

# Do you have citizens ... or subjects?

## “Democracy in America” by Alexis de Tocqueville

A French aristocrat toured the USA in the 1830s. His report was the definitive look at what made America great. And it has a lot to say about the modern organization, too.

### Tocqueville on lack of engagement

There are some nations in Europe whose inhabitants think of themselves in a sense as colonists, **indifferent to the fate of the place they live in**. The greatest **changes occur in their country without their cooperation**. They are **not even aware of precisely what has taken place**. They suspect it; they have heard of the event by chance. More than that, they are unconcerned with the fortunes of their village, the safety of their streets, the fate of their church and its vestry. They think that such things have nothing to do with them, that they belong to a powerful stranger called “the government.” They enjoy these goods as tenants, **without a sense of ownership, and never give a thought to how they might be improved**. They are so divorced from their own interests that even when their own security and that of their children is finally compromised, they do not seek to avert the danger themselves but **cross their arms and wait** for the nation as a whole to come to their aid. Yet as utterly as they sacrifice their own free will, they are no fonder of obedience than anyone else. They submit, it is true, to the whims of a clerk, but **no sooner is force removed than they are glad to defy the law** as a defeated enemy. Thus one finds them **ever wavering between servitude and license**.

When a nation has reached this point, it must either change its laws and mores or perish, for the well of public virtue has run dry: **in such a place one no longer finds citizens but only subjects**.

### Your engagement test

How much are your employees ...

- indifferent to the organization’s fate?
- lacking a sense of ownership (reactive instead of proactive)?
- uninterested in the growth of the organization (only thinking about their role, not the big picture)?
- defiant of policies and processes unless forced (by pay, threats, etc.) to follow them?

## Tocqueville on the elements of engagement

... in America, the people are **enlightened**, **alert to their own interests**, and **accustomed to thinking about them**.

### Your checklist for increasing engagement

#### "Alert to their own interests"

- New hire orientations, where you explain why you do what you do, and how that impacts the team, the employee, the client.
- Communications from leadership, where you explain where the organization is going and why—and how the employee impacts that, and how the change impacts the employee.
- Scoreboards that track not just team goals but the impact on staff.
- Pay plans that reflect these proactive behaviors.

You are trying to get them to be so engaged they have their "radar up."

#### "Accustomed to thinking about" their interests

- Regularly scheduled **coaching**, where you get the employee thinking.
- Cross-functional teams, where you invite ideas on and investment in growing the organization.
- Input-gathering sessions, whether they be town hall meetings, employee surveys or managers in the habit of funneling up feedback.

"Accustomed" is another way of saying "habits." You are trying to get them to constantly engage in *thinking*.

#### "Enlightened"

- What is your origin story?
- What is your why—your purpose? Have you defined your values? Do your people know your why and your values?
- What value do you bring your customers? Your employees? Your community?

Tocqueville says enlightenment is an "arduous enterprise ... it would be less difficult to interest them in the details of court etiquette than in the repair of their town hall."