EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

It's not an initiative, it's an attitude.

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talent curve

Introduction

According to Gallup's renowned "State of the American Workplace" survey (2013), 70% of American workers are "not engaged," "actively disengaged," or are emotionally disconnected from their workplaces. Gallup estimates that these employees cost the U.S. between $450 billion to $550 billion each year in lost productivity. The results of the Gallup poll are not surprising and can be corroborated by countless studies, articles, and surveys. Presently, most organizations recognize that employee engagement is no longer a buzzword, that paying attention to your people—and their levels of interest in, fidelity to, and satisfaction with the organization— is a critical success factor. However, if you are embarking on your next employee engagement initiative, **STOP**. Your efforts are not likely going to make a major impact on your bottom line.

Whoa—but, what do we know about your employee engagement initiative? The fact of the matter is that if your employee engagement strategy is a series of isolated or disjointed *initiatives*, you are going to get less than optimal results. A robust employee engagement strategy is not an emphasis on programs, activities, rewards, and other initiatives. The most successful employee engagement strategy requires a fundamental paradigm shift that transcends the initiative, and evolves into a cohesive, empathic, and comprehensive organizational attitude.

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What does this mean? An organizational employee engagement attitude recognizes that people are not variables in quantifiable, time-boxed initiatives; instead they are complex and unique beings who require sustained and consistent engagement. Through a focus on the quality of this employee-organizational *relationship*, employers can create a more productive workplace.

As organizations embark on the journey toward an engaged organization, understanding how to transition from the employee engagement initiative model to adopting an organizational attitude of engagement will be crucial to prolonged success. This white paper will:

- Explain the key differences between initiative models and the attitudinal model of employee engagement
- Provide strategies to transition from the initiative model to the attitudinal model
- Give examples of real organizational scenarios that would benefit from this transition

"What's with the 'tude?"

The initiative model of employee engagement focuses on a discrete set of time-boxed activities designed to achieve a specific, measurable outcome. Conversely, the attitudinal model focuses on an organizationally accepted paradigm that continuously fosters employee growth, satisfaction, and interest without targeting a predetermined success outcome. Essentially, the initiative *ends*, while the attitude *permeates*. How do you know if your organization is using an initiative or attitudinal model of employee engagement? The following list of questions will help you figure out if your engagement strategy is initiative-based.

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YES

- ☐ Do my employee engagement activities have specific start and end dates?
- ☐ Are my employee engagement activities targeted to a specific group in my organization?
- ☐ Does my employee engagement strategy utilize only one method at a time?
- ☐ Are outcomes of one initiative used to decide if you are improving engagement overall?
- ☐ Does my strategy operate on "if, then" principles? i.e. **If** the organization does *this*, **then** the employee will do *that*.

If you answered, "yes," to any of these questions, your employee engagement strategy is likely based on an initiative model, where you launch time-boxed, or targeted, quantifiable initiatives to help get your employees more engaged. These initiatives could include: data collection (e.g. surveys, town halls, suggestion boxes), incentives (e.g. merit increases, bonuses, awards, prizes), events/activities (e.g. parties, team-building workshops, recreation), and amenities (free food/beverages, entertainment opportunities).

You may be wondering, "um, what's left?" To be clear, the initiative model has its merits, and these engagement initiatives can have a positive impact on employee engagement. However, these positive impacts are short-lived, and rarely affect productivity and profits for any length of time. Why? Because initiative models ignore the root of change and engagement: people. More specifically, they ignore the complexity of human psychological development, and neglect to incorporate the elements that actively engage diverse groups of people, with differing motivators—*for a long time*. With over 27 accepted psychological theories of motivation, reducing employee engagement to initiatives is not only simplistic, but is also largely ineffective.

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Gallup conducted extensive analyses from 2010-2012 and found that engagement differs based on variables such as type of industry, occupation, length of service, age, education level, and gender when studied at an aggregate level (Gallup 2013). As such, the organization with an attitude of engagement embraces the employee holistically; provides opportunities for growth that consider the employee's career life cycle stage and individual interests; and strives to develop a healthy, committed relationship with that employee. The figure below highlights the *key differences between the initiative model and the attitudinal model of employee engagement.*

	INITIATIVE MODEL	ATTITUDINAL MODEL
	Targeted set of activities designed to increase employee engagement	*Relationship* between organization and employee designed for him/her to thrive
	Time-Boxed; begins and ends	Ongoing; does not end
	Focuses on improving employee *work life*	Focuses on improving employee life *holistically*
	Short-term, positive impacts	Long-term, positive impacts

"I, employee, take you, organization..."

