



Creating Engaged Employees in a Downturn Market

Due to challenging market conditions, employers have responded with various cost cutting measures like reductions in force, low or zero pay raises, fewer parties, and cuts in training budget. Although these measures may be necessary, left unbalanced they can create negative impacts on employees like fear of job security, stress, low morale, reduced commitment, turnover, reduced productivity, or low motivation. Given that employees are the heart and soul of an organization, these challenges can have far reaching implications affecting performance in sales, service, productivity, creativity, and profitability.

Engagement

In the book, *Engagement by Allegiance*, it states: "Engagement is the emotional bond that employees have with your business." Employees who are engaged work with passion, are results-oriented, are confident, take pride in their organization, and are committed to doing whatever it takes to help their company be successful. Engagement is a measure of an employee's commitment, job satisfaction, feelings of purpose, pride, job commitment, and discretionary effort. In his article "The Drivers of Employee Engagement" Robinson D. Perryman found the following behaviors in engaged employees: 1) belief in the organization, 2) desire to work to make things better, 3) understanding of business context and the 'bigger picture', 4) respectful of, and helpful to, colleagues, 5) willingness to 'go the extra mile' and 6) a belief in the organization's products and services.

Disengaged employees, on the other hand, not only reduce productivity and are unhappy at work, they actively undermine the work of engaged employees. During tough times, or anytime for that matter, who do you want working for you?

Organizations must work to engage the employee, who in turn has a choice about their level of engagement. How does an organization engage an employee? David Zinger states "employee engagement is created through caring connections with others in the workplace and connections to our work."

Balancing with Engagement Actions

As organizations, we need to counter balance the fear, stress, and morale issues created when implementing cost control strategies. The following actions help provide employees an

opportunity to engage. The approach for each employee depends on his or her needs.

I) Communication – Keep employees informed on business strategy, monthly performance, new product introductions, success stories, and anything positive that can be shared. But don't sugar coat it; tell employees the challenging news as well. Employees feel included as part of the company, when they are in on things, good or bad. During challenging times increase communications. Be open and forthcoming with information. Seek feedback from direct reports and be a good listener. Allow employees to vent and express concerns. Employees can't perform well or be productive if they aren't clear about what it is they're there to do and the part they play in the overall success of the company. Be sure to communicate expectations. "The vision is really about empowering workers, giving them all the information about what's going on so they can do a lot more than they've done in the past." --Bill Gates

II) Line of Sight -- Create a vision of where you are going, define the strategy on how you will get there, and then let employees see their role in how they make a difference. Help employees see how what they do matters to your customer and overall organization.

III) Appreciation, Recognition, Gratitude and Celebrations – Catch teams and individuals doing the right things both informally and formally. Show appreciation and thank employees whenever possible, in ways that are meaningful to them. Empower and train leaders to do effective recognition within their work teams. Give them tickets to local events, ball games, movies or dinner, to use when they see an opportunity to say thank you. A timely, well meaning pat on the back can go a long way in helping employees feel appreciated. Celebrate little successes, results, observed values, and behaviors you want to see repeated.

IV) Involvement - Companies utilizing high-involvement practices show superior performance. In addition, workers in the high-involvement organizations show more positive attitudes, trust, organizational commitment, and intrinsic enjoyment of their work. Perhaps one of the strongest drivers of engagement is a sense of being valued and involved. This is best accomplished by involvement in decision making to the extent employees feel able to voice their ideas and have

managers listen to and value these views and contributions.

