

PERSPECTIVE

Happy doesn't always mean productive

Five critical ingredients for employee engagement

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HRReporter
CANADIAN
THE NATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT www.hrreporter.com

This article first appeared in the Canadian HR Reporter (www.hrreporter.com).

Published 22 times a year, the popular tabloid offers readers the most current news, information on the latest trends and practices, expert advice, experiences and insights from HR practitioners, research and resources.



Happy doesn't always mean productive

While many employers boast about improving employee satisfaction levels, employee engagement beats satisfaction as an indicator of productivity.

Competitive pay, great benefits, decent hours and a reasonably healthy work environment help drive satisfaction. But if employees don't feel a special bond with the organization and its mission — if they are not engaged — they will be reluctant to put discretionary efforts into their jobs.

According to different studies by The Gallup Organization, Towers Perrin and International Survey Research, about two-thirds of employees in Canada and the United States are “moderately engaged,” with the balance falling almost evenly in the “highly engaged” and “disengaged” categories.

More relevant to line executives, these researchers have found a strong correlation between employee engagement and organizational performance.

Given these findings, HR departments should see fostering employee engagement as a strategic priority. However, before rushing into launching engagement surveys and related interventions, it's important to step back to ask a few questions. What exactly is engagement? What does it look like? What drives it? What kills it? A real-life example may help to answer some questions.

Several years ago, I was hired to lead a corporate team charged with defining and implementing a major transformation of the company's business processes. This service-industry organization had international operations employing several thousand people. Middle managers from various functional areas and business units constituted the core of the change team. From the beginning of the

initiative, their engagement built up to a level I had rarely seen before.

More importantly, they were able to develop and sustain this engagement over the 18-month period of the project. In retrospect, this intense engagement of the core team represented the single most important factor in the successful outcome. Engagement is contagious. It has to start at the top and then spread down through the rest of the organization. As more employees from all levels got involved in the implementation — several hundreds at peak time — the devotion and enthusiasm of the core team spread like a virus.

It's important to note compensation was not a driver. The corporation was operating in a low-

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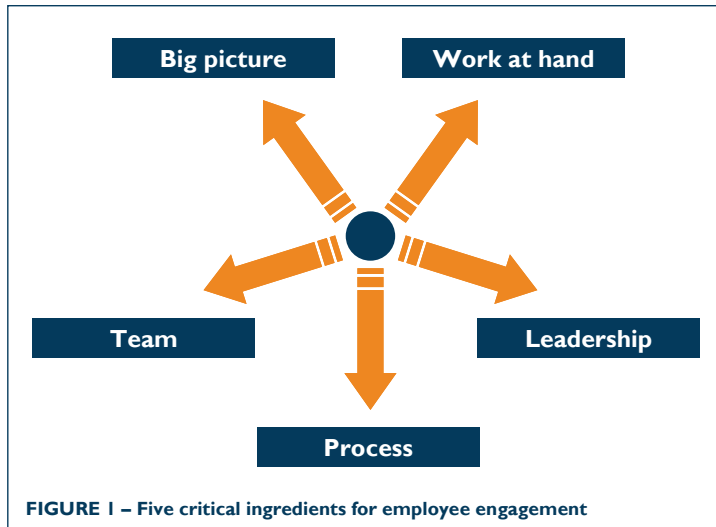
wage industry, and it was not particularly competitive in term of compensation. A project bonus plan was eventually created for the core team, but not until two months before actual completion.

Later, as I tackled the challenge of engaging employees at other organizations, I often found myself reflecting back to this experience. I concluded that true engagement has five equally important elements. For employees to put discretionary effort into their work, they must feel engaged with the big picture, the work at hand, the leadership, the process and the team.

These five dimensions are mutually reinforcing, as the successful project illustrates.

Engaged with the big picture

Most employees in the project team had spent the bulk of their career in the industry and had developed a real passion for the business. They had experienced first hand, as customers, the products and services offered by their company and its competitors. They were proud of the



mission of their organization, and of the distinctive way in which it delivered its services.

They felt an emotional bond with the business and its purpose. They also understood how their respective day-to-day roles were contributing to fulfilling the mission.

In tune with their evolving competitive landscape, they saw the transformation they had been asked to lead as a critical, strategic undertaking. For example, they were among the first to identify key industry trends, and they redesigned the operating platform in such a way that would later enable important strategic changes. They were both emotionally and rationally engaged with the big picture.

Engaged with the work at hand

The mandate of the project team was clearly challenging. As a stretch assignment for everyone involved, it provided plenty of development opportunities. The core team was assembled to ensure the skills, perspective and knowledge of its members were complementary.

