GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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Invest, Listen & Coach

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Leaders and managers of teams are frequently looking for more engaged employees. At all levels there are teams comprised of people who just don't seem to care about their job that much, at least not compared to previous generations, and performance is suffering. This problem is compounded by market headwinds where leaders need increased results with existing staff. Fortunately, there's a proven playbook for increasing employee engagement.

What does "employee engagement" mean?

The first thing to address is that most people don't have a great definition for employee engagement, even those who regularly promote their company initiatives around team culture. It's nearly impossible to improve what isn't defined, but fortunately, Gallup—which has done more research into employee engagement and outcomes than any other organization—provides this definition: Employee engagement is the extent to which employees are involved in, committed to and enthusiastic about their work and workplace.

Most everyone would agree that employees being involved in, committed to and enthusiastic about their company is a positive thing. But Gallup has found that there are significant business outcomes that strongly correlate to highly engaged teams. According to their State of the Global Workplace report, teams who are the most engaged compared to those that are least engaged realize 21% higher profitability, 17% higher productivity and 41% lower absenteeism, in addition to 24% lower turnover. Employee engagement is far more than a nice-to-have; it's a game-changer when it comes to the bottom line.

The problem that many companies encounter when attempting to increase engagement is that they go about it the wrong way. These are the firms who say they're all about their people and regularly post online about fancy uniforms, new equipment, company cookouts, baseball games, charity events and celebration dinners complete with trophies and gift cards. To be clear, there isn't anything inherently wrong with these things and they can be nice gestures for employees. But they don't move the needle on employee engagement. In fact, these initiatives sometimes cost a lot of money and often breed entitlement among staff who now regularly expect the next event. Worse yet, pulling back on them demotivates staff.

What drives employee engagement?

Gallup has found a correlation between 12 psychological metrics and positive business outcomes. They're things like: Knowing what's expected of me; having an opportunity to do my best at work; having a manager who cares about me; and feeling like growth and learning is occurring. Employees need to strongly agree that their basic needs are being met, that they're making a quality contribution, that they feel like they belong to a quality team and that they're able to experience growth to be engaged on the job.

The research on employee engagement actually has a very long history. In the 1960s, psychologist Frederick Herzberg developed his two-factor theory. He found that workplaces can offer two types of characteristics called hygiene factors and motivation factors. Hygiene factors never lead to high employee satisfaction or motivation, but removing or reducing them always reduces employee satisfaction and motivation.

Hygiene factors are things like good pay, workplace conditions, paid insurance, vacations, retirement benefits and job security. A certain level is required by law and a certain level may be expected in a market to be competitive, but providing a higher level doesn't deliver employee engagement.

Motivation factors, however, always lead to increased motivation and satisfaction. They're things like challenging work, recognition for achievement, responsibility, opportunity to do something meaningful and involvement in decision making. These are never required, but the lack of them are often the reason employees leave companies.

Despite the history and science, many conversations over engagement and their outcomes always end up focused on hygiene factors. Leaders seek to reinvent their referral bonuses, scheduling policies, social initiatives or benefits package hoping to get better results with their teams only to be disappointed again and again.

So what can leaders and managers do to start improving employee engagement right away? Start with regular coaching conversations with employees. A weekly one-on-one meeting between a manager and direct report, preferably done at a standing time, is the gold standard for building trust, consistency and engagement. In these meetings, employees should be asked about how they feel about their job and performance.

Conversations should focus on alignment between expectations, finding the right tools to be successful (including physical tools, software programs and team support) and how employees can use their unique talents to accomplish outcomes. Often times, goal setting is an effective framework for starting this conversation. Asking, "What are your daily, weekly and monthly goals right now?", "What does excellence look like for you?" and "What support will you need from me to help?" are excellent questions for any person in any role to improve engagement.

It's important to understand that asking these questions doesn't mean that whatever response is given by employees becomes the plan. Managers and employees must find consensus on all expectations and goals should be set collaboratively. But that also means that leaders must not dictate goals and timelines in the way that many traditionally operate. Starting a dialogue and exploring the employee's perspective is an empowering way to make them feel valued (another key indicator of employee engagement) while inviting them to be more involved in their own performance.

For employees who do have a clear understanding of what's expected of them and how they may achieve it, conversations can shift to themes of belonging to a quality team. This may sound like inviting employees to suggest how operations can be improved or how the purpose of the organization inspires them daily. Asking, "How can our team improve quality or efficiency?", "How can we better serve our customers?" or "What are you most proud of that we accomplish here?" can help explore these concepts.

Finally, employees should discuss concepts of growth and development, both personally and professionally. Perhaps the largest hidden cost for every organization is the expense of turnover when an employee departs. Between replacement costs of hiring (job boards, interview time, administrative costs), lost productivity from an empty or backfilled position, and onboarding and training ramp-up time it's often estimated to cost a company at least 150% of the annual salary of an employee who leaves.

One of the best ways to prevent such costly turnover, while also recouping a return of a more productive worker, is to invest in training and development at all levels. Asking, "Are there things you'd like to learn to do your job better?" "What do you envision for your career growth?" or "What is a dream for yourself you maybe haven't shared much?" can help employees and managers work together to provide growth that drives both retention and performance.

True engagement isn't built through perks or quick fixes; rather, it's cultivated through meaningful conversations, clear expectations and real opportunities for growth. When leaders focus on what truly drives motivation, they not only reduce costly turnover, but unlock higher performance, stronger teams and lasting loyalty. The path to better results next season begins with managers who commit to listen to, coach and invest in their people. **GT**

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