MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR WORKFORCE: Best Practices in Employee Engagement

By Mila Cosgrove, IPMA-CP, SPHR

What is Employee Engagement?

Mary is the employee everyone wants on their team. She consistently shows up to work in a positive frame of mind, she does an excellent job on her assigned tasks and projects, and she often looks for ways to contribute more to the team effort. She demonstrates initiative and comes up with creative solutions to problems the team encounters, she understands what is needed to help move the team and the organization forward... In short, you can always depend on her to bring the best part of herself to work. Mary is an engaged employee.

Employee engagement can be defined as the amount of discretionary performance an employee is willing and able to engage in. Accordingly, the level of engagement among our employees has a direct impact on the quality, quantity and manner in which services are provided to the public we serve.

Making a Business Case for Employee Engagement Practices

For those of us working in human resources, the concept of employee engagement resonates. We’ve long known that creating a better work environment results in more productive employees. Getting that idea across to management, however, can sometimes be challenging. Our hard-core critics just don’t seem to get that “HR stuff.” However, when it comes to creating an employee engagement initiative, buy-in and active support from the top levels of the organization is crucial.

The Gallup organization, one of the front runners in the field of defining and measuring employee engagement, provides statistics that even the most hard-core “by-the-numbers” managers can understand.

- Engaged employees average 27 percent less absenteeism than those who are actively disengaged.
- Business units with a surplus of disengaged employees suffer 31 percent more turnover than those with a critical mass of engaged employees.
In low turnover organizations, disengaged workers experience 51 percent more turnover than engaged employees.

The bottom quartile of employee engagement had 62 percent more accidents than work groups in the top quartile.

Highly engaged work units equated to 12 percent higher customer scores.

Teams in the top quartile are three times as likely to succeed as those in the bottom quartile, averaging 18 percent higher productivity and 12 percent higher profitability.

Gallup suggests that the average organization has only 29 percent of employees who are actively engaged—the remainder are either just showing up for a paycheck (54 percent), or actively disengaged (17 percent). Clearly the average organization has room for improvement. How do you know where your organization falls? You ask.

Tips for Running the Survey

Select the right time. When planning your survey kickoff, think about when would be the best time of year to run the survey. Avoid holidays and traditionally stressful times in the work cycle. Our organization runs our survey in mid-spring, after our summer seasonal workforce has returned to the job and before school is out and employees begin their summer vacations.

Communicate throughout the survey period. The survey should be announced to the organization by your senior executive if possible. It is usually helpful to have email reminders from that person go out over the course of the survey—three to four depending on the length of your survey period. All levels of the executive/management team should actively support the survey in their day-to-day interactions with employees and supervisors should be reminded to mention the survey during their staff meetings.

Make it easy for employees to participate. Employees should be given the opportunity to take the survey on work time (paid) or at home if they prefer (unpaid). Paper copies should be provided to those employees who do not want to take the survey online.

Designate survey champions. Our organization has found it helpful to designate “survey champions” in each work group. Survey champions are provided with the list of employees in their work area, a flyer to post in their work area reminding people of the survey and associated deadlines, and copies of the survey in paper format for those who don’t have computers or are hesitant to take the survey online. Throughout the survey period, we notify our survey champions every few days of what percentage of their employee group has taken the survey. Survey champions whose work groups have an 85 percent or better return rate are given a gift card as a reward for their efforts. Last year, our voluntary return rate was more than 94 percent.

Communicate results in a timely fashion. Data analysis can be time consuming, depending on how many work groups you survey. Post overall results as quickly as possible and let work groups know when they can expect to see more detailed reports for their areas.

Getting Started – Determining the Baseline

Once you have your executive leadership on board, measuring your workforce to determine where the level of employee engagement falls is the crucial next step to improving your overall employee engagement.

The benefits of engaging in a comprehensive employee culture survey are numerous. A survey allows a direct view of employee perception about their work unit, their coworkers, their supervisor, and the organization as a whole. Having that information allows management the opportunity to conduct a reality check about their own perceptions, which often differ from line employees. Having hard data allows management to “quantify the anecdotal” and to take clear action steps to resolve issues and to help teams move from average performance to excellent performance.

There are a variety of assessment tools available for purchase or you can create your own assessment tool if you understand engagement factors. The key is to pick a survey tool that resonates with your culture and that you are willing to work with over a period of years. It is also important to have a survey that allows employees to answer specific engagement questions through a rating scale and to answer general questions in a narrative form. Allowing employees to offer comments gives you more detailed information with which to work.

