

Engaging Employees is Path to Profitability

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



JetBlue flight attendant Steven Slater “disengaged” from his employer this month with eye-popping flare. After an encounter with an allegedly rude passenger, Slater cursed her out over the airplane’s PA system, grabbed a beer from the galley and slid down the emergency shoot.

His widely publicized “take this job and” exit from the plane and his career, seems to be resonating with many American workers who are being asked to take on more work, sometimes for less pay, as their colleagues are being laid off.

Facebook pages have lit up with praise for Slater, who has become the poster boy for burned out workers. It seems there isn’t anyone who hasn’t dreamed about dumping a hot latte over an obnoxious boss’ head and stomping out of work! So it’s easy to laugh at Slater’s exit from JetBlue. But the fact is that neither the individual incident, nor its implications for all businesses are funny.

According to Deloitte LLP’s recently released annual Ethics & Workplace Survey, one-third of employed Americans plan to look for a new job when the economy gets better. Forty-eight percent of those potential jobseekers cited a loss of trust in their employer and 46 percent said that a lack of transparent communication from their company’s leadership are their reasons for looking for new employment at the end of the recession.

Some business owners and managers may be tempted to smugly respond: “So what? Let them try to find a new job!”

Perhaps more enlightened leaders may be concerned that they could lose good, critically important employees – those in whom they have greatly invested - if job hunting opportunities improve. They recognize that in some fields, where specialized skills are needed, hiring actually is taking place now.

Sixty-five percent of Fortune 1000 executives surveyed by Deloitte admitted to being concerned employees will be job hunting in the coming months and they believe trust will be a factor in a potential increase in voluntary turnover.

But a greater immediate threat to businesses today likely is not coming from the potential “Slaters” in the workplace, who will curse out customers and then jump ship. It likely isn’t even coming from the potential loss of critically needed workers to corporate recruiters.

It is coming from “disengaged” employees in the work force who slog through their work days, putting up with increasing stress and an overall feeling of being unappreciated and taken for granted by their employers.

They stick around, doing just enough to keep their jobs, but little to advance the business for which they work. They’re a threat to a company’s reputation, productivity and bottom the line.

Who is to blame? Too often it can be traced back to ineffective direct leadership within the company – the departmental boss a worker interacts with on a regular basis.

An annual Gallup Poll that measures employee engagement has noted for more than a decade that the big difference in “engagement levels” is not between companies. Rather it is between departments within the same company, or organization.

In these dire economic times, too many companies are simply cutting costs by plugging the holes in their work forces, rather than implementing innovative strategies that include “engaging” employees. Effective managers and leaders are keys to engaging employees.

An observation commonly cited in management courses resonates in these times: “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” In other words, managers and business leaders can be brilliant, but their workers just may not care if the leader is perceived as distant and detached.

Steps that can be taken to engage workers and influence them to be motivated include:

- Letting employees know what is expected of them.
- Giving employees opportunities to improve their skills.
- Providing tools and resources needed for employees to do their work.
- Letting employees know what they do makes a difference and their work is meaningful.
- Expressing appreciation for good work done.
- Fostering trust by being trust-worthy.
- Communicating the purpose, goals and values of the company.
- Encouraging employees to be innovative by sharing ideas.

Change and conflict are part of business life. They are best addressed directly and collaboratively.

To lead effectively, good managers need to make the most of company resources. This includes using tools that include targeted training, performance reviews, action learning and individual coaching.

Engaged employees are happy and productive employees. And productive employees are the key to higher profitability – in good times, and in bad.

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