

How Do You Define Employee Engagement?

By Michelle Winkley and Colleen Lauria



One of my clients was recently expressing his frustration over lack of employee engagement within his company. He showed me the Xbox, the free drinks, and the espresso machine and wanted to know why all of these perks weren't leading to greater engagement. He read all about how progressive companies like Google and Juniper Networks were dealing with building employee engagement – why wasn't it working for him? What was engagement anyway?

So I put my HR hat on and told him what I knew:

Employee engagement is an emergent property of the relationship between an organization and its employees. An "engaged employee" is one who is fully absorbed by and enthusiastic about his/her work and so takes positive action to further the organization's reputation and interests. An organization with high employee engagement might therefore be expected to outperform those with low employee engagement, all else being equal.¹

When employees care—when they are *engaged*—they use **discretionary effort**...

Then my client walked away. Mid-sentence. I had lost him.

The reality is that lots of companies are struggling with this issue. According to Gallup, 70% of US workers are not engaged at work.² Engagement programs and employee engagement consulting is big business – we do surveys, run engagement programs and internal marketing campaigns, promote value statements etc. Still we find it isn't working, at least not wholly.

Then I had my “aha moment” as Oprah would say. Last week I was a guest at the launch of a five-year project. Approximately 1300 employees, families and friends were invited to witness the launch first-hand. As I watched this small team congratulate their leader it dawned on me that I was witnessing true and organic employee engagement. This group of employees worked for over 5 years to create a successful project. There were no major incentives that drove them - they did not earn an extra bonus or extra time off; they did it because they wanted to. I asked the group how they came to have so much engagement with such little formal engagement efforts. Here is what I learned:

Recruiting - The team was handpicked. They “hired” the right people. Each person added something to the team. For some it was a stretch assignment, but all members brought a skill to the table.

Vision - The goal of the team was clear. The “how” was not always clear, but the “what” and “why” were.

Goals - Each team member knew exactly what he or she was responsible for and worked with others to get it done. The leaders made sure that the team had what it needed to get the work done.

Leadership - With a small budget, no incentives and an uphill battle, the leader led his team through example, honesty, and the secret ingredient...passion. The passion for the work was so contagious that it drove the team to success.

Teamwork - The team came to appreciate its personal connection. They spent time together on breaks, learned about their families, dreams, likes and quirks. They created inside jokes and rituals, such as the \$1.00 swear jar and a super hero day that encouraged everyone to emulate their favorite super hero.

No one wanted to be the weak link, so they all worked hard and supported each other. This was the real key to their success.

So the formula for true employee engagement?

- 1) Recruiting—Hiring the right people is the most important thing a manager can do. Don't settle for a candidate because you need to fill the role.
- 2) Vision—Leaders should make sure every member of the team knows the vision for the job and the department and how the vision drives the success of the business.
- 3) Growth—Give employees the opportunity to learn from each other, mentor others, and grow professionally.
- 4) Communication—Include the team in updates, brainstorming and problem solving. Don't forget to celebrate successes big and small.
- 5) Leadership—Engagement programs are effective, but they do not replace leadership. Nothing is more effective than a genuine and PASSIONATE leader.
- 6) Fun—Teams are made of people, and people need to connect both around and outside of work. This is where engagement programs play a major role. Make sure that happy hours and team events translate into personal connections.

I went back to my client immediately and revised my answer: **employee engagement is the right people being led by a passionate leader.**

The Xbox, free drinks, and espresso still remain, but more importantly, we have implemented leadership training and recruiting success factors. We have even figured out how to use the Xbox as a connection tool! Early feedback on these changes has been positive. Through communication and training we have promoted two people into supervisor roles whom we would not have thought of as supervisors before. One of the new managers is already leading through passion.

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1 Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Employee_engagement

2 Gallup – <http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163007/state-american-workplaces.aspx>