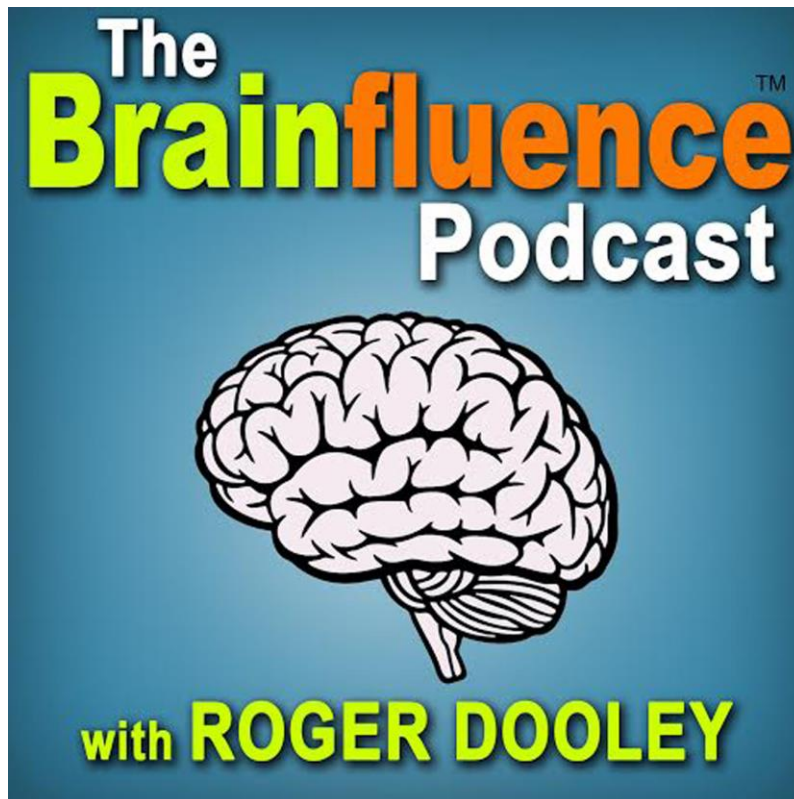


Ep #77: The Brainy Way to Increase Engagement with  
Brady Wilson



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**Roger Dooley**

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## Ep #77: The Brainy Way to Increase Engagement with Brady Wilson

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast. I'm Roger Dooley. My guest this week has been described as the embodiment of focused energy. He's an expert on how to increase engagement in the workplace and of particular interest to Brainfluence Podcast listeners; his techniques have the roots in brain science. He's the co-founder of Juice Inc. and the author of the new book *Beyond Engagement: A Brain-Based Approach that Blends the Engagement Employers Want with the Energy Employees Need*. Welcome to the show, Brady Wilson.

Brady Wilson: Hey, thank you so much. My pleasure, Roger.

Roger Dooley: Brady, you're from Guelph, Ontario. Believe it or not, I've been there many number of times. I spent my early years in Buffalo, New York right across the border and was in Ontario quite a bit. How is Guelph these days?

Brady Wilson: Guelph just went through a massive heat spell, hot spell, I should say and we are now looking at the other side of that. It looks a bit grim. I think fall is definitely on the way now.

Roger Dooley: We're based in Austin, Texas. We have pretty much have a continuous heat spell from spring until fall. It's still very, very warm here but it's not too bad. It's dry. Brady, here's

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a question for you that you've probably seen asked once or twice before, do you have a best friend at work?

Brady Wilson: I do, my business partner.

Roger Dooley: Okay, because amidst the classic measure of employee engagement, I think that Gallup says that it's the number 1 indicator of whether an employee will ... I forget exactly what they say, it predicts their level of engagement whether they'll stick around or attitude toward the company. Do you buy the fact that having a best friend at work is a key metric for engagement?

Brady Wilson: I don't buy that it's a key metric. I know that Buckingham has walked us through 10 ways to Sunday. I do not say that it is not an important metric. I just don't believe it is the key metric. We are seeing that there are a handful of elements that employees will live or die by. They feel so vital and so urgent that it's like their need for oxygen. Having a best friend at work is not one of those.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, Brady. I'm a little bit suspicious of that metric myself. I think the idea that you have a best friend may bring you into the office or workplace a little bit more willingly. In other words, I mean I dread going into the office but how that makes you feel about the employer really is open to question. You may have a friend who has a great attitude about work and motivates you or they may be rather discontented in their job and do the opposite. The last time I had a best friend at work, we ended up leaving the large company and founding our own company. It was indeed a good experience for us but not necessarily from the employer's standpoint.

