

Connecting employment engagement to business success

BY DAPHNE WOOLF

Historically whenever companies wanted to improve business results, management dealt with specific business issues. But, by changing that focus to deal with employment engagement, corporate issues can be resolved and business success achieved.

At the lowest common denominator, a company's corporate vision drives three basic strategic objectives. The first strategic objective is financial, ensuring the company's solvency and profitability on a sustained basis. The second is operations; making sure the right structures and processes are in place for the efficiency, quality and timeliness of products and services.

The third objective relates to people. It ensures that everyone involved in the company is doing what they need to do, when they need to do it, to ensure the success of the financial and operations objectives.

Every business issue and challenge involves people. As much as they drive the strategic effectiveness of a business, when they are not engaged in their work, they adversely affect operational imperatives and financial stability. This is nothing new. What is new is

taking the approach that, in addition to people having a role in contributing to management's challenges, they can also play an essential role in identifying business issues and helping resolve them. Facilitating an environment of employment engagement can bring the answers an organization needs.

What is employment engagement?

Engagement in the workplace is not one-sided. After all, "it takes two to tango" in any situation.

The term "employee engagement" implies that just the employees need to be engaged and that their committed efforts will go a long way towards meeting the company's objectives. This is true, but it's not the whole story.

The total picture is captured by the term "employment engagement." Employment engagement implies a mutual aspect to engagement. Both the employees and the employer need to be committed to supporting each other in meeting the organization's objectives. With this approach, the onus is not just on the employee. Rather, it recognizes that both the employer's and the employees' needs must be equally in sync.

Employer's needs

First of all, employers need staff to "be" at work. This is not just about physically being at work and on time, it's about attentiveness, attitude and focus on the job.

With written job descriptions, managers specify what they need an employee to do in any given job function. Each job has a specified degree of operational requirement and expectation. Beyond this employees must do their jobs well, going above and beyond. It's about employees putting some of their selves into the role. It's bringing passion to the job, being dedicated, exceeding expectations.

If every employee was at work when they were needed, did the job according to what was required, and did that job well, then employer needs would be met.

Employees' needs

Ah, here's the rub...employees want something in exchange. Employees really only want three things.

The right level of total remuneration: Employees want to be rewarded with an appropriate quantifiable value for the work they do. These days employers can choose from a whole host of different components for the total remuneration package. Whatever is included in this

basket, the levels of compensation need to be adequate. It's not necessary to offer the highest level, it just has to be at the right level for employees to feel they're adequately valued and treated fairly.

Tools and support: Employees will do their jobs more readily if they have the right tools and support. At a very basic level, this includes things like air conditioning, an ergonomic chair, phone and computer. But tools and support can also include access to supportive leadership, mentoring, training programs, job rotation, career opportunities, clearly defined performance measurement standards and an understanding of how a job fits within the larger business context.

Responsibility with corresponding authority, recognition: In terms of driving functionality and engagement, responsibility, authority and recognition are so closely interrelated that it is appropriate to bundle them together into one category. To do their job well, employees need to be given responsibility; they need to have ownership. Any given responsibility needs to be matched with corresponding authority so that the employee feels they are being supported to succeed, not being set

See Next Page

Success with small changes builds employee engagement

Continued Previous Page

up to fail. Finally, the employee who meets the employer's requirements wants to be appreciated for accomplishments and adequately recognized. This is not about money; it's about being appreciated and respected for efforts.

The business connection

Securing an environment of mutual employment engagement is the catalyst to resolving business issues at their foundation.

If every business issue and challenge involves staff, then it stands to reason that employees have the answers. In its simplest form, the employee who has a problem articulates it only because she is also the keeper of the solution. So, it's in management's best interest to pay attention to employees who are vocal about their concerns, who speak out about problems — they are doing the organization a favour. To resolve business issues and challenges, ask employees the right questions in the right way, and they will provide the answers.

The role of surveys

We are a society of metrics. We love measurement. We like using quantifiable measurement tools and asking employees if they are happy in their jobs or feel adequately engaged. There are excellent survey tools and resources available that can help benchmark where the company stands in these areas. These surveys will tell HR where there is job satisfaction and where trouble spots exist. By conducting surveys on a regular basis, improvements and gaps can be noted.

But surveys, in and of themselves, don't resolve business

issues or promote employment engagement. Asking employees about the problem is only the first phase of resolving engagement issues. Going back to them and asking for the answers is the second.

Operationalizing survey results to ensure a real impact on the business and employment engagement is both the key and the challenge. Sometimes, management will get survey feedback and ask, "Now what do we do?" They don't know how to impact engagement issues or how to resolve the red flags. What they don't realize is that the employees have the answers.

Getting and using employee input

Too often, management is afraid to ask employees for their opinions. Afraid of what they'll say or concerned the company won't be able to follow through with the changes that are needed or suggested. There may be concerns about raising expectations that cannot be met.

So here is a model for approaching employees in a corporate problem-solving effort — be it job satisfaction, engagement, operations or other business-related issues.

Business perspective: Senior management must define the business issue, challenge or operational imperative. Start by describing the current situation, and all the effects that the problems are causing throughout the company. Then identify the desired outcome, by describing how it should be when "it's working right." Do a gap analysis, evaluating what is missing. Consider employees' role in further identifying, contributing to and resolving these issues. Define the change mandate and parameters.

What are you prepared to do and what won't you do, to resolve these problems? Ensure the entire senior leadership team is onside.

Employee perspective: Establish a process to involve employees. Segment them appropriately. Share the change mandate, change parameters and desired outcomes, and get their buy-in. Conduct facilitated discussions to keep everyone on track. Create a safe environment for feedback and ideas about what's happening and what's missing.