Thinking of your employee engagement strategy as developing a relationship with your employee is a fundamental building block in transitioning from the initiative to attitudinal model.

Metaphorically speaking, the organization with an attitude of engagement behaves much like a partner in a healthy marriage. The employee and the organization profess a shared commitment to each other, and then work to honor that commitment through their ups and downs, every day. In the same vein, the initiative model is akin to the romantic date that may happen once in awhile, but promises no follow-through. Thinking of your employee engagement strategy as developing a relationship with your employee is a fundamental building block in transitioning from the initiative to the attitudinal model.

If you want the long-term benefits that an attitudinal model of engagement brings to your organization, how do you make it happen? The first step is understanding what an organization with an engaged attitude looks and feels like. The engaged organization bears the following characteristics:

Employees at all levels in the organization are enabled to participate. All too often, organizations focus on C-level executives and managers. However, the people that make up the majority of the workforce, and the infrastructure of the organization, are neglected or given subpar opportunities for career development. This inattention to the average employee promotes a lack of visibility into the real challenges the organization is facing and gives leadership a skewed impression of the organization's level of engagement. The organization with an engaged attitude has an inclusive culture, and works to create developmental pathways for all employees.

Communication is reciprocal and continuous. In an organization with an engaged attitude, communication is not limited to annual surveys or quarterly townhall meetings. Employees are provided with safe and accessible communication channels to ensure their feedback and insights can be incorporated into organizational plans.

People are considered holistically. Organizations with engaged attitudes are not simply launching employee engagement strategies because keeping people is cheaper. Instead, they are focused on the employee's personal and professional growth, even if they are developed to the point where they leave the organization. The attitudinal model of engagement recognizes that employees who feel fulfilled, considered, and empowered are more likely to produce higher quality outcomes during their tenure. The goal does not stop at retaining the employee. The goal moves beyond retention to ensure the employee feels engaged enough to put their best foot forward while they are at the organization.

Motivational factors are recognized as different among employees. For an employee engagement strategy to be effective, the organization must recognize that human beings are motivated by different factors depending on their existing set of circumstances. While financial incentives may increase motivation for one employee, others may be motivated by praise and recognition. The organization with an engaged attitude creates avenues for employees to be motivated by factors particular to them.

For example, generational differences can affect motivational factors. Gallup's 2012 data showed that Millennials had the lowest employee engagement of any generation at work. In addition to their high levels of disengagement, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics reports that Millennials will be the dominant group in the workforce in 2015. A study by Upwork and Millennial Branding states that 58% of these Millennials expect to leave their jobs within three years or less. This statistic is a stark contrast to the value of long-term employer allegiance held by many Baby Boomers. When considering these factors, strategies that engage Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millenials will be drastically different based on the social mores of their times. Organizations with an attitude of engagement will appreciate these differences and consider these differences when developing a relationship with the employee.

The Attitude Adjustment

The attitudinal model of employee engagement may be understandable theoretically, but how can this transition happen in real life? Adopting an attitude of employee engagement is a complex transformation that will be unique to the particular organization, but a few tips can help move your organization in the right direction. The following three scenarios are initiative-based employee engagement strategies that can be transitioned to an attitudinal model with a few tweaks.

The Fun Workplace

The Scenario: You may have seen pictures of this place on your local "best places to work" survey. This workplace has the coolest gadgets, laundry services, sleeping quarters, hi-tech break rooms, free food, and fun parties. When employees need to unwind, they have a myriad of options which can include video games, ping pong tables, and company-sponsored happy hours. Pretty cool, huh? Sounds like a fun place to be...but does this type of workplace improve employee engagement? Specifically, does access to these types of activities inspire employees to feel *connected* to their organization—and thereby, do better work?

The Problem: Companies that emphasize "fun" at work are highly successful in recruiting top talent, but rarely have an effect on retention. The focus on novelty and convenience at a fun workplace may seem inviting at first to employees. After all, isn't it awesome for work to be your one-stop shop for all your needs and desires? The problem is, if the creation of the fun workplace is the organization's engagement strategy, the point is entirely missed. Novelty and convenience attract the employee to the perk, not the organization. The fun workplace is not creating a relationship with the employee; instead, it is creating a relationship between the employee and the perk; remove the perk, and what's left?