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Brady Wilson: I think if we look at what's underneath that, what's underneath it is a profound sense of connection, belonging, inclusion. That enjoyment that comes out of those things, while we know that when we are experiencing connection and a strong sense of trust and inclusion with another person, it releases oxytocin in their brain and oxytocin is incredibly pleasurable. It releases dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is incredibly pleasurable as well. These are the types of things that are the thrive hormones that produce and sustain our energy. If we think at what is it that creates engagement and high performance, definitely connection and having these quality connections in our work experience, doesn't necessarily have to be a best friend though.

Roger Dooley: Right. Too bad we can't hug them these days. I had Paul Zak on the show not that long ago. I'm sure he would recommend that as a way of releasing oxytocin but sadly, the legal folks tend to frown at these days.

Brady Wilson: I love Paul Zak. I'm assuming he hugged you. Did he?

Roger Dooley: We were remote. If he did, it was a virtual hug.

Brady Wilson: He was sending you a virtual hug. You can count on that.

Roger Dooley: Your focus obviously is employee engagement. That's a huge buzz word these days for businesses. It seems like from what I've seen, engagement efforts are often very survey focused. "Okay, we're going to do this survey to see how engaged people are." Then, there's some lip service, maybe a few speeches afterwards but the action tends to die out. One of the things you talked about is the contrast between engagement and employee exhaustion. What do you mean by that?

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Brady Wilson: We're not actually contrasting. We're saying that the paradox of engagement is the more that you manage engagement, the more disengagement you produce. With that, there is depletion and exhaustion. The reason for that is very simple. From a brain-based approach, if you look at it, when someone is exhausted, when we are low on energy for instance, the very first thing that we lose is the executive function of the brain, our ability to predict outcomes, connect the dots, regulate our emotions, our ability to make great decisions and prioritize. Clearly, these are the power tools of value creation. They're the power tools of innovation. If we're low on the executive function, low on energy, we will resort to quick fixes and duct tape workarounds and reactivity. We actually create the perfect ecosystem for ongoing exhaustion.

What we're saying is yes, of course, we want engagement but if we manage engagement, typically, it is received by the employee as, "I need you to give more effort." The effort ethos clearly, clearly does not release high performance. What we're really saying is to managers and leaders listening today, what happens when you shift from managing engagement to managing energy is something very profound and it really moves the dial in a lasting way.

Roger Dooley: Even just talking about engagement reminds me of that old sort of a humorous look at relationships where the female in relationship tells the male that it's time that we talk about our relationship and the male responds, "Huh? We're in a relationship?" To some degree, most employees might find it strange that an employer wants to talk about their relationship in that way. It's like, "Let's just get on with business."

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Brady Wilson: I had a manager. I remember the session to this day. He said, "It's like we're talking about the relationship and talking about being on the beach and holding hands but we never do it. We never actually get on the beach and hold hands." Employee engagement, with all of the machinery associated with the surveys, the town halls, the newsletters, the action planning and then coming back and saying, "Here's what we're going to do," it has created a crisis of belief. We work with some organizations, Roger, where 50% and upwards of the employees do not believe that any meaningful result will occur as a result of the engagement survey. Now, that is creating profound levels of cynicism in organizations. We got employees who are saying, "You know what? Nothing happened since the last time I filled this out. Why should I fill this out again?"

Roger Dooley: I think it's not even just in employee engagement space but you can have the same complaint about, say, strategic planning efforts and other sort of business review situations where a lot of effort goes into collecting data and analyzing the data and collecting the results in a big book but then the follow-through isn't there. Why do you think that is?

Brady Wilson: What we fail to do is recognize the organ that really drives execution and follow-through and that is the human brain. The human brain has an operating system and that operating system is conversation. Neuron A transmits a message to Neuron B and when Neuron B receives that message, his synapse fires and we speak, we move, we make a decision, et cetera. In essence, we have an operating system in our brain just based on that type of conversation but we approach organizational life in non-

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conversational ways. For instance, as you said, strategic planning, we balance score card, 360s, all sorts of things that we invest in, they can be very divorced from face-to-face conversation with the employee. We're almost guaranteeing that some of these implementations will face overt or covert resistance because they're not tapping into the native wiring of every employee which is conversation.

