

What Employees Want

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It's not money or flex hours. Rather, employees want to feel they are a good fit in the organization, are clear about their job, are supported in their role, are valued, and are inspired.

By Brady Wilson

Getting the very best from employees has become the holy grail of the training and human resources industries. Millions of training dollars are spent to determine how to achieve a state of "flow" where workers are functioning at a high level of productivity, efficiency, and engagement. But can this be sustained for more than a few days? And is it even possible?

The answers to both questions are a resounding "Yes." And the benefits lead to bottom-line results. We've seen organizations boost their employee engagement and report a year-over-year doubling of their sales growth; reduce their returns and credits by 50 percent; set new safety, productivity, and customer service records; and save millions on their bottom line through increased efficiencies. In fact, when employee research and consulting firm Towers Perrin-ISR conducted a 2006 study of 664,000 employees worldwide, it found a 52 percent gap in the one-year performance improvement in operating income between companies with highly engaged employees versus those with low engagement.

However, the path to getting there is not the one most of us would think of taking because it's right in front of our eyes.

Stairway to Engagement

The first step is to know what we want from our employees. That's easy enough. We want them to be happy and energized at work, and well equipped to consistently deliver their best results.

And what do employees want? As it turns out, it's not what we think. For years, employers have focused on the tired old habit of handing out perks such as pay raises, performance bonuses, extra vacation time, and even preferential treatment such as the coveted corner office or weekend at the company condo in Lake Tahoe. Less-inspired employers have their own method of inspiration: threats of layoffs.

These motivators aren't necessarily bad ideas (with the exception of threats, of course), but it's short-term thinking that inevitably leads to an eventual drop in performance again. After all, how motivating is a bonus check or vacation that's eight months away? Two decades of research tells us that dangling the carrot like this can't create a sustained shift in employee engagement and productivity.

I think there are a couple reasons why employers lean on these kinds of incentives so heavily: Because they're easy, routine, and tangible. Checks are easy to quantify, and days off are simple to implement. But these "solutions" miss the mark because they don't reflect what all of us as employees really want. We aren't calculating, always-rational automatons that can be bought. Incentives such as the ones described above don't address the fact that employees are human beings with actual feelings.

When Towers Perrin conducted a survey of 90,000 employees worldwide in 2007, it found that a company's financial productivity depends on its employee engagement levels. And the No. 1 element driving engagement on a global level was an employee's belief that senior management was interested in his or her well-being. Imagine that. The most important determinant of an employee's success on the job was to feel cared for. Not money or flex hours, but good, old, oh-so-human feelings.

Despite all of our efforts to bring measurable, quantifiable science to the pursuit of employee effectiveness, in the end we've just been attempting all along to hammer a square peg into a round hole. People respond best when they are treated like human beings and not like numbers.

A simple logic check confirms this to be the case in all of our work lives. If the company president takes the time to stop us in the hallway and ask about our children, don't we feel like an important part of the organization? For example, one of our clients is the CEO of a national insurance company. She makes it a point to know all of her employees by name and chat with them whenever she can. Another executive I know writes thank you notes to the spouses of employees who have been putting in long hours. How would this make you feel?

Five Drivers of Engagement

