Employee Engagement:
A Basic Competency Managers Must Master

Think back to your childhood for a moment. Mom or Dad was frustrated and frantically looking all over the house for something. Finally, he or she found "it" and lamented: *Why is it ALWAYS in the last place I look?*

Employee engagement is a lot like that. Businesses continue to look for competitive advantages. They benchmark. They build new buildings and invest in new technology. They outsource and work to get "lean." They hire consultants, attend seminars, and struggle to manage rapid change. Then some of these organizations stop, think, and begin to actively involve a natural resource that has ALWAYS been there - their employees.

They go beyond theory and concept to practical application and values-based behaviour. The result: they unleash extra commitment, effort, and loyalty - the three components of engagement - from their workforce. This engagement helps accelerate productivity, innovation, customer service, quality, and many other desired business results.

The first step in building employee engagement is for YOU to become engaged in the process. Do that and you will have earned the right to expect others to follow your lead. Here are a few key practical ideas, actions, and behaviours to execute that really work to build and sustain engagement.

Let Values Be Your Guide

When organizational and personal values are brought to life, employee engagement often follows. This is because following values - walking the talk - builds trust, and that trust produces leaders who are respected and followed. Then, it's a short trip to employee engagement because of the positive work environment that is created.

- With few exceptions, all employees want to contribute to and be part of something special, noble, good, and right, and they want to work for good people whom they respect. Being values-driven - applying the ideas and strategies that follow - will help you meet both of these employee needs. Be sure to clarify your instructions and other communication by using specific language so everyone is on the same page. It's difficult to "walk the talk" when the "talk" is either unclear or confusing.

- **Keep it real.** Receiving direction from your leader with unrealistic time frames can lead to values "shortcuts". So make sure the time frames you set for assignments and projects are doable. Ask team members for their input - and adjust accordingly.

- **Add a caveat.** When planning projects and activities, write down what you intend to accomplish, then add the phrase "... in a way that reflects and supports our organizational values." Evaluate your final plans and the eventual results against this add-on criterion.

- **Target what's out of sync.** Identify, address, and correct specific behaviours that do not support the values of your organization. This can include behaviors that negatively affect both internal and external customers.

Communicate Your Way to Commitment

Most employees want to know where their organization is going, why it wants or needs to go there, how they can make meaningful contributions, and what are the potential personal benefits to be gained by supporting the business and its goals.

The more they understand those things, the greater the likelihood that they will be committed to, and engaged in, their jobs. And the way you, as a leader, help team members develop that understanding is through communication.

- **Address the Triple I.** Share personal stories with your staff that exemplify identity, importance, and impact. Identity addresses pride to be part of the organization/team. Importance emphasizes the criticality of following procedures, processes, and organizational values. Impact expands employee's appreciation for their roles on the team and the positive differences they can make.

- **Try the X7 Strategy.** Identify your most critical messages and repeat them seven times over a one-month period- using different communication techniques and media. The more you reinforce key messages, the more your people will understand what's truly important...and remember it.

- **Expand your personal communication to 1-2-3.** First, share information in a timely manner through oral, written, and electronic means. Second, enhance understanding of the information by describing how employees should apply it in their daily activities. Third, reinforce key messages through repetition.

Concentrate on Change

Change is inevitable and, unfortunately, so is its potential for anger, confusion, fear, and uncertainty. When you add the fact that often people are being removed from their comfort zones, you can understand how engagement might suffer. Let's face it; it's tough to be engaged with what you perceive as a "moving target" - especially one that is creating insecurity or fear.

Leaders can have a significant impact on how team members deal with change - and the spill-over impact on engagement as well. You can minimize those natural obstacles to engagement by helping people understand, accept, and work through change more effectively and less painfully. Here's how...

- **Share what you know.** Send clear messages about upcoming changes. Include when, how, and who is affected and in what way. When messages involving change are cascaded through your organization, they need to be delivered with clarity and detail.

- **Embrace it yourself.** Demonstrate support for and commitment to any changes that are taking place. Set the tone and example for others to follow. By showing the way, you become the facilitator of change rather than the dictator, a mere messenger, or a victim.

- **Separate resistance to change into two categories: obstacles and objections.** The obstacles are things that people can't control, the objections are emotional barriers. Remove as many obstacles as possible and have one-on-one discussions about objections.

Keep Your Finger on the Engagement Pulse

It's important to determine what your team's level of engagement actually is – right now. Does your perception of, and intuition about, your team's engagement match reality? Maybe...maybe not! Are you overlooking any existing engagement strengths and weaknesses? Perhaps ... perhaps not! Could you make even better engagement decisions if you continually kept your finger on your team's engagement pulse? ABSOLUTELY YES! Here are a few ideas:

- **Pay attention.** Are team members consistently arriving right at shift start and leaving as soon as clock strikes quitting time? Do they turn off their cameras during Zoom meetings? Do they turn their cameras off in 1:1 meetings? Are they participating or sharing in meetings? Behaviours like these are typical signs of some level of disengagement.

- **Listen to what people are saying.** Do you periodically hear comments like: That's a great idea - bring it up at our meeting tomorrow - they'll listen to you. Or, Last night, I was thinking about how we could do this even better. These are the types of comments engaged employees make.

- **Check the numbers.** Look at absenteeism, attrition, and the quantity and quality of people posting for jobs on your team. If attendance is high, turn over low, and the applicant pool strong, you likely have a highly desirable, engaging work environment.

- **Watch what they wear and carry.** Do employees willingly wear or carry items (caps, shirts, coffee mugs, backpacks, folders, pens, etc.) with your business name or logo on it? People who have pride in being associated with an organization tend to be more engaged in their jobs.

Intelligent, busy leaders will build and sustain employee engagement by actions not good intentions. Yes, you may call them basic leadership competencies...we call them essential!

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