

Engagement starts at the top: the role of a leader's personality on employee engagement

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Companies are spending enormous amounts of money each year trying to identify and implement ways to increase engagement among their employees. Engagement is the extent to which employees think, feel and act in ways that represent high levels of commitment to their organization. Companies are right to focus on this, as engaged employees are motivated to contribute 100 per cent of their knowledge, skills and abilities to help their organization succeed (Seibert *et al.*, 2011).

Engagement, however, is not merely about making employees happier at work; it is about bringing out the best in people and tapping their full potential on a day-to-day basis.

Companies like Apple and Google have famously worked to foster engagement by offering things like free lunches, onsite childcare, themed workspaces and so on.

Unfortunately, while these perks are nice to have – and certainly contribute to a positive work culture – engagement is not won solely by external factors. In fact, a leader's personality is a more important driver of engagement than any perk. Engagement begins and ends with leadership.

Focus on employees' basic needs

Thousands of years of evolution have taught us that humans in group-living societies are driven by three main needs:

1. to have good relationships with others, or to get along;
2. to be successful, or to get ahead; and
3. to find meaning in work and life (Hogan and Holland, 2003).

In the professional environment, these needs translate to needing to be a valued part of a team, receive appropriate recognition for contributions and to achieve something meaningful.

So, of course, salary is part of this. Work performed needs to be appropriately compensated. However, research shows that salary only affects engagement up to a certain point. In fact, employees need to feel they are paid well relative to others, but the link between job satisfaction tends to plateau around the average (Williams *et al.*, 2006). In other words, after a certain point, salary is no longer a motivating factor.

In a similar vein, using “perks” as a means to enhance engagement treats it as an end in and of itself rather than part of a broader

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strategy to enhance performance. Arming employees with all the perks in the world removes barriers to getting work done – free day care relieves stress so they can focus on work – but at the end of the day, if they aren't motivated by what they are doing, no perk will change this.

Rather, an engaging work environment should focus on relational strategies. These strategies to enhance engagement must consider our primary needs: being a valued member of a team, receiving recognition for contributions and achieving something meaningful.

Research suggests that engagement comes from the development of close relationships between managers and their employees that focus on performance and on well-being. Moreover, the personality of a manager has been shown to enhance or inhibit engagement. In other words, engagement comes from leadership and leadership is driven by personality (Saks and Gruman, 2011).

Assess managers' personalities to identify potential issues

Hogan Assessments, one of the leading publishers of personality assessments, partnered with Mercer | Sirota, a consulting firm specializing in employee surveying and organizational assessments, to examine the role of personality in creating engagement.

Assessments were administered within several large organizations to measure a manager's personality and values as well as their team's engagement and effectiveness. This preliminary research has produced some very important insights. Namely, leader personality can and does impact employee engagement.

Hogan Assessments consist of three tests that measure unique aspects of personality. The Hogan Personality Inventory assesses normal personality qualities that describe how we relate to others under usual conditions. The Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI) measures personality from the inside: the core goals, values, drivers and interests that determine what we desire and strive to attain. Finally, the Hogan Development Survey (HDS) assesses qualities that emerge when people are stressed, bored or not monitoring their behavior – in other words, derailing behaviors that create obstacles for success.

The study shows that there are certain personality traits in leaders that clearly have a positive effect on engagement in their followers. Qualities such as being highly sociable can work to enable performance and create a positive team climate. Being inquisitive or curious can create an agile and open culture and enhance team effectiveness. However, high levels of prudence, or being highly organized and rigid, can negatively interfere with several aspects of employee engagement.

The MVPI results showed that a leader's values also drive engagement, or not. For example, leaders who are driven by values of altruism, affiliation and recognition are likely to foster engagement. Altruism and affiliation are related to creating a work environment focused on the well-being of others. Being high on the recognition scale can mean a leader responds well to recognition and praise, but is also more likely to recognize others for their accomplishments.

On the other hand, motivating values such commerce, security

and hedonism can inhibit engagement. Commerce refers to being driven by money and materialistic outcomes. Security relates to the desire for structure and predictability. Unsurprisingly, these characteristics may contribute to a rigid working environment that is overly focused on the bottom line. Hedonism, on the other hand, refers to seeking fun and pleasure. Managers who are highly hedonist may appear to prioritize their amusement over their employees' needs, which can breed mistrust and feelings of insecurity.

Finally, the HDS showed both that several derailleurs can affect engagement positively or negatively. For example, high degrees of skepticism and cautiousness in a leader can hurt employee engagement by creating a distrustful and risk-averse environment. While, leaders who are highly imaginative and colorful can enhance it, as these people tend to have big ideas that employees may find inspiring.

More research is needed to tease out the various ways personality affects engagement. The bottom line, though, is that when people are engaged, they find meaning at work and are proud of what they do; they are willing to go the extra mile and work beyond their formal roles or responsibilities. Leadership creates engagement, higher employee engagement equals better organizational performance and lower employee engagement equals worse organizational performance.

References

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