



We exist to serve others so they may better serve the world. SM

Written by: Bryan K. Williams

To engage the customer, you must engage those directly serving the customer

Engagement – Part 1

Over the last few years, one of the main questions I'm constantly asked is, "What is the best way for my company to engage our customers?" My short answer is usually, "engage those who serve the customers". Sounds simple enough...but before you go running to the jewelry store to buy engagement rings for all of your front line employees, let's be clear on what "engage" really means in this context.

For your employees, being engaged transcends just showing up to work and doing what they are supposed to do. It goes beyond constantly being on time and never calling in sick. More than anything, engagement is much more than being "satisfied" at work. Being engaged is synonymous with truly living the culture of the workplace. It is about genuinely enjoying the opportunity to be a part of the organization and noticeably excited about contributing in a significant way...everyday. Engaged employees are your role models; the ones that you'd like to multiply and replicate throughout your company. They are the ones who constantly look for ways to exceed your expectations, and consistently delight customers with their urgency, inclusiveness, and follow through.

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Basically, when you go to work and see that your engaged employee is working, you breathe a sigh of relief, because you know that your day will be significantly more successful.

I'm sure that everyone reading this can point to at least one individual on their team who fits the above description. So the real question here is, "How do you create a team full of engaged employees?" Or at least develop more than what you currently have.

To successfully do that, you must involve your staff in matters that directly and indirectly affect them. Here are six suggestions that you can use immediately:

1. **Involve them in your annual strategic planning meetings.** Even if you don't have an employee actually attend a meeting, make sure that their "voice" is heard. Have a townhall meeting to solicit their input on what the organization should consider as priorities in the future. Hold mini focus-groups with a healthy cross-section of your best line staff. Use data from the employee satisfaction survey. Basically, as you and the other senior leaders gather relevant information to help shape the company's annual strategic plan, be sure to include the voice of your employees. (And make sure they know that you are, in fact, using that data and you value their input).

2. **Solicit their ideas for best practices.** The sharing of best practices is one of the most underutilized practices in many companies. To replicate success you must focus on success. Shine a spotlight on what currently works so that everyone will know exactly what you mean when the term “excellence” is used. By the way, this also encourages your best people to continue churning out more best practices...which is always a great thing.



3. **Get their insight on common pitfalls to avoid.** Believe it or not, your employees, like everyone else, have what’s called “tacit” knowledge. Tacit knowledge means knowing something without openly expressing it. For example, Employee A has been working at your company for 7 years, and has seen multiple managers come and go. Chances are that Employee A has knowledge about the company’s “real way of doing things” that newer employees don’t have...including you and other managers. Employee A has seen when the new hot-shot manager tries to implement new processes...and failed. Employee A has also accumulated a wealth of insight into what initiatives have not worked, and why they haven’t. If you don’t believe me, eavesdrop on what some of your tenured line employees are discussing over lunch or in the locker room. You’ll be amazed at how much tacit knowledge they really have. So how do you tap into this vast resource? Ask. Many times that’s all it takes. Genuinely solicit their insight on what has worked and what hasn’t worked in the past. This is especially powerful when it’s done during the new manager’s assimilation period...usually the first 60-90 days of employment. Trust me, the mere fact that you are seeking their expertise will earn you major points and will simultaneously engage them.

4. **Ensure that each employee’s goals are linked to departmental and company goals.** They need to see how their personal performance fits into the bigger picture. You should be able to walk up to any of your employees and ask about the company’s mission and get a clear, confident answer. Furthermore, they should also be able to articulate how their department’s goals are aligned with the company’s goals. If it sounds too good to be true, spend some time with any recent winner of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Employees in those organizations know exactly what makes their company unique, and they also know that their individual contributions are needed and valued. You can begin this alignment process by articulating clearly what the organization’s mission is and ensure that all of the employees completely understand it. Then challenge each of them to think of ways they can personally energize that mission. On a monthly basis, all departments should have a team meeting, and reviewing the department’s goals should be a vital part of the agenda. The key here is to

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5. **Show progress on department and company goals.** John Maxwell once wrote that teams can make adjustments when they know where they stand. Just like a stadium has a scoreboard that constantly gets updated, every department should have some easy-to-understand tool for tracking key department and company goals. The key points are that the “scores” should be accessible and they need to be easily understood. I have seen

many well-intentioned executives take the financial charts and graphs directly from their high-level board meetings and post them on the employee bulletin board. Newsflash: Not everyone has the patience to decipher tables and spreadsheets; especially not a line employee who may not be used to reviewing such reports on a regular basis like a senior manager or executive. Extract the data that is most relevant to that department and show a few key overall metrics that everyone affects.

6. Foster a culture of effective communication flow and two-way communication.

Make use of every opportunity to connect with your workforce. Utilize town hall meetings, company banquets, cross-functional task forces, and the “Ask the boss” link on the company Intranet. For engagement to take place, employees must feel like the company cares about them as individuals and genuinely wants to see them succeed. You can’t fake it...employees know when it’s not genuine.

Involvement equals more engagement. Solicitation of ideas equals more engagement. Linking personal goals to department and company goals equals more engagement. Regular two-way communication equals more engagement. People like to be involved in the planning of the work that affects them. They crave it; even if they don’t verbalize it all the time. So tap into their expertise and they will appreciate you and the organization for it. The end result will be an army of engaged employees whose sole mission is to engage all of your customers all the time.

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