

Engagement Starts with Care

By Jessica Neville

Recently the topic of employee engagement has caught the attention of those in leadership roles, but what does it mean? Employee engagement can be challenging to implement because leaders use many different definitions. It's essential to figure out what engagement means and what it will produce for both the employee and the employer. Many organizations have found that when their members are engaged, they have higher retention, better output, and lower production costs, amongst many other things. Researchers William H. Macey and Benjamin Schneider describe engagement as "above and beyond simple satisfaction with the employment arrangement or basic loyalty to the employer. Engagement, in contrast, is about passion and commitment—the willingness to invest oneself and expend one's discretionary effort to help the employer succeed (Macey & Schneider, 2008)." Another important thing to understand is that producing an environment where people are engaged is within a leader's control. Research shows that the things that produce the highest engagement are within the control of the supervisor/leader (Shaufeli & Bakker, 2004). A 2019 study shows that the majority of reasons people leave their job is due to the negative culture and environment the employer creates (Heathfield, S.M., 2019). So how do we as leaders create an environment where people are engaged? The first step is simple; leaders need to create a place where people feel valued, and their leader cares. There is a difference between caring about someone and caring for someone; as a leader you are responsible for both.

Caring about your people

Caring about someone is a compilation of thoughts and emotions that drives our actions (see next section). In order to care about someone, it is helpful if there is common ground, something that makes a connection. It is most effective if the connection goes beyond the person's capabilities (what they can produce for you) and is also rooted in their well-being. The best way to do this is by taking action and combining the effort to care about people and care for them.

Caring for your people

Caring for someone includes action, but in a business environment, the actions should be driven by the need. It is very easy for a leader to assume their people feel care when an action is involved, but the action is only helpful if it is meeting a need. For example, a business leader can stock a breakroom with free food daily and be baffled that the employees feel unheard and undervalued. This is an example of caring for someone without caring about them. Was that breakroom food what they wanted or needed? Every action is additionally impactful when it fulfills a need. The first step is discovering what those needs are:

- Make the effort to get to know them
 - What are their professional goals?
 - What is the most effective form of communication for them?

- How do they learn best? What kind of “learner” are they?
 - How often do they want feedback about their work?
 - What motivates them?
 - What is their “Why”?
 - What are their interests and hobbies?
- With what you know about them, what efforts can you put forth to help them with their professional goals? For example: Can you structure your training program to help them learn the job better and faster according to their learning style? Are you giving them feedback in a productive way? Is there a project they can work on that will allow them to contribute a specific skill?
 - Are the current goals and incentives motivating to them?

Implementing CARE

Communicate often

Appreciation

Recognize everyone’s efforts

Environment of safety

1. Communicate often

- Get feedback. Ask questions and get their opinion about work-related things that impact them. You will find that the people closest to the problems also have the best solutions. This will make them feel valued and give you many opportunities to make the right changes.
- Give feedback. Ensure you know how often they want feedback, what they want feedback on, and how to deliver it properly.
- Actively listen. You should always do more listening than talking. It is also important to remember what they tell you; do what it takes to remember- write it down, record a voice memo, set calendar reminders, etc.

2. Appreciation – plan small acts of kindness that show you appreciate and know your team.

Take what you have learned about your people and put it to good use. Make sure you recognize their efforts regularly by providing things that THEY will appreciate. You will be able to identify these things as you get to know them; it might even be as simple as a handwritten thank you card.

3. Recognize everyone’s efforts

Make sure to spread your recognition throughout the entire team. It is easy to fall into the trap of only recognizing the highest performers, the people you are most comfortable with, the

people with more visible responsibilities, etc. If you are not careful, it can actually cause further disengagement amongst the team, especially if they feel there is an unfair balance of recognition.

4. Environment where your people feel safe and comfortable

Safety can mean many things, and for this purpose, all of them are applicable. Here are a few examples:

- Physically safe – is the environment one that can/will keep people safe if something happens? Are there plans to keep your people safe, and does the team know what they are?
- Emotionally safe – Is the environment one where people can come to you with concerns and know that they will not be blacklisted, especially if the concern is about something you did? Is there a “mean girl” environment where gossip, bullying, exclusion, etc., are tolerated?
- Professionally safe - Always keep it professional and have an expectation of professionalism amongst your team. You need to get to know your people, but make sure it’s in a professional way. Nothing will hurt a culture faster than a leader that crosses the line or allows others to cross a line. Make sure your actions always remain professional; when learning about your people, stick to the questions listed in the section above under “caring for your people.”

References

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