

Improved Employee Engagement: The Perfect Holiday Present

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

As I am writing this column, I realize it will be published in the December issue of HR News. For most of us, December traditionally ushers in a time of celebration and gift giving.



The holiday period is often observed with a round of office parties in the American workplace, varying in complexity from the cozy homemade potluck variety to the elaborate catered celebration at a hotel, complete with a live band and free alcohol. In some organizations, people have come to expect a Christmas bonus or some other sort of tangible representation of management's appreciation for a year of hard work. However, as this December looms, many public sector employees are anticipating receiving the proverbial lump of coal in their Christmas stocking.

In many government agencies, 2011 has been a tough year. Workers have seen their fellow employees laid off, themselves being furloughed, salaries and benefits frozen or cut entirely, and politicians, jockeying for reelection, bad-mouthing government employees more than usual. All the while, the government employee's workload has typically increased as a result of higher demand for government services, often in response to the weakness in the private sector economy.

The Gift that Keeps on Giving to Everyone—Employee Engagement

What's a manager to do? How do you demonstrate that you appreciate your employees in this Scrooge-like environment? I suggest that you give an inexpensive gift that keeps on giving, for both you and your employees. Take steps to better understand the level of employee engagement in your organization, and set

in motion low-cost, high value initiatives to improve that level of engagement.

What is employee engagement? That 21st century arbiter of global wisdom, Wikipedia, defines an "engaged employee" as one who is "fully involved in, and enthusiastic about their work, and thus will act in a way that furthers their organization's interests." These are employees who eagerly go above and beyond the call of duty to satisfy their organization's customers because it gives them joy to do so.

The first published use of the term *employee engagement* was in William A. Kahn's 1990 *Academy of Management Journal* article, "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work." The term quickly caught on to the point where nearly 20 years later, in 2009, two academics, Brad Shuck of Florida International University, and Karen Wollard of Broward College, reviewed 140 articles that mentioned employee engagement. They generalized four aspects of the concept, which I paraphrase below to make them more reader-friendly:

1. Engagement is a personal decision, not an organizational decision.
2. While early definitions treated engagement as a unified concept, later definitions described three dimensions to engagement: emotional, behavioral and intellectual.
3. The employee's behavior is how one recognizes engagement.
4. Engaged behavior is that which is intended to meet or exceed organizational goals.

Having a more fully engaged workforce means happier employees and a more successful organization, so clearly it is in the best interest of both management and employees to work on improving engagement. The professional literature is clear that high employee engagement means lower attrition, fewer workers' compensation claims, less time lost to

sick leave, and measurably better organizational performance. But how does one measure employee engagement, exactly, and determine what to do about it?

How to Get Started

First, employ a well-validated survey instrument to establish baseline information about the current level of employee engagement in your organization. There are a number of commercial firms in the marketplace that can administer an engagement survey with validated survey questions. Many of them offer public or private sector benchmark information for other entities, so you can see how your organization compares with others. Before initiating the survey, launch a communications campaign within your organization so your people understand at least a week in advance that they are going to be surveyed. The communications should explain why the survey is happening, and that it is their own best interest to respond to the survey honestly and completely. Employees always wonder if their frank responses are going to come back to bite them. Using a third-party survey company has the advantage of giving employees a high degree of confidence that their individual responses will remain confidential. The third-party firm will also provide useful statistical analyses of your survey results.

However, if you have budget constraints and can do without the advantages of a third-party survey administrator, you can develop your own survey using simple survey software like SurveyMonkey and conduct the survey yourself. If you can engage a sister organization to manage the actual online survey administration and data collection for you, you can offer at least some assurances of individual confidentiality to your employees. As presented by Doug Nierle at the IPMA-HR International Training Conference and Expo in Chicago in September 2011, a set of validated

engagement survey questions and methodology are available free of charge from the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB). The set of 16 questions was administered to 37,000 federal employees across two dozen federal agencies in 2005. Each question allowed the respondent to answer using a five-point scale, from “highly agree” to “highly disagree.” The MSPB has published a useful document analyzing the results, which is available on the MSPB website, www.mspb.gov. While the data is a few years old, it provides useful and free external benchmarking information.

Here are the 16 questions, sorted by major factors affecting employee engagement:

MSPB Employee Engagement Questions

Pride in one's work or workplace

1. My agency is successful at accomplishing its mission.
2. My work unit produces high-quality products and services.
3. The work I do is meaningful to me.
4. I would recommend my agency as a place to work.

Satisfaction with leadership

5. Overall, I am satisfied with my supervisor.
6. Overall, I am satisfied with managers above my immediate supervisor.

Opportunity to perform well at work

7. I know what is expected of me on the job.
8. My job makes good use of my skills and abilities.
9. I have the resources to do my job well.
10. I have sufficient opportunities (such as challenging assignments or projects) to earn a high performance rating.

Satisfaction with the recognition received

11. Recognition and rewards are based on performance in my work unit.
12. I am satisfied with the recognition and rewards I receive for my work.

Prospect for future and professional growth

13. I am given a real opportunity to improve my skills in my organization.

Positive work environment with some focus on teamwork

14. I am treated with respect at work.
15. My opinions count at work.
16. A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit.

Sharing is Caring

Second, share the survey results—the good, the bad and the ugly—with your employees. Nothing builds trust and respect in a workforce like full disclosure. Based on the survey results, focus on the highest priority problem areas, but do pick areas where you have some control as a manager and can reasonably expect to create change. Resources and time are not infinite, and neither is your control over your organization, so focus is the key consideration here. Identify important areas where you can make the most difference, and focus your energy on them like a laser beam. Make sure you share your plan with your employees.

Third, convene a focus group of employees around the one or two priority areas on which you will focus. Arrange a facilitated discussion about what employees think would be helpful in those areas and be sure that your own ideas are put on the table. Make this focus group activity a short and sweet exercise of no more than two hours, and include the opinion leaders in your organization. If you think you'll get more frank information-sharing from your employees by using an external facilitator, by all means do that. Even if all you do is “borrow” a colleague from another part of the organization to be your facilitator, that itself may be enough to create enough distance for people to feel more comfortable opening up.

There is no Substitute for Action

Fourth, follow up. Actually implement specific actions that emerge from the focus group. These often cost little or no money. They can be relatively simple behavioral changes by managers, like providing more frequent informal performance feedback to employees, sharing information more freely on important opportunities and challenges facing the organization, and being more open to teleworking and alternative work schedules. Tell employees about what you are doing and when you are doing it, and what benefits you expect will result for them. If you don't vigorously and conspicuously act on the information you have collected, you should expect employee engagement to deteriorate because you will have raised expectations and then not followed through. It would have been better never to have held out the promise of positive change at all than to have raised employee expectations without following through.

On the other hand, if you start 2012 with a commitment to improving employee engagement and follow through on your commitments, you will indeed be giving yourself and your employees a treasured gift for the holidays, and one that will generate benefits for years to come.

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