



Engaging Your Workforce

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“Employee engagement is a deep and broad connection that employees have with a company that results in a willingness to go above and beyond what’s expected of them to help their company succeed.”

–Gebauer & Lowman, Closing the Engagement Gap

The term “engagement” is everywhere in the business world these days. You may have seen it mentioned in an article or in ads from consultancies that specialize in employee motivation. And perhaps you’ve concluded that it’s just another buzzword. But employee engagement is no fad. It’s here to stay.

Studied by scientists at top universities across America and Europe¹, engagement represents a growing body of research based on empirical results. You can use this research to improve your business. The most basic takeaway is that engagement is beneficial to both your organization’s bottom line and your employees’ well-being, whether you work with operators, engineers or managers.

Managers are increasingly seeing boredom plaguing the workplace. They’re finding employees who seem half asleep on the job, are exhibiting “presenteeism” (merely showing up) or, as the movie Office Space puts it, “are working just hard enough to not get fired.” Firing up employees requires more than motivational talks; it requires a persistent state-of-mind that drives them forward.

Let’s first look at what engagement is and its benefits. And then, most importantly, methods and ideas for engaging your workforce.

¹Including such experts as Christina Maslach of UC Berkeley, Jim Harter of the Gallup Organization, Wilmar Schaufeli of the University of the Netherlands, and Arnold Bakker of Erasmus University, Rotterdam.

WHAT IS ENGAGEMENT?

It seems that so many “experts” are jumping onto the engagement bandwagon that its definition is becoming distorted. We will only discuss the definitions of engagement that are associated with proven results. Our primary definition is a mental state characterized by absorption, dedication and vigor (Bakker, et al., p. 187).

ABSORPTION

“being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one’s work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulty detaching oneself from one’s work”

DEDICATION

“being strongly involved in one’s work, and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge”

VIGOR

“high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties” (Bakker, et al., p. 188).

But whatever the definition, and whoever the researcher, engagement is a persistent state. This means that once the employees are engaged, a single inconvenience or disruption in work will not stop them in their tracks. As with a train, it takes some effort to get it going, and once it is going, it tends to keep going. Engaged workers keep their efforts up even when faced with difficulties, because their energy remains high as they pour themselves into their work.

Engagement research emerged due to a general dissatisfaction over studying burnout in the workplace. By the late 1990s, businesses across the country were keenly aware of the burnout syndrome. However, leaders were not satisfied with just knowing what goes wrong with workers, so researchers began studying what goes right.

Ironically, studying burnout is what first led to studying engagement. Burnout, too, is a persistent state. An employee does not become burned out suddenly from a single tedious or onerous task. Once burned out, the employee does not simply “snap out of it” after a lunch break. The same is true in a state of engagement.

THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGEMENT

As negative states-of-mind and behaviors, such as low morale and resistance to change, have proven to be contagious in the workplace, the positive states such as engagement are contagious as well. One study (Schaufeli & Salanova 2007) reports that engagement is contagious to coworkers and even family members. High levels of employee engagement benefit organizations through:

- (a) The retention of highly valued employees
- (b) A positive corporate reputation
- (c) A competitive and effective organization (Bennett, Cook, & Pelletier, 2003)

And a study published by the Academy of Management linked employee engagement to improved task performance (Rich et al, 2010).

According to the Gallup Organization, “the relationship between engagement and performance at the business-unit level is substantial and highly generalizable across companies.” (Q12 Meta-Analysis, p. 37). The Gallup Organization, recognized as an authority on workplace engagement, recently completed a metaanalysis on engagement, compiling many individual studies and documenting consistencies across them. They found solid evidence for engagement leading to positive organizational outcomes, such as increased workplace safety (Q12 Meta-Analysis, p. 28); other researchers have linked engagement to better quality products and increased profits (Phelps & Brossoit).

SAFETY FIRST

Safety is a major concern of organizations in the process industries, and researchers are paying close attention to how engagement leads to workplace safety.

Workplace safety and accident prevention can be improved through external factors such as safer work environments and effective policies and procedures, as well as what goes on in an operator’s mind. Only so much can be done to make the physical environment safe. Additional efforts include instilling safety in the culture of the organization through improving employee engagement. Thus, engagement leads to both superior in-role and outside-role performance.

