



Keeping Employees Engaged and Energized Through Good Times and Bad

Developing an engaged workforce can make the difference between competitive success and failure. The key is maintaining employee commitment through all business conditions.

People can do their jobs or enjoy their work. They can remain remote or be psychologically committed to performance. They can be engaged in organizational goals or work 9-to-5, doing as little as possible.

Companies that want to be operating at full steam in the competitive marketplace need each employee to be engaged, energized and motivated. That is the person who is most productive, has a sense of purpose for being at work, and feels a connection to the business.

Workforce engagement is a business imperative because the degree of engagement and enthusiasm is directly related to positive performance outcomes. Developing this kind of high-energy drive in the organizational workforce demands a supportive work environment and a host of strategies that address the needs of a changing workforce.

First Things First ... Embrace a Talent Management Mindset

Developing an engaged workforce is challenging, given the numerous cutbacks and slow economic recovery defining the business environment.

In October 2013, a worldwide Gallup poll of 142 countries reported a dismal 13 percent of employees feel committed to their jobs and are motivated to be as productive as possible. Approximately 24 percent were actively disengaged and likely sharing their negativity with coworkers and customers. This means approximately 63 percent of the workforce is showing up each day feeling lackluster about work and doing the minimum required.

Employee engagement is a tangible, measurable quality. When employees do not feel a commitment to their jobs and are not fully involved in their work, they are not as productive as possible.

Employees spend a significant portion of their lives at work, so engagement can be thought of as a quality of life issue as much as an issue impacting the bottom line. With a quality of life perspective, employers can begin to develop strategies that identify the work-life factors that influence the engagement level.

Each business should be asking itself important questions concerning engagement levels. Is the organizational culture supportive? Are employees participating in decision-making and contributing



to solutions to business problems? Do employees believe they have career training, development and advancement opportunities? Has leadership given employees a reason to have a sense of purpose? Do employees seek out collaborative opportunities and offer innovative ideas? Do business policies help employees balance work with personal goals and issues like family time, caregiving and retirement?

Feeling Positive This is a Great Place to Work

Traditionally, Western businesses have focused more on business health than worker engagement, not understanding the two are integrated.

A 2006 Towers Perrin-ISR (now Towers Watson) study reported that net income in companies with very engaged employees increased by 13 percent over one year. One of the reasons the number of people feeling disengaged is currently so high is related to the severe cost-cutting and downsizing that has defined the economic crisis. Motivating people while cost-cutting may seem like opposing goals, but raising engagement levels even in this difficult situation is possible when employees are asked to make a positive commitment to helping the business meet challenges.

Developing a supportive and positive organizational culture is the ultimate goal because engagement becomes a self-perpetuating process. The organization develops a positive theme for the workforce, like making a commitment to provide superior customer service and incentivizing staff success with a reward-recognition system. Senior leadership needs to clearly articulate the company mission, overall goals and objectives and begin developing a workforce filled with positive ambassadors.

Strategies for building a supportive culture include developing a strong onboarding program, helping employees develop career plans that blend with organizational objectives, giving the workforce a variety of online and offline ways to share ideas and comments with leadership, and regularly sharing and praising successfully implemented employee solutions.

Leadership should also convey a sense of purpose that is derived from more than making a profit. The 21st century workforce will help a company succeed if there are shared values like delivering highest quality products and services, maintaining work-life balance, and giving people opportunities to use their full capabilities. To permeate the organization with a positive culture, line managers can empower people to make decisions on their own and then share positive results with others.

Everyone is Equally Appreciated

Mentoring, leadership development programs, utilizing public praise to recognize and reinforce engaged behavior, allowing people to participate in community projects, and creating reward systems for outstanding work and participation are popular engagement strategies. One thing to avoid is inadvertently creating a workforce of "haves and have-nots" by excluding a large group of



people from the engagement process. IBM includes all employees in the performance-based bonus program for this very reason.

At the same time, there should be strategies specifically designed to engage the various generations now present in the workforce. Millennials dislike traditional organizational structures so need the ability to communicate and collaborate across functions. Generations X and Y expect to use social media for most activities, including sharing ideas and communicating with everyone from co-workers to the C-suite. Gamification is an excellent tool increasingly used by corporations to engage younger workforce members because employees can prove learning progress to leadership across the organization.

Positive Cycle

Naturally, maintaining a positive culture means conflict must be managed and not allowed to fester. Dealing with conflict at its lowest level and achieving early resolution is important. This is one way to emphasize the importance of each individual which is a key engagement strategy.

Management consultants are the first to point out that most grievances and legal claims that end up in court mostly reflect employee unhappiness and not necessarily a desire to prove an employer acted unlawfully. Disengaged employees who are unhappy are more likely to bring a grievance, spread negativity and under-perform. It becomes a vicious cycle in which underperforming employees trigger disciplinary actions which leads to the need for resolution.

Whatever strategies are used to promote workforce self-actualization should be consistent and focused on continuous improvement. The effort cannot be random if employees are to value being part of the organization. Strategies need adjusting as business conditions change, and engagement should be regularly measured through tools like surveys and employee assessments.

If a business pays attention to engagement, the business is paying attention to success.