

Abstract

Engaging staff: the next challenge

Is your organisation talking about staff engagement - or lack of it? The challenge: after difficult economic times, how to re-engage staff and restore faith in managers and leadership.

Research surveys and productivity reports have always placed responsibility on managers for low staff morale, low productivity and staff turnover. Now that staff engagement is seen as critical for business recover; poor management it's feared could mean staff will not make the commitment needed.

But managing people is not easy. Ask most managers what is the most difficult thing about managing staff and they'll talk about the numbers of people, staff conflicts, the paperwork involved, and a lack of time and resources; plus frustration at the communication they deliver, which is denied by staff.

A coaching approach could be the solution. Not a soft option, rather a system and process for a win-win solution! The manager can be confident that performance outcomes are clear and agreed to and that action plans are in place for monitoring and review: leaving time for leadership. Employees know what they are responsible and accountable for; they feel valued and supported, encouraged to use their initiative, respected for problem solving – and called to account if they abuse the trust.

Read more; find out how coaching works and try out some simple strategies yourself.

Author Bio

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She has developed a nationally accredited program for training managers in coaching skills and has written a book, *2 Way Feedback*, for guiding team leadership and communication. She is also a committee member of the Victorian GMAA and a coaching panelist for Parks Victoria. Contact Jennifer: jmccoy@positivechange.com.au

Engaging staff: the next challenge

Jennifer R McCoy

Is your organisation talking about staff engagement - or lack of it? Just as we're beginning to emerge from economic doldrums, according to business analysts another problem has surfaced: Business needs staff to drive it forward, yet because of their experiences over the past two years, they've become disengaged. If they weren't retrenched, they shouldered greater responsibilities and worked longer hours for the same pay; probably also wore the flak from their immediate managers facing similar or greater pressures. The challenge: how to re-engage staff and restore faith in managers and leadership.

Research surveys and productivity reports have always placed responsibility on managers for low staff morale and levels of engagement, for low productivity and staff turnover. Now that staff engagement is seen as critical for business recovery, poor management it's feared could mean staff will not make the commitment needed.

*The scope and number of actions employers have taken in response to the economic crisis have resulted in a drop in employee engagement (particularly among top-performing employees), and this could have a long-lasting and detrimental impact on productivity, quality and customer service. **Looking Toward Recovery: Realigning Rewards and Re-Engaging Employees -2009/2010 US. Strategic Rewards Report. 2010. Towers Watson***

Are the criticisms justified? Probably – disaffected employees usually claim poor management as the chief cause. Sydney-based companies, Exit Info and Skilled Up¹, highlight the high cost of staff turnover and list the top 5 most common reasons for staff turnover as lack of opportunity for career advancement, lack of interest in the work itself, not enough challenge in the role and a poor direct manager; plus a communication disconnect between Gen Y and managers who use outdated management styles and practices.

A survey of 2,400 employees, 40% Australians, asking them what they **hate** about their workplaceⁱⁱ, listed top of the list: feeling unappreciated, fellow staff 'getting away with non-performance, not knowing what is going on and not being listened to, not trusted or respected for skills and expertise; plus little feedback, coaching or encouragement.

What managers say

Managing people is not easy. Ask most managers what is the most difficult thing about managing staff and they'll talk about the numbers of people, staff conflicts, the paperwork involved, and a lack of time and resources; plus frustration at the communication they deliver which is denied by staff. These days they'd likely add the pressures to cost-cut and deliver bottom-line efficiencies, combined with their own job insecurity.

If we're going to build bridges, managers need something that is tangible and immediate. They need strategies, even the words to use.

"You can only push and shove so far. It isn't leadership till you somehow touch people in a way that makes them want to contribute to the maximum."

Ralph Hauser. Johnson & Johnson

Coaching for Staff Engagement

Let's make it clear from the start, coaching is not a soft option. People are employed to do work that adds value to a business; a manager's role is to make sure they do just that.

A coaching framework is simple: the manager clarifies expectations at the start, agreement is reached on a goal and an action plan is written down. That means commitment and progress can be monitored. Achievements should be applauded and failure to keep commitments must be met with logical consequences - also clarified at the start.

Sound like traditional performance review? The difference lies in the coaching skills, the process the manager uses in working with an employee.

Coaching involves communication and the building of respectful relationships - valuing people and their skills. The goal and action plan are developed cooperatively, acknowledging skills, needs and resources available. Monitoring progress means communicating: asking questions, giving feedback, both positive and constructive, supporting people to ensure they can meet their commitments, challenging for higher achievement - easy when both parties know the goals to be achieved.

Coaching means asking questions instead of giving directives: 'What would you need to be able to achieve this (goal) by (time)?' 'Can you see any problems in meeting this time frame?', 'I need to know how the plan is progressing; can you prepare a weekly update for us to discuss.' Questions like: 'What do you think might be a solution?' or 'How far have you got with finding a solution?' leave responsibility with the employee who agreed to the commitment. Questions like: 'What have you learned from this (problem/project)?', 'Would you do anything different next time?' build confidence and resilience for the long term.

It's a win-win situation! The manager can be confident that performance outcomes are clear and agreed to and that action plans are in place for monitoring and review. Now there is time for leadership – keeping an eye on the bigger picture, leading and listening to staff, guiding progress consistently. Employees know what they are responsible and accountable for; they have opportunities to discuss the work, feel valued and supported, encouraged to use their initiative, respected for problem solving – and called to account if they abuse the trust.

Try these 5 coaching strategies yourself

1. Clarify exactly what needs to be done to achieve work goals.
2. Take each of your team members and decide: what are your expectations of each one? What are their positive behaviours that you want to build on and what behaviours do you want to change?
3. Have a meeting with each person to clarify your expectations and discuss goals to be achieved. Reach agreement on an Action Plan, with progress reporting times - and document it.
4. Whenever a team member comes to you with a problem ask firstly, 'What do you think could be a solution?'
5. Make sure you follow up – praise achievement and manage non-performance.

Readings

ⁱ **ExitInfo.** It's not you; it's me – employers not getting real story on 'staff turnover'. Media Release 29 July 2008

SkilledUp. Managers are from Mars, GenY is from Venus: Aussi bosses grapple with staff retention crisis. Media Release 28/07/2008

ⁱⁱ **James Adonis.** Employee Engragement: Why People Hate Working for You.

http://www.positivechange.com.au/products/prod_employee_engragement.html