

What it really takes for an employee to be engaged

The Globe and Mail Metro (Ontario Edition) · 11 Jun 2018 · MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

Leadership speaker and consultant, founder of Turning Managers Into Leaders

When was the last time you washed a rental car? Probably never. And the reason is simple: You don't own it. This simple reality offers a compelling insight into why some leaders are able to engage their employees with enthusiasm, and others are not. Employee engagement is all the rage nowadays: Companies are conducting in-depth surveys, consulting firms and leadership gurus are offering scads of advice. But, at the end of the day, employee engagement is about one simple word: ownership. Do your employees feel as if they have a vested interest in the short-term outcomes and the long-term success of your organization?

Keep in mind that ownership in the context of employee engagement doesn't necessarily mean that your people need to have actual share ownership or a financial investment in your organization. It does, however, mean that they care deeply about what you do, why you do it and how your customers feel about your products or services. And when employees believe that what they do matters and makes a difference, they have ownership – that's employee engagement.

So, what exactly does it take to create this degree of engagement; this level of interest and ownership that would get your employees to not just wash the cars, but also check the oil and rotate the tires? It's certainly not coming from highlevel strategic engagement initiatives developed by senior management at the annual planning retreat. Nor is it a slew of engagement policies developed by a small army of bureaucrats in a backroom somewhere. Engagement happens at an individual level, employee by employee, and as a direct result of the one-on-one relationships each employee has with their immediate and direct supervisors.

All of which means that if you're a manager, supervisor, team leader or any other title that has direct responsibility for people, then your behaviour and actions will unequivocally determine how engaged each of your employees are. This is a weighty responsibility, one that you should not take lightly. So here, then, are four specific things you can do to engage, really engage, your employees.

GET TO KNOW THEM

Take the time to understand your people at more than just a superficial level. Find out about them, and who and what they love, both professionally and personally. When you know more about their kids, their pets, their hobbies, their career goals, their long-term hopes and desires, not only do you get a deeper understanding of what drives them, but you

also build a relationship. And when things go awry in the day-to-day world of work, it is these very relationships that will encourage your employees to roll up their sleeves and help you determine what went wrong and how to fix it. This is ownership.

PRAISE THEM

And don't just praise benign generalities, but recognize specifics. Whether your employee stayed late, went above and beyond to solve a critical issue, helped a co-worker or followed through on a commitment to a customer, be specific in your appreciation. And it's absolutely fundamental for that praise to be valuable – you can't just think about it; you must verbalize your praise to the employee. Praise and recognition don't count unless you actually say it, out loud, to the person concerned. When praise is specific and timely, you will see employee engagement.

TRUST THEM

You hired your employees because they're proficient at what they do. So trust them to use their good judgment to assess known risks and make decisions. Will they always get it right? Probably not, as hindsight always proves some decisions to be suboptimal. Nevertheless, give your people the flexibility to act. They have the knowledge and skills to determine when and how things need to be done, so let them. When you trust your employees, you permit them to take ownership. And when they take ownership, they're engaged.

INVEST IN THEM

The ultimate indicator of your commitment to employees is when you invest time and resources into helping them grow. This happens when you give them chances to learn and opportunities to progress, or when you give them access to expert mentors or you grant them the ability to stand up and keep going, even after they fail. In the process, you create ownership. Funny thing: When you commit to your employees, remarkably, they commit back to you. Ownership equals engagement.