Strategic planning: Compare what employees have said with senior management's views. Identify connects and disconnects. Create a strategic plan with specific actions, accountabilities and timelines, and get senior management's approval.

Communication: Share the plan with employees, including the what and the why.

Implementation: Follow through and implement the plan as promised, and keep employees informed about the progress.

Determining change parameters

How much change is the right amount? Depending on the business issue, the required change may be dramatic. When it comes to facilitating an environment of employment engagement to resolve business issues, the smaller the change, the better.

The challenge is uncovering those small but effective changes that will make a meaningful difference. Small, consistent changes that indicate steady progress in the right direction build a positive momentum for employment engagement. Concise, concrete changes with a tangible impact

are an engagement enhancer. Large-scale change can be an engagement detractor and usually requires change management initiatives to ensure the desired outcome.

The more specific and contained the change or intervention, the more effective and better understood it will be by the people implementing it and experiencing the outcome. Changes that will positively effect employment engagement need to be "on the ground," not in the realm of the strategic or "at 30,000 feet."

Where to start?

With a very large or diverse workforce or multiple business issues, prioritization is necessary. This is where the concept of "engagement risk" comes in: where will the impact of disengaged employees have the greatest effect on the business? Some employers say it's with the employees who have the first contact with the customer, such as call centre staff. Others say it relates to the leadership team. Still others have said it relates to a specific location, such as where there is a pending union certification.

Wherever the greatest level of engagement risk is, that's where you start. This does not mean that you value one role, job function or location within the organization more or less than another. It is a matter of identifying the key business drivers and the related people role, and then harnessing the power of people to meet strategic objectives.

There is one caution: an initiative involving employees, either to solve business issues or to embark on a process to secure a greater degree of em-

See Next Page

Continued Previous Page

ployment engagement, should not be viewed as “today’s task” that can be ticked off a list when done. Over time, both the corporate vision and the corresponding strategic objectives are dynamic, not static. To ensure sustainability, the method-

ology adopted to secure employment engagement must be ongoing and resilient to change.

This process is a continuum. It is an ongoing initiative that must be woven into the very fabric of corporate culture, including day-to-day decision-making. Having a resilient methodology allows HR and management to

circle back on a regular basis, and change direction as required, keeping the process fresh, current and relevant.

Employees want to care. They want what is best for the company — after all, they have a vested interest. Secure an environment of employment engagement, and involve employ-

ees in business-issue resolution, and you’ll find that they are the best source for business success.

Daphne Woolf is a managing partner with The Collin Baer Group Ltd. She can be reached at (416) 461-5600 or dwoolf@collinbaer.com.

■ CASE STUDY: RESOLVING BUSINESS ISSUES AT THEIR FOUNDATION

Company	A large global financial institution.
Goal	Improve the effectiveness of the senior leadership team.
Problem	The company has 45 VPs. Five VPs do an excellent job and are role models for the organization; 15 VPs are reliable in their leadership skills, but are not exemplary. The remaining 25 VPs are lacking and do not provide appropriate leadership to their teams.
Step 1	Meet with the executive team to identify what their expectations are of the VPs, what they feel is and is not working, and what is missing between the two. Also identify what the change parameters are (operational imperatives, budget limits).
Step 2	Develop an appropriate facilitation tool to be used in discussing this issue with the VPs.
Step 3	Segment the VPs appropriately. Meet with the top performers together in one group and gain an understanding of how they view their jobs, employees, challenges, role within the organization. This provides a benchmark of what’s involved in doing the VP job right.
Step 4	Meet with the “reliable” group of VPs. Ask them the same questions as in Step 3. (To maintain the right combination of people in each group and to preserve intimacy, there were no more than six participants in any one group. As a result, multiple focus group sessions were held.)
Step 5	Meet with those VPs whose skills are lacking and ask them the same questions as in Step 3.
Step 6	Collate the data from the executive team and each VP meeting. Identify patterns, findings and evaluate what needs to change.
Step 7	Regroup with the executive team to present the findings and formulate a strategic plan with specific next steps, timing and accountabilities.

Among the findings

- The VPs who do their jobs well do so from being closely connected with their staff — both formally and informally. For them, people management is a priority.
- The VPs who do their job reliably were less focused on their people personally and more focused on meeting quantifiable outcomes.
- The VPs who were lacking didn’t have the same understanding as the executive team about what was involved in their jobs.

Some of the solutions

- The five VPs who were close to their employees collectively developed a list of guidelines related to relationship and team-building that was proven to be effective in their culture. They then helped train the other VPs, who appreciated getting help and support from someone who understood their particular pressures — in effect, “one of their own.”
- The executive team worked with HR to better articulate expectations of the leadership team at the VP level and built these expectations into annual performance management discussions. This was communicated by the executive team at a VP meeting off site. This gave the VPs the feeling that they were valued and that what they did in their jobs was of high priority to the organization.
- Initiatives related to team-building that the top five VPs had introduced with their own teams were integrated into the culture company-wide.
- All of the above was put on a one-and-a-half-year timeline. After the one and a half years, interviews were again held with all of the VPs across the country to ensure continuous improvement among these most valued senior leaders.

Outcomes

- Three VPs who were still lacking in their skills were terminated.
- Eighty per cent of the remaining VPs are now first-rate, with a smaller percentage still working towards better leadership skills but who nonetheless are still reliable performers.
- The improvement in leadership has positively impacted quantifiable business results.

Learnings

- The VPs themselves had the answers to their own leadership problems.
- Asking them the right questions in the right way got the answers to the executive team for action.
- Acting on what was heard and then circling back after the fact ensured sustained and continuous improvement.