

## The Tools of Engagement: Boosting Employee Commitment When Money is Tight

*My employees show up for work every day, and most of them do a pretty good job. But I can see that they're counting the hours until the workday ends. I know we could do a lot better as a company if they were more excited, but I have no idea what to do. I can't increase salaries right now. Any other ideas?*

– Jeff

This question was posted a few weeks ago in an online site, and the responses immediately started pouring in. Most people offered suggestions. A few said it was hopeless, and complained about trying to engage and motivate their employees, all to no avail.

In this tough economy, the challenges are even greater. Traditional motivators such as performance bonuses are often off the table as budgets shrink and belts are tightened. Is there an answer? The good news is, yes. Employers can motivate their employees even when dollars are in short supply. This white paper will get you started on the road to better employee engagement.

### What employee engagement means

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An engaged employee is one who:

- Is committed to the goals of the company
- Is excited about his or her job
- Sees the job as more than just a source of a paycheck
- Actively looks for ways to do the job better
- Is enthusiastic about participating in the workplace
- Believes their contribution matters to the company's success

### Why employee engagement matters

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The frustrated employer in the post above understands why employee motivation and engagement matter, when he says:

*I know we could do a lot better as a company if they were more excited*

That's it! Your company will perform better; your customers will be happier, and your turnover rates and absentee rates will be lower IF your employees are actively engaged and properly motivated to do their jobs well.

## **The tools of engagement**

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There are many tools an employer can use to improve morale, boost employee motivation and raise the level of engagement, even when budgets are tight. They fall into one of four basic categories:

- What is said?
- What is permitted?
- What is encouraged?
- What is offered?

### **What is said?**

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One of the most powerful tools managers and employers have at their disposal is what they say (or do not say) to employees, around employees and about employees.

What words do you typically say to employees who are doing their job well? This is not about the “gee whiz” moment. It's about doing a job well, day after day. What words do they hear from you? See if any of these are familiar, and then read the message your employees hear.

- They hear nothing, because it's their job to do their job right. Message: Who cares if you do your job well? That's why you get a paycheck.
- They hear a request (or a demand) for more work Message: Don't do more than you have to or you'll regret it.
- They hear criticism for the one or two small things they did not do well Message: Why bother to try so hard. They always find something wrong anyhow.
- They hear nothing, because you are too busy to notice the ones who actually do their job well. It's the problem employees who get all your attention. Message: Just keep your head down and get through the day. No one cares if you do your work well. Just don't get caught messing up.

Are you seeing the problem? Saying the wrong things, or saying nothing at all, sends a message that doing a good job every single day has no value to you as the employer or manager. Is it any wonder that employees operating under this kind of manager are seldom engaged in their jobs?

Consider altering your message to reflect the real value solid workers have for your company. For instance:

- This department just couldn't survive without your hard work. Thanks for everything you do to keep us on schedule.
- You work so hard day in and day out. Why don't you take off an extra hour for lunch today? You've earned it.

These and other similar messages of recognition for daily effort can turn around an employee's attitude toward the job. The cost? A bit more effort on your side to pay attention to the steady performers, plus a few minutes to sincerely comment on it. Perhaps a thank you card with a hand-written note. Overall, a powerful, and essentially free tool of engagement.

## **What is permitted?**

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How much freedom do your employees have on the job? Is every aspect of the job controlled or are staff members allowed some latitude in deciding how to accomplish their goals? Do they have a voice in setting the goals themselves?

Study after study has proven that employees who are permitted to define certain aspects of their job, including the specific steps used and performance goals, report a much higher level of commitment to their jobs than employees who are told exactly what, how and when to do a job.

While a few jobs might require a high level of control for reasons of safety or legal compliance, most positions could be opened up to a more employee-driven model of performance. Under the umbrella of goals, which ideally the employee has helped to define, the specifics for achieving the goals could be left in part to the employee.

That freedom permits innovation. It gives the employee a chance to use his or her skills to develop better ways to achieve goals. And though it may even result in finding a better way to do an old job, it will certainly mean a higher level of employee engagement and job commitment.

## **What is encouraged?**

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What are your employees actively encouraged to do? Are risk-taking and trying new approaches rewarded?

Clearly and regularly encouraging employees to take chances and try new things is an extremely effective tool for raising the level of employee engagement. This encouragement says several things to your staff, including:

- We see you as competent
- We trust you enough to want you to try new things
- We will not punish you for looking for a better way, even if it does not work
- Your ideas matter to us
- You are a part of this team, not just an employee

All of these messages encourage employees to stretch their wings and actively participate in the process of making your business more successful. Each piece, each idea, and each motivated employee adds to the whole.

## What is offered?

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When your employee steps inside the door or goes out on to the job site, what do you offer to make the workday more interesting? What tools do you offer to help them expand existing skills or acquire new ones? What information do you offer that might improve their health or help with work/life balance issues?

Many employers limit what is offered to those things that clearly fit within the job description. What they are missing is the profound effect other skills, information or opportunities could have on overall employee engagement and performance.

Giving your employees a chance to expand their skills, whether directly related to a current job or not, improves attitude, opens doors for future job growth and improves morale. If you're sincere about improving engagement, consider offering:

- An employee library, with materials available for free checkout. Books, DVDs, CDs and CD-ROMS on management skills, time management, creativity, project design, motivation and other essential skills are great choices.
- Mini-classes on new technology to bring nontechnical employees into today's electronic age.
- A schedule of Lunch-and-Learn classes. Languages, personal finance, wellness, stress management and communication are just a few of the subjects you could cover. Tap in-company experts to share their knowledge as teachers for an additional boost to engagement levels.
- An empty office or area of the property for yoga or Tai Chi classes.
- Information on current community events, to demonstrate an awareness of your employees as people with lives within and outside of the company.
- Encouragement for employees to participate as teams in charity functions.

## Now try it!

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The tools of engagement are out there. The suggestions in this white paper are a great place to start. Remember the four categories.

- What is said?
- What is permitted?
- What is encouraged?
- What is offered?

Use these ideas to help you identify what's missing in your workplace, and to find the tools you can use to turn everyday employees into valuable team members.