Proffitt
Management Solutions

Nancy Proffitt

Proffitt Management
Solutions
326 Maddock St.
West Palm Beach, FL
www.ProffittManagement.com

561-582-6060
info@proffittmanagement.com

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: YOUR SECRET WEAPON

Surveys and studies indicate global job dissatisfaction is at a two-decade high. Disengaged employees account for nearly 70 percent of the workforce, which significantly affects the bottom line, according to data from Towers Watson. They cause corporate income, earnings and profits to suffer to the tune of $500 billion each year.

Comparative surveys also indicate that leaders believe engagement is higher than it actually is. Appearances never tell the full story, contributing to this disconnect in perspective. Busy people are not necessarily engaged but may be overworked. Leaders struggling in a dysfunctional culture may not discern low performance levels.

When leaders focus more on managing tasks than on people, the disconnect widens. Staff attitudes and performance trend downward. Disengaged leaders beget indifferent employees. When an organization's culture fosters disengagement, it's ultimately up to leaders to take corrective action.

THE BASIC ENGAGEMENT MINDSET

Leaders must focus on people, understand what they need, and motivate them to enhance engagement and productivity, notes leadership consultant Clint Swindall in Engaged Leadership: Building a Culture to Overcome Employee Disengagement (Wiley, 2011).

Many leaders fail to understand disengagement's impact. They may not associate staff disengagement with overall inefficiencies, low productivity or reduced profits. Studies show these factors have a greater influence on corporate performance than the economy, market trends or competitive forces. In other words, an organization's

strengths and weaknesses hinge more on internal than external issues, most importantly the staff's emotional health.

Dissatisfied workers simply don't care as much as their satisfied colleagues. Their performance, efforts and concerns about company or customer well-being are marginal. When too many employees fall into the "disengaged" category, the outcomes we experience are predictable.

Many leaders believe transferring or dismissing troublesome employees is the most effective way to conquer disengagement. They see killing the problem as the simplest, quickest way of eliminating it. This may occasionally hold true, but it should never be one's de facto approach. A culture known for high turnover will never inspire morale. Strong relationships are the key to overall organizational wellness and employee satisfaction. Enhancing relationships—not cutting them out—is the answer, and it takes hard work.

Leaders must start by adjusting their mindset and focusing on two main engagement ingredients: caring about others and knowing how to reach them. You can cultivate significant improvements by being mindful of basic human needs and doing what you can to meet them. Start with the culture, recognizing that the traditional focus on programs and processes no longer works.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE ORGANIZATION

Leaders who recognize engagement's importance have a greater advantage. Enthusiasm skyrockets when they create a positive environment, promote helpfulness, value their staff and provide the resources necessary for success.

Adopting a philosophy that puts people first strengthens engagement, provided it's backed by actions. Your people need to see signs that you value them. Convey this by giving them the tools they need to do their best work. Do they need additional manpower or funding? Are better supplies or equipment required?

Do your people have the direction and plans they need to ensure projects are completed successfully? Are procedures and policies thoroughly communicated, and is training adequate? Do people know exactly what to do—and why they're doing it? Without these baseline provisions, people feel lost, frustration builds and disengagement

flourishes. Frustration leads to resentment and low morale when leaders fail to implement solutions.

Never forget that people need adequate skills to accomplish the tasks you've assigned. Only then can they be confident in their abilities and enjoy success. Doing good work compels people to continue on the right path. As they reap the rewards of a job well done, they continue to grow and can make greater contributions to the organization. They'll look forward to new challenges and opportunities. It's your job to provide them with the tools they need to advance.

A culture that fosters empowerment and accountability motivates people to find their own solutions and make a difference. Enhance this by giving people as much authority as their abilities allow. Let them suggest improvements to their processes, and authorize them to implement as many as feasible. This gives your people a greater sense of ownership—one of the greatest professional motivators.

Leaders who establish an excellence-oriented mindset provide these basic organizational benefits so their people feel valued and achieve short- and long-term success. Caring for your people raises their level of engagement by building strong bonds of trust, thankfulness and respect.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PARTNERING

Nothing extinguishes engagement more than feeling controlled, used or disrespected. When leaders treat their employees as a lower class or as props for personal gain, resentment and disillusionment set in.

