

Management's plea to the employee: Engage thyself!

By LEIGH BRANHAM
Guest Columnist

"Employee engagement" continues to be an oft-repeated management consulting buzzword. If your company's management hasn't started talking about conducting an employee engagement survey, it probably will be soon.

Ever since the cease-fire was declared in the war

for talent around March 2001, corporate leaders started worrying less about keeping employees and more about getting the most out of them. Put simply, an engaged employee is one who

brings his "A" game to work, goes the extra mile and feels a strong sense of commitment both to and from the organization.

The Gallup Organization, which regularly surveys the degree of engagement among the American work force, reports that only 25 percent of workers are engaged. While this is a truly alarming statistic that translates to the loss of trillions of dollars in productivity per year, it is also explainable.



Branham

COMMENTARY

Working conditions in many companies — from overwork to lack of resources to untrustworthy company leadership — are less than ideal for optimum engagement. And we all know that many employees who have been downsized during the past decade will never be as engaged again as they once were.

As usual, line managers get caught in the middle. Senior leaders and consultants now survey employees to track the percentage of engaged employees in each department, then challenge department managers to do whatever it takes to better engage their people and improve their scores in next year's survey. While this does engender accountability for managing people with skill and emotional intelligence, there is a potential downside.

It is simply this: The responsibility for being engaged does not just fall on the shoulders of the manager — it is the employee's responsibility as well. One manager asked, "What about the employees? They shouldn't just be waiting around for the manager to engage them. Why don't we just score each employee on how well they are keeping themselves engaged?!"

By overemphasizing the manager's role in engaging employees, organizations risk creating an environment where employees may become passive, expecting all motivation and incentive to come from external sources. It is easy enough for many employees to fall into a victim mentality and assume an attitude of entitlement, especially when organizations habitually fail to seek active employee input and fail to confront poor performance.

Maintaining the fine balance between engagement and entitlement is a shared partnership between company leaders and employees. The need for both parties to meet each other halfway in the process makes it all the more important for organizations to spell out exactly how they expect employees to keep themselves engaged, as well as how managers should work to engage their employees.

Here are a few things employees can do to stay engaged:

- Go to work for managers and organizations you respect, where you feel you are "doing something" that is significant to you, not just working to have "something to do."

- Understand your best strengths, and relentlessly pursue work that makes the best use of them.

- Think of your job not as a static list of responsibilities, but as a dynamic and growing relationship between your gifts and the organization's needs. Don't wait for your supervisor to tell you what needs doing — see the need and approach your manager with solutions.

- Learn to communicate assertively with your supervisor. This is the only way not to become a disengaged victim. If you've tried and it still isn't working, find a new manager in a different department or organization.

- Finally, learn to manage your energy and stress level. This may even mean learning how to "strategically disengage" when necessary. For more on that topic, read *The Power of Full Engagement* by Loehr and Schwartz.

Most employees prefer to be engaged. As a precondition, organizations need to give clear expectations about what they expect employees to do to keep themselves engaged.

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