

The Science of People

Engaging employees is the secret to moving forward.

When was the last time you asked your employees, “What are you doing?” Now try and remember the last time you asked your employees, “How are you doing?” In today’s economic climate, changing that first word has the power to change your business. All businesses have felt the recession’s impact. The U.S. Small Business Administration says small business owners have been hit particularly hard. In 2008, more than half a million closed and more than 40,000 went into bankruptcy. In this culture of survival, businesses often make a critical mistake: They focus so much on cutting back they lose sight of what keeps them moving forward. And what is that? Engaged employees.

Making sure employees are engaged is one of the most cost-effective ways to improve productivity and profitability. But the numbers on employee engagement are not encouraging. A 2010 Gallup Poll reported that only 33 percent of employees are actively engaged (passionate and connected to the company’s outcomes), 49 percent are not engaged (putting in time but minimal energy) and 18 percent are actively disengaged (acting out to undermine those who are engaged). What does this mean for small businesses? The bad news is more than 70 percent of your employees may be disengaged. The good news is if you have disengaged employees, you also have the resources you need today to increase your bottom line.

The Power of a Conversation

Unleashing the potential of your workforce doesn’t have to be expensive. It does, however, require an investment. Small businesses have to be willing to invest the time and energy to better understand what drives employees to be invested in the success of the company. This understanding grows out of utilizing soft skills – listening, motivating, communicating and inspiring. Business owners, managers and supervisors have to look beyond measuring what their employees are doing and start paying attention to how their employees are doing, shifting their mindset from being a “boss” to becoming a “leader.” Leaders have conversations, cultivate relationships based upon trust and work to connect with their employees as individuals. Employees leave managers, not companies. The most effective managers never try to fix weaknesses; instead they focus on reinforcing and developing strengths and talent. By doing small things differently – being aware of their disposition, expressing appreciation and recognizing solutions rather than spotlighting problems – leaders can ignite employee enthusiasm.

From Job Descriptions to Strengths-Based Positions

Employee engagement also thrives in response to strength-based management. Most businesses manage their employees based on a 1950s construct: the job description. In the fluid environment of the workplace, however, job descriptions rarely capture the realities of performance. This disconnect between the description and the actual job can cause employees to disengage, creating a “that’s not in my job description” work environment where employees are more committed to their job description than they are to the company.

Company cultures driven by employees’ strengths, however, inspire engagement. The center of this business model is the core belief that everyone has the talent to be exceptional at something. The trick is finding that talent. Some companies invest in personality assessments. I like the Attribute Index because it provides a full picture of an individual’s soft skills – behaviors, values and attributes. But tapping into people’s strengths can also be as easy as having a conversation. When employees are working within their strength areas, they are engaged in the outcome.

Final Thoughts

These recommendations may seem theoretical, but consciously creating a relationship-based, strength-driven workplace has real implications for your bottom line. Cathy Greenburg's study on the Science of Happiness in Business demonstrate that positive manager-employee relationships lead to a 27 percent increase in employee engagement, a 66 percent reduction in the time it takes to get a product or service to market, and a 76 percent gain in productivity. In strength-based working environments, turnover dropped by 14.9 percent.

Re-evaluating doesn't cost money. Not doing so may. In this economy, businesses have to rethink what it takes to run a successful company – hard skills and rigid job descriptions, or soft skills and strengths-based positions? The most profitable companies realize that employee engagement is not a human resources initiative – it's strategic for the way they do business.

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