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Driving Engagement—Sans Kumbaya

Leaders know that striving for high engagement is important. Many, however, are often frustrated by the ambiguity surrounding how to make meaningful changes without all the “kumbaya” nonsense.

Below are Gary’s 9 Keys to Driving High Engagement without All the Fluff:

1. Get clear on your target. Engagement is the degree to which people are willing to give discretionary effort. A person may be willing to do a job with one hand tied behind their back, but we want them to use both. The goal then is to get employees willing to give their discretionary effort, not just the bare minimum.
2. Expand your visibility of what makes your people tick. To effectively drive engagement, leaders need to expand their knowledge of the engagement drivers of individuals—beyond just money and work/life balance. That information can easily be attained through assessment and, once given some guidance to leaders, through observation. Assessments, properly done, will also uncover those things that people did not know they valued and show their degree of importance, which are two pieces of information often missing in engagement reports.
3. Seek to expand empowerment. The more that people feel empowered to make decisions that affect the quality of their work, the more likely they are to be engaged. Be specific and methodical in outlining the scope of things people can make decisions about and make as broad as appropriate.
4. Show the yards along the mile. The only constant is change, and it’s truer than ever that today’s leaders must be master change agents. Effective leaders cannot just tell the group, “It will be better when....” Plan on highlighting predictable wins along the way for large projects, and give people a next milestone to hit and celebrate.
5. Let clarity be your North Star. Be clear on expectations. Even the best players cannot be successful if the lights are not on at the court. Don’t make people guess what success looks like. Nobody wants to arrive at a destination and be told they took the wrong train. Nobody likes to feel like they wasted time when, in their mind, they were taking initiative. Get on alignment early and often.
6. Manage the middle. The key link between the organization and the bulk of the organization is the layer of managers below the executive suite. The degree to which they know how to hire, onboard, manage, develop and retain talent will be one of the biggest determinants of engagement. This link will become even more important to monitor as organizations will have more and more leaders with less and less leadership experience in these critical roles.

7. Fix flats fast. A large driver of engagement is the degree to which performers who meet and exceed expectations perceive their managers as addressing those who are not meeting expectations. Nobody likes to feel as if they are pulling others along or doing more than their fair share. Make sure that leaders are truly addressing performance issues in a way that raises the performance of all participants.
8. Don't underestimate the power of enjoying one's job. Research has shown that people who enjoy 75% or more of their work are three times more likely to be successful at it. If people just do not enjoy the tasks, responsibilities and environment of the work, then there is hardly an intervention that will help. Don't just put people in roles based on eligibility (those factors like education and experience); also consider suitability (those factors like wanting to lead, wanting challenge or even the degree to which they like detailed work). Not liking big parts of one's job puts people on a negative spiral. And trying to manage a negative spiral is often a fruitless endeavor.
9. Pay attention and show attention. There are three basic approaches to feedback: give positive feedback, give negative feedback or ignore. Research has shown that (by far) ignoring people is the most disengaging behavior. Too many nice leaders are actually cruel in that they avoid the hard conversations that would bring issues to light and get people moving.

Highly engaged workforces are essential for high performance. The key points above are practical steps leaders should consider as they maintain and improve their workforce.

For more information on how to get the best out of yourself and others, please feel free to contact me directly.

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