Roger Dooley: Perhaps, the exhaustion factor that you talked about could be part of it as well. I think that often, the problem with taking action is that you have to finally get through this massive effort. There is so much sort of "real work" that is the work that's needed to satisfy the customers that day and that week that needs to be done that these other things get pushed aside because there's simply not enough time. Both the managers and employees are too depleted in resources to say, "Okay, well, now we can really focus on improving the situation and devote some time and effort to it." It can be, in most companies, can be quite difficult for that reason.

Brady Wilson: For sure. Some of the inadequacies and lack of integration in our systems, processes that don't talk to each other makes the real work that you're talking about, delivering value to the client, the customer, the patient, et cetera, so cumbersome that we don't truly have enough buffer. We don't have enough leftover capacity to engage in this new strategic plan or this new implementation.

Once again, if we look at it from managing energy point of view, when employees feel that they have no capacity, that they are overwhelmed, that their circuits are overloaded, we know what that does. It triggers the

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sympathetic nervous system, the SNS in the brain, which is basically it sends us right into gas-guzzling mode. It is so metabolically expensive because cortisol's kicking in, adrenaline's kicking in, norepinephrine's kicking in and they are so metabolically expensive. They send us on high alert. Our brain is paved in cortisol. It's very difficult for us to feel like we have our capacity to step into this new strategic plan.

Roger Dooley: How do you increase energy or reduce the depletion of energy in people's brains? Obviously, you can do little things that have immediate impacts on energy, give over some glucose or something but organizationally, how do you change that energy generation factor?

Brady Wilson: For the last 20 years, we've been asking our self that very question, Roger. That is when I look in the eyes of a CEO and they say, "I know how to manage my customer experience. I've got an index for that. I know how to manage my employee engagement," you are saying that you can manage energy. How do you manage and how do you measure energy? We have identified that there are 5 driving needs that employees must have in the work experience. Each one has a different waiting for different employees but belonging, security, freedom, significance and meaning.

If we can, as leaders and managers, move from parenting to partnering with employees, partnering with them to co-create the conditions where they can experience the type of autonomy that they need, the sense of meaning in their work, the sense of connection and belonging, then we can produce ways of working together that very predictably will create renewable and sustainable energy.



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Maybe I should just give you a quick anecdote if that would be helpful.

Roger Dooley: Sure. Go for it by all means, Brady.

Brady Wilson: One of the things we do is we just help managers and leaders have a very simple energy check conversations sitting with an employee and partnering with them, not fixing anything but working together with them to co-create these conditions where they can be energized. Here's an example. A director who inherited a team of business analysts, on that team, there was one business analyst who is having a lot of absenteeism issues and stress and whatnot. The VP said to the director, "We have not been able to crack this nut. You know what? If you can't get this absenteeism fixed with this employee, you have complete freedom to just free up our future, if you will."

Roger Dooley: Nicely put.

Brady Wilson: Nice euphemism.

Roger Dooley: Open up new opportunities on someplace else.

Brady Wilson: This gentleman, Alan, started looking at this business analyst and we'll call her Tina. He saw, man, she's so smart. When she is on her game, she's incredibly productive. He started getting into conversations with her and he said, "Tina, I don't need to know what's going on in your personal life. I just need you to know that I'm in your corner and I want to make this work. What can we do to take some stuff off your plate?" It might sound okay to the listeners so far but every time they had those types

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of conversations, it devolved into something very frustrating for both of them.

He went through our program and it was just about finding out what matters most, which is the driving need that is most important for this particular employee. When he started just asking her about what was most important to her and what mattered most, she said, "You know what it is? I want to feel like I can be a high performer in one area of my life. That's not going to be my whole life right now but every time I meet with you, you take challenges away. You take stuff off my plate. I need more challenges at work so I could feel like I can be highly productive there." This guy, Alan, is going, "Who would have known the person in the high stress situation with tons of absenteeism, she wants more challenges?"

He started giving her project after project, challenge after challenge. Every time he did, she hit it out of the park. Eighteen months later, I met him in the airport and I said, "How's it going with Tina?" He said, "It's like I have 1.5 employees in one body. She was nominated for the Bravo award for high performers. Subsequently, she was elevated to a management position. She was a rock star but she was starving for the driving need that mattered most to her which was a sense of significance, achievement, progress. I can do great work." When managers sit and have these very simple conversations about what matters most, we can very easily craft the conditions with employees where they can experience more autonomy, more meaning, more sense of organization or structure, more sense of significance. That clearly is something that has been important for many organizations that we've been working with.

