Employee Engagement: A Leaders Priority

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"The more I talk to athletes, the more convinced I become that the method of training is relatively unimportant. There are many ways to the top, and the training method you choose is just the one that suits you best. No, the important thing is the attitude of the athlete, the desire to get to the top." **Herb Elliott**

Abstract-*A leadership priority is emerging — how to improve employee engagement within companies: There have been disquieting developments in recent times. All over the world, good employee policies exist in the manuals. However, the management capability to engage with the workforce and to implement the policies humanely is under pressure. Most organizations today realize that a satisfied employee is not necessarily the best employee in terms of loyalty and productivity. It is only an ENGAGED EMPLOYEE who is intellectually and emotionally bound with the organization who feels passionate about its goals and is committed towards its values thus he goes the extra mile beyond the basic job. Employee engagement is a powerful retention strategy. An engaged employee gives his company his 100 percent. When employees are effectively and positively engaged with their organization, they form an emotional connection with the company. Employee engagement is a barometer that determines the association of a person with the organization. It is about creating the passion among associates to do things beyond what is expected from him/her. The objective of this paper is to analyze the importance of Employee Engagement, measures, drivers, how to improve employee engagement, how it will have an impact on other employees, how turn-out as a win-win situation for both employer and employees and to analyze the future trends in employee engagement.*

Key Words: *Employee Engagement, Employee Retention, Engaged Employee, Retention Strategy, Job Satisfaction*

Introduction

Employee engagement is an idea whose time has come. Employee engagement is the level of commitment and involvement an employee has towards their organization and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance with in the job for the benefit of the organization. It is a positive attitude held by the employees towards the organization and its values. Engagement at work was conceptualized by Kahn, (1990) as the 'harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles. In engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances. The second related construct to engagement in organizational behavior is the notion of flow advanced by Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990). Csikzen tmihalyi (1975) defines flow as the 'holistic sensation ' that, people feel when they act with total involvement. Flow is the state in which there is little distinction between the self and environment. When individuals are in Flow State little con scious control is necessary for their actions. Employee engagement is the thus the level of commitment and involvement an employee has towards their organization and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance with in the job for the benefit of the organization. The organization must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee.' Thus Employee engagement is a

barometer that determines the association of a person with the organization.

HR practitioners believe that the engagement challenge has a lot to do with how employee feels about the about work experience and how he or she is treated in the organization. It has a lot to do with emotions which are fundamentally related to drive bottom line success in a company. There will always be people who never give their best efforts no matter how hard HR and line managers try to engage them. "But for the most part employees want to commit to companies because doing so satisfies a powerful and a basic need in connect with and contribute to something significant".

Aspects of Employee Engagement

Three basic aspects of employee engagement according to the global studies are:-
  i. The employees and their own unique psychological make up and experience
  ii. The employers and their ability to create the conditions that promote employee engagement
  iii. Interaction between employees at all levels

Thus it is largely the organization's responsibility to create an environment and culture conducive to this partnership, and a win-win equation.

Categories of Employee Engagement
According to the Gallup the Consulting organization there are there are different types of people:-

Engaged- Engaged "employees are builders. They want to know the desired expectations for their role so they can meet and exceed them. They're naturally curious about their company and their place in it. They perform at consistently high levels. They want to use their talents and strengths at work every day.

They work with passion and they drive innovation and move their organization forward.

Not Engaged- **Not Engaged** employees tend to concentrate on tasks rather than the goals and outcomes they are expected to accomplish. They want to be told what to do just so they can do it and say they have finished. They focus on accomplishing tasks vs. achieving an outcome. Employees who are *not-engaged* tend to feel their contributions are being overlooked, and their potential is not being tapped. They often feel this way because they don't have productive relationships with their managers or with their coworker's.

Actively Disengaged- The "actively disengaged" employees are the "cave dwellers." They're "Consistently against Virtually Everything." They're not just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. They sow seeds of negativity at every opportunity. Every day, actively disengaged workers undermine what their engaged coworker s accomplish. As workers increasingly rely on each other to generate products and services, the prob lems and tensions that are fo stered by *actively disengaged* workers can cause great damage to an organization's functioning.