Therefore, in addition to developing new competencies, people had the opportunity to do what they did best and leverage each other's strengths. They also recognized that the project would result in profound changes in the way their department or business unit would operate, as well as transform their own day-to-day jobs. They were in the driver's seat. They

owned the work at hand. They were devoted to it.

Engaged with the leadership

The company's top leadership made it clear the undertaking was of prime strategic importance. Their statement was reinforced by their action. On regular occasions the case had to be made for additional resources and stronger executive involvement. It wasn't always easy, but senior management always agreed to give the team what it needed. They even agreed to forego opportunities that would have threatened the change effort.

In addition, most executives were regularly enquiring about the progress of the project and its challenges. Often occurring during informal one-on-one discussions with team members, the probing demonstrated senior management's genuine interest.

With each milestone cleared, the team received praise and intangible recognition from key senior executives. When the going got tough, they received encouragement and active support. The team became deeply engaged with the company's leadership — not all of the corporate leaders, but the ones who mattered most.

Engaged with the process

All members of the project team, both at corporate office and in the field, were truly involved in decision-making. To start with, senior management incorporated into the

The five dimensions act like the legs of the proverbial stool: remove one of them and you risk a full collapse.

strategic plan the input received from the core team about emerging industry trends. The project leaders received significant and broad autonomy to decide how best to implement change.

In turn, project leaders made a conscious effort to share this authority with local project

leaders, which contributed to their engagement. Finally, they were given complete freedom to organize themselves however they wanted throughout the 18-month initiative.

Engaged with the team

The last dimension was related to the team itself. Although social bonds existed within the group, the commitment towards the team was professional rather than social. Because of their engagement with the other dimensions, all team members were willing to give their time, energy and brainpower on a discretionary basis.

Knowing their co-workers were equally committed reinforced the dynamics. There was one long, late night meeting when a critical "go/no go" decision had to be reached. After a day of frantic activities and back-to-back meetings, the team gathered to debate how to proceed in light of the recent developments. Despite exhaustion, everyone got very involved in the discussion. Nobody thought about the time, beyond calling families and ordering food to fuel the discussion.

A decision had to be reached that night and the input from everyone was critical to making the right choice for the company. So people kept going until a strong consensus was reached, which occurred in the early hours of the following day. Such discretionary effort by the team was the norm. They were actually so engaged that, as their leader, I regularly had to force them to pull back to retain stamina for the long haul to project completion.

How some employees became disengaged

The five dimensions act like the legs of a stool: remove one of them and you risk a full collapse.

Midway through the initiative, a vice-president left the company. She had appointed Wayne, a high-potential manager, as a key member of the project team. But the new executive didn't see the potential his predecessor had seen in Wayne. Sensing it, Wayne started disengaging himself from the leadership. The first signal

came during a casual discussion, when he vented his frustration with his inability to read his new boss. I then noticed a change in his thinking. Until that time, Wayne had been a strong advocate of balancing short-term and long-term considerations. His focus was now essentially tactical. Although he remained very professional, his loss of trust and confidence in the leadership was clear in his comments.

A few months before the massive rollout of the change, the company made another change in its senior executive team. The new officer appeared mildly interested in the initiative, despite its strategic and operational impact. The team was disturbed but fortunately, the project was in the home stretch. The team had retained enough engagement from the other dimensions to fulfill its role. However, the spirit had been

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broken. The team members disengaged themselves from discussions about follow-on projects. For Wayne, it was too much. He resigned shortly thereafter. He is now fully engaged again, to the delight of his new employer.

Five keys always relevant

The relevance of all five dimensions in non-project situations is the same.

Measuring employee engagement is important but it is just a means to an end. The real challenge for HR is to leverage the insights gained through measurement and help managers drive engagement. The story provides a few pointers.

First and foremost, HR must look for ways to better connect employees with the big picture, as everything becomes much easier when people really care about the business. There is no substitute for good leadership. If the leaders are not themselves fully engaged and committed to goals, don't be surprised if employees lack spirit too.

Management must provide support — both tangible and intangible — that people need to succeed.

The various roles must play on the strengths of the incumbents while offering development opportunities. Managers should avoid forcing people into a process, as involvement is indispensable to engagement.

Finally, managers must remind themselves that disengagement is even more contagious than engagement. Employees who remain disengaged despite management's best efforts must be removed from the team.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Edmond Mellina is President of ORCHANGO, the learning division of TRANSITUS Inc. — a leading provider of learning and consulting solutions to master organizational change.

Edmond is internationally recognized as an expert in the field of change and transition management. For close to 20 years, he has helped organizations on both sides of the Atlantic successfully adapt to change, first as executive and now as advisor. He is the creator of the ORCHANGO Change Management System™ and ORCHANGO Learn-and-Execute System™.

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