

## **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

### **What is employee engagement?**

**The Northeast Human Resources Association (NEHRA) defines employee engagement as “the willingness and ability to contribute to company success.” Development Dimensions International (DDI) defines employee engagement as “the extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for doing it.” According to a study by Towers and Perrin, engagement can be measured by “the extent to which employees put discretionary effort into their work, in the form of extra time, brainpower and energy.”**

**The Gallup organization has done the most research in terms of measuring employee engagement. Their study revealed that about 54 percent of employees in the United States are not engaged and 17 percent are disengaged. Only 29 percent are engaged employees.**

**So, what does an engaged worker look like? It’s easy to spot an engaged employee by their enthusiasm, excitement and willingness to do whatever they can to get the job done. An engaged employee actively contributes to the success of the organization and is fully involved in his/her work. Simply stated, an engaged worker puts heart and soul into their work, rather than just ‘going through the motions.’ People are more engaged when they believe they are making meaningful contributions to their organizations. Engaged employees care about the work they do. The reason they care is because they feel cared about by their employers.**

**Again, according to Gallup, in 'world-class organizations,' the ratio of engaged to actively disengaged employees is 9.57:1. In average organizations, the ratio of engaged to actively disengaged employees is 1.83:1**

**The rewards of an engaged workforce can be linked to retention levels and productivity in an organization. Gallup estimates that within the U.S. workforce, disengaged employees cost employers over \$300 billion dollars per year in lost productivity!**

**Although the concept of employee engagement may sound a bit vague, engagement can be measured with hard data on employee and organizational performance, productivity, retention, and financial gain. Again, according to NEHRA, highly engaged employees outperform their disengaged colleagues by 20 to 28 percent. A 2005 study by Serota Consulting of 28 multinational companies found that the share prices of organizations with highly engaged employees rose by an average of 16 percent compared with an industry average of 6 percent.**

**Since increasing employee engagement is obviously a smart business investment, why aren't more organizations making engagement a top priority? At this point, there is overwhelming evidence connecting high engagement rates to business profitability. Let's take a look at some specific ways to create a culture of employee engagement.**

**1. *Inspire trust and confidence in senior leadership.***

The integrity of an organization is always determined by senior leadership. In recent years, evidence has shown a strong connection between treating employees right and business profitability. A survey of more than 800 MBA's from 11 North American and European schools found a substantial number were willing to forgo some financial benefits to work for an organization with a better reputation for corporate social responsibility and ethics. In organizations where senior leadership is trusted, people view their workplaces as worthy enterprises, and are proud to be part of them. Mission statements are adhered to with integrity, and there is an absence of cynicism.

Employees simply cannot be lead by managers they don't trust. In order to gain employees' trust, you need to be open, fair, honest and consistent. It is crucial to keep employees' confidences and admit your own mistakes. Trust is built gradually through reliability and authenticity, but can be irrevocably damaged in a moment of indiscretion.

If your employees know they can trust you, they will 'move mountains' to get the job done. Treat your employees fairly and respectfully, and resolve to help employees during times of need. Remember that your employees are not machines, but rather human beings with a wide range of emotions. So, rather than just tolerating the humanity of employees, management would do well to accept and embrace it. If your employee is in crisis, take the time needed to help in any way possible. Not only is this the right thing to do, but it will engender long-term loyalty to your organization.

**2. *Help employees understand the big picture.***

Employees need to understand how their jobs fit into the big picture and what they can do to contribute to the success of the organization. When employees don't have enough information to understand why certain things are happening a certain way, they tend to fill in the gaps themselves- usually with the wrong information.

Communicate the values and vision of the organization, and make sure employees know what they're there to do. Let your employees know what matters most to you and the organization, and what you're trying to accomplish. Make a decision to be question-friendly. Questions from employees should be seen as signals of interest, rather than interruptions to your work. If an employee has stopped asking questions, the process of disengagement has begun.

