

DIVERSITY NEWS

April 2007

Yvonne: Have you ever been so involved in what you were doing that you completely lost all track of time?

Or... have you ever been so “in the flow” of an activity that your actions seemed... completely effortless.

Thomas: Have you ever had a job that you loved so much that you could not wait for the WEEKEND to be over so that you could get back to work?

Yvonne: Wow!

Thomas: Yeah!

Yvonne: The role of diversity management is to create and maintain a workplace environment in which all employees...ALL employees...can contribute to the success of their organization...to the maximum extent possible.

Thomas: Such an environment must be flexible and inclusive in order to allow...and empower...ALL employees to fully engage their work.

Yvonne: In THIS edition of Diversity News, we'll take a look at employee engagement... what it is... how it can be measured... how it can BEST be put to good use... what gets in the way... and how those BARRIERS can be overcome.

Yvonne: In the March 2007 edition of its Research Quarterly, the Society for Human Resource Management focused on the strategic role of human resources in leveraging employee engagement.

The research report identifies employee engagement as a key business driver for organizational success. In addition, the report points out that high levels of employee engagement are known to improve the retention of talent and to increase levels of customer satisfaction.

As the report points out, employee engagement is influenced by many factors, including workplace culture, organizational communication, managerial styles, leadership, and company reputation.

Other factors influencing employee engagement include access to training and career opportunities, work/life balance, and personal empowerment.

To FOSTER a culture of engagement, the report recommends that HUMAN RESOURCES lead the way... in designing and evaluating workplace policies and

practices that foster positive, effective management... and that focus on employee well-being.

Thomas: So, what IS employee engagement?

Employee engagement has three dimensions: a physical dimension, an emotional dimension, and an intellectual dimension.

The PHYSICAL dimension of engagement has to do with the levels of energy or effort that you are willing to invest in your work... and your PERSISTENCE in your efforts, even when facing difficulties.

The EMOTIONAL dimension of engagement has to do with your enthusiasm and your inspiration, as well as your sense of significance, pride, and challenge at work.

The emotional aspect of engagement ALSO is related to how you feel about your job, your fellow employees, your supervisor, upper level management, and your organization overall.

The INTELLECTUAL dimension of engagement has to do with your mental focus, your level of concentration, and your ABSORPTION in what you're doing.

For example, being so deeply engrossed in your work that time passes quickly, or you have difficulty detaching yourself from what you're doing.

It also has to do with your BELIEFS about your organization, its leaders, and its workplace culture.

Yvonne: In their study of employee engagement, the Gallup Organization has identified three different LEVELS of employee engagement: Engaged employees... employees who are NOT engaged... and employees who are actively DIS-engaged.

ENGAGED employees work with passion... and feel a profound connection to their work or to their employer. They're the ones who drive innovation and move the work of the organization forward. Gallup estimates that approximately 29 percent of all employees are engaged.

Employees who are NOT engaged are essentially "checked out" or, perhaps, "retired on the job." They're sleep-walking through their work day...putting in their time... but not investing their energy or their passion.

These employees tend to concentrate on TASKS rather than GOALS or outcomes and usually need to be told what to do. Gallup estimates that approximately 56 percent of all employees are NOT engaged.

Actively DIS-engaged employees are so unhappy in their jobs that they actually interfere with the productivity of others. For example, by ignoring their responsibilities or requests for assistance from their co-workers. Gallup estimates that 15 percent of all employees are actively DIS-engaged.

Thomas: So, how do you MEASURE employee engagement?

The only way to identify ENGAGED employees is to observe their behavior. Examples of behavior that INDICATE employee engagement include high levels of effort, persistence at difficult tasks over time, providing assistance to others, going above and beyond expectations, making recommendations for improvements, expanding personal role or responsibilities in response to organizational needs, and adapting to (and even facilitating) CHANGE in order to improve the work, the workplace, and organizational effectiveness.

Employee SURVEYS provide one way to measure an OVERALL level of employee engagement. The Gallup Organization has identified a dozen survey questions that they believe are particularly useful:

Do you know what is expected of you at work?

Do you have the materials and equipment you need to do your work RIGHT?

At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do BEST every day?

In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?

Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?

Is there someone at work who encourages your development?

At work, do your opinions seem to count?

Does the mission (or purpose) of your company make you feel your job is important?

Are your associates (or fellow employees) committed to doing quality work?

Do you have a best friend at work?

In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?

And,

In the past year, have you had opportunities at work to learn and grow?

