



Leadership Engagement As Job One

By David A. O'Brien, WorkChoice Solutions

The demands of today's *more with less* workplace climate have produced an unprecedented amount of stress and frustration in most people's lives. Not surprisingly, these dynamics are magnified substantially in the lives of countless leaders who are expected to foster a culture of *work harder, smarter and faster*. At the very core of this not so new but accelerating workplace reality is the issue of employee engagement. While much has been written and continues to be written about this subject, the often overlooked reality is that employee engagement really starts with leadership engagement.

Countless engagement surveys are conducted every year and in most cases, the focus is on employee gaps in productivity and overall performance. Of course there is value in most of these surveys but without a deeper understanding of the leader's role, the potential for peak performance among the broader team is at best, marginal.

As a beginning point, leaders must assess their own level of engagement based on such critical leadership characteristics as openness, integrity, resilience, trust, respect and overall role model behavior. Absent a high level of commitment to these important factors, leaders at any level will be fighting an uphill battle to inspire and motivate a higher level of employee engagement.

Taking the time to understand the complexities of employee motivation is another worthwhile endeavor for today's leader. While writing my first book, I conducted a fairly rigorous research effort that explored how employee motivation had evolved over the previous 25 years. There were certainly some interesting findings in my research but chief among them was the influence that *feeling valued* had on employee motivation and engagement. To be sure, there are a multitude of factors that influence employee motivation but today's leader is well served by choosing

to explore this and its critical link to high performance.

Creating clarity through clear and consistent communication especially as it relates to performance expectations also goes a long way in building employee engagement. While there are certainly core characteristics that describe what employee engagement means in general terms, there are in fact elements that are unique to each organization and/or team. Soliciting input from employees regarding team

specific measures helps to not only build a common language but also creates purpose and more than likely, ownership.

Another important element of the clear and consistent communication equation is the leader's ability to link each person's role and contribution to the key goals of the department and organization. The more each employee understands how their efforts impact the greater good of the group, the more likely they are to find meaning in their work.

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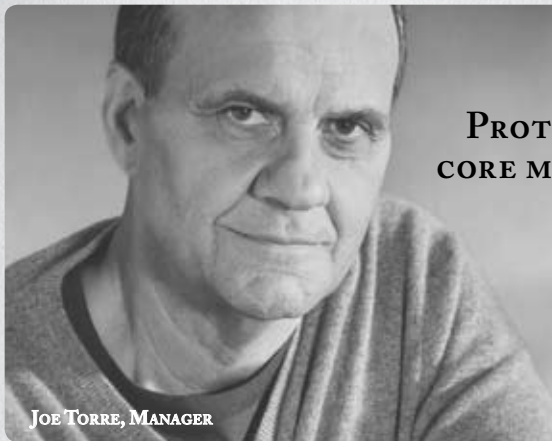
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The issue of clarity goes well beyond building a framework of understanding as it relates to performance expectations. Timely and specific feedback also serves to guide each employee toward a higher level of engagement and personal success. Acknowledging the fact that no employee knowingly chooses to fail can and often does set the tone for marked improvements in engagement and job ownership.

Employee engagement is clearly the engine that drives high performance. While conventional thinking tends to focus on the employee as the starting point, leaders within all functions must understand and embrace their role in this equation based in large part on the enormous range and scope of their influence. Absent a high level of leadership engagement, it's mere folly to expect high performance from individuals or teams.

Seven more things that you can do now:

1. Define the top five leadership characteristics that best describe your leadership formula and assess the impact that they have on employee engagement.

2. Initiate a discussion with your team about their view of engagement and what they think are the key actions and behaviors that support success for the group and organization.
3. Seek input and guidance from your Human Resource partners to assess your leadership gaps and to develop meaningful solutions for increasing employee engagement in your department.
4. Assess the frequency and impact of your leadership communications to identify areas of improvement. Think, *what can I do more of and what should I do less of.*
5. Incorporate an "employee motivation discussion" in your next staff meeting and encourage your team to identify the group's top 3 shared motivation drivers.
6. Invest the time to identify linkage between each person's role and the key objectives of your department. Communicate this clearly and often.
7. Look for ways to reinforce positive behavior while also doing your part to make each member of your team feel valued.

About David A. O'Brien:

David is President of CT based WorkChoice Solutions, a nationally recognized provider of leadership and team effectiveness training and consulting services. He works with a wide range of clients in both the non-profit and corporate sectors to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* was released in July 2008 and is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. His 2nd book, *Tapping Your Leadership Wisdom* is expected in bookstores next year. To learn more, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at www.workchoicesolutions.com

David is also presenting a workshop through CT Nonprofits' Center for Professional Development. "Creating High Impact Meetings: Your Guide to Getting the Most Out of Business Meetings" will be held on Monday, April 19th from 9:00 to 11:30 a.m. at CT Nonprofits' Hartford office. This workshop will explore the key aspects of a productive meeting and build on your meeting management skills while expanding your capacity as a leader to impact key organizational outcomes. A comprehensive planning and delegating guide is included. For more details and to register, visit www.ctnonprofits.org/education/offerings.