**3. *Provide onboarding for new employees.***

Unfortunately, many organizations continue to use the 'sink or swim' method of employee orientation. Research has shown that an employee's first day on the job is a key factor in determining their future level of engagement. The way to get people to be part of an organization is by building relationships, which is essential in helping a new employee to fit in. Both retention rates and productivity increase when new hires are successfully assimilated into the organizational culture. Onboarding can be especially effective when used with executives coming into complex roles. Assigning mentors or coaches to new hires is also an excellent way to create a smooth transition and decrease the time spent 'coming up to speed.'

#### **4. *Coaching.***

**Engaged employees typically have good relationships with their managers, with clear communication between them. Managers need to demonstrate that they really care about their employees and about what is important to them. Good coaches provide regular feedback, and spend time guiding their employees. They help employees understand their contributions and the value they give to the organization. The manager who takes the time to discuss how an employee's strengths can be effectively used to further the goals of the organization makes connections that lead to employee engagement.**

**The first signs of disengagement will be apparent to a manager who is having regular and interactive coaching sessions with employees. It is important to let go of any negative feelings you may have about employees. Change your perspective by thinking about the unique contribution each employee makes to the organization. Nigel Nicholson says that a manager needs to look at the employee not as a problem to be solved, but as a person to be understood.**

**Relying solely on the 6-month or 1 year performance review is simply not good enough. Coach your employees on a regular basis. You can think of coaching as making an investment in your employees' performance. If you are not regularly coaching your employees, you are not leading them. Good coaching improves retention because the process is interactive. As a skilled coach, you will be helping your employees define and achieve their professional goals, which improves their chances of remaining with the organization. Regular coaching also helps to avoid 'ambushing' a weak-performing employee at the time of their performance review.**

**One study found that 50% of work satisfaction is determined by the relationship an employee has with his or her immediate boss. Managers who provide employees with support and needed information will help them to get their jobs done within the context of a personal relationship.**

**Make sure to encourage cooperation between coworkers and departments and actively discourage competitiveness within the organization. Ask employees for feedback about how you are doing. Although this can feel threatening, it is really the only way for you to grow in your own management skills. Ask specific questions, such as “what could I be doing to make your job easier?”**

#### **5. *Have career conversations.***

**According to business editor, Paul Michelman, many workers prefer to stay with their current employer if their manager presents them with opportunities to grow, develop their skills and position themselves to move forward in their careers. Research tells us that inability to achieve career goals is the most common reason people give for leaving their jobs. An annual career conversation can help to focus and inspire employees.**

**Make an investment in your employees by getting to know them, and what their vocational goals are. Challenge and develop your employees. Take time to help employees polish their existing abilities and acquire new skills. A career conversation can also help a manager to spot an employee whose job is a poor fit. The individual strengths and specific talents of each employee should be used as effectively and creatively as possible. Don't ignore the ambitions of good employees; bored employees will eventually move on to a more challenging job.**

**6. *Share decision-making.***

Employees should be encouraged to contribute to decision-making in their departments and throughout the organization. Solicit ideas and input from everyone. Don't tell employees what to do – listen to what they want to do. If you spend more time listening and less time talking, your employees will tell you what they need. But listening is only half of the equation – good employee ideas need to be implemented by management. This will result in employees feeling more valued, and will boost morale. Empowering employees through shared decision-making can result in increased job satisfaction and commitment, as well as lower rates of turnover and a sense of ownership.

**7. *Maintain proactive focus on retention.***

By the time an employee gets to the exit interview, it's too late to ask questions about what you could do to make them stay! It is the responsibility of managers and supervisors to make sure their employees are satisfied. Although research tells us that 75 percent of executives report employee retention as one of their top three business priorities, only 15 percent actually had any plan in place to reduce turnover. When employees see their talents being put to good use in an organization, they feel appreciated, and tend to stay in their jobs longer.

Increase the emotional intelligence of your employees by providing training in problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. Improved communication and positive interpersonal relationships reduce stress, and make for a more pleasant workplace.