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Roger Dooley: Brady, that is a great story but I guess one question I would have is can employees always articulate what their greatest need is because coming from the neuromarketing space, part of the key concept there is that people cannot answer always what they want from a product, why they like a product, why they don't like another product and that it's necessary to get into their subconscious. Even a reasonably skilled manager sitting down to talk with somebody, I would think, might be frustrated sometimes by the fact that the employee does not know himself or herself what they're lacking. In your anecdote, Tina, she had pretty clear insight as to what she was looking for but I wonder how often it occurs that they can't articulate that very well.

Brady Wilson: It often happens, Roger. You are so bang on. The questions that we created and have brought to the marketplace are ones that make the undiscussable discussable. It is very, very important that we ask the right trigger questions that can allow a deeper level of insight for the employee, him or herself, but also for the manager. What we typically find is it's a 1 or 2 or 3-level process where the employee brings out this as the issue and the manager asks a couple more questions and we find out that that was just the presenting issue. The real issue is a couple layers down. One of the very, very simple questions we're having managers ask is when the employee says, "You know what? I want to be able to learn and develop and grow. I want more learning opportunities." "Okay, I can see why that would be important to me but help me understand why is that so important to you?"

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When the employee opens their mouth next, they're going to start to give some data that that manager can listen to that will help him understand what is it about learning development opportunities. Is it significance? Is it the sense of mastery? Is it the sense of purpose and meaning? Now, we're starting to get a finely pointed edge to what it is that matters most to this person. I agree with you completely. The questions are framed in such a way that we actually help the person come to a higher level of insight.

Roger Dooley: Brady, you talked about underperformers and overperformers but often, companies really don't distinguish very much between those two. I think sometimes, it may be uncomfortable for employers first to deal with particularly underperformers but then, you also have these constraints that, "Okay, well, it's been a rough year this year so we're limiting all the increases to 3%." It's often easier for managers just to say, "Okay, well, this is what we're going to do. Everybody will get the 3% but maybe next year, it'll be better." How should companies be differently treating underperformers and overperformers?

Brady Wilson: One of the things you pointed to is that when we think about rewarding performance and high performers, often, we resort to very extrinsic measures, the 3% increase, the chachkas, the trips, et cetera. Clearly, extrinsic rewards have their place but in terms of the management of ongoing energy, if we can tap into more of the intrinsic sense of reward, we can actually produce more sustainable energy because those intrinsic rewards become expected over time. Their real charge gets diluted.

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If we can understand what is it, the reward package is greater, of course, than money and it's greater, of course, than tangible things. If we can understand what is the reward package for our employees that includes those things such as greater level of flexibility in their schedule, that includes time in a mentoring relationship, it includes just that face-to-face, "I need to tell you the impact that you've had on the business in very concrete ways," these are some forms of reward that clearly are meaningful to people over the long haul. I would say one thing is let's understand the greater reward package and not place as much reliance on the extrinsic aspects of it and really start to explore some of the intrinsic aspects of reward. Does that make sense, Roger?

Roger Dooley: No, it does. It makes a lot of sense because often, the extrinsic rewards are subject to arbitrary constraints. This person's a great performer. They're a standout but they happen to be at the top of the salary range for that particular job and we can't do anything beyond that or these artificially limiting situations or salary freeze for the next 12 months for everybody. I'm trying to find those intrinsic things that will work or that makes a lot of sense.

Brady Wilson: I will say one thing and that is what drives high performers crazy, if you will, is democratic recognition, democratic reward system where everybody just gets the same. When I have gone above and beyond the call of duty, when I have gotten up in the middle of the night with an idea that actually transforms one of our processes and then I see underperformers getting the same level of recognition or reward, that is one way that is guaranteed to dissipate and deplete that person's energy over the

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long haul. Democratic recognition, we really have to learn how not to do.

Roger Dooley: Right. Everyone gets a trophy is not a great strategy.

Brady Wilson: No, not in the business world.

Roger Dooley: Brady, you quote Gavin de Becker who says your brain's limbic system defines what you experience as reality. What do you mean by that and how does that affect engagement?

