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Why engagement is not enough

by Keith Ayers

So much has been written about the subject of employee engagement in recent years, and yet The Gallup Organisation's ongoing research indicates that average levels of engagement of the Australian workforce have not changed much over the last decade, if at all.

Professor Roger Collins in a recent article for Human Resource Magazine stated that "engagement has run its course." He went on to say: "Instead, companies should aim to focus on wellbeing as their key strategy."

Are we even clear on what employee engagement is?

I like simple definitions, and the one that makes the most sense to me for engagement is "switched on." When you engage the gears in your manual car, they are connected and ready for action. Employees who are "switched on" are alert, thinking about what they are doing and about how they can do a good job. Employees who are "switched off" are doing their job, but just going through the motions.

We've all been on the receiving end of a switched-off customer service representative or shop assistant, and we don't like it. In fact we will most likely switch to a competitor for service, assuming we can find a switched on person there.

You can't keep good customers or grow your business with switched-off employees. In fact you can't achieve anything beyond average until your employees are switched on, or engaged. We have to start with engagement because until people are switched on we can't get them to do anything productive. Then we need to go beyond engagement to get employees to be innovative, use their initiative, and be willing "go the extra mile." Or is that the extra kilometre these days?

So I don't think "engagement" itself has run its course, as much as the methods employers use in attempting to engage employees.

I agree with Professor Collins that the motivation for engaging employees has become very employer-centric. Many organisations are attempting to increase engagement for their own reasons... to improve productivity, drive out waste, increase customer satisfaction etc. The focus is on the benefits to the organisation.

Employees aren't stupid. They will see through any attempt at increasing engagement where the organisation is not really interested in meeting the employees' needs.

In the current economic environment, employers desperately need to get employees involved in reducing waste, improving the way work is done and increasing customer satisfaction. But they have to want to help their organisation do that... they have to care about their organisation's success. And it's hard for them to care about the organisation when they feel like the organisation doesn't care about them.

I remember a conversation I had with a Personnel Manager early in my career as a consultant – yes it was before they became Human Resource Managers – and we were talking about the importance of recognition. His response was: "Why do they need recognition; we pay them, don't we?" I think a lot of managers have the same attitude towards engagement. "Why do we have to pander to people to get them engaged? They should be thankful they have a job!"

And I understand that thinking – there is such a thing as an employment contract:

you get paid for working. So it seems logical that everyone would understand that and just get on with the job. But the reality is that you employ people not robots. People have feelings... so do you. If someone treats you with disrespect or doesn't care about your needs as an individual, are you going to want to give your best to them?

■ Five basic needs

Employees who are passionate about the work they do and the organisation they work for are your most valuable employees. Passionate employees create passionate customers because of the value they create for the customer. What many leaders don't realise is that passion is not a magical, elusive quality that employees have just by luck.

There are five basic needs employees have, that when satisfied on an ongoing basis, result in an ordinary group of workers becoming a passionate, high performing team. The problem is that it requires leadership skills that many leaders don't have. Here are the five levels of needs and the leadership skill needed to satisfy each:

Level 1 – The need for respect

It is almost as basic a human need as oxygen – everyone needs respect. And yet so many leaders unintentionally treat their team members with disrespect. People don't feel respected if they are not listened to; when decisions that affect them are made without their input; when they are not compensated fairly; or when their need for a career/family balance is dismissed. The leadership skill needed to satisfy this need sounds simple – treat people with respect. But to do that, leaders need to believe in people – to focus on building trust with team members by trusting them.

Level 2 – The need to learn and grow

This need is as natural as it is for a baby to need to get up and walk. We are born with an innate curiosity that drives the desire to learn, unless that desire has been extinguished by life experiences. Even then, the thirst for knowledge and new experiences can be reignited by a leader

who is skillful at coaching and mentoring. These skills bring a significant return to the organisation as employees become more talented and productive.

Level 3 – The need to be an “Insider”

Insiders have a strong emotional connection to the organisation. They know they're part of the team; they feel valued and involved. Exceptional leaders value the unique differences each team member brings to the team, encourage their participation in problem-solving and decision-making, and involve them in looking for ways to improve performance.

Level 4 – The need for meaning

Meaning comes from knowing we are doing something worthwhile – that we are “making the world a better place” for others. When employees understand the purpose of their work and how it makes a difference to others, they reach a higher level of engagement and commitment. The leader can play an important role in satisfying this need by ensuring every team member aligns the purpose of their role with the purpose of the organisation, and aligning their personal values with the organisation's core values.

Level 5 – The need to be on a winning Team

The term team spirit says it all. When a team works together so well they outperform even their own expectations, passion is a natural outcome. The ability to bring a group of people together and turn them into a high-performance team is a skill all leaders should have. But really, that skill is the combination of all of the leadership skills described above. It takes time to develop these skills and conscious effort to continue to use them to build that high performance team.

Underlying the successful application of these leadership skills is the leader's ability to see their team members' needs to be at least as important as their own needs. In fact, by putting your own needs aside

and focusing on the needs of your team members, your own needs will be met to a much higher level than if you were to just focus on your own needs.

You have to give, to get. You have to give value as an organisation to get high levels of profit. You have to give to your employees, to satisfy their needs, to get their best performance. There is no other way to create a great organisation.

So if your organisation is not seeing results for the efforts you are making to increase engagement, it may be time to review the objectives of your initiatives. If the honest response is that the primary objective is to benefit the organisation, therein lies the problem, and the solution. If you are serious about making sure customers are passionate about your business, get serious about igniting the passion in your employees. ■



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