

Time to get engaged in the battle against employee disengagement

By Rosie Steeves

Everywhere I go these days, I hear stories of organizations working hard on engagement, and central to their efforts is the question of what they can do to engage their employees.

But this is the wrong question. I don't think they should be asking what they need to do to engage employees. Rather, they should ask how they could stop disengaging employees.

Consider this. On the day a new employee starts work, that employee is engaged. He or she typically wants to do a good job, is keen, anxious to learn and excited about the new opportunity. Then slowly, but surely, we go about the process of disengaging them.

What is it that happens in organizations that causes employees to disengage? I believe it is caused by a series of organizational missteps, most notably organizational neglect, organizational disdain and organizational busyness.

In many organizations the root cause of disengaged employees can be traced back to a systemic epidemic of organizational neglect. This doesn't occur on Day 1 of the job when we show genuine interest in our new employees, ensure they have what they need to do the job, worry less about output and more about orientation. Oftentimes new employees meet those they consider to be senior managers, who perform as they should and show genuine interest in them.

Employees then embark on doing their work. Initially, engagement levels likely stay high as they learn the job. They're intensely focused on the job at hand and are not looking for a sense of higher purpose or an enhanced relationship with senior management.

However, at some point the learning curve levels off and, no longer faced with the challenge of the job, new employees start to look for something else. They wonder if anyone cares or notices them. Indeed, the degree of attention they received on their first day of work is never repeated. And unless they're performing badly, they likely drop off the radar for many managers. The lack of interest in their reality caused by neglect by senior managers can send a previously engaged employee down the spiral of disengagement.

Raised in the era of the mechanistic organization, all too many of today's senior managers fail to appreciate the true value of employees. Quietly harbouring outdated mental models, in which employees are viewed as interchangeable parts of a machine, those at the top do not always value employees' input – despite the rhetoric they may espouse. And every time an employee is not asked for input or every time he or she offers input and it's dismissed as irrelevant, his or her degree of engagement spirals down.

In today's world everyone is busy, but organizational busyness is simply not an excuse to permit the disengagement of employees. While it's challenging, the links between the bottom line and employee engagement must surely make it a priority. It takes a lot less time to prevent engaged employees from becoming disengaged than trying to re-engage a disengaged employee.

Senior managers who genuinely want to prevent the spiral of disengagement can do so – if they care enough. The solutions are simple.

- Pay attention to your employees. While you likely can't put as much effort into paying attention to your employees as you did on Day 1, don't neglect them on Day 2. A simple acknowledgement can go an awful long way.
- Get into their world and their reality. Meet employees on their turf. There is much to be said for this notion of walking around – providing it's done with genuine interest. Employees almost certainly have a different reality from those several hierarchical levels removed from them. Simply demonstrating to employees that you're interested in their world can do wonders.
- There comes a point in all employees' careers when they begin to question how their work fits into the bigger picture. This yearning for a connection to the larger system is not restricted simply to those at the upper end of the hierarchical pyramid. Explaining the bigger picture and their part in it will help mitigate the disengagement factor.

There is no mystery to engagement. It's simply a matter of not disengaging. So ask yourself: what have you done (or not done) today to prevent your employees from becoming disengaged? •

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