Changing the Attitude: An organization with an engaged attitude will not use the "fun" strategy in isolation. If employee needs and resulting engagement is the goal, fun perks will be a supplement to a much broader framework of engagement, designed to address the hierarchy of employee development needs, including: survival, social, professional, personal, intellectual, and emotional.

The Data Collector

The Scenario: The Data Collector organization's engagement strategy is based on collecting information from employees. They utilize the industry's leading edge survey tools in an attempt to understand the employee perspective on a variety of domains affecting engagement. Once results are collected, (which may have been procured by some serious employee hair and teeth pulling), the organization uses them to launch their engagement improvement initiatives. Feedback is good, right? But, does gathering data make an employee feel that his/her *opinion* counts?

The Problem: Utilizing survey instruments is a good way of getting a snapshot of how engaged employees are with the organization. However, most data collector organizations do not utilize their results in a way that truly propels their engagement strategy. In fact, many organizations use the survey as their key engagement indicator, basing their interventions on the results without drilling down to determine root causes for their results. Without this drill down and root cause analysis, the engagement strategy lacks specificity and is not tailored for the particular organization and the unique make-up of employees within it.

Changing the Attitude: Survey instruments are often time-consuming and laborious for employees to complete. However, once they are complete, organizations rarely go back to their employees for clarifications or analysis to ensure they are capturing the sentiment that accompanies the data. Although most surveys are anonymous by design, the organization with an engaged attitude will provide multiple channels for feedback to be collected, analyzed, validated, and shared with participants. Feedback cannot be provided in one direction; instead, organizations using an attitudinal model will ensure that there is a bi-directional and continuous feedback loop where employees are giving and receiving feedback to and from the organization.

The Rewards Program

The Scenario: Big bonuses, incentive checks, and awards await the employees who perform well in the rewards program organization. If employees work hard and hit targets, they can smile all the way to the bank. This organization knows that money makes the world go 'round and when the company wins, everyone wins. The rewards program organization is highly competitive and only high performers can *survive* the competition, right?

The Problem: According to results from a "meta-analysis by Tim Judge and colleagues, in which the authors reviewed 120 years of research to synthesize the findings from 92 quantitative studies and develop a combined dataset of over 15,000 individuals and 115 correlation coefficients, the association between salary and job satisfaction is very weak. The reported correlation ($r = .14$) indicates that there is less than 2% overlap between pay and job satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the correlation between pay and pay satisfaction was only marginally higher ($r = .22$ or 4.8% overlap), indicating that people's satisfaction with their salary is mostly independent of their actual salary." (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013)

If an organization is using money to engage an employee, two problems exist. First, money can be a solid motivator when an employee needs it. However, financial incentives cease to have an effect when the recipient reaches the threshold where it becomes irrelevant. What does that mean? Essentially, money stops motivating individuals once they have enough to live a lifestyle where money is not causing problems for them. The second problem is analogous to the fun workplace problem mentioned previously. Rather than creating a relationship with the employee, the initiative creates a relationship between the employee and his/her money. Money only inspires fidelity when it is a dependency.

Changing the Attitude: An organization with an engaged attitude will not use financial incentives as the core of their employee engagement strategy. Although rewards can be great reinforcements or basic motivators, a strategy based on this principle will find itself fizzling out. At an organization with an attitude of engagement, solid benefits, fair salaries, and performance-based rewards should be par for the course and should not be used to compel loyalty. Instead, provide financial incentives as a standard outside of engagement initiatives, and use the engagement strategy to tap your employees' higher order needs.

Conclusions

Creating an attitude of engagement can be a daunting undertaking for any organization. The development of a relationship with employees is complex, delicate, and oftentimes, "high-maintenance." However, like any relationship, this diligence returns the loyalty, productivity, and quality the organization requires to achieve maximum levels of success. Accordingly, a focus on adopting this attitude of engagement and a genuine effort to act in accordance with this attitude at all levels in the organization is the foundation for the most sophisticated employee engagement strategy.

For real-world employee engagement strategies and practical supportive tools, contact Talent Curve at 866-640-0230 or email us at solutions@talentcurve.com. Visit our website at www.talentcurve.com.

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