Yvonne: As pointed out in the report by the Society for Human Resource Management, employer practices can affect employee levels of engagement. For example, through job and task design, recruitment and selection practices, training and development opportunities, performance management policies, and, of course, through forms of compensation.

In terms of job and task design, employee engagement can be increased by addressing the MOTIVATIONAL and SOCIAL characteristics of the work. MOTIVATIONAL characteristics of work include skill variety, task significance, autonomy, and performance feedback. SOCIAL characteristics of work include the interdependence of job roles, feedback from others, and opportunities to get advice and support from co-workers.

In terms of recruitment and selection, employee engagement can be increased by targeting RECRUITMENT efforts toward qualified applicants who are likely to find the work interesting and challenging... by CHOOSING candidates who are best-suited to the job... AND to your organization's culture (which, hopefully, is flexible and inclusive).

In terms of training and development, employee engagement can be increased through employee orientation programs that establish the relationship between the employee's work and the organization's mission...

Employee engagement can also be increased through training that helps employees acquire the knowledge and skills they need to perform their jobs to the best of their ability.

In terms of performance management, employee engagement can be increased through setting challenging goals that align with the organization's strategic objectives, and by providing positive feedback and recognition for accomplishments. Effective performance management systems also identify and resolve performance PROBLEMS.

In terms of compensation, employee engagement can be increased through various forms of incentive pay---for example, performance awards or special contribution awards---AND through flexible benefit programs.

In addition to ORGANIZATIONAL policies and practices, the behavior of individual MANAGERS can promote employee engagement...by showing strong commitment to diversity, taking responsibility for successes and failures, demonstrating honesty and integrity, helping to find solutions to problems, respecting and caring for employees as individuals, setting realistic performance expectations, demonstrating passion for success, AND defending their direct reports.

Thomas: The Gallup Organization conducted a year-long study of barriers to employee and customer engagement. The study uncovered about 200 barriers that shared several characteristics.

First, the barriers were generally outside of LOCAL control; that is, they are typically imposed by employees who are far away from the front lines. They could be the result of rules or policies, resource allocation decisions, or new programs or initiatives.

Second, the barriers are damaging to employees AND customers. For example, barriers prevent employees from using common sense, or they prevent customers from getting the answers they need.

Third, barriers put the emphasis on CONTROL of employee behavior. For example, by requiring employees to rigidly follow prescribed procedures.

And fourth, barriers CAN be removed.

In addition to the shared characteristics, Gallup identified five ROOT CAUSES of the barriers to employee engagement.

The FIRST root cause is FEAR, either by managers or their employees. For example, managers might be so afraid that their employees would make a bad decision that they won't allow them to MAKE any. Employees might SHARE that fear and be hesitant to act outside of prescribed boundaries.

The SECOND root cause of barriers to employee engagement has to do with the flow of information: within departments, across departments, from management to frontline employees, or from the front line back to management. It also has to do with employees' ability to ASSIMILATE information or to use it effectively.

The THIRD root cause of barriers to employee engagement has to do with organizational alignment. For example, the lack of goal alignment among various departments...OR the absence of a complete customer strategy.

The FOURTH root cause of barriers to employee engagement has to do with money. For example, when UNDESIRABLE behavior is rewarded or when DESIRABLE behavior is NOT.

The FIFTH root cause of barriers to employee engagement has to do with having a short-term focus. That is, actions taken in the interest of NEAR-term benefits that end up having a negative effect in the LONG term.

Yvonne: What can be done to strengthen employee engagement? The Society for Human Resource Management offers these suggestions:

Clearly and consistently communicate organizational goals and objectives.

Establish policies and practices that promote a workplace culture that stimulates employee engagement.

Align day-to-day work with organizational goals.

Maintain an open dialogue among senior management, managers, and employees.

Reward managers whose behavior fosters employee engagement.

Listen carefully to what employees want and need.

Provide opportunities and challenges to leverage the respective talents of employees.

Do a pulse check: Are employees engaged? Find out what is working and what is not.

Hold managers accountable for demonstrating organizational values, for the development of team members, and for results.

Be sure that employees know HOW they can contribute.

And, genuinely thank employees for their contributions.

When employees have the power to make decisions related to their performance, have access to information and the knowledge, training, and development they need in order to do their jobs, AND they are rewarded for their efforts, they are more engaged, and more productive.

For more information on employee engagement, including links to online resources, visit the DM&EEO Web site at www.va.gov/dmeeo and click on the link to "Best Practices."

Thomas: But that's all we have time for in THIS edition of Diversity News. We appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to dmeeo@va.gov, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from YOU! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words "Diversity News" in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!