



The X-factor

The key to developing employees with oomph is communication

By Joe Robinson

We see it every day at the office: the I'm-in-pain-because-I'm-working-so-hard face. It may look convincing, but it's not a metric for effectiveness.

"It's an illusion that the harder and faster we work, the better our solutions will be," says Diane Fassel, founder of Boulder, Colo.-based Newmeasures, which helps companies upgrade effectiveness through something better: increased engagement. "The mindset is that more is better. They're not thinking that effectiveness is more productive than quantity," she says.

It's a focus that can lead to a major dysfunction: disengaged, burned-out employees, simply going through the motions.

Fassel, a Harvard grad, sounded the alarm on the unsustainable workplace in her books *The Addictive Organization* and *Working Ourselves to Death*. She discovered that an addiction to busyness drives a contagious loop in which company leaders model bravado behavior that actually undermines productivity and engagement. To break out of this counterproductive reflex, leaders must gather information about how people work—and how they feel about their work.

Engaged employees are more energized, dedicated and committed to their tasks and to the company than folks operating by rote. The oomph they provide, or "discretionary effort," has been shown to increase performance and profits.

The Towers Watson 2012 Global Workforce Study measured 32,000 people in 29 global markets, focusing on engagement brought about in the following areas: leadership (leaders show sincere interest



in employees' well-being and earn their trust and confidence); stress, balance and workload (stress levels are manageable, there's a healthy work-life balance and enough employees to do the job); goals and objectives (employees understand how their job contributes to achieving company goals); supervisors (managers assign appropriate tasks, coach employees and behave consistently); and image (the company is held in high regard by the public and displays integrity in business practices).

The study found that companies with the highest engagement levels had an operating margin of 27 percent, while those with the lowest were at less than 10 percent. At disengaged companies, 40 percent of employees were likely to leave in the next two years; at the most-engaged firms, the number was 18 percent.

Employee engagement is a major concern among large companies and human-resource professionals. But in the entrepreneurial realm, there's little thought paid to working style; instead, it's a flat-out, unconscious frenzy, a reaction to what's incoming all day long.

Engagement is the X-factor entrepreneurs would be wise to harness.

The key is in making people feel valued and trusted. "Feeling valued means that the work culture supports the employees' growth and development, removes obstacles to getting the job done and allows employees to use all of their gifts in the service of the organization," Fassel says. "If they don't feel valued, they typically burn out quickly. But if they feel valued, they tend to work hard and cope well."

Recognizing value requires effort from leaders to find out what people really think, by taking time to dialogue solutions and

showing a willingness to communicate beyond mouse clicks. That means offering positive feedback, looking employees in the eye and affirming that they are doing a good job. Recognizing a good idea or dedication to a project fuels engagement, particularly when it goes to a person's sense of competence, rather than just results. ("I like how you handled that.") A sense of competence is a core psychological need that drives intrinsic motivation and a continuous interest in the work at hand.

A personal touch can go a long way to building an engaged team. Fassel points to hand-scribbled thank-you notes from supervisors: "It's not just, 'What a great job you did,' but 'When I saw you solve this problem, I realized what a wonderful asset you are to the team, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate that.' These people keep these notes for years. If that's all it takes, we're really missing the boat."

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