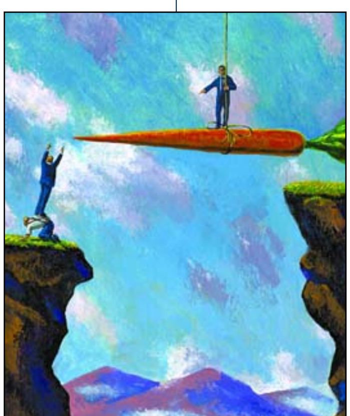
Are You Engaged?

Use seven ways to engage people.

by Leigh Branham

IF WE DEFINE LEADERSHIP in terms of employee engagement, most leaders are failing the test. Only 25 percent of workers are fully engaged (giving their best effort). Over half (55 percent) are not engaged, and 15 percent are actively disengaged (working against team interests). The estimated cost of such disengagement ranges between $200 and $400 billion per year.

U.S. employers spend $759 billion a year on compensation for which they receive no benefit because workers waste an average of 1.5 hours a day.



The best leaders define their success in terms of the degree of commitment, effort, and performance (engagement) they inspire among their workers. Most businesses succeed or fail based on the quality of customer-employee interfaces.

For 10 years, I have researched why employees engage and stay or disengage and leave. My search led me to the Saratoga Institute and its database of 19,700 post-exit surveys.

Seven Root Causes

By analyzing this data, I uncovered seven root causes—factors that cause employees to disengage and leave:

1. They found the job or workplace to be different than what they had expected when hired.
2. They were not well matched or challenged in the jobs for which they had been hired, or to which had been assigned or promoted.
3. They received too little coaching and feedback from their supervisor.
4. They perceived few prospects for professional growth and advancement.
5. They felt undervalued or under-recognized, either through lack of informal acknowledgement of their contributions, feeling underpaid, not feeling "in the loop," not having their input sought, not having the right tools.
6. Feeling stressed or burned-out due to overwork or life-work imbalance.
7. Loss of trust and confidence in senior leaders.

These seven causes are not the reasons most employees give in exit interviews. Departing employees typically respond with the answers their leaders prefer to hear—better pay or opportunity. Through such denial, managers never learn what they need to avoid or correct the real causes of disengagement and turnover.

Most managers believe employees leave mainly because of "pull factors"—pay and opportunity. However, Saratoga's research concludes that 80 percent are motivated to leave because of these seven "push factors."

Managers and leaders may not want to acknowledge the real reasons employees leave—since all seven are factors they can influence directly.

The good news is first that some turnover is desirable. Second, between the time employees become disengaged and the point when they leave, there is time and opportunity to re-engage them. Third, if we know why employees disengage and leave, then we also know why they stay and engage. Fourth, since only about 12 percent of employees leave mainly because of their pay, the things we need to do to re-engage most employees are relatively inexpensive, requiring mostly the time and attention of direct managers, the support of HR, and the commitment of senior leaders.

Seven Engagement Practices

Use these seven engagement practices to engage or re-engage your people:

1. Give realistic job previews to ensure the expectations of new hires match on-the-job reality. This involves giving a candid description of difficult challenges or conditions, touring the plant, allowing candidates to discuss job challenges with current employees, or portraying actual work situations.

2. Take more time in hiring to avoid person-job mismatches. Analyze the critical success factors required for all jobs, screen candidates via personality assessments, ask behavior-based questions, use multiple interviewers, and check references. Don't over-prescribe how jobs are to be done, but communicate clearly what result is expected.

3. Provide managers with training in performance management and coaching. This should include the art of giving performance feedback and dealing with situations of potential conflict. Leaders of engaged workforces teach an adult-to-adult partnership model that allows more input from the employee in performance goal-setting, and features more frequent discussions.

4. Provide self-assessment workshops and train managers how to be career coaches. Require all employees to complete an annual Individual Development Plan and update it with managers after six months. Some CEOs state that managers do not "own" the talent and that "talent-hoarding" won't be tolerated. Employees will not be prevented from moving laterally when they are ready.

5. Create a culture that acknowledges all improvements and contributions. Assure that people receive the message that they are valued. Request employee input about matters that impact them, keep them informed, provide the right resources at the right time, and discipline or fire managers who abuse and disrespect people. Hire great people and pay above-market wages.

6. Maintain reasonable workloads. Help people to have a decent life outside work. Survey your people and find out what they need. Companies with many female workers with children might start flex-time and subsidized child care or trade some pay for increased vacation time.

7. Gain and maintain the trust and confidence of employees. Convey a clear and compelling vision that inspires confidence and gives people hope that they can grow as the organization grows. Convince workers that you care as much about them as you care about shareholders and customers. Back up your words with actions and maintain high standards of ethics and integrity.

The "employers-of-choice" will always be a minority. Do you have the caring and commitment to do what it takes? **LE**

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