

Leaders: Engaged Staff Means Engaged Stakeholders



“If you change the way you look at something, the thing you look at will change,” says psychologist and author Wayne Dyer. Perhaps this holds true for leaders of nonprofit organizations who struggle with retaining competent staff and building a loyal base of engaged constituents and stakeholders. Could it be that these two challenges are two sides of the same coin? Should leaders look at these things in a new way that finds them inseparable?

The concept of employee engagement is a phenomenon that affects HR strategies and can lead to the creation of a loyal constituent base needed to sustain the organization’s mission. It’s prudent now more than ever for leaders to consider this critical connection.

ITS IMPORTANCE

An engaged employee passionately puts their physical, emotional and cognitive talents into achieving the specific goals for their job and for the organization as a whole. They are involved and committed to their roles and the work that needs to be done. Engagement is about positive emotions and right actions that create high

performance and goes beyond employee satisfaction.

It is estimated that 75% of employersⁱ measure employee engagement at some stage. Worldwide, a survey of nearly 90,000 individuals in 18 countries conducted by Towers Perrinⁱⁱ reveals that only about 21% of workers are engaged, that is, willing and able to provide discretionary effort to their job, while greater than a third are either disenchanted or overtly disengaged. The others are merely present at their job, never going the ‘extra mile’ by investing their full talents into achieving the goals of the organization.

The research behind employee engagement explains this keen interest. The Gallup Organization’s ground-breaking work in 1999 shed light on twelve key ingredients of engagementⁱⁱⁱ, and linked them to such indicators as high levels of productivity, performance, customer service, cost control and profitability, loyalty, safety and teamwork. While the benefits of an engaged workforce are significant, so too are the risks of not having one resulting in greater organizational problems such as absenteeism, turnover and increased costs due to mistakes and customer problems.

By 2006, Gallup’s efforts had a data base of some ten million interviews to support their assertions about the nature of employee engagement^{iv}. Clearly, the critical nature of things like communication and clear expectations, proper tools to do the job right, relationships with one’s immediate managers and recognition of strengths resonated with leaders.

While valuable in and of itself, understanding more about employee engagement presents executives and managers with an attractive, new way to think about impacting the larger mission of the nonprofit sector, particularly with the requirement of keeping stakeholders active and involved.

CONSTITUENT ENGAGEMENT

Even in the worst of times, nonprofits succeed when they assemble a broad array of people with a significant interest in their success. Whether it’s the recipient of the services, the funders who invest resources, the regulators who want to assure that the organization complies with established laws or the community who benefits from the nonprofit’s success—all will encounter the organization’s employees sooner or later. Each interaction is a ‘moment of

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truth' which shapes that stakeholder's impressions, conclusions and capacity to accept the value proposition the organization stands for.

LEARN ABOUT AND WORK TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT, STARTING WITH YOUR OWN.

Information and resources about engagement abound on the internet and in bookstores. Managers do well to school themselves in these ideas and reflect upon their own levels of engagement. A natural first step is to use a measurement tool to assess the level of engagement in specific teams, departments or the entire organization. While executives find themselves in a powerful position to influence engagement, once they embark on this effort they must be cautious to be diligent and persistent, since insincere or half-hearted initiatives will easily backfire.

ASSESS, SUPPORT AND CULTIVATE STRENGTHS.

Managers who make hiring and supervisory decisions can create a culture that supports and capitalizes on people's strengths. Matching a job's duties with individuals who naturally possesses the talents to fulfill them is essential to

engagement and success. When this natural fit exists, training, mentoring, coaching and correction are far easier endeavors.

Unfortunately, assessing one's strengths is not always easy to do, and applicants and incumbents are often demure when trying to inventory their skills. It may also take a manager some effort to recognize exceptional skills in an employee, as they are more apt to spot deficiencies than aspects of excellence.

PUSH THE POSITIVES.

Engaged employees are more likely to see the glass half full. If they are encouraged by leaders who soberly see positive things all around them, they are more likely to become a part of that energizing and hopeful climate. In these days of shrinking funding and high stress work, it's often the bountiful bad news that supersedes any discussion about the good things taking place. Managers must consciously accentuate accomplishments and underscore the bright spots of progress because they too are likely to be numerous if they are equally considered. People attuned to positives like this find more and do more.

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION: LISTEN MORE, TALK MORE.

Research evidence^v suggests a strong link between employer/employee communication and greater employee engagement. It is no accident that Gallup found more longevity, productivity and customer service in place where employees endorsed the statement, "at work, my opinions seem to count." Managers gain important knowledge when they listen to what their employees are observing and concluding. When leaders are free with information for their staff, workers have more input that guides them to proper actions.

NO TIME TO SPARE

Blessing White Research^{vi} finds that the future years ahead could see unprecedented turnover and be a challenge for executives trying to retain talent. Nonprofit organizations need engaged employees — and the cultures that produce and sustain them — more than ever if their employees are going to help accomplish their agency's mission.

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ⁱ Esty, K & Gewirtz, M (2008) *Creating a culture of Employee Engagement*, NEHRA – The Voice of HR, www.boston.com/jobs/nehra/062308.shtml retrieved November 2010

ⁱⁱ Towers Perrin, "Closing the Engagement Gap: A Road Map for Driving Superior Business Performance," (2008) retrieved November 2010 www.towerswatson.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Buckingham, M and Coffman, C, "First, Break all the Rules" (1999), the Gallup Organization, Simon and Schuster

^{iv} Wagner R and Harter, J "The 12 Elements of Great Managing" (2006), Gallup Organization, Gallup Press

^v Attridge, M, *Employee Work Engagement: Best Practices for Employers*, Research Works, American Psychiatric Foundation, June 2009

^{vi} BlessingWhite Research, "Employee Engagement Report 2011", BlessingWhite Inc, Princeton, NJ, retrieved Dec 2010 from www.blessingwhite.com/research

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