

Your employees are your firm's most valuable asset, and maximizing their happiness and productivity starts with maximizing their engagement.

business issues

SIX MYTHS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

BY MAGI GRAZIANO

WITH TODAY'S GLOBAL ABILITY to produce carbon copy technology and business models, people truly are a company's *only* competitive advantage.

Businesses that want to accentuate and optimize their competitive talent advantage focus on employee engagement strategies that improve overall workforce productivity and return on staffing investments.

A major disruption to employee engagement is the adverse impact of the unhappiness epidemic across many companies.

When employees are disengaged or disenfranchised with their work situation, performance plateaus or greatly diminishes. But when there is awareness about what causes unhappiness at work, a company can do something about it.

The drivers of employee engagement rely greatly how an employee feels about work and feels at work. It begins with the employee feeling connected and invested in the company mission and direction and continues with their having trust in the company's leadership.

The first step in creating and inspiring engagement in the workforce is to debunk the pervasive and misleading myths about employee engagement. Here are six myths disrupting companies' ability to keep people engaged:

1. A flexible work environment always fosters productivity. While remote work opportunities reduce the carbon footprint and avert hours wasted in traffic, more often than not companies do a poor job of looping remote workers into the day-to-day activities of the business.

Unfortunately, a very typically adverse impact of remote work for the employee is out of sight, out of mind. Research shows that remote workers and workers with flex time schedules receive less coaching and mentoring and miss out on the institutional knowledge-sharing and socialization that happens in the typical course of a shared workspace.

2. Strong paychecks always equal strong loyalty. Not all people are primarily motivated by money, and more often than not, fair and sustainable pay is not a motivator; it is a table stake. For years, company leaders have approached solving the employee retention problem through monetary rewards and incentives. While this economic motivator works for 20% of the population, most organizations are finding that employee spiffs and salary increases alone are insufficient in reversing the turnover trend.

For the other 80% of the working population, the money is not a lever that leads to engagement and buy in. Around 40% of people want workplace rewards in terms of more

educational opportunities, rewarding and challenging projects and a sense that they can further their knowledge and career path as a result of working with a specific company or in a certain role. The other 40% want to feel emotionally connected to the mission and service of the organization and to the customers they serve. Increasing their customer-facing opportunities is much more rewarding than a few extra bucks in their paycheck or a receiving a gift card for coffee.

If money is the only mechanism to get people to stay, it leads people using money to create to bidding wars between current and future employers.

3. Employee independence is always necessary for performance. One pervasive myth is that all employees need autonomy and independence, and the more hands-off that management is the better the employee will perform.

The reality is that autonomy and independence are not values that everyone shares. To one employee, being left alone can be a true benefit and they may thrive when left up to their own devices. To others it is a recipe for feeling disconnected, isolated and ignored.

4. A job is just a job. Today's workers, and human beings in general, are much more evolved and present to work life fulfillment than ever before. Employees today fundamentally want and need so much more than a job for a paycheck. A striking majority of workers have said they want purpose and meaning in the work they do, and that they feel happier at work when they know that what they do matters to the success of the organization.

5. Employees should be satisfied with their current position. High-performing people need to see a pathway for themselves in the role they own and in the company they work in.

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Engagement research shows that when people see a pathway for their growth and development, they provide a higher-level of consistent results for the team. When employees feel that a company is invested in their growth, they are more committed to their role and more connected to how they impact the success of the company.

6. Your company is enough to keep the employee. The sixth myth is that people go to work for a company and their loyalty to the company and brand is enough to keep them engaged and retained. What has become painfully apparent over the last decade is that people don't leave companies; they leave managers. When a good employee does not have a strong relationship with their manager, no incentive or brand loyalty will keep the employee fully engaged. People need to feel appreciated, respected, acknowledged or important. When their direct manager does not provide meaningful assignments, regular feedback and mentoring, engagement is thwarted.

While all of these perceived solutions are good ideas as components of an effective employee engagement program,

alone they are insufficient means to drive employee connection and engagement. When carrots like money, time off, autonomy and a clear career path are not coupled with alignment, good people management and "match fit," those incentives wind up costing companies millions and derive little to no benefit in the long run.

A well thought-out, conscious employee engagement program considers who people are as individuals and allows for customization in the approach to assigning work and giving feedback. Individualization is a 21st century shift from the one size-fits-all management of the 80s. A main component of a well-built employee engagement program includes highly competent management team who embraces coaching and mentoring their people.

When a manager takes the time to offer professional development opportunities, communicate how the employee's role contributes to the overall organizations success and provides rewards for great performance, employees feel valued and appreciated and engagement soars. ■