

Engagement. It's not optional anymore!

By Siobhan Murphy

The hottest topic in the Human Capital arena is Engagement. Employee engagement spells the difference between profitability and failure.

Research has shown that highly engaged teams:

- *Produce 32% higher Earnings Per Share*
- *Produce 263% higher compound growth*
- *Are twice as profitable*
- *Are three times more likely to reach target*

What is engagement?

The Corporate Executive Board defines it this way: “Engagement is the extent to which employees commit to something or someone in their organization, how hard they work and how long they stay as a result of that commitment.” This is not just intellectual assent to your company’s vision or mission. It involves the heart as well as the head. Engagement is the ability to tap your employees’ desires to make a contribution and give that extra discretionary effort that goes above and beyond the minimal requirements of their job.

According to my colleagues at HiringSmart.ca, “while we intuitively want to believe that happy employees are a good thing and that no good employer would be happy with dissatisfied employees, there is no – zero – correlation between employee happiness and business performance. Hundreds of studies over the years have tried to find one, and failed. Happy, satisfied employees are not more productive; in fact, there tends to be a negative correlation... some level of dissatisfaction with the status quo fuels passion and drive. It creates a gap between where we are and where we want to be that impels us forward.

On the other hand, there is a direct and well documented correlation between engaged employees and business outcomes. Engagement is the measure of how committed employees are, and how attached they are to delivering the team’s goals and objectives. It stands to reason that the more engaged the group, the higher the business unit’s performance and profitability.”

According to Ken Wright of *The People Pill*, “The beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, norms and practices of people within an organization, particularly the leaders, determine the level of engagement. Highly engaged teams are energized, enthusiastic and passionate about their business, love engaging customers and exceeding expectations.” Engagement is a powerful force that governs the organization’s “way of life”.

Behavior that creates disconnection

As an executive coach, I've had a front row seat to observe what works and what doesn't work on creating engagement. Some clients report appalling behavior by managers who seem clueless to what impact their actions have on their staff. Some of these behaviors include:

- Failure to assess for a good fit before hiring someone
- Bad mouthing employees behind their backs
- Accepting poor behavior, and even bullying, from employees.
- Playing favorites with staff members instead of treating all employees with respect and dignity
- Fostering internal competition instead of encouraging staff to compete in the marketplace, or even better, against a high ideal of themselves.
- Treating employees as if they were machines, relentlessly driving activity without allowing for time to recoup energy or to refill the creative well.
- Failure to celebrate successes.

While there is no universal definition of employee *engagement*, most companies agree that it involves a positive workplace where employees:

- Are committed to staying with the company
- Would recommend the company to others
- Go beyond normal duties to help the company succeed
- Are proud to work for the company

What are some of the key ingredients to creating an engaged workforce?

Fit. The *HiringSmart* system of recruiting and talent management is an approach to aligning employees with positions and cultures where they can shine. It's a whole new paradigm for staffing in a post-industrial world. Tim Brennan and Jan van der Hoop claim "One of the best ways to set the stage for engagement is to be obsessive about the *four critical aspects of fit*. When an employee clicks with their manager, when their job draws from their talents, strengths and interests, when they genuinely like their coworkers and are liked and respected in return, and when they feel they are contributing something of significance to the organization... the pieces are in place to build commitment, pride and a real desire to deliver. Fit can be assessed during the hiring process through the use of assessments and structured interviews."

Vision and Values. Articulating a compelling vision of what the company sees possible and having a common mission that everyone's activities are driving toward. This is not a statement that just hangs on a wall but a guiding light for all the other initiatives of the company. Highly engaged companies create a set of values and live by them.

The Manager. A person's boss is the most integral part of the engagement puzzle. An astounding 76% of employees who leave a company do so because of their boss! Companies with high engagement invest in the leadership development and coaching skills training of their key managers.

Strengths focus. Engaged cultures focus on strengths and what *is* working instead of focusing on weaknesses and what's wrong. Kurt Wright, in his book ***Breaking the Rules***, suggests that we can tap into the energy and creativity of the intuitive mind by learning to ask intuition engaging questions including "What's working?" It's as if the intuitive part of us is a supercomputer with enormously more energy and information available to us than our analytical, problem solving mind.

Recognition and praise. Creating an environment of appreciation has positive effects on performance, retention and health. It meets a fundamental human need.

The Stakes are High

When you consider how many hours a day we spend at work, the enormity of this issue is staggering. How we engage affects our health, our wealth and our relationships.

In ***How Full is Your Bucket?*** the authors document the ill effects on health of a work environment that does not take engagement seriously. The research, done by the Gallup Organization, outlines the ill effects on health that a negative work environment can create:

- Bad bosses can increase the risk of stroke by 33%
- Working for a boss that you dislike can significantly increase blood pressure
- Poor management can increase the risk of coronary heart disease by 1/6th.

Negativity in the workplace lowers productivity and impacts client relationships as well.

Conversely, a positive work environment can do wonders to impact engagement levels. The Gallup study, which involved over 10,000 businesses reports that an environment that includes ***recognition and praise*** positively impacts engagement, customer loyalty and satisfaction, increases individual productivity and reduces accidents.

Michael Lee Stallard in ***Fired Up or Burned Out***, uses the term "Connection Culture" to describe a workplace that embraces the necessary beliefs and behaviors that enhance connection among people and meet the universal human needs for respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, personal growth, and meaning. A ***connection culture*** is not a soft or fuzzy approach to the workplace where people hold hands and sing songs. People who experience positive human contact are more creative and better problems solvers. Neuroscientists have shown that connection enhances attention, trust in others, and reduces fear and worry.

Along with the performance metrics and quality standards discovered through Six Sigma and Competitive benchmarking practices, a way to measure the right brain based strengths or "Relational" intelligence of a company is now required. Since business culture rewards and subsequently promotes leaders with strong left brain strengths, it's time for a right brain revolution. It's not either/or, but both/and. We need the financial and left brain metrics to complement the right brain relationship based

measurements as well. Dan Pink, in *A Whole New Mind*, outlines why the time has come to value and reward the right brain strengths of Design, Story, Symphony, Empathy, Play and Meaning.

Questions for Reflection:

- What causes you to put forth that extra discretionary effort on the job?
- What challenges do you face in engaging your team?
- What skills do you need to learn to be a more effective leader?
- What do you do to ensure a good fit between your staff and the roles you are asking them to play?
- What right brain attributes do you value in the workplace?
- Are you ready to join a Connection Revolution?

We'd love to hear from you!

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Siobhan Murphy is a Master Certified Coach, Visionary, Facilitator and Speaker. She loves to work with leaders and their teams to make the transition to a vibrant new kind of working world where business is dynamic, people are connected to each other and themselves in a deeper way, and we've moved from battleground to creative playground and engagement at work. She can be reached at www.thequestconnection.com/contact.lasso. She is an Affiliate of HiringSmart. You can learn more at www.thequestconnection.com/hiringsmart.html.