You’ll also want to make a decision about whether to collect the information in-house through an online tool like SurveyMonkey, or whether an outside vendor would lend more credibility—and confidentiality—to the process. There is no right or wrong answer to this decision, but you should factor in the level of trust in your organization, the overall cost, and the impact on staff resources.

Once you have your tool and collection process in place, it is time to communicate! Let employees know what the purpose of the survey is and how you expect to use it moving forward. Stress that the responses are confidential and that the results will be made available to employees.

Taking Action – Following through on Results

Once you’ve asked employees for feedback, you have to listen to what they say and take action where appropriate. Conducting a survey and using the information to follow up with employees and make improvements in the organization builds trust and credibility with the workforce. Trust and credibility make the crucial foundation to building and maintaining employee engagement. If you ask and do nothing, it is worse than doing nothing to begin with.

Hold follow-up meetings at the work-group level. Best practices in employee engagement suggest following up with survey results at the work-group level. In our organization, the department director cont...
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meets with each work group in his or her department to review the survey results and to discuss what influenced the scores. Work groups are then tasked with choosing three specific areas they would like to influence in the upcoming year. Groups are encouraged to think about where their scores are low and to identify actions steps for improvement. Groups are also encouraged to include at least one area where they are already doing a great job to see if they can make that area even better in the future. Action plans are revisited on a periodic basis throughout the year to monitor progress and keep the improvement goals at the forefront of employees' attention.

In approaching the survey debrief this way, line employees are listened to, management has a better sense of what barriers there are to success, and all levels of the organization own employee engagement and feel accountable for the outcomes. Work groups that have bought into the concept eagerly look forward to seeing the scores the next time around.

Hold managers and supervisors accountable. Poor scores almost always point to something that the manager has direct influence over. Coaching the manager to improve effectiveness and holding him or her accountable for improving his or her behavior will have a direct impact on employee engagement moving forward.

Publicly recognize managers and work teams that are doing well. Learn from what these work groups are doing right to help build a culture that focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. Celebrating success helps keep a positive approach to employee engagement initiatives and lets staff know that their contributions are recognized and valued.

Identify barriers to success. If there is a part of the organization that is struggling, it is important to plan initiatives to help address the root cause of the issues. This might involve teamworking initiatives, management training, work process redesign, improved communication strategies, or other interventions to assist the work group, or organization as a whole, in achieving success. If you listen to the feedback of the employees, there will be direct clues about what is needed to move the organization forward.

Do it again. Employee engagement surveys should be an iterative process. Trending information over time allows insight into specific issues in individual departments and work groups. It becomes very easy to see if engagement initiatives are making a difference and how individual managers and supervisors are doing in relationship to their work groups. It allows you to target your follow-up activities in the areas where they are most needed and to learn from the parts of the organization that are consistently excelling.

Beyond the Engagement Survey – Ongoing Initiatives

Employee engagement doesn’t end with conducting a survey. Organizations that are serious about employee engagement look for every opportunity to influence engagement. Such opportunities occur both formally and informally throughout the employee lifecycle.

Formal engagement programs begin with the initial touch of a potential employee. How you recruit and select employees communicates the culture of your organization to potential employees in a way that influences their perception of the organization. Once hired, having a thoughtful and thorough onboarding process lays a clear foundation for ongoing employee success and involvement. Ongoing training, performance reviews, development opportunities and goal setting are other opportunities to provide the tools, resources and motivation to foster and maintain engagement.

Total compensation strategies are also effective. Looking for ways to tie some portion of compensation to performance is generally motivating to employees. Fostering a culture of work hard/play hard also builds engagement in employees. If the employer respects, rewards, and values its employees, employees will give the same back to the organization.

Of course there are also countless informal opportunities to strengthen employee engagement. Many of these opportunities arise daily in the interactions that supervisors have with their direct reports. As part of their research in employee engagement, the Gallup organization identified 12 critical elements in influencing employee engagement. These elements are often referred to as the "Q12." The presence of these elements in the workplace is primarily due to the specific behaviors supervisors choose.

As HR professionals we know that employees leave the organization in large part due to poor management. We also know that employees will give their very best to a supervisor they respect and admire. Supervisors and managers should be provided with training designed to build trust and accountability on a person-to-person basis.

The organization I work for has been conducting employee engagement surveys since 2002. Over time, we’ve seen the story of the organization unfold in the feedback we receive. We have found our survey to be an invaluable tool to tell us what is working well, where we can do better, and what our next steps might be. We’ve learned the hard way that follow-through and continuous communication are the keys to building trust and accountability in our employee engagement initiatives. It is gratifying to see the efforts of our work reflected in the feedback we receive from employees. In the true spirit of performance metrics, we measure what matters.

Don’t be afraid to ask; the answer is always worth your attention.

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