

9 Ways to Keep Employees Engaged

Follow these tips to power up the performance of your employees and your company.

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Are your employees giving your company their all? Do they believe that what they're doing is important? Do they feel appreciated? Do they show up for work each day filled with passion and purpose?

A red flag should go up if you answered "no" to any of these questions. Why? Managers who aren't taking care of their employees are missing out on significant cost-savings and profits.

I've been spreading the word about this for 15 years, but only recently have I been able to rest my case on a growing body of research. For example:

- Gallup International recently reported that businesses in the top 24 percent of employee engagement had less turnover and remarkably higher percentages of customer loyalty, profitability and revenues.
- Extensive studies by organization and HR consulting firm HayGroup have revealed powerful links between employee engagement and productivity, which ultimately impacts a business's bottom line.
- Through real-life examples, workplace values expert John Izzo has abundant proof that this generation of employees is more conscious of their own needs and of their place in the world.

For business leaders in companies of all sizes, the writing's on the wall: You can make and save money by keeping employees engaged. Coupled with The Sarbanes-Oxley Act, requiring businesses to document internal controls relating to employee and customer satisfaction, it's never been more important for business leaders to stop dismissing internal customer care as "soft and unimportant."

Let's face it, employees aren't just humans doing; they're human beings. Today's managers must make it a priority to get to know them so they can provide whatever is needed to keep their employees fully engaged in what they do. This creates wins for everyone. With that in mind, here are nine management tips for creating and sustaining employee engagement:

1. Let go of any negative opinions you may have about your employees. Approach each of them as a source of unique knowledge with something valuable to contribute to your company. Remember that you're co-creating the achievement of a vision with them.

2. Make sure your employees have everything they need to do their jobs. Remember when you started a new school year and you'd prepare by getting all new school supplies? Why not build just such an opportunity into your department by simply asking each staff member, "Do you have everything you need to be as competent as you can be?" Remember, just as marketplace and customer needs can change daily, so can your employees' needs.

3. Clearly communicate what's expected of employees, what the company values and vision are, and how the company defines success. Employees can't perform well or be productive if they don't clearly know what it is they're there to do and the part they play in the overall success of the company. Be sure to communicate your expectations--and to do it often.

4. Get to know your employees, especially their goals, their stressors, what excites them and how they each define success. I'm not suggesting you pry too deeply or start counseling

your staff. What I'm suggesting is that you show an interest in their well being and that, when appropriate, you do what it takes to enable them to feel more fulfilled and better balanced.

5. Make sure they're trained--and retrained--in problem solving and conflict resolution skills. These critical skills will help them interact better with you, their co-workers, customers and suppliers. It's common sense--better communication reduces stress and increases positive outcomes.

6. Constantly ask how *you're* doing in your employees' eyes. I know it can be difficult for managers to request employee feedback, and it can be equally if not more challenging for an employee to give the person who evaluates them an honest response. To develop this skill and model it for your employees, begin dialogs with employees using such conversation starters as, "It's one of my goals to constantly improve myself as a manager. What would you like to see me do differently? What could I be doing to make your job easier?" Be sure to accept feedback graciously and express appreciation.

7. Pay attention to company stories and rituals. Are people laughing *at* each other or with each other? Do they repeat stories of success or moments of shame? Stay away from participating in discussions that are destructive to people or the organization, and keep success stories alive.

8. Reward and recognize employees in ways that are meaningful to them. This is another reason why getting to know your employees is so important. Remember to celebrate both accomplishments *and* efforts to give employees working on long-term goals a boost.

9. Be consistent for the long haul. If you start an engagement initiative and then drop it, your efforts will backfire, creating employee estrangement. People are exhausted and exasperated from program du jour initiatives that engage their passion and then fizzle out when a manager gets bored with it. There's a connection between an employee's commitment to an initiative and a manager's commitment to supporting it. A manager's ongoing commitment to keeping people engaged, involved in and excited about the work they do and the challenges they face must be a daily priority.

Ultimately, you must keep in mind that employees are a company's greatest assets. Their collective ideas, feedback and enthusiasm for what they do can help your business grow and succeed. Some people are naturally wired to give their all and do their best no matter where they work. But the majority of people require the guidance of skilled managers who welcome their ideas, ask for feedback and generate enthusiasm in order to have a sense of purpose and energy about what they do.