Looking for Exceptional Leadership? Look for Exceptionally Engaged Teams

Career Development

An engaged employee is someone who is both happy at work, and in their overall life, and is fully absorbed and enthusiastic about their job. They take positive actions to further their organization's reputation and interests.

Almost every company measures its employees' engagement. Every company I have worked for has. But is this just some corporate exercise to raise morale? Does it matter? In fact, engagement is probably the best predictor of exceptional performance. When Gallup analyzed the differences in performance between actively engaged business/work groups, work units scoring in the top quartile in employee engagement significantly outperformed those in the bottom quartile, with 41 percent lower absenteeism, 24 percent less turnover, 70 percent fewer safety incidents, 10 percent higher customer ratings, 17 percent higher productivity, 20 percent higher sales, and 21 percent higher profitability.

If you want exceptional results — focus on your team's engagement. Most companies use tools like surveys to measure engagement. This allows you to compare your results to other companies in your region or industry. It also allows you to measure factors that can drive engagement. But like any measuring device, it has the risk of being inaccurate or subjected to leadership's influence. I was a general counsel of one company where our employee engagement factored into the annual bonus pool. As employees, we used to laugh and say, "Filling out the survey is like an IQ test! Why would you want to show low engagement? Just to get a lower bonus?"

Other ways to measure engagement are valuable but less quantifiable. Providing the opportunity for anonymous (and often difficult or embarrassing) questions through an online program can allow your team to vote for the most popular ones. This tells you what is on the mind of your employees and is also a good barometer of how the team is feeling. In addition, "walking the aisles," quick one-on-one chats with team members at all levels, where you ask what they like and dislike about working with the group, can be helpful.

Over time you will identify people who have their finger on the pulse of the organization, and some of them will be comfortable being brutally honest with you on how the team is feeling. At MassMutual, I had several team members who could provide valuable input on how the team was doing, and how certain actions might be received. I have found many women were better attuned to the feeling of the troops than the men. We can debate the reason, but, stereotypically, women have more leadership attributes than men. (By the way, this is one reason I believe when this century is over — I won't be around to see it — it will be viewed as "the century of the woman.")

The principal driver of engagement is not compensation, group activities, or Happy Hour, but the manager. Gallup has found that the manager, or team leader, accounts for 70 percent of the variance in team engagement. We all like working in an environment where our manager cares about us as people, values what we are doing, and actively works to develop us.

So, if engagement is so important, how do we get it? If it is primarily driven by the leaders within your team, how do you find them? Some argue that such leadership is innate. This may have been true for Napoleon, but I believe much of leadership can be taught, practiced, and improved. So, what do the leaders need to do? They need to be clear with their team members that they care about them and value them. They need to understand the needs, values, interests, and desires of each member of their team. They need to be clear to them, and the entire organization, that they value them as individuals, and appreciate their work and performance.

In addition, a leader must be clear that differences in the team are needed and valued. ***There is a clear correlation between the support for diversity and inclusion and employee engagement***. Over the years, as I looked at the engagement survey results of my teams, as compared to others in the company and to the results of leaders in my organization, and there was always a close correlation between the high scores on supporting diversity and inclusion and overall engagement. Of course, the diversity of the team is important — it shows you value difference — but you also need to have inclusion. Team members need to have the opportunity to express themselves, and a leader must listen to them and understand their thoughts and concerns. There needs to be a culture where each employee can fully express themselves at work, without feeling a need to hide or cover their differences.

In the current work environment, a critical aspect of valuing individuals' differences is to understand the needs to harmonize our lives and work. We all (I hope!) have lives outside of our careers. We need to understand what those lives are, and the needs to address them. Except for a very few professional jobs, there are opportunities for flexibility. The old days where productivity equaled "butts in chairs" is gone. You have no clue if an employee sitting in their space is focused on their work or looking on the web for their next vacation.

We all are happier — and more engaged — when we like what we are doing. At the high level, this means that as a team we need to understand the greater purpose we are all working toward. And then, at the individual level, we all like working in areas we are interested in and where we excel. Corporate America has focused way too much on assessments and tests to identify where we are deficient and then on resources to improve in those areas. (Of course, there is no downside in working to improve in every area.) But we should really focus on where we excel and then accentuate and draw upon these skills and abilities. People will be happier and more engaged if they work on what they are good at and are able to add significant value by doing so.

If we understand each other and draw upon each other's strengths and support others deficiencies, we are truly acting like a team. People don't like to disappoint other team members and want to be part of a team — in particular, a "winning team." And if your team is engaged, they will enjoy working with each other and be winners.

One action a good manager will take is to communicate to the team the results of any engagement survey. After every survey, I sent a message to the entire team on our overall scores, how they compared to the company, best practices, and previous years. I identified the strengths, areas where we could improve, and the next steps we would take to work together to drive improvement.

You also want to look carefully at, and evaluate together, the differences in any engagement survey results. First, you want all your leaders to have visibility to who scored well in some areas, and who did not. This isn't because it is a contest, but because we all can learn from who is doing well. (At one company where I worked, our head of HR was adamantly against this — to this day, I do not understand why.) Second, a good team will identify areas where there are concerns and then work together to create countermeasures to improve. In one of our team's surveys at MassMutual, the overall lowest scores were in the work/life balance area. We created a task force to work on the issue, including various groups and levels of employees to better understand the concerns, and then developed and implemented countermeasures to improve. The very fact that we were clear with our entire team that we had an issue, wanted to understand the concerns, and were working on it to improve, sent a strong message.

Don't underestimate the value of having the opportunity to grow. We have all heard the

expression: “The only constant is change.” I don’t like the word “change.” To me, it sounds like we do it, and then it is “one and done.” The better concept is “next.” What will we be doing next? However, to be ready for the “next,” we need to have an environment that values and encourages continuous learning and development. Just last week, I received an email from a woman whom I had encouraged to participate in a one-year African-American technology leadership development program. After she completed the course, she received the award for being the most transformed. You could see how proud she was. No surprise: She will be one engaged employee!

As you work with an engaged team, accomplishments will appear, and you will be among the winners. With that in mind, do not forget to recognize those leaders on your team who have highly engaged employees working for them — this is not an accident. Also, if leaders cannot improve the engagement of those under them — it is time for a new manager. If the manager was once a strong individual contributor, put them back into the role where they were good. I have been shocked by how often peers who have had continually poor engagement scores remain in place.

Often the “excuse” an executive will give for low engagement is that to meet corporate expectations or to reduce costs they are implementing necessary changes and even job eliminations. ***There are no excuses for a lack of engagement!*** Such an excuse insults the intelligence of our teams. I have found that if the reason for change is clearly articulated and understood, and the process is clear, transparent, and fair, engagement actually goes up. Our employees expect our leaders to lead. So even under such circumstances, low engagement is a very telling sign on the ability of the leadership to drive change. If I were a board member, I would ask to see the engagement survey scores of all of the key leaders in an organization, including the CEO.

In addition to recognizing the leaders with engaged teams, also recognize the individual results of all team members. Positive reinforcement is much stronger than negative. Make it clear that you appreciate and value their performance — and hope they like each other and have fun while doing it. Yes, those “fun” things and events — pool tables, Friday beers — do have some value. And if your leaders and employees are showing up for them, laughing, happy, and enjoying each other — that is a clear result of engagement. If the leaders don’t show up to interact with their team members on such a personal basis, that tells you something too. Leadership and getting exceptional results really isn’t that difficult or complicated. Focus on your employees’ engagement!

References

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