- V) Optimism** – The belief that goodness pervades keeps us moving forward. Being optimistic inspires our teams to expect favorable results and a desire to excel that is not hindered by negativity. Be honest, yet look for the positive, as you communicate the vision of where you are going.
- VI) Surface Concerns and Resistance** – Keep a pulse on employee satisfaction and other key engagement indicators, by conducting annual employee opinion surveys and keeping an open dialog between managers and employees. Do more than just get their opinions, act on the feedback. Get to know your employees, especially their goals, their stressors, what excites them, and how they each define success. Create an atmosphere where employees are comfortable coming to you with concerns.
- VII) Employee Growth and Development** – The opportunities employees have to develop in their jobs is another key driver of engagement. Keep employees aware of career opportunities and empower them to pursue them. When possible, provide development tools, job experiences, and training to meet the demands. Today, many employees are more involved in managing their own careers. Organizations should seek opportunities to encourage and empower self-development. A lot of training and work experiences can be done utilizing internal talent and opportunities. Strive to promote from within.
- VIII) Positive Interactions** – Create positive interactions between leaders and employees and between co-workers. Subtle changes in tone or behavior that suggest disjoint or conflict between employees, leaders, or managers can result in disengagement. Build relationships born of trust. When you trust employees, they feel honored and respected. But, when you fail to trust them, they feel undervalued and become disengaged. Train employees in problem solving and conflict resolution skills so they can solve their own conflicts. Champion an “all for one, and one for all” attitude.
- IX) HR Practices** – Understand and plan for future staffing needs. Hire the right staff levels and the right people in open positions. Emphasize training and development, utilizing the strengths of existing staff. Assess those who have skills that may be needed elsewhere in the company. Shift cross-trained workforce to other functions, as needed. Effectively manage and recognize performance. Focus on your top talent to ensure they stay as the bear market becomes a bull.
- X) Good Leadership** – Possibly the biggest contributor to engagement is the relationship employees have with their manager. Managers clearly have a very important role in fostering an employee’s sense of involvement and value. Hire the right person in the beginning to ensure a strong fit with the position, team, and company values. Help employees see how they fit into the organization’s

larger strategic direction by giving them line of sight. Conduct effective performance management discussions, ensuring clear expectations and providing positive feedback. Know, embrace and communicate the organization’s strategy. Keep employees informed, especially of things that impact them. Create vision, direction and strategy that fosters engagement while being open to employees helping to co-create the organization’s vision and direction. The more attention a manager gives employees, the more likely the engagement. Bring out the best in others by playing to their strengths. Know employees aspirations and empower them to reach it. Forge mutually beneficial connections between individual aspirations and company goals. Constantly ask for employee feedback. Consider having a dialog where you say something like, “It’s one of my goals to constantly improve as a manager. What would you like to see me do differently? What could I be doing to make your job easier?” Then accept the feedback graciously and express appreciation.

XI) Job Enrichment – Whenever possible build motivators into the job and work experience like feelings of accomplishment, enjoying the job itself, recognition, goal attainment, adding value to the organization, challenge, and personal growth. Don’t rely too heavily on carrots and sticks to drive motivation. Building intrinsic motivators into the job and letting employees be self motivated is much more engaging in the long-run.

Attempts to raise engagement levels in any market require quality managers, two-way communications, alignment of business strategy with employees, internal cooperation, development focus, commitment to employee well being and clear, accessible HR policies and practices to which managers at all levels are committed. Pay attention to culture; help redefine each employee’s career giving them line of sight with their future and act on employee input. Some employees give their all and do their best no matter where they work. But, the majority require the guidance of skilled managers who welcome their ideas, ask for feedback, and generate enthusiasm in order to have a sense of purpose and energy about what they do.

By Ken Spencer, President and Sr. HR Consultant

*Ken Spencer, SPHR, MHRM, President, and Sr. Human Resources Consultant, HR Service, Inc., (801) 685-8400
Ken@HRServiceInc.com, www.HRServiceInc.com. Call for assistance with engagement, training or opinion surveys.*

Sources: The Drivers of Employee Engagement, Robinson D. Perryman; SHRM Fidello Training Technologies, Retaining and Motivating Your Best Employees in Today’s Economy. 9 Ways to Keep Employees Engaged, JoAnna Brandi.