Importance of Engagement

Engagement is important for managers to cultivate given that disengagement or alienation is central to the problem of workers' lack of commitment and motivation. Meaningless work is often associated with apathy and detachment from ones works. In such conditions, individuals are thought to be estranged from their selves.Other Research using a different resource of engagement (involvement and enthusiasm) has linked it to such variables as employee turnover, customer satisfaction – loyalty, safety and to a lesser degree, productivity and profitability criteria.

Employee Engagement: A Leaders Priority

An organization's capacity to manage employee engagement is closely related to its ability to achieve high performance levels and superior business results. Some of the advantages of Engaged employees are

· Engaged employees will stay with the company, be an advocate of the company and its products and services, and contribute to bottom line business success.

· They will normally perform better and are more motivated.

· There is a significant link between employee engagement and profitability.

· They form an emotional connection with the company. This impacts their attitude towards the company's clients, and thereby improves customer satisfaction and service levels

· It builds passion, commitment and alignment with the organization's strategies and goals

· Increases employees' trust in the organization

· Creates a sense of loyalty in a competitive environment

· Provides a high-energy working environment

· Boosts business growth

· Makes the employees effective brand ambassadors for the company

A highly engaged employee will consistently deliver beyond expectations. In the workplace research on employee engagement (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002) have repeatedly asked employees 'whether they have the opportunity to do what they do best everyday'. While one in five employees strongly agree with this statement. Those work units scoring higher on this perception have substantially higher performance. Thus employee engagement is critical to any organization that seeks to retain valued employees. The Watson Wyatt consulting companies has been proved that there is an intrinsic link between employee engagement, customer loyalty, and profitability. As organizations globalize and become more dependent on technology in a virtual working environment, there is a greater need to connect and engage with employees to provide them with an organizational 'identity.'

Key Findings according to the Employee Engagement Report 2011

i. 31% of employees are engaged, and 17% are disengaged

ii. There is a strong correlation between engagement levels and age, role/level, and tenure in the organization.

iii. More employees are looking for new opportunities outside their organization than in 2008.

iv. Engaged employees plan to stay for what they give; the Disengaged stay for what they get.

v. Employees worldwide view opportunities to apply their talents, career development and training as top drivers of job satisfaction.

vi. Trust in *executives* appears to have more than twice the impact on engagement levels than trust in immediate managers does.

vii. Managers are not necessarily doing the things that matter most. The actions most correlated with high engagement are not always the ones that receive the most favorable ratings.

viii. Executives appear to struggle with key leadership behaviors, especially what's required to create a high-performance culture.

ix. Engagement surveys without visible follow-up action may actually decrease engagement levels, suggesting that organizations think twice before flipping the switch on measurement without 100% commitment for action planning based on the results.

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Factors leading to Employee Engagement

Career Development- Opportunities for Personal Development
Organizations with high levels of engagement provide employees with opportunities to develop their abilities, learn new skills, acquire new knowledge and realize their potential. When companies plan for the career paths of their employees and invest in them in this way their people invest in them.

Career Development – Effective Management of Talent
Career development influences engagement for employees and retaining the most talented employees and providing opportunities for personal development.

Leadership- Clarity of Company Values
Employees need to feel that the core values for which their companies stand are unambiguous and clear.

Leadership – Respectful Treatment of Employees
Successful organizations show respect for each employee's qualities and contribution – regardless of their job level.

Leadership – Company's Standards of Ethical Behaviour
A company's ethical standards also lead to engagement of an individual.

Empowerment
Employees want to be involved in decisions that affect their work. The leaders of high engagement workplaces create a trustful and challenging environment, in which employees are encouraged to dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy and to input and innovate to move the organization forward.
Image

How much employees are prepared to endorse the products and services which their company provides its customers depends largely on their perceptions of the quality of those goods and services. High levels of employee engagement are inextricably linked with high levels of customer engagement.

Equal Opportunities and Fair Treatment
The employee engagement levels would be high if their bosses (superiors) provide equal opportunities for growth and advancement to all the employees.

