Stop Trying to Make Your Employees Happier

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Workplaces are facing what Gallup (2017) calls a “worldwide employee engagement crisis,” with four out of six employees simply collecting a paycheck or, worse, actively sabotaging the organization, leaving only two of every six employees to carry out the organization’s objectives and mission. This trend spans decades and is not getting any better.

Conventional wisdom was to create a company culture of employee satisfaction. Companies offered perks and benefits such as child care, gym memberships, robust retirement plans, health insurance and holiday bonuses. Those things did nothing to improve engagement; all they did was encourage the disengaged to stay on the payroll by adding golden handcuffs (i.e., “I hate my job but I can’t leave because of the health insurance benefits”).

The next evolution of chasing employee satisfaction in the hope of increasing engagement was to offer flex-time and telecommuting. This only gave more opportunity for the disengaged to simply collect a check with even less effort, deploying the out-of-sight-out-of-mind trick. Further damaging the ability to increase productivity levels, flex-time and telecommuting added a layer of sequestration to engaged employees. It also created silos and hampered cross-functionality and collaboration. Free lunches and foosball tables are not going to get it done either.

To date, management has treated the symptoms of disengagement, applying bandages to bullet holes. Trying to make employees happier will not move the engagement needle. Chasing happiness is like chasing a bird; when you think you are close to capturing it, it flies away. Instead, we should treat the root causes of disengagement and give employees the tools they need to get work done efficiently. Help them feel a sense of agency in their own futures and in the future of the company.

Four Ways to Move the Engagement Needle

1) Clarify work expectations. Miscommunication is a leading contributor to disengagement. Gallup (2017) data show that only 13% of employees strongly agree that leadership communicates effectively. Leaders must clarify their own thoughts and expectations first. How do you think your thoughts? Do you have a clearly articulable process of how you think? If not, and the data indicate that 87% of leaders fall into this category, how can you communicate effectively and with clarity? Attending a training class on communication will not help. Only 13% of employees clearly understand, receive and, therefore, act on your messaging. Attending a communications class without first learning how to think clearly is akin to sending people to a diet and exercise class without teaching them how to change their thinking about fitness and nutrition, and expecting that to fix the obesity epidemic.

2) Switch from a survival mind-set to a thriving mind-set. Only 15% of employees strongly agree that their organization’s leadership inspires enthusiasm about the company’s future. Stop defaulting to just putting out fires. Stop using the do-more-with-less mantra. Give people what they need to do their work. Invest in technology and efficiency. The more employees feel the company is operating in survival mode and wasting time with inefficient, reactionary processes, the more checked-out they will become. A thriving mind-set says, “We can always generate more money, we can never generate more time. How can we utilize everyone’s time more effectively to generate greater revenue?”

3) Provide career development. Give employees a sense of agency in developing their futures. If you cannot increase learning and development spending, leverage the existing budget by using talent development solutions based on the latest science and research. Spend resources to create self-managing employees. Traditional management is external, which is what has created the disengagement epidemic. Manage means to be in charge and control. Developed self-managers are in charge and control of themselves. They are committed and engaged internally. It means having employees who are committed to the company mission and values, not people merely compliant with them.

4) Promote positive coworker relationships. Take a top-down approach to facilitating better coworker relationships. Start with the CEO and executive level. A full 62% of executives and managers alike are disengaged (Gallup, 2017). That means in a boardroom of 10 executives, at least six are disengaged. Set a good model for what workplace engagement, clarity of thought, enthusiasm, thriving mind-set and communication should look like in leadership, then retrain the other levels of staff.

Each of us, employee, manager, executive and CEO alike, bear responsibility for our own engagement. The magic happens when we fully engage with ourselves, then persuade, influence and guide everyone in the organization to take on that same responsibility. Engagement, like disengagement, is contagious. Happiness is fleeting, but fulfillment through purposeful achievement is sustainable.

References