

Employee Engagement

Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW

Every HR professional knows that employee engagement is critical to organizational functioning. We have developed metrics for it as a way of proving its value, but I see little written about simple ways in which we can increase it. The value of engagement has been known for centuries, but the methods for enhancing engagement still rely heavily on intuition, imagination, and common sense.

Money alone will not get the job done. Employee engagement has much more to do with how people feel when they leave for work each day. It's a matter of workplace relationships, sense of belonging, feeling valued and respected, and being seen as playing an important role in the organization's success. Engaged employees feel wanted and needed. They want to contribute to their coworkers' success and experience rewarding human relationships.

Before the industrial revolution, workplaces were specialized and small. Businesses were largely tradesmen who offered their unique skills to a community and felt respect for what they offered. The cobbler, stone mason, carpenter, blacksmith, pharmacist, baker, and a host of other trades involved direct relationships with customers and opportunities for banter as customers came and went. Work was more than creation of a product. It was the smile of a satisfied customer and feeling of being valued as an individual.

When assembly lines came into being, relationships changed. Workers lost their identity and became cogs in a wheel. They experienced little customer contact and few incentives beyond receiving a salary. When we turned humans into functions, we denied them identification with their work. We made them mere numbers on the time clock. It's no wonder that these conditions led to emotional and social disinvestment. Companies viewed personnel as tools of production and a cost of doing business. When technology offered cheaper tools of production, fewer workers were needed and interdependence decreased. It's little wonder that 60% of Americans hate their job and hardly a surprise that they see themselves as doing little more than putting in time to collect a pay check.

The research for my master's thesis involved data gathering from 36 HR directors for manufacturers employing between 400 and 600 personnel. One of these was the HR Director of Marley, a Kansas City based maker of cooling towers. Marley was known for its quality products and consistent profitability. Marley's HR director profoundly changed my approach to management. He did so through his genuine interest in me as a person and his explanation of a framed "document" on his wall that read: _____
_____. I could hardly wait to finish data collection so I could ask him what the sign was about. He responded: "I put that sign there as a reminder to myself that every person entering this office has but one request of me: PLEASE MAKE ME FEEL IMPORTANT. At that moment I discovered the secret to Marley's success. This HR Director's attitude reflected Marley's corporate culture which held that every employee is critical to producing high-quality products and keeping the company viable. No exceptions.

As companies grow in size, it is increasingly difficult to resurrect the sense of belongingness and value people had experienced in smaller work settings. As functions become increasingly specialized, the office place becomes a virtual tower of Babylon. It's a challenge to restore dignity and respect to a demoralized workforce, especially as cash flow is tight and we move into a global market.

Despite overriding global realities, we can make little things go a long way. Here are some ideas:

1. Set up lunch time events where volunteer hobbyists can talk about their hobby.
2. Do potlucks. People love sampling the variety and exchange of recipes.
3. Set up a spring event in which gardeners can give away divisions and seedlings. This works very well when done during lunch. I did this a number of times, and it was always a hit. Garden talk adds a new dimension for relating and an opportunity to encourage a very healthy hobby. Plants

brought by managers are especially meaningful. Every time the receiver looks at the plant in their home garden, it is a reminder of a pleasant experience with the manager who gave it. These offerings create bonds of sharing and caring without compromising managerial authority.

4. Create a “fun” board in the lunch room in which staff can post community events others might enjoy. This can range from adopting a highway mile to giving away unused season tickets. Church events are not community events. Don’t go there.
5. Post a company blog in which the CEO can cheerlead and offer updates that keep staff in the loop. Use it to acknowledge staff for deeds well done.
6. Purchase a plaque, metal sculpture, or something tasteful that rotates each month to recognize an employee who has gone “Beyond the Call of Duty.” Start with HR asking for nominees and selecting the first recipient. Thereafter, a committee of the last three recipients receives nominations and makes the decision. This puts personnel in control, creating good will. Provide a certificate to each awarded individual to keep and display. Announce each month’s recipient and cite the reasons for the award. Post an “Honor Roll” of recipients. Strongly encourage that the award travel across all departmental lines.

All this takes so little, but goes a long way in fostering recognition, engagement, pride, and a sense of ownership in the welfare of both company and its personnel.

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