



Employee engagement is not created! It is a function of what happens inside an organisation.

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CULTURE

Beyond constraints

Successful managers who have grown up from the ranks know that they are dependent on their team members to achieve targets. In doing so, they understand that interdependence is key for collaborative ventures.

Synergies of this interdependence cannot be harnessed in the absence of a conducive work environment, which is also referred to as organisational culture, work context, or climate. If we look around, we would find that there are some corporations where people [just] work, and others in which they work as well as love what they do. In essence, we say that there are companies in which people thrive and thereby the company grows from good to great. We ask ourselves: are these people special that they are able to thrive, or is there something [special] about the inside of such companies?

This is about the forests of Fontainebleau in France, “if you go there with a thought of leisurely walk, you won’t be able to simply do so... it would be difficult for you to resist yourself from jumping to catch the branch of a tree, throw pebbles or simply run...” Goshal and Bartlett (1994) say that some organisations, inside themselves, create an environment that is similar to the forests of Fontainebleau. It is full

of energy, where everyone wants to do a little more. There are four ingredients of this thriving and energetic work environment—stretch, discipline, trust, and support.¹

Organisations with such an environment believe less in the idea of constraining their members with rules and standing orders; instead, they believe in the value of stretch. Living by this value, all members believe in stretching their limits and in contributing an extra bit. They also do not believe in the idea of compliance. They say it is about discipline. The value of discipline is intrinsic by nature and hence, members of such organisation practice even simple, day-to-day activities such as coming to meetings on time. Organisations like these, value trust and do not believe in the idea of contract. The strength of trust goes beyond the written employment contract and forms the foundation stone. Finally, the fourth and most important ingredient of a thriving work environment is support, which is in direct contrast to organisations which believe in exercising control. It is about mutual support—ranging from task resources to those that help personal well-being.

Organisations with a thriving work environment—which has stretch, discipline, trust and support as key ingredients—breed engaged employees. The point of contention here is that

employee engagement in itself cannot be created; rather, it is an outcome variable which germinates in the Fontainebleau kind of work environment. Those with such a work environment have an engaged culture within themselves.

Whose responsibility is it?

Contrary to a popular belief that employee engagement is the domain of HR, we believe that the onus rests on the immediate reporting manager to create an engaged culture. Having said so, we acknowledge that not all managers

are able to do it. When we read about some celebrated managers, we discover that these leaders are a perfect blend of doing and behaving. That is, these managers are able to do their task to perfection, and when it comes to dealing with people (including peers, subordinates and bosses), they are humble to the core. In describing such a manager, we refer to the

Level-5 theory of leadership² which describes level-5 leaders as a powerful mix of personal humility and indomitable professional will. “They were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results. . . . It is very important to grasp that Level-5 leadership is not just about humility and modesty. It is equally about ferocious resolve, an almost stoic determination to do whatever needs to be done to make the company great.”³ They are loved and respected too.

Organisational tasks are performed, at times on one-on-one basis (akin to chess) and through cross functional teams (like soccer) at other times. Smart organisations are those who are able to nurture as many Neymars and Ronaldos and as many teams like Belgium, Croatia, and France as we saw recently saw in the FIFA 2018 tournament.

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What is the binding force?

Herb Kelleher, co-founder, former CEO, and now Chairman Emeritus of Southwest Airlines said, “Employees come first and if employees are treated right, they treat the outside world right, the outside world uses the company’s product again, and that makes the shareholders happy. That really is the way that it works, and it’s not a conundrum at all.” Due to the unflinching belief in this philosophy of employees first, the entire engagement agenda of Southwest Airlines was anchored around empowerment to engage with the customers freely, freedom to design interventions, and encouraged employees to err by the customer’s side during defining moments.

Many times, we come across organisations that launch an engagement agenda with little thought to the purpose of doing so. As a result, the activity means different things to different employees and ultimately it loses its charm and punch. Hence, we believe that the binding force that keeps employees engaged with their organisation is the sheer purpose. Demystifying the dilemma of ‘why we do what we do’ is one of the key roles of any manager.

Refresh

Anything new attracts attention. It is applicable in the engagement space as well. Organisations need to constantly innovate to improve on their

engagement methodologies to stay fresh and peppy. When every other aspects of business changes, the engagement belief, language, tools and delivery mechanism also need to change and stay fit with the new wave of changes. It is difficult and yet an opportunity.

Caution! Engagement has a dark side too

Any engagement idea that is ill-conceived or badly executed or a cultural misfit may actually end up creating disengagement. At times, organisations expect the same response from

employees who are culturally different. Nothing can do a disservice to the purpose of engagement than this. For instance, a victory celebration on achieving a historic milestone in a pan-India organisation will be celebrated differently in the northern part of India as opposed to the same event in the southern part. Any attempt to compare the decibel levels at such celebrations can be culturally unacceptable.

The next miss comes under the guise of best practice adoption in the engagement space. At times, leaders with experience in an earlier organisation may attempt to cut paste what worked there with very little thought to uniqueness, strengths, and weaknesses of the present organisation. Any such retrofits are bound to receive negative vibes and should be avoided.

Too much of engagement focus may help people get along but not necessarily get ahead. In the din and bustle of engagement, we should not muzzle the voice of dissent and contrarian views. The aura engagement activities create also need to be watched with caution by the leadership team, as it runs the danger of creating a false sense of invincibility and may lead to complacency. Nokia, Kodak, and Yahoo were iconic and highly engaged teams too.

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Engagement strategies should fairly address the idea of work-life integration. At times, organisations use the props of gymnasium, 24/7 restaurant, etc, to stretch the employees' time at the desk, leading to burnouts. Sound engagement practices actually should go beyond the four walls of work and look at the lives of its employees outside work. Questions such as do they get enough time with friends and families? Do they get enough time to take a break and pursue their passions? Once a CEO was asked by an employee as to why the company is not having gym in the office like others do? The answer was: "we respect your family and personal time like no one else and hence do not want to block that any with these temptations within the premises." That was his philosophy, although received with cynicism was greatly valued over time.

What next?

The Fourth Industrial Revolution that we witness today in terms of knowledge revolution ushers in a new breed of workers into an organisation. Maslow propounded that an individual moves up the need hierarchy in an ascending order, step by step. In today's time, it may not be out of place if the original pyramid starts with self-actualisation at the first level. The audacious startups are the telling example of these trends.

So, any engagement in changing times must address the intellect, emotion, and the soul of the doers of work. No doubt, a herculean task at hand for all organisations, yet the cost of not doing may far exceed benefit of attempting.

Yes, the new normal in the engagement space is getting redefined, and one must not forget that the notion of employee engagement shall continue to evolve at a rapid pace ever, thus fitting the VUCA world. 

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