

Closing the culture gap

A five-point plan to reconnect employees

With a good total rewards program, an organization might reasonably expect employees to be motivated to do their best and drive operational efficiency so the company will meet its financial objectives and realize business success.

But this is a costly assumption. It overlooks two huge factors in the whole total rewards equation: culture and communication. If the executive team and employees are on different pages, how effective and productive can the company be? It may be wasting valuable resources by underutilizing people while investing in a total rewards program that doesn't deliver.

Getting on the same page

The company has a corporate vision of where it wants to go, what it wants to achieve and what success looks like. This vision is supported by three strategic objectives: financial, operations and people.

In terms of financial objectives, the company sets revenue targets, return on investments objectives and share price goals. With respect to operations, it sets out processes, procedures and tactics to meet customer demand, provide the required level of service quality and differentiate itself from the competition. And if the people are engaged, committed to the company and dedicated to their role, they will help achieve financial and operational targets.

That's the company vision. A company hopes its total rewards program will be the catalyst to making that vision a reality and securing employee engagement. If it doesn't seem to be working, the problem might be unrelated to the total rewards plan. Perhaps someone forgot to involve the employees — to tell the employees what they should be striving for and why. In that case, what the compa-



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ny might have on its hand is a culture gap.

Top-down support and bottom-up involvement

The solution is, fortunately, simple: start a dialogue with employees.

The following five-step process can be used to connect total rewards with the corporate culture and engage employees. For a culture connection to be effective, it must have top-down support and bottom-up involvement and implementation.

1. The executive team articulates the executive view. The executive team gets together as a group to discuss their views on the business strategy, people strategy, work environment, career environment and total rewards by answering these kinds of questions:

- What are their business issues?
- What are their operational imperatives?
- What is the role of their people in contributing, identifying and resolving these issues and imperatives?
- What are their expectations of their people?
- What are the expectations of their people of them?
- Is there a breakdown in employee engagement?
- How is this breakdown affect-

ing the business?

- What needs to change and why?

- What are the barriers to change?

2. The executive team discusses employee expectations and parameters for change. Employees have musts, needs and wants. Employees must have effective leadership and they need to have learning and career growth opportunities. They may want to have a flexible work arrangement. The musts and some of the needs cannot be negotiated. The balance of what they need and want is up for discussion.

3. The executive team explores the employee view. The executive team then dons a different hat. They stop being executives and start thinking like employees. How would their employees answer the questions above related to business strategy, people strategy, work environment, career environment and total rewards?

4. Employees share their views. Groups of employees are asked to share their views on the same issues posed before the executive team.

Typically, a few things happen here. First, employees may be surprised and appreciative that the company is taking the time to ask their views in a coherent, focused session. Second, in hearing what employees have to say, employers are often astounded by what they learn. A large financial institution thought work-life balance was a key concern for employees. But in speaking with employees it turned out that what would really relieve employee stress was more specific performance measurement criteria. In another case, an organization in the service industry felt employees should know the detail concerning what the company was doing and why. In discussions with employees it was made apparent that employees just want the "need to know" information and preferred not to be burdened with the detail.

So, in speaking with employees and listening carefully, an employer may find previously held conceptions are unfounded. In the

context of total rewards, there may be elements of the program an employer thinks have a positive impact but may not and vice versa. Best to ask and make sure the money is used wisely.

5. Is everyone talking the same language? Compare what the executives said about the company, what the executives said they believed employees would say and what the employees actually said.

The findings clarify gaps of culture and understanding that may be compromising the company's strategic objectives, causing employee disengagement and preventing the organization from realizing its corporate vision.

How to eliminate those gaps is no mystery.

"Use plain language and make it personal," says Laurie Soper, a 16-year veteran in business communications. "You nurture trust and employee engagement when you start using the language of your employees and bridging that language with the corporate vision. You lose your audience when you impose your own language on them. Start talking their language and they suddenly start to hear you."

Don't be under the delusion that a total rewards program can achieve anything by itself. It works only if there is a coherent culture connection to give it relevance and ultimately drive employee engagement.

Once employees understand the connection between the corporate culture and their total rewards offering, the program will be that much more effective in driving employee engagement and the resulting productivity. Ensure the connection between the organizational culture and total rewards is clear through an effective communications strategy. Remember, people don't just listen when they care and understand: they get motivated, they get involved and they get engaged.

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