Make sure your organization isn't easy to leave. Good relationships are a major reason that people stay with organizations. Keep your employees in the information loop, and be family friendly.

Employees' families should be their first priority and they need time to live their lives. If you notice an employee is unduly stressed, ask "what would make your life easier?" Be flexible and work together with employees to find creative ways to provide needed work/life integration. If you're not working to keep your best employees, you'll be working to replace them!

#### ***8. Make good hiring decisions.***

Poor hiring decisions are costly to organizations. Saratoga Institute estimates that the average cost of losing an employee is one times their annual salary. Avoid desperation hiring - today's hiring mistake is tomorrow's headache. Hire passionate people. If employees are in jobs that match their skills and interests, they receive more pleasure and satisfaction from what they do. A happy and satisfied employee is an engaged employee.

Make sure that the executives you hire are capable of performing executive/managerial tasks. Screening prospective employees for personality traits consistent with the jobs they'll be asked to do is a good investment, and will increase retention rates. Avoid promoting technically proficient employees to managerial positions without first determining if they interact well with other people. When it comes to hiring or promoting managers, good interpersonal skills and adaptability are more important than experience.

Never underestimate the importance of hiring employees who are a 'good fit' in your organizational culture. When considering a job candidate, ask yourself these three questions: 1) Can they do the job? 2) Will they do the job? 3) Will they fit in? Consider how you would describe the 'rules of survival' to a friend who is newly hired by your company. The answer to that question will likely provide clues to identifying your company's culture. The culture of an organization is defined as the core values and shared meaning of the majority of its employees. Often, the specific culture of an organization is overlooked when someone is looking to change jobs. But, the importance of a good cultural fit becomes painfully obvious to the new hire after discovering she doesn't fit into the culture of the organization.

#### ***9. Support employees to succeed.***

For employees to give that all-important discretionary effort, they need to embrace the organization's mission and have pride in their work achievements. They also need sufficient resources and support to achieve a sense of accomplishment from their jobs. Make sure employees have what they need to be as productive as possible. Ask them directly, "do you have everything you need to be effective in your position?"

It won't matter how motivated your employees are if support resources aren't available to them. The organization needs to look for ways to make it easier for employees to do their jobs and reach their goals. Find out what your employees want and need, and respond to requests quickly. Don't wait to be nagged into action. Make employees feel important enough to be given what they need to do their jobs well.

**10. Give rewards for high performance.**

**According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, author and management consultant: “Compensation is a right; recognition is a gift.” Employees want and need regular recognition and rewards. Be generous with your praise and make sure the rewards you provide are meaningful to your employees. If you don’t know how your employees would like to be rewarded, ask. Employees need to feel valued and consistently recognized for their achievements. They should be seen as complete people with personal lives and distinct personalities, who need to feel a sense of their own worth and competence.**

**Employees may begin to disengage if:**

- 1. They don’t feel heard or understood by their managers**
- 2. They are taken for granted; not shown simple appreciation**
- 3. Managers focus too much on numbers, not enough on people, resulting in poor work/life integration**
- 4. They feel their ideas aren’t appreciated**
- 5. They receive an unexpectedly low performance evaluation**
- 6. They feel like they *don’t* get appreciation they deserve, while others do**
- 7. They feel invisible – like no one even knows or cares that they exist**

**8. They receive recognition that is too late in coming – it doesn't mean anything if they have to ask for it!**

**9. They don't feel competent or trusted by their managers**

**10. They don't feel like they are a part of the organization**

**Sources:** "Love 'Em or Lose 'Em- Getting Good People to Stay by Beverly Kay and Sharon Jordan Evans; The Power of Employee Engagement, Leadership Advantage; Employee Engagement, GALLUP; 'Marketing Your Talents Workshop,' Right Management Associates; Increasing Employee Retention Through Employee Engagement (<http://ezinearticles.com>); How to Increase Employee Commitment and Engagement, Andrew Cox; Increasing Employee Engagement, Retention. Naukrihub.Com

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