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Are your employees 'engaged'? Here's how to win them over

By Keith Ayers

Much has been written on the subject of leadership. In fact, a recent search on Amazon.com resulted in finding more than 16,000 books with "leadership" in the title.

With so much information available, it would seem that by now we should know everything on the subject, and everyone in a leadership role should be doing a fantastic job. Right?

Wrong! If that were true, Gallup research polls would show a lot more than 29 percent of the U.S. workforce as engaged in their work, because great leaders get people to be excited about and committed to their organization's vision.

One thing we need to understand about the role of the leader in employee engagement: Leaders are either *increasing* engagement, or they are *decreasing* it. There is no middle ground. Everything a leader does that impacts on employees either increases or diminishes engagement.

THE TRULY ENGAGED EMPLOYEE

Rather than start by looking at what kind of leaders you need to hire (or become), let's be clear on what it means to have truly engaged employees. Then we can better understand the kind of leadership we need to provide.

When looking at human motivation, I think it is helpful to do it in the context of the "whole person concept." The underlying principle in this model is that all motivation comes from within the person. More specifically, motivation comes from the needs or values levels. In other words, people do what they do either to satisfy a need, or because they believe they should because it is consistent with their values.

Full engagement rarely comes from just satisfying employees needs. Receiving a pay rise or bonus, extra benefits, or even a promotion can have a temporary impact on engagement, but the effect doesn't last long.

The fully engaged employee is one whose needs and values are aligned with their work and their organization.

5 SKILLS THAT BOOST ENGAGEMENT

Leaders must have five essential skills to increase employee engagement. They are:

- **Building trust.** Trust is an essential ingredient in increasing engagement. The first thing leaders need to know about building trust is that it does not happen just because you are

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trustworthy.

People do not know how trustworthy you are until you demonstrate it by using trust building behaviors, and the most important of these behaviors is to trust others. Building trust requires a basic belief in people, a belief that people are essentially trustworthy.

After all, if your employees are not trustworthy, why did you hire them, and why are they still there?

- **Mentoring.** The relationship between the employee and his or her immediate manager is a critical factor in how engaged the employee feels. Employees need feedback. They need to know how they are performing — not just once a year at review time — and be able to discuss their needs for growth and development.

This is a must-have skill for effective leaders — to give and receive feedback, and to coach and counsel employees in a way that increases engagement and commitment.

- **Inclusion.** Whether employees feel like an insider or an outsider also impacts on their level of engagement.

Effective leaders know that everyone on their team has strengths the team needs to be successful, and they know how to get the best out of each person, regardless of ethnic background, gender, age, or sexual orientation. They understand that people with different personal values can work together effectively when they commit to the same values about trustworthiness and standards of work performance.

- **Alignment.** Engaged employees feel aligned with their organizations purpose, values, and vision. Their work is meaningful to them because their leader helps them see the connection between what they do and the success of the organization.

The effective leader also understands that gaining the team's commitment to the organization's values increases the team's performance standards as well as their engagement.

- **Team development.** Effective leaders understand the potential for significant increases in performance through high performing teams. They make sure that all team members understand the strengths they and other team members bring to the team, and work at developing a process that capitalizes on all of these strengths.

The leader's focus is on developing the leadership potential of each team member, and ultimately implementing a shared leadership approach to continuously improving performance that is owned by the team.

ALL SKILLS ARE NEEDED

All of these skills are needed to fully engage employees. If any of them are missing, engagement will be diminished. The challenge in developing these skills is that they are dependent on each other. That is, you have to build trust before you can be effective at mentoring, and you will need your mentoring skills to be effective at inclusion and alignment.



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You won't have much success at getting all employees aligned unless they feel they are an insider, and to build a high performing team, the leader needs all of the above skills.

The reality is that these skills don't come naturally to very many managers, and they can be learned. But they can't be learned effectively during a single training event.

Developing these skills for many managers requires the unlearning of old habits, often habits of a lifetime. So it will take time, reinforcement, and practice — and a serious commitment.

With all the evidence we now have about the significant increases in organizational performance as employee engagement increases, can you afford not to make the effort?



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