Brady Wilson: When we receive stimuli, they come through the limbic system first. In particular, the amygdala gets a chance to say, "Is there any memory in my data bank that signifies that this particular stimulus represents threat?" After it gets to weigh in, then that information or that data then goes to the cognitive brain. What's happening there is millions of data points are being sourced in our, it's the Library of Congress of emotional experiences.

Roger Dooley: Not to interrupt your flow, Brady, but this should tie in pretty well with, I believe, the previous week's guest if I've got my order straight of when these will air, and when we talked to Joe LeDoux about the amygdala at great length.

Brady Wilson: Wonderful. You know what? I better not be redundant because you already covered it but the main point here is that we've got this part of our brain that is incredibly attuned to social cognition, i.e., figuring other people out. Can I trust them or not? Is this situation a threat or not? That limbic part of our brain picks up subtle cues. It's fantastic with social radar, intuition, gut level instinct. It then sends the message to the cognitive brain and said,

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“You can trust this person. What they’re saying rings true.”

We make decisions then based on our emotions. Then, we justify those decisions with our rational but clearly, the limbic or emotional part of the brain has a very, very strong weighting. What that means to employee engagement is that a manager can be sitting with an employee talking about engagement, talking about their commitment and or recognizing them and if the employee’s limbic brain does not feel respected, then all the assurances and declarations and all the words that the manager says, they simply are rendered useless because it’s not being felt.

We know there are 2 types of engagement, rational engagement, emotional engagement. One of them drives 4 times the discretionary effort than the other. If we can tap into the limbic brain and send authentic messages of acceptance, of recognition, of respect, then what happens inside the employee’s brain and in their being is, “I think I can trust this manager and I can start to open up and have a real conversation.” That clearly is going to impact the engagement conversation.

Roger Dooley: How would the manager do that? In other words, I would have to imagine that a typical employee gets called into his or her manager’s office, say, “Have a seat. Close the door,” that would immediately fire up their amygdala saying, “Oh my God, what did I do wrong? Am I going to get fired and so on?” In terms of the tools to build that trust ... You talked about the messages that are authentic. Would that be things like praise that actually makes sense and relates to what the employee did? In

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other words, they can say, “Okay, well, that makes sense,” as opposed to that meaningless praise that everybody gets?

Brady Wilson: Right. If we think about the thrive hormones, dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin, the question in a manager’s mind today listening to this is, “Okay, dopamine makes people insanely creative. It cuts the sense of pain, enhances pleasure. Oxytocin creates greater connectivity and trust and bonding. Serotonin creates more a sense of ease, reduces worry, tension, fear. Can you turn those on? When that employee steps into your office, are there things that you can do that will trigger the release of dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin?”

Thankfully, there clearly are. For instance, whenever we highlight a sense of possibility or opportunity or sense of optimism about the employee’s future, that releases dopamine. Dopamine is responsible for the seeking drive which triggers the employee to start to be more goal-oriented. That’s going to change the nature of that conversation. If we acknowledge what matters most to the employee in the conversation, when they bring something up, we clearly feedback to them and mirror back to them why that seems to be so important to them, that releases oxytocin.

If we can give that true sense of respect and recognition for somebody’s achievement, for their contribution, that releases serotonin. As these things are done authentically and the employee’s limbic brain goes, “Yes, I can trust this person,” those hormones start to flow. Those are high performance hormones that create a very quality conversation.



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Roger Dooley: Very good. Let me remind our listeners, we are talking with Brady Wilson, author of the new book, *Beyond Engagement: A Brain-Based Approach that Blends the Engagement Managers want with the Energy Employees Need*. Brady, how can our listeners find you and your stuff online?

Brady Wilson: [www.juiceinc.com](http://www.juiceinc.com). There's free stuff there. People can listen into webinars, information, articles that we've written that will help them learn how to manage their own energy and that of their employees. We would love to be able to offer these things. If people are interested in learning how to do energy checks, we have a manager's toolkit that people can grab and learn how to do this right away.

Roger Dooley: Great. We'll have links to that resource as well as any others that we talked about during the course of this conversation as well as your new book, Brady, and a text version of our conversation as well. That will all be on the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast). Brady, thanks so much for being on the show.

Brady Wilson: It has been my pleasure, Roger. Thank you so much.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at [RogerDooley.com](http://RogerDooley.com).