Leaders who create a culture of unity, where everyone is on the same team and equally important, inspire the highest levels of engagement. If employees are regarded as partners rather than subjects, they have the highest sense of value. Their performance matches their engagement, and they can accomplish amazing feats.

True partners are included in all decisions, plans and discussions. They are stakeholders and will more readily buy in when there's a personal investment. They should be familiar with the organization's vision, mission and strategy. Allow them to contribute and understand how they fit into big-picture growth and improvement. Inclusion is a great motivator. Many employees lack access to company business plans—sometimes inadvertently, often intentionally.

Inform people about situations related to their specific roles and duties. Open communication on matters big and small promotes inclusion and value. Share important decisions with them, and explain the reasons or rationale. Give them the supportive data or validation you were given so they can better appreciate the organization's methods and values. This improves their trust, comfort and engagement.

With any decision or change, allow people to understand how they're affected—collectively and individually. Leaders should set the example of embracing the progressive aspects of new policies or practices. Part of enhancing engagement is creating a more positive environment, where people feel cared for, their interests are considered and their futures are secure. They don't need propaganda or fluff—just truthful, trustworthy and timely information.

Your people will feel more unified and engaged when they understand how they'll contribute to upcoming changes, meet the new challenges and make their environment better—together.

Everyone benefits when leaders share their personal progress or status. Such communication conveys value and unity. Find the best ways to impart information, and allow people to offer input or feedback. Meetings, reports or messages can be used in different ways, with varying effectiveness. Creating a way for people to raise concerns and get answers enhances their interest in their roles. Keeping people connected and informed pays many dividends.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PERSONAL CONNECTION

While providing resources and information enhances relationships, it takes more to strengthen them: a personal connection with people and an investment in their lives. The most successful leaders demonstrate a genuine caring. Employee engagement reaches only moderate levels without it.

As Swindall states, both leaders and employees contribute to workplace disengagement. Employees generally start their jobs with enthusiasm but lose it over time after chalking up negative experiences. Employees cannot be expected to make the initial efforts to correct problems. Leaders must initiate improvements and oversee organizational health.

Relationships drive engagement, which, in turn, drives productivity and success. Leaders must therefore be the relationship initiators and encouragers. If you care about people, your natural inclination will be relationship driven. In fact, personal connection is so critical that it takes the top spot among the 10 key factors influencing employee engagement, as listed by organizational behavior experts Dan Crim and Gerard Seijts in *"What Engages Employees the Most OR, the Ten Cs of Employee Engagement"* (Ivey Business Journal, March/April 2006).

Connecting with employees and getting to know them have powerful benefits, conveying value and appreciation. Your staff senses your support and understanding as the relationship grows. They respond with trust, loyalty and effort. The employee gets to know your character, forging a tighter bond. A leader conveys caring by being interested in an employee's life, family and aspirations.

Strong relationships permit the frank sharing of concerns and ideas, leading to joint ownership. Both parties better grasp the other's world. Greater accountability and transparency lead to higher engagement for both parties, and a greater sense of unity. Following up on your commitments is the final step in showing people you can be trusted to take care of them.

Effective leaders don't show bias or partiality among employees. All people should be treated equally, under the same set of rules, with equal considerations, consequences and rewards. Favoritism destroys unity, while fairness is a great trust-builder, enhancing employees' perspective and engagement. Employees also look for a leader's flexibility when their personal lives are challenging. Offer it if you can. Working from home, taking time to attend to a family situation or being left alone while on vacation are important considerations that greatly enhance attitudes and engagement.

Leaders who accentuate positive results build a powerful culture. Find tasks your employees are doing well and point them out. Two of your most powerful words are "thank you." Use them frequently.

Encourage and motivate people to learn, grow and take on more. Your support through their seasons of growth is essential. Recognizing and celebrating their accomplishments will greatly raise their engagement. A leader's success is the compilation of their people's many achievements. Everyone benefits.

The leadership mindset needed to build employee engagement involves a number of natural steps, all of which can be learned and executed. The basic premise is to make underperforming employees better and good employees great, building on who they are and what they're truly capable of doing. Start with those who will best spread their positive attitudes to their coworkers, assisting your efforts to raise the bar. The goal is to bring out the best in everyone.