



The Latitude of Attitude

Invest in engagement now to strengthen your workforce bond for the coming recovery.

By Lisa Maxwell

Smart corporate leaders recognize that “attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference” when it comes to engaging and retaining top talent in uncertain economic times. Organizations have growing concerns about whether valued employees will remain once the economy recovers. Smart recruiters recognize this concern and focus on the expertise necessary to attract top talent and advise their clients of strategies to retain that talent so that, when the economy does recover, the task of keeping employees happy and engaged amid continuing cost pressures will be balanced.

Many factors impact employees' attitudes. Mercer polled more than 320 U.S. and Canadian employers and found that 47 percent reported increased levels of employee engagement during the past 12-to-18 months. According to the report, higher levels of engagement can be the result of reward and talent programs adopted to balance employee needs against cost pressures. Employees' desire to preserve their jobs may have contributed to a willingness to go the extra mile, be resilient, and embrace change.

An engaged employee is one who is fully involved in, and enthusiastic about, her or his work. In other words, employees have differing degrees of attachment to their careers, colleagues, and organizations. In addition to attitude, employee engagement is impacted by job satisfaction, motivation, culture, climate, and opinion. People with positive attitudes act with total involvement. They are committed, both intellectually and emotionally, and this contributes to accomplishing the work, mission, and vision of the organization. An engaged employee has a heightened level of ownership and does what is necessary for the benefit of their internal and external customers. Because of the correlations between employee engagement and desirable business outcomes—such as retention of talent, customer service, individual performance, team performance, business unit productivity, and financial performance—it is more important than ever to focus on attitudes. Knowledge and skills are important, but a positive attitude is critical to creativity, inspiration, and innovation. Studies have statistically demonstrated that engaged employees are more productive, more profitable, more customer-focused, safer, and less likely to leave their employer.

In *The Why of Work: How Great Leaders Build Abundant Organizations That Win*, authors David and Wendy

Ulrich challenge company leaders with the question: Before you ask, “What do my employees put into their work?” ask yourself, “What do they get out of it?”

Gallup Management Journal indicates that 29 percent of employees are actively engaged in their jobs, and those engaged employees work with passion and feel a strong connection to their companies. This also indicates that more than 70 percent are not engaged, meaning they go through each workday putting time but no passion into their work. No amount of perks will persuade employees to engage at top levels if the relationship with their CEO and/or manager is fractured, so I recommend the following five areas to for your focus and action:

1. Clarify expectations—If expectations are not clear, negative attitudes may result, leaving the employee thinking more about surviving than focusing on helping the organization succeed.
2. Career advancement and improvement opportunities—Provide employees with the tools to initiate change and generate cost savings for the organization.
3. Regular feedback from superiors—Many times just the words, “You did a good job” are enough feedback to give employees a sense of where they are going.
4. Effective internal employee communication—Convey a clear description of what's going on to keep employees at all levels in the loop and engaged.
5. Reward to engage—Acknowledge the role of incentives; set realistic targets, select the right rewards, communicate the scheme effectively and frequently.

According to a recent survey by Right Management, only 28 percent of top organizations retain most of their top talent. Organizations should seek leaders who understand the importance of employee engagement in order to retain long-term the best and brightest for their management teams. CEOs must identify with employees, via programs such as special recognition for a job well-done, career development, flex-time, wellness programs, day-care, family leave, and other HR benefits.

Investments in human capital now will pay off as the economy strengthens and competition for talent intensifies. With forethought and consideration of our employees, we can provide the groundwork that will matter when a competitor comes calling. The key is leaders who weave high levels of engagement into the fabric of the organization. As Sir Winston Churchill aptly noted, attitude “is a little thing that makes a big difference.” **HRO**



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