



If engaged employees are more productive, what can you do differently to improve employee engagement in your organisation? Rob McTague discusses two tools designed to measure the bond between employee and organisation.

Imagine you're the coach of a professional sports team and that, on a good day, maybe 23 percent of your players are 100 percent committed to the team's success. Just over 60 percent are kind of committed—you know that with a great team talk you can get them up to perform—and the other 15 percent? Well, they are the players who turn up but don't seem to contribute much. They make the minimal amount of effort necessary to be noticed, collect their pay cheques, and go home. Oh yeah, and of the five members of the coaching team, you're the only one who gives a damn!

Is a team like that turning up to participate, compete or dominate? How productive will they be on the field? Sure you'll win the odd game—against other teams like yours—but a dedicated team like the All Blacks will wipe the floor with you because you won't have enough people on your team with the drive or motivation to leave everything on the field in order to get the win.

Now, let's translate that scenario into an organisational environment. Rather than athletes and coaches, we're talking

employees and managers. And the C-Suite has put the hard word on you to improve productivity across the organisation so your competition is a raft of KPIs.

That means only 23 percent of your employees are engaged, 62 percent are neither engaged nor disengaged, and 15 percent are totally disengaged. And only one in five of your managers is engaged—the people you rely on to implement your strategy!

These are the real numbers here in New Zealand according to a Gallup Survey published in October 2013. That same survey estimates that actively disengaged workers cost the New Zealand economy \$7.5 billion each year.

Much research has been undertaken around how improved engagement produces improved productivity. If your numbers were to reflect those quoted above, how could you set about improving employee commitment and engagement in your organisation? In exploring this, I put it to you that 'commitment' is the emotional output of engagement.

Let's start by defining employee engagement. Wikipedia states: "Employee engagement is an emergent property of the relation-

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ship between an organisation and its employees. An engaged employee is one who is fully absorbed by, and enthusiastic about, their work and so takes positive action to further the organisation's reputation and interests."

An organisation with high employee engagement levels might therefore be expected to outperform one with low employee engagement, everything else being equal.

While it is possible to measure engagement itself through employee surveys, this does not necessarily assist in identifying areas for improvement within organisations—particularly if a gap exists between an employee's reality of a situation and a manager's perception of that reality. And given that most organisations only conduct an engagement survey once a year, if at all, will the employees' answers help managers identify what that gap is and indicate what you might have to do differently to address it so the team becomes more engaged? This is particularly so if, for the past 10 months, the employee's perception has been an emotionally driven one.

Improving an organisation's ratio of engaged to disengaged employees takes a lot of hard work and it can be all too easy simply to pay lip service to it. But it's important to recognise that when an employee tenders his or her resignation, the decision to do so is usually made long before the event!

Most of us are familiar with the truism that employees don't leave companies, they leave managers. To most employees, their manager is their direct representative of the company. As a manager, you're the leader of your team, and, along with everything else required of you, it's your responsibility to ensure that your employees are engaged to the highest possible extent. Doesn't that put some pressure on!

With this in mind, apart from acting on engagement surveys, how else can an organisation begin to improve its employee engagement? I believe there are two approaches, each of which will have an impact on the other.

WAY IN

The first approach occurs at the start of the employee's relationship with the organisation. Think back to when you last started in a new role—what was it like for the first few weeks, how did you feel, what was it that influenced your level of engagement? Did you find yourself asking yourself questions like "Where am I supposed to be", "Am I comfortable", "Does my manager like me", "Do my workmates like me", "Do I feel confident participating" and "Am I getting along well with the others"?

Human beings are genetically and neurologically geared to form attachments with others. We see this in nature every day. When a new employee joins an organisation, they go through a similar 'attachment' process to that between a parent and child or

between people in a romantic relationship. And just as in a personal relationship, an employee won't become 'engaged' until they have developed that attachment—in this instance to their manager.

Employee attachment is all about creating a strong emotional bond between the new employee and the organisation. Research shows this occurs during the first 120 days of employment. And not surprisingly, the direct manager is the person with the greatest influence over the strength of this bond. But since managers are not mind readers, and they rely on hard data to make informed decisions, how can they know what to change?

Enter the Employee Attachment Inventory (EAI), a psychometric-based survey created and patented by Anthony Sork, founder of Sork HC in Australia. This is not simply another on-boarding survey, which will tell you nothing about an employee's level of emotional commitment to the organisation. It measures attachment—the bonding period that occurs before engagement.

Many organisations measure employee engagement annually, but by then they have probably already missed the 'attachment' boat. To be fair, up until now, there hasn't been a recognised instrument that an organisation could use to measure attachment, but there is now and, unlike many surveys, it's neither time-consuming nor cumbersome.

Australian research shows that, based on average direct and indirect costs, recruiting and upskilling new talent to minimum performance standards exceeds \$100,000 per new employee over the first three months of employment. The average time it takes for an organisation to recover that investment is anywhere between 12 and 18 months, depending on the role, industry and learning curve to reach full competency.

Any attrition prior to a new employee's 'recovery' point represents a financial loss to the organisation. Add this loss to the cost of replacing the exiting employee and the \$100k investment increases dramatically with each new recruiting exercise.

Developing the Employee Attachment Inventory involved assessing key factors that cause employee attrition across a wide range of industries and a diverse range of people. The research shows that there are 20 critical drivers an employee assesses, both consciously and subconsciously, during their first 120 days. How we, as managers, choose to manage these perceptions, or not, will determine the degree of attachment and subsequent engagement.

WAY OUT

The second place to look to improve employee engagement is at the other end of the employment cycle—at the time of exit. Traditional exit surveys are no longer enough if an organisation is serious about improving employee engagement. They are often one-sided, seek feedback from the exiting employee only, and do little if anything to engage the manager in the process.

Research has pinpointed the key push and pull forces that influence an employee's decision to part ways with an organisation. The resulting Employee Detachment Inventory (EDI) survey differs from traditional exit interviews in that it seeks feedback from both the exiting employee and his or her manager. It's important to know the reasons why an employee decides to leave, but it is equally important for the manager to understand the extent to which each detachment force had an impact on that decision.

The comparison of responses between the employee and manager to the same set of questions enables the manager to identify the gaps in their perceived view of how satisfied the employee was in the role, compared with the employee's actual satisfaction ratings. The power of the EDI is in surveying the manager.

This comparison is designed to help managers gain awareness of the issues the remaining and future team members may also be experiencing, rather than to salvage the relationship.

As organisations spend more time and effort improving their levels of engagement, the last thing they need is a handful of disgruntled employees pulling it apart. These instruments are specifically designed to help reduce your recruiting spend and improve productivity through improved employee engagement. They should be used with, not instead of, your existing processes.

Attachment comes before engagement, but it's not being measured and traditional exit surveys, in my experience, are given worthwhile attention by very few.

The definition of insanity? Keep on doing the same old things while hoping to achieve a different result!



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