Performance appraisal
Fair evaluation of an employee's performance is an important criterion for determining the level of employee engagement. The company which follows an appropriate performance appraisal technique (which is transparent and not biased) will have high levels of employee engagement.

Pay and Benefits
The company should have a proper pay system so that the employees are motivated to work in the organization. In order to boost his engagement levels the employees should also be provided with certain benefits and compensations.

Health and Safety
Research indicates that the engagement levels are low if the employee does not feel secure while working. Therefore every organization should adopt appropriate methods and systems for the health and safety of their employees.

Job Satisfaction
Only a satisfied employee can become an engaged employee. Therefore it is very essential for an organization to see to it that the job given to the employee matches his career goals which will make him enjoy his work and he would ultimately be satisfied with his job.

Communication

The company should follow the open door policy. There should be both upward and downward communication with the use of appropriate communication channels in the organization. If the employee is given a say in the decision making and has the right to be heard by his boss than the engagement levels are likely to be high.

Family Friendliness

A person's family life influences his wok life. When an employee realizes that the organization is considering his family's benefits also, he will have an emotional attachment with the organization which leads to engagement

Co-operation

If the entire organization works together by helping each other i.e. all the employees as well as the supervisors co-ordinate well than the employees will be engaged.

Factors for Higher Employee Engagement

Here is a list of some contributing factors:

i.   Understanding of corporate goals/mission: Every individual in an organisation should have a clear knowledge of corporate goals/mission.

ii. Understanding of job and how it contributes to overall corporate goals: The employees must have a clear understanding of their job.

iii. Clear communication of goals, expectations, directions: The concerned authority must communicate the goals of the organization, department and individual level with their roles and responsibilities and must provide proper direction.

iv. Job design: The job must be properly designed to easily understand the roles and responsibilities.

v.   Job fit: A proper candidates should be allocated a proper job.

vi. Support and tools: Work environment must be supportive and tools and techniques must in place.

vii. Independence & innovation: There must always be given scope for independent work and innovation.

viii. Relationship with boss/direct reports: There must be a two way relationship with boss and subordinates and must strive for win-win situation.

ix. Clear feedback on performance: Clear and presize feedback system must be maintained.

x.   Recognition: There must be ample scope and recognition for achievements. As it will act a motivation tool for employees.

xi. Learning and development opportunities: The learning organisation may a time leads for employee engagement.

xii. Opportunities for advancement: Future opportunities in respective department or organization must be clearly communicated to employees.

xiii. Pride in organization: We must make our organization such a place that people should be proud to be part of the organization.

xiv. Employee input: Proper inputs at proper time must be supplied to the employees for effective outcomes.

xv. Employee involvement in decision making: While coming up with any vital decisions, employees suggestions or opinions must be taken or at least they must be prior informed.

xvi. Work-life balance: The job profile must match the work-life balance of the employees.

xvii.   Co-worker relationships/good team environment (enjoy colleagues)

xviii.   Fair HR practices

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Measuring the Impact of Employee Engagement
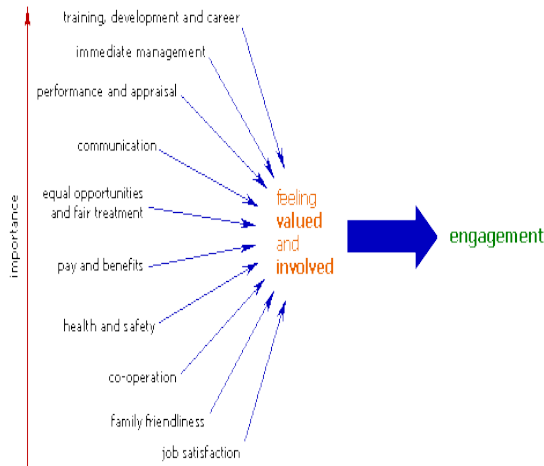
Some useful company engagement programs could include

i. A daily column, written by Directors, Chairman, on the intranet with company announcements / programs etc.
ii. Online real-time tracking of progress. Employees can view company progress towards targets / goals.
iii. Provide long term strategic vision for business growth.
iv. Employee suggestion systems / quick responses.
v. Weekly blog related to serious business issues and staff to read / comments.

