Connect with People: The Foundation for Employee Trust and Engagement

The key is creating relationships built on trust and respect and by implementing frequent, consistent employee-manager interactions.

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The ever-changing nature of workplace expectations, accelerated by a sense of economic uncertainty, has enhanced the pressure on managers to get more results in less time and with fewer resources, without sacrificing quality. Not surprisingly, this trend is producing a growing sense of disengagement within many organizations. When employment opportunities are tight, employees may be happy just to have a job and feel there is limited room for open commiserating about the growing stresses of employment. As employment options improve, however slowly, the potential for more open discontent among employees has a tendency to increase dramatically. As a result, managers need to shift their effort and energy to focus on meaningful ways to engage employees and connect with their people in building strong teams for the future.

In this pressure-cooker environment, supportive and cooperative relationships often are compromised. To stop a negative cycle of employee discontent, it is important for managers and executives to adopt a strong human relations approach to leadership. This means going back to basics by creating relationships built on trust and respect and by implementing frequent, consistent employee-manager interactions. While this approach does not require a huge monetary investment, it does call for a real commitment to, and recognition of, the strategic value of strong teams and the interpersonal connections required to maintain them.

Building Productive Work Relationships

In his book, "How to Win Friends and Influence People," Dale Carnegie described three stages of professional business interactions for building productive work relationships. These stages include building or strengthening relationships, enhancing teamwork, and influencing employees' ownership of change. Employing the principles recommended by Dale Carnegie provides managers with the tools to become more effective team leaders.

Connecting with employees starts by building strong, dynamic relationships. This extends beyond the typical surface-level questions (e.g., "How are you doing?" and "What's happening?") and delves into understanding what motivates and excites employees both inside and outside the workplace. It requires managers to become active participants in conversations with employees. They need to understand who each employee is as an individual. By listening closely when employees describe things such as what's important to them, what they want out of work and life, and under what circumstances they do their best work, managers can more effectively assign tasks, and coach and mentor employees. It is through these kinds of interactions that employees begin to feel important in their role in the organization.

The next step in building productive work relationships is creating strong teams. To accomplish this, all team members need to believe they are valuable contributors to the team as a whole. While there is some natural tension with individuals on a team, a strong leader can help team members replace destructive habits, such as arguing, being disrespectful, or having unrealistic expectations of others with sincere efforts to understand other team members and gain their cooperation. Leaders need to take conscious steps to engage the entire team in generating ideas, moving those ideas to action, and helping teams recognize that what they accomplish together is just as vital to the organization as what they accomplish as individuals.

The final stage in this process is equipping employees with the skills needed to effectively take ownership of change. Organizations are changing dramatically, and the "new normal" consists of an ever-present feeling of a state of transformation. Too often, employees hear about the need to "change" and yet are never quite sure exactly what they are supposed to do to respond to the change. They just know they need to adapt to these constant changes. Leaders need to address this challenge through active listening, by demonstrating understanding, and by encouraging improvement. When strong individual and team relationships exist, leaders are more adept at helping their employees deal with changes. A savvy leader teaches employees how to turn negative perceptions of change to positive ones, allowing employees to grow and experience future opportunities with the organization.

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The Strategic Nature of Connecting with People

Unfortunately, in a time of tight resources and increasing demands, managers too often focus only on achieving theirgoals and building their careers. This approach is flawed. When managers shift their attitude to focus on engaging employees individually, and as part of a team, their approach becomes more strategic in nature. There is an intentional focus on the corporate culture, the business entity as a whole, and the outcome of sustaining results.

While some managers are able to produce results without strong teams, they typically cannot sustain such success over the long term. Teams that operate in an environment devoid of trust and respect eventually will become ineffective, experience high turnover, and disintegrate. For example, in an international marketing firm, there was a manager who was effective at driving short-term results. His team accomplished goals faster than others within the organization. Unfortunately, this was at the expense of his team members' sense of value and contribution. They always felt uncomfortable, that their jobs were constantly in jeopardy, and that they were always being scrutinized. They were afraid to make any decisions or give input. Instead they waited for the manager to make the decisions and tell them what to do. This tore away the fiber of the team, and the organization began losing some of its best employees. Once organizational leaders understood what was happening, they moved the manager out of that role and brought in another manager to lead the team. The new leader began by establishing relationships with each team member. Based on these relationships, the team began to take some small risks. The leader started turning over decision-making to team members to create small wins quickly. As the team members built confidence in their own abilities and confidence in the continued support of the leader, they began having open dialog with one another regarding additional ways to improve their team efforts. They started taking proactive measures to identify and address customer needs before problems arose. Within a few months, the team members were accepting the need to change with a more positive attitude. They also began to move past the old fears, and eventually the team started working more effectively and connecting as a team and as individuals. Other teams approached them for input on decisions and looked to them to lead new projects. This built even more confidence in the team members and created stronger results. The impetus came from the leader who was committed to rebuilding strong relationships, engaging the team in a cooperative environment, and helping them take ownership for driving changes in their area.

Connect Successfully

It's no secret: Employees are more motivated and excited about being part of a team when they are closely connected with their leader. That's what produces engagement. Engaged employees tend to outperform their disengaged counterparts—those employees simply going through the motions. In fact, a 2008 Federal study demonstrated that employee engagement contributes positively to organizational outcomes, as well as reduced sick leave use, less work-related illness and injury cases, and decreased intentions to leave the organization (www.doi.gov.hrm/MSPB_Response.pdf).

In a work environment where resources already are stretched thin, the importance of building productive work relationships becomes even more important to the strategic success of an organization. When leaders connect with people, by taking a keen interest in understanding the strengths and motivations of each team member, they strengthen relationships, build trust, and create an engaging work environment needed to help their team achieve peak performance.

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