

Keeping Engagement Alive During Tough Times

By Dave Laclede

This paper explores how to keep employee engagement alive, even during economic downturns. The ideal engaged employee has a proven track record of making meaningful contributions, speaks positively about the organization to friends, coworkers, clients and potential employees, and puts forth the extra effort to be successful over the long term.

OVERVIEW

In the simplest terms, *employee engagement is evidenced by passion for the work and advocacy for the organization*. Recent analysis by Hewitt Associates, a global human resources consulting firm, indicates that employee engagement continues to be a serious concern. Almost 50% of the organizations surveyed saw a significant drop in engagement levels during the first half of 2010. Employees across many industries are still feeling the stress of heavy workloads, economic uncertainty, career stagnation and flat or declining compensation.

Since employee engagement is proven to have a measurable impact on profitability (due to enhanced productivity, innovation and the quality of goods and services delivered) the imperative for managers becomes development of engagement strategies and practical implementation.

If you haven't done so already, now is the time for you and your team members to take the initiative – define what your engagement objectives are, how they will be accomplished and get the necessary buy-in. Understand that engagement efforts don't fall only to managers; the process needs to be a two-way street. Employees have high expectations of management, and management should have the same high expectations of their employees.

EMPLOYEE EXPECTATIONS OF MANAGEMENT

Effective Leadership

Management has charted a compelling course for the organization. The mission is well understood and embraced by employees, because they are empowered to turn the vision into reality.

Open Communications

News is constantly shared, both the good and the bad – no secrets, no hidden agendas, with office politics kept to a minimum.

Risk-Supportive Culture

Success comes through the embrace of new ideas, innovation and the acceptance of manageable risk. All points of view are solicited to get the best thinking and create effective solutions.

Recognition Environment

Outstanding work is publicly recognized on a consistent basis. Celebration of accomplishments, for both individuals and teams, becomes an integral part of a performance-oriented culture. By the way, handwritten "Thank You" notes are one of most powerful and cost-effective reinforcement tools available.

Constructive Performance Feedback

Clearly established job roles, responsibilities and expectations are communicated. Employees at every level receive regular input and appropriate coaching.

INSIDE THIS WHITE PAPER

- Engagement is a two-way street between employee and management
- Employees expect from management: effective leadership; open communications; a risk-supportive culture; an environment of recognition; and constructive feedback
- Management expects from employees: dependable performance; open communications; solutions recommendations; ability to make a difference; and constructive feedback
- There are tactical ways to create a performance-driven culture
- Benefits accrue when managers and employees take constructive action to improve engagement

MANAGEMENT EXPECTATIONS OF EMPLOYEES

Dependable Performance

Goods and services are delivered on time and within budget. Work effectively alone or as part of a team. Keep management informed of progress and potential obstacles to assignment completion.

Open Communications

News is constantly shared, both the good and the bad. Positive information is celebrated and negative information is handled honestly, quickly and effectively.

Solutions Recommendations

When surfacing a problem or an opportunity, be prepared to make positive recommendations to address it. In terms of potential solutions, "Think it through and provide at least two."

Make a Difference

If professional talents and skills are not being used to their fullest potential, employees are expected to discuss the situation with their manager. "Bad Career Fit" often lies at the heart of disengagement and can lead to needless turnover.

Constructive Performance Feedback

Employees are encouraged to offer advice and counsel to improve manager performance so that the entire team can benefit.

Keeping engagement alive during tough times can be viewed either as a burden or an interesting challenge. Note that "Waiting around for things to get better" can have serious consequences:

- Professional burn-out due to stress and/or boredom, resulting in low productivity
- Work conducted at only marginally acceptable performance levels
- Knowledge and expertise taken to another workplace, or worse, to a competitor
- Higher than normal turnover and hiring/training expenses
- Vicious cycle of reduced revenue and profit, as product and service quality is negatively impacted and customer satisfaction levels decline

The costs involved in creating a performance-driven culture can be relatively small. Soft dollar costs include advance planning, collaboration, proper follow-up and positive behavioral adjustments on everyone's part. Some of the tactical elements that follow require hard dollar investments.

TACTICAL ELEMENTS

- Survey employees to determine current engagement levels and identify areas for improvement
- Establish recognition criteria based on the organization's core mission and values
- Align recognition, incentive, career development and compensation to organizational objectives
- Provide a web-based process for managers and associates to recognize and reward each other for superior performance
- Measure employee engagement levels every six months and communicate the results

When managers and employees take constructive action to improve engagement, benefits accrue to the entire organization, the customer base and the larger community.

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