The Future of Employee Engagement:

The world of work is constantly evolving. What was common practice 10 years ago is now antiquated and what was once seen as ground breaking is now viewed as the minimum standard. The question that should be in the minds of all business leaders is "what's next?" You need to ensure you are keeping up with these changing norms or risk being left behind.

If you look back in history to the agrarian model, work and family life were one with no clear distinctions between them. People were able to get a sense of personal fulfillment from growing or making something and seeing it go to their customer. We then moved to industrial model, with work being physically and emotionally separate from the rest of our life requiring us to find a way to balance the two competing forces. This was not good news in terms of maintaining passion at work, which is hard to do when you feel pulled between your personal and professional commitments. Today we seem to be swinging back to the original work life integration model and the distinctions are again starting to blur. What people are hoping to achieve is a return to the days of feeling a sense of satisfaction, a personal connection to their work. In other words, a return to feeling engaged at work.

So what specific changes have occurred in the workplace to cause this cycle and what can we expect in the future? To answer this question let's take a look at the world of work from three perspectives:

i. Where we have come from
ii. Where we are now
iii. Where I'd like to think we are heading
iv.

Where we have come from:

If you look back only 20 years you can see some dramatic differences in how we work compared to now. The workplace back then was very much a "one size fits all" arrangement and bad luck if you didn't fit the mould. This was a workplace where men and women had quite defined roles and progression was slow, particularly if the seniority rule was adhered to.

Throughout this period we did see some development in workplace culture. Organisations were starting to consider the needs of women and becoming gender friendly. People of other cultures were starting to find more acceptance as were people with a disability. Even family friendly policies were making an appearance.

Where we are now:

Fast forward to today and you will find that we now have an acceptance of family friendly policies as the minimum standard and a move towards being generation friendly. In other words, we are starting to see organisations catering to the needs of people of diverse generations. With four distinct generations now in the workforce, organisations have been forced to adapt to changing times. This could be in terms of working hours and location, dress codes or the office environment.

We have also seen changes to leadership styles with the acknowledgement of leadership as a discipline, with a more "feminine" leadership style replacing the very "masculine" managers of the past.

Where we are heading

I think we can move beyond family friendly and generational inclusion to lifestyle friendly, taking into account the needs of people of all ages, backgrounds and personal circumstances. After all, isn't that what many organisations are trying to do for their customers... to take into account their unique personal circumstances and come up with a product or service that meets their real needs rather than a generic solution that fits very few? It's about time we extended the concept to include employees.

This would require, amongst other things, customized career paths (such as those advocated by Benko and Weisberg in their book "Mass Career Customisation") and the true use of "work from home" policies rather than a begrudging acceptance of their need in special cases. We used to talk about the paperless office so perhaps the next term will be the "stress free commute". In other words, taking a few steps from your bedroom to your home office most days of the week and only going to the "office" when required.

In Employee Engagement, we must keep in mind about the implications of a social perspective. Workplace stress, caused by job dissatisfaction, is a major cause of illness and injury. Imagine if we could reduce that, taking pressure off the overloaded public health system. Workplace stress is also blamed for marriage breakdown. If we could keep a few more couples together the social security system would also get a break.

Finally, as the available pool of talent diminishes through the globalisation of the workforce and people's increasing desire to be self employed, the time must come when the goal of employers is to see full and active workforce participation by all available potential employees including women with small children, mature workers and people with disabilities. I believe if we can remove the barriers for these groups and make the workplace an engaging place for all we will solve many of our skill shortages and talent gaps.

Conclusion

Employee Engagement is the buzz word term for employee communication. It is a positive attitude held by the employees towards the organization and its values. It is rapidly gaining popularity, use and importance in the workplace and impacts organizations in many ways. Employee engagement emphasizes the importance of employee communication on the success of a business. An organization should thus recognize employees, more than any other variable, as powerful contributors to a company's competitive position. Therefore, employee engagement should be a continuous process of learning, improvement, measurement and action. We would hence conclude that raising and maintaining employee engagement lies in the hands of an organization and requires a perfect blend of time, effort, commitment and investment to craft a successful endeavor.

"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."

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