

# If Not You, Who? How to Crack the Code of Employee Disengagement

by Jill Christensen

Employee Engagement... it's all the rage. Why? Well let's start with the cold hard fact that per Gallup, 87 percent of global workers are disengaged. Basically, this means that the vast majority of people in the world are going to work, sleepwalking through their day, giving companies little to no discretionary effort, and doing what they have to do to get by. Doesn't sound very productive, does it?

What is the definition of employee engagement? Engagement occurs when workers trust leaders and feel an emotional connection to your company – the same way they did their first day on the job. And the payoff is enormous.

## The Case is Undeniable

Reams of data exists which shows the correlation between profitable revenue growth and employee engagement – the most successful companies in the world have the highest levels of employee engagement and are growing the fastest. Companies in the top tier of employee engagement outperform their peers by 147 percent in earnings per share and have a 90 percent better growth trend than their competition.

The benefits of having engaging workers are vast and go well beyond bottom-line results.

Engaged workers also:

- Provide better customer service;
- Stay longer;
- Make fewer mistakes;
- Recommend your company as a great employer to their family and friends;
- Are more productive; and
- Are great ambassadors for your brand.
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How's that for a case about why every company in the world should care about increasing engagement and improving their employee engagement survey score?

However, in the face of all this powerful data, many companies are clinging to the status quo, and not doing much to improve their culture and their bottom line. A recent report states that while 90 percent of C-Suite leaders say it's important to have an employee engagement strategy, only 25 percent of companies actually have one.

## Happy is Not Engaged

My guess is that if we look at the strategies which exist, many of them are not strategic at all. I'd put money on the fact that many of these strategies include things like: assemble a fun committee to plan the summer picnic and holiday party, purchase an office dog, provide free lunch on Fridays, buy a ping pong table, etc. One of the most important takeaways from this article, my friends, is that happy is not the same thing as engaged. As I say in my keynote

speech, “Engaged is when your employees trust leaders and feel an emotional connection to your company. Happy is a feeling people get when the office dog licks their face.”

Would it be wonderful if everyone in your company was in a good mood and happy all of the time? Yes. However, a good temperament is not going to ensure that your employees give you 125 percent discretionary effort every day – the same way they did their first day on the job. Being engaged will.

## Why are Companies Failing?

It isn't difficult to figure out that employee engagement matters, and has a significant impact on everyone who comes in contact with your company – your customers, shareholders, board members, contractors, and employees. Why, then, are so many companies that embark on an employee engagement journey failing in this space?

In my humble opinion, I believe little progress has been made because for the past three decades, leaders have outsourced employee engagement to Human Resources (HR). This is not a dig against HR; strategic HR people are wonderful. However, although HR “owns” culture, they don't “own” culture.

The definition of culture is *How We Do Things Here*. There is no group of people who set the stage more for *How We Do Things Here* than your senior leaders. Senior leaders “own” culture. Therefore, in order for you to succeed, HR, you must engage your senior leaders in your employee engagement strategy. They must be a part of the team that champions the strategy and all engagement-related communications must come from your CEO.

How do you get leaders to engage in employee engagement? Data. *Executives love numbers!* Why? Because you don't get to be an executive without learning a thing or two about numbers. Executives present numbers to their boards all the time and are judged on their ability to ensure the numbers are directionally correct. Therefore, gather all of the compelling data you can find which shows the correlation between employee engagement and profitable revenue growth, and share it with your senior leaders. Savvy leaders will get it and will agree to partner with HR to improve your dysfunctional culture.

## What Do Employees Need?

So what exactly should an employee engagement strategy include? From my experience, the strategy is not difficult nor is it rocket science – it's basic. In order to engage or re-engage employees, you must develop a strategic plan which fulfills your employee's basic human needs and focuses on four areas:

- **Get the Right Person in Every Chair:** Employees want to work for a company whose values align with their own individual values. Therefore, you must get the right person in every chair by hiring for a values match as well as a job skills match. In addition, if you have toxic employees, they must be developed or removed from your organization. Why? Because toxic employees act like a cancer – spreading their negativity and incompetence, and impacting the people around them. As you set out to improve your culture and re-engage employees, you cannot afford to have people in the midst who are unwilling – or unable – to get on the bus.
- **Create a Line of Sight (Goal Alignment):** Employees want to know that what they do every day has meaning and adds value, so you must ensure every person's goals are aligned with the CEO's goals. Why? When an employee's goals are aligned with the CEO's goals he/she

has a line of sight all the way through the organization, and can see that they are making a difference. Their job is important and is adding value. What they do is impacting the company's future and its success.

- **Create a Two-Way Communication Culture:** Employees want their voice to be heard, so you must build a two-way communication culture where people can express their ideas, opinions, feelings, and complaints. Why? When an employee thinks their voice matters, they feel validated and important. In addition, if you have the right person in every chair, you have smart people working for you. People who are closest to the customer and have amazing insights about what's working, what's not and what could be improved.
- **Recognize People:** Employees want to feel acknowledged and appreciated for a job well done, so you must create a recognition program that is based on thanking people for their great work. Why? When you give an employee a company-branded water bottle, you've done nothing to let them know specifically what they did that is recognition-worthy. Put away the water bottle and replace it with the words *Thank You*. Hearing those two words is a basic human need and it will inspire your employees to give you a lot of discretionary effort.

### Is That It?

Yes, this is where you begin. I liken it to building a house. The first step to building a house is to pour the foundation on which the structure will be built. Like a house, your culture needs a strong foundation on which it will be built. It can't be cobbled together or simply made up of things that make people happy. It needs to be made up of things that drive trust in leaders and an emotional connection to your company. When you focus on the four areas above, it will yield these results.

As you embark on your journey to improve employee engagement, remember that it is just that – a journey. Employee engagement is not a program or an initiative led by HR – it is a strategy. Successful employee engagement strategies are championed by senior leaders and fundamentally shift how you operate your day-to-day business.

Does this mean more work for the people involved? No, it does not. It simply means doing the things that you are already doing – hiring and firing, goal alignment, communication, and recognition – differently. It means doing these things in a way that drives enormous levels of trust in leaders and an emotional connection to your company. Make the shift today and you can begin realizing the benefits tomorrow. A win-win for all involved.

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