EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Five best practices for protecting and investing in your most prized corporate asset: Your employees!

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From Wikipedia: "Employee engagement is a measurable degree of an employee's positive or negative emotional attachment to their job, colleagues and organization that profoundly influences their willingness to learn and perform at work."

When I read that definition, one word stands out to me: PROFOUND. But what does it really mean? Something profound is intense and deeply felt. So if I profoundly do anything, I am basically willing it to happen. In a corporate environment, this is much more difficult to do, and any organization that surrounds its employees with the right level of support, empowerment and opportunity will have a substantial edge.

So why are so many organizations struggling to keep their employees engaged? A recent Gallup poll indicated that 70% of employees are actively or passively disengaged. 70%! That is more than two-thirds of our workforce. This is a corporate crisis and one that is costing companies millions of dollars.

It is clear that there is a direct correlation between engagement and corporate output, and companies that make this their top priority will absolutely leapfrog the competition. Of course, deciding to make engagement your No. 1 priority is the easy part; knowing what to do is much harder.

What Does Success Look Like?

Let's look at one of America's best companies to see success in action: Southwest Airlines.

The following is captured straight from Southwest's mission statement:

"We are committed to provide our Employees a stable work environment with equal opportunity for learning and personal growth. Creativity and innovation are encouraged for improving the effectiveness of Southwest Airlines. Above all, Employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest Customer."

Three things stand out in this statement:

1. The fact that it is part of Southwest Airlines' mission. A company's mission statement is a few words and/or sentences that tell us what they are about and what they are trying to achieve. Southwest Airlines makes it profoundly clear who their most important asset is—their employees!

2. The connection between employee and customer. Southwest is telling their employees that they will be treated no differently than their customers. This lets employees know that they are EVERY bit as important as the people they take care of every day.

3. Check out the keywords used, such as learning, growth and creativity. If you trust your employees and invest in them so that they can do the very best they are capable of, you enable them to grow and they will be engaged.

To prove this point even further, I spent quite a bit of time researching Southwest Airlines, mostly because of the great reputation they have created as an employer. Now keep in mind that, living in Toronto, I do not even have the option to fly Southwest, so I had to be creative.

During my research, I decided to call Southwest Airlines and find out what one of their own employees had to say about the company. Now this is a sample size of one, but something was instantly telling when I asked this employee what she liked most about working at Southwest. She was sincere! I could hear the pride in her voice when she told me, "I am treated exactly how I treat my customers." Now that's poetic.

Southwest Airlines ranked in the top 10 of a recent MSN survey ("2012 Customer Service Hall of Fame") for companies providing the BEST customer service. This isn't surprising in light of how employees are made to feel and the degree of participation, training and development they receive—on top of competitive pay and benefits. And it links directly to the distinguished flying experience for which Southwest Airlines is known.

Five Best Practices for Increasing Employee Engagement

Becoming a top employer for engagement is a long, arduous and lifelong process. It is undoubtedly a corporation's most difficult challenge to overcome and doing so is hard. Few succeed at it like Southwest, but with the right tools and, most importantly, committed leaders, it is possible.

The following are five effective, proven ways to lift employee engagement:

UNDERSTAND WHY EMPLOYEES ARE DISENGAGED

Beyond an anonymous survey, of which there are many great choices (even SurveyMonkey will do the job), see if you can engage your staff in some candid discussions. Take the gloves off and ask some tough questions—just make sure that you are prepared for what you may hear. Be careful not to pass judgment. If you start defending yourself or the company, you will lose their trust fast. Listen today, respond tomorrow.

CREATE TWO WORKING TEAMS

One team should be composed of leaders and the other of employees. Keep the team sizes small and ensure that employees can decide for themselves who should participate—this is another great way of establishing trust. Decide on primes for each group and set up a series of working sessions to talk through the challenges and better understand them. Once all the issues and ideas are on the table, summarize them and share with everyone.

BUILD A PLAN

Like anything else in business, things don't just happen (well, at least not often), they happen because they were intended to. By documenting your intentions, you are committing to the outcome. Also, you have something to show and share with the organization to demonstrate your commitment. Establish timelines to show progress and set an achievable goal. Great teams with great plans can lift engagement 10% or more in one year.

DEFINE THE ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE

As part of your plan, and with full buy-in from everyone, define specific activities that your staff can commit to and which will make a substantial improvement. While all things won't work for all teams, there are a few that will help EVERYONE including:

- **Participation.** Find ways for employees to shape your environment and feel part of the solution. Treat them as intelligent, capable contributors and you have already won.
- **Appreciation.** In my humble opinion, this is No. 1. Help employees feel that they really matter. Be SINCERE in your dealings and find ways to say thanks often. Recognize great effort and challenge them to be better—most of us inherently want to do well.
- **Development.** Invest in employee development. This is where you can leverage HR and existing corporate programs, especially in larger organizations. Define a career path for your employees so they know what is achievable. Partner in the development of plans to foster their growth (this includes being great in their current role). Set up mentoring and job-shadowing programs—and celebrate internal promotions!
- **FUN.** Make fun a habit and not just an event. Most of us relish a chance at distraction, especially when it makes us laugh. It doesn't cost much, if anything, to creatively have fun at work. Set up a team and let employees lead the effort to have fun at the office.
- **Executive commitment.** Many companies talk a big game when it comes to employee engagement, but rarely deliver. Remember the stats: Close to 70% of employees are disengaged. Take the lead from Southwest Airlines, whose CEO clearly stands behind the companies' commitment to engagement. It has to start at the top!

STAY THE COURSE!

This is where most engagement plans slow down or stop altogether. Work priorities change, your boss wants something you haven't planned for, technology goes down, sales fall below plan, customers escalate, etc. This is work life. The key is not to stray from your No. 1 priority—the well-being of your employees. Communicate and reinforce this message often, stick to your plan and celebrate your improvements. The rewards will be huge!

It Takes Commitment

Can it actually be done? Unequivocally, yes. With the right level of commitment (top down) any organization can improve employee engagement. But it isn't easy, not by a long shot. It takes a substantial amount of hourly effort and commitment. The key is to be CONSISTENT. It is too easy to get distracted by other organizational priorities. Many of us do. It's natural. Engagement tends to be a hot topic after a survey is taken, but it slowly it drops off everyone's radar until the next survey shows that no progress was made.

Remember, every measure of corporate success ties back to the employees who do the work—that includes automation, which human beings still program, execute and operate. If, as an organization, you are truly committed to making an environment in which employees can improve, it will snowball to every other measure you judge yourself by, including operating expenses, revenue and shareholder value.

Moreover, if having a world-class customer experience is your goal, look no further than your employees. Happy and engaged employees = loyal and satisfied customers. This has been proven time and time again. Getting there will require discipline and hard work but the rewards are well worth it! Just ask Southwest Airlines. ℗

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