The Key to Employee Engagement Is Purpose. Here's Why — and How to Foster It in Your Workplace.

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Employees seem to be following a pattern of professional detachment. Since the beginning of 2020, Gallup's worker engagement polls have shown steady employee-organization distancing. In the last three years, employee engagement levels dropped four percentage points. Given it can take nearly six months to break even after hiring and onboarding new talent, leaders everywhere are contemplating strategies to bring engagement numbers up again. One solution is to focus on fostering purpose for your employees.

Why purpose? Employee engagement is the measure of a team member's emotional investment in their job, the company and their overall well-being. In other words, it's the intrinsic value someone feels. When a professional feels valued by their bosses, coworkers and employer, they are more likely to plant roots. As those roots take hold, these people become dedicated, enthusiastic advocates. They're less likely to leave and more likely to become vital ingredients to the success of their organization.

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According to McKinsey & Company's findings, 70% of professionals noted a link between their sense of purpose and what they did for a living. When seven out of 10 people say

that they equate their work with their merit, that’s a sign that it’s time to look for ways to fuel engagement among your employees.

There’s no one way to impart a sense of purpose at all businesses, of course. You’ll need to conduct some trial and error. When you do, you’ll be able to measure which initiatives are working. For instance, when the members of your workforce become more connected to their work, you should notice an uptick in innovation, productivity and morale, as well as a lowering in your churn rates. Since replacing a worker can cost up to 213% of the worker’s annual salary, that’s a huge savings that goes right back into your overall profits.

You might also see a spike in job seekers actively coming to your organization, whether or not you have openings. Your employee referral program will see more opportunities with an attractive culture and incentives. That’s a nice side benefit. Companies with a reputation for being employee-centered generally have lower recruitment costs because they’re seen as top places to work. When you’re known for your collaborative, supportive, healthy and trusting environment, you’ll naturally attract high performers. This will also have positive effects within your sales process, as your potential clients will appreciate working with top talent.

If you’re struggling with engagement, try some of these approaches to become a more fulfilling workplace.

1. Build engagement responsibilities into leaders’ profiles

Leaders need to be on the front lines of modeling purpose-driven behavior for their employees. For example, we have a

Director of Employee Engagement and Corporate Culture. This individual is in charge of knowing, communicating, organizing and measuring all engagement-related initiatives. Having this position makes sure our employee engagement is never left to chance.

As president, I'm also tasked with fostering purpose in team members daily. I have to be the first to provide the support and mentorship that I expect to see in colleagues who have direct reports. We expect our managers to create trusting, collaborative environments where they listen to their colleagues' needs and leverage that insight for everyone's success. We've gone so far as to name "Captains" on each of our teams who report back to our Director of Employee Engagement and Corporate Culture. The Captains are in charge of ensuring everyone knows about upcoming events and fostering our culture among their individual teams.

Our rising employee retention rates indicate that having a purpose-focused structure embedded into our organizational makeup encourages A-players to thrive. They take ownership of their projects and have no problem asking for help, opportunities and resources.

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2. Make time for recognition and celebrations

Work can become hectic at times. Nevertheless, it's important to celebrate the things that are going well. In the aforementioned Gallup piece, the authors made a fascinating connection between organizations that celebrated achievements and those that didn't. It turns out that companies that won Gallup's Exceptional Workplace Award in 2022 showcased more than two times the engagement rates of non-winners. Coincidence? I doubt it. I suspect it's because those

businesses are investing in the satisfaction of their people through employee recognition programs.

At our company, acknowledging the efforts of our colleagues is not considered optional. We participate in what we call “forced recognition,” which mandates that our employees recognize each other at least once per week during meetings. We also conduct monthly and quarterly company meetings where awards are presented, and we regularly celebrate team members in our Slack channels and through other celebration tools. We encourage these moments of recognition to be specific, timely and, most importantly, genuine.

We provide recognition in other ways, too. This can be through verbal means or via ceremonies, rewards, you name it. When our Sales Development Representatives schedule client appointments, we host floor-wide celebrations where each team has its own silent celebration tool. All these measures add up to a more cohesive and fun culture.

3. Offer more incentive to your employees than just a paycheck

The best way to create employee engagement is to be people-focused. That’s not possible if you aren’t open to meeting the various needs of your team members.

Take Nike as a noteworthy example. The company believes in supporting employees in myriad ways, such as providing access to continuing education and training, offering competitive insurance plans and encouraging participation in fitness programs. Nike promotes work-life balance in order to maintain an engaged workforce, and you would be wise to follow its lead in order to keep your valued colleagues from burning out. Just do it.

While it can be hard to implement what you hear – and you

might not always be able to adjust your company to the “wish list” requirements of all employees – it’s all about putting forth your best effort. In the end, establishing a culture where employees can feel purpose and satisfaction at work just makes sense. You’ll have stronger internal and external partnerships, not to mention sustainable business growth. Plus, you’ll never lose sleep wondering whether your employee engagement is waxing or waning.

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