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## **Beyond the Happiness Factor: Practical Approaches for Building Employee Engagement**

*By Heather Claridge*

In a recent conversation with a senior manager, he was lamenting the retention challenges he was facing. "I don't get it. We pay well, our building is great, there are video games and we have free food and onsite massage. We have all the perks to make it a fun place to work yet people are still leaving. What more can we do to keep people happy?"

Does this scenario sound familiar? Too often organizations overemphasize the "happiness factor", assuming that employees will stay and will be productive if they are happy. The key to retention and a high performing workforce is, however, far deeper than happiness. Employee retention and productivity is directly related to how engaged they are in the work that they do and with the organization that they work for.

The research is clear. Employees commit to an organization with their minds and with their hearts. Employees commit at a rational level when they have a meaningful job, they receive the support they need to be successful and they can see the opportunity for professional growth and development. They commit at an emotional level when they believe in what they do, when they know that their work is valued and because they are proud of the organization that they work for.

There is a compelling business case for focusing on employee engagement. Rational commitment drives retention and emotional commitment drives a willingness to contribute and deliver results over and above what is required for the job. A highly engaged workforce is the key to unlocking a high performing organization.

Another thing to recognize about employee engagement is that it is far more than a survey score. Often, organizations focus solely on results of an employee survey with the objective of improving the survey results. While surveys are a great way to benchmark a general level of engagement and give you baseline measurement to track progress against, the surveys don't take into account two critical factors. Firstly, employee engagement is individualized and secondly, it is also likely to change depending on circumstances that the company may or may not be able to impact. No survey score will tell you at an individual level how people are feeling about their jobs and the company. This is where the manager comes in.

An employee's direct manager has the greatest impact on an employee's level of engagement. The direct manager acts as a conduit, to allow employees to connect to their jobs, to team members and to the organization. The direct manager is the one who knows the individual needs of team members and good managers use this knowledge to tailor their communication, feedback and coaching in a way that meets the unique needs of each individual.

So where do you start the journey to building a highly engaged workforce?

1. Connect employees to their jobs. Ensure they understand how their roles contribute to the success of the team, department and the broader organization.
2. Give them the tools and support they need to be successful.
3. Show them how they can grow professionally.
4. Recognize effort and celebrate success. Show employees that their efforts and contributions are appreciated.
5. Watch out for derailleurs. These are things that are going on in the organization that will undermine your best efforts to build engagement. For example, do you want to foster innovation in your organization yet your culture is unwilling to tolerate mistakes?
6. Live your company values every day in every way. Watch out for those values that only live behind a picture frame. Younger employees are looking for organizations whose values align with their own. If the corporate values stated during the recruitment process don't come to life in the day to day operations, new employees will be quick to leave.
7. Train your managers. Give them coaching skills that allow them to understand at an individual level, the unique needs, abilities and talents of their people. Focus on aligning people in the right roles and leveraging strengths for greater performance rather than always trying to improve performance.
8. Hire for fit. It's a scary thought to limit your potential pool of candidates by screening out those who don't "fit" with the culture of your organization but you have to do it. A bad fit is damaging to team dynamics and business performance.
9. Measure your progress. Use survey scores but augment that with other measures such as departmental retention rates and never underestimate the value of tracking your employee referrals. It is a great benchmark of your employees' willingness to promote your company as a great place to work.
10. Finally and most importantly, when was the last time you asked each employee a simple question - "what keeps you here and what would cause you to leave?" It all starts with understanding.

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