

DRIVING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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Employee engagement has emerged as a critical leadership challenge. To illustrate this concept, consider the following scenario:

The high potential leaders of a sales organization were taking part in a development program. At the end of the program, there was an open dialogue session. One key theme that emerged in the discussion was that the individuals were struggling to lead balanced lives because of the increasing pressures they were facing in their jobs. The discussion continued for some time, and the tension in the room began to escalate. The facilitator then asked two important questions: first, she asked, “how many of you feel overworked and feel you really can’t do any more if asked by your organization?” Virtually every hand in the room was raised. Clearly this group was feeling overworked. Then came the second question: “how many of you feel there is a part of you – your creativity, passion, ingenuity – that is sitting, untapped by this organization?” Virtually all the same hands were raised.

This scenario strikes at the heart of the engagement challenge facing leaders in today’s organizations. On the one hand, here was a group of high-performing employees feeling completely overworked, under tremendous job pressure and somewhat disengaged. At the same time, the same individuals felt

there was more in terms of their passion, creativity and ingenuity that they could be giving to their organizations.

Leaders today need to be able to create inspiring workplaces that truly engage employees to give their best to the organization. The first step is to ensure that leaders have an intimate knowledge of where their employees stand in terms of engagement.

Over the past few years, we have conducted interviews with hundreds of employees at all levels and in a cross-section of sectors. We have found some striking similarities in the factors that drive engagement and the personal investment that employees make to their organizations.

1. **Being part of a winning organization:** Employees want to know they are part of a winning organization. This could mean the organization is financially successful, or that it is recognized as a thought leader among customers, or that the organization has an ambitious vision, core purpose, and well-articulated business strategy in place.
2. **Working for admired leaders:** "Admired leaders" are one of the most important non-monetary drivers of performance.¹ Organizations with a strong network of admired leaders, create the conditions for high engagement.
3. **Having positive working relationships:** Employees value positive working relationships with high caliber and professional colleagues. Employees describe being excited about the thought of coming to work with these kinds of colleagues.
4. **Doing meaningful work:** Meaningful work is often defined as work that makes a difference or has an impact to the organization. Employees often want to see how their work impacts the organization's vision and strategy. They also want to know that the organization's customers are "touched" by their work.
5. **Recognition and appreciation:** Recognition is another important driver of employee engagement. Recognition may mean monetary rewards and compensation, but it also can refer to the appreciation and direct feedback that employees receive from managers. This recognition and appreciation demonstrates that employees are valued and that their contribution is acknowledged by the organization. Recognition also means that leaders notice the often unnoticed things that employees do, to make their organizations successful.

6. **Living a balanced life:** Organizations that create cultures that value balance, and assist employees to achieve life balance will be rewarded with highly engaged employees. Work-life balance does not mean that employees are not loyal, nor committed to their organizations, it means that employees want to lead whole lives, not lives solely centered on work.

When leaders understand the factors that drive employee engagement, they are then able to create the conditions that drive higher levels of organizational performance

Notes

¹ *Corporate Leadership Council, Crafting a "Compelling Offer": Overview Of Results From Primary Research Into The Career Decisions Of High Value Employees*, (Washington DC: Corporate Executive Board, 1998).

This article is an excerpt of the book, *The Leadership Gap: Developing Leaders for Competitive Advantage* (Wiley, 2005), co-authored by Dr. Vince Molinaro and Dr. David Weiss.

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