Engaged employees have been shown to go the extra mile in their jobs, and this behavior leads to fewer workplace accidents. For instance, organizational psychologists study such actions called organizational citizenship behaviors, or OCBs, which can lead to a safer environment. These are activities that are not explicitly called for in the job description. One example of OCB is reporting a problem in the work environment that no one else seems to have noticed.

HOW TO ENGAGE EMPLOYEES

If you are in charge of people, there are various “levers” at your disposal to motivate your people. Inviting employees to compete for an award and offering incentive-based raises work to motivate employees. These tactics may increase the amount of work your people do, but they do not necessarily engage them. So what does?

According to Arnold Bakker of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, several studies across many organizations have identified the precedents of worker engagement. For our purposes, a precedent is something that happens or exists before something else. These precedents include job resources such as social support, feedback, autonomy and learning opportunities (Bakker et al., 2008, p. 194). Let’s look at these and a few others.

Social Support

Social support is the feeling that an employee is cared about. This means they do not feel like they are merely people who happen to have important skills, but rather are important people who are appreciated for their skills. Employees who truly care about their jobs and places of employment do not exist in a vacuum, but are actively encouraged and cared for. Positive relationships at work are pivotal in this regard. In fact, the Gallup Organization’s engagement survey includes a question asking if the respondent has “a best friend at work.” This may even strike some readers as “touchy-feely,” but engagement does not come from the crack of a whip. It comes from savvy managers who know how to foster relationships and a sense of community.

Feedback

To be effective, feedback needs to be timely, positive and constructive, and focused on the work rather than the worker. Pay attention to how your organization handles performance feedback. Touch base with each employee once a week to let them know how they are doing. Always tell them something they are doing right, and praise them for it.

High Involvement

Another general strategy you may employ is the development of a high involvement workforce. Think about what employee involvement would mean at your office or plant. We recommend that you focus on three critical factors – empowerment, transparency and knowledge.

• Empowerment or autonomy

Are your workers empowered to have as much authority about how they do their work as possible? Clearly, policies and procedures disallow many workers from doing their job in whatever way they see fit. But, within such parameters, ask yourself—and ask the workers—if there are specific ways they would like to do their work differently. For instance, a chemical plant was spread out over a large area, and the supervisors talked with the operators about what would make their jobs easier. “Bicycles” was the answer and now operators peddle from one end of the plant to the other, saving time and energy. Listening to workers’ ideas and suggestions can positively affect processes in the company. If they know they are being listened to, that can increase their dedication to the organization and enhance their level of engagement. After all, they know more about the processes than anyone else and their recommendations can greatly impact performance. If your organization has a culture that is not open to employee feedback, then it will be quite difficult to engage them.

• Transparency

Are the organization’s operations as transparent as possible, so that employees can see how their own efforts impact the whole? Do workers in one unit understand how their product or performance impacts another unit’s processes? Do they know how making on-spec product, or not, impacts the organization’s earnings? They may have a vague idea, but let them know more concretely how their specific job contributes to the organization’s success.

• Knowledge/learning

Does the organization make a commitment to employee learning? This commitment means more than meeting the minimum training requirements. Organizations that invest the bare minimum into their employees can only expect to get the bare minimum in return. So make learning a serious priority by giving employees ongoing opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge throughout their careers.

This is especially important for Millennials who see life as a continuous learning process. Help them learn the things that a) they want to learn and b) contribute to the organization’s success. Quite frequently, this entails “soft” skills training such as leadership development, teamwork effectiveness and communication skills. Do not shrug those off—such skills may be desperately needed at your organization and can help give it a competitive edge.

The Engagement Checklist below can help you make sure you are covering the right bases.

ENGAGEMENT CHECKLIST

How well are you doing the following? (Rate your company on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest.)
What are your three highest and three lowest?

- Job and Task Variety
- Job and Task Significance
- Job and Task Autonomy
- Feedback
- Social Support
- Empowerment/Autonomy
- Transparency
- Knowledge/Training
- Listening to Employees
- Sufficient Physical Resources

Evidence shows that employee engagement is not a passing trend. Enhancing engagement has been proven to give companies a competitive advantage. So, if you're not sure your business is keeping employees engaged, a formal assessment by a third party is an ideal first step. Our robust engagement assessments identify your "current state" and the levers with the greatest potential for sustained success.

For more information, email info@tdshou.com

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