

## **Get Connected: The 8 Secrets to Powerful & Meaningful Employee Engagement**

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What is one of – if not the *most* – crucial ingredients to business success? Many would say sales and marketing, customer service, or manufacturing. Obviously every business function is important. But, unless there is employee engagement, business success will always seem to be out of reach.

Ironically, the best assets for creating business success are right in front of us—the people—who are too busy answering blackberries and cell phones to properly engage with the real human beings right in front of them. Teams would rather take a conference call meeting down the hallway in their cubicle than to be in the same room as their colleagues. Often they are checking email rather than contributing 100%. Even multitasking, workaholics and office gossip are forms of disconnect. Employee disengagement needs to be addressed to boost employee focus, performance, retention and loyalty. What is disengagement costing you?

According to the *Gallup Management Journal's* Employment Engagement Index (and other global studies) most employees are not actively engaged. According to Gallup, only 29% of employees are engaged in their jobs, while 54% are not engaged, and 17% are actively disengaged. With over two-thirds of the workforce sleep walking through their daily activities, it's no wonder the lack of employee engagement is costing business billions every year.

According to The Corporate Executive Board, those companies that can move employees from low to high engagement can experience increases in productivity of over 21%. “I can clearly see the difference,” says Mark Erickson, the owner of a contracting business in northern California that builds custom homes. “When I first got into the business I worked with a company that focused only on profit – not people. Turnover was probably over 50%. With my company, I've placed a premium on engaging my people. There are guys on staff who've been with us for over 20 years – and they still love their jobs. Employee engagement makes a huge difference.”

Research shows engaged employees demonstrate more confidence in themselves and in the company, 53% higher belief in the organization's product quality, 45% more proactive customer service and 49% more impact on positively affecting costs. This means our common sense intuitions are right on target: happy, enthusiastic, engaged people perform at higher degrees of quality, productivity and morale.

The big question though is: How, in this incredibly mobile and disconnected culture, can we cultivate engagement?

### **Engagement begins with leadership.**

Engagement begins at the top. Whether you are a CEO, business owner or a department manager, employees will respond to your level of engagement. They look for cues that

you are sold-out on the company vision; that you truly care about the success of the business; and, perhaps most important, that you care about them – that you really want them to have high levels of personal success. How often, and to what extent, you engage with your people will determine a large part of their engagement.

Human nature being what it is, people respond to strong and consistent leadership. Having a leader they can model, trust and have belief in is paramount to a basic cultural desire. Provide this and they will run through brick walls for you, and ask “How high?” when you ask them to jump. Strong leadership is the most powerful and effective employee engagement tool you have.

As you impart your own brand of leadership – and empower your managers to do the same – there are eight principles or actions that, when implemented, secure a strong foundation for employee engagement.

**#1 Hire for Attitude.** The best way to cultivate engagement is to hire people who exemplify strong character and positive attitude. Not only do these people work hard, they want to do well and care about the company. Even if they don’t have every skill or a boatload of experience in the functions you need, a person with strong character and a good attitude can be easily developed. Skills can be taught – character cannot.

**#2 Create Buy-In.** What do your employees really want? When you sincerely ask, the responses you receive may surprise you. It’s not all about money. In fact, more and more surveys are showing that employees want to make a difference; they want learning and growth opportunities; and they want to be included. And, yes, they want to be compensated fairly and have future opportunities for advancement. But, it all begins with asking – and following up.

**#3 Throw out the carrot-and-the-stick.** Cash bonuses are nice, but they often backfire. Once a practice of giving bonuses is implemented, people develop expectations year after year. And one of the things they expect is that bonuses will grow. The other thing they can do is create an extremely competitive internal environment. Go back to #2. What do your people want? Instead of bribing them into productivity, identify what really drives them—their intrinsic motivators. Hint: their core values *are* their internal drivers. When individuals align their decisions, actions and personal values with the organization’s values and vision, engagement is guaranteed to expand. Those are incentives that are priceless.

**#4 Catch them in the act.** Of doing something good. Employees typically only expect to be spoken to if something is wrong or needs to be fixed. Through your proactive engagement as a leader, you will have a higher degree of contact with your people. One way of catching people doing something good is to practice “walk-around leadership” where you go to them. Sincere and personal connection has a significant impact. It costs so little and saves so much. Plus they begin to look forward to seeing you knowing you are acknowledging strengths and successes.

**#5 Use the personal touch.** By its very nature engagement is personal. This means creating relationships. Human nature is pretty easy to follow – the more you do to engender trust, the more faithful employees will be. This comes about not by directing them, but by coaching them. Ask open-ended questions that start with “How” or “What”. Allow your people to express opinions and thoughts freely. Honor and validate what they have to say. This approach creates connection – and the more connected people feel, the better they perform.

**#6 Go deep at every position.** Some day you are going to retire. Who will replace you? You may have that in mind already, but, what about other key people in the organization? What happens when they retire, become promoted, take maternity leave, or move to a different city? Do you have a plan for their succession? Taking your succession plan to the next level is smart. It also gives people a sense of place and a deeper connection to the long-term vision and plans you have for their role in the organization.

**#7 Stop the fence jumpers.** Head-hunters are on the prowl 24/7 – and they’re talking to your top performers. You can cut them off at the pass. By following the path of engagement – creating relationships and building trust – your top people will feel far more comfortable in letting you know when they are being pursued. While this may make you uncomfortable, it is inevitable that other companies will notice your top people. Being proactive will eliminate a surprise resignation and the scramble to replace a nearly irreplaceable performer. The “Grass is Greener” syndrome *can* be eliminated.

**#8 Grow leaders.** A sure way to create engagement is by making a commitment to invest in strengthening the leadership skills within every employee. A company of leaders is a company of engagement.

During these turbulent, changeable times, employee engagement takes on a whole new significance. As people are asked to do more with less, if a person isn’t engaged they will be seeking greener pastures – and the chance of them sleepwalking through the day increases. 25 years ago 64% of a company’s value was determined by their tangible assets. Today, however, 80% of a company’s value is determined by the intangibles – like employee engagement.

This makes sense. After all, a company whose employee’s value their performance is a company whose performance increases its value. Remember, employee engagement involves performance, priorities, passion & purpose. Overlook any one of these key requirements and it will cost you, the employee and the organization.

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