

Employee Engagement – Why Is It So Critical Now?

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Today's employees are facing unprecedented levels of stress both personally and professionally. In many companies, employees face uncertainty and perhaps a furlough, layoff or pay reduction due to the economic impact of the pandemic. In other companies, where the demand for their service or product suddenly increased (PPE products, telemedicine software or video conferencing) employees find themselves overwhelmed with excessive hours week after week, perhaps in addition to now having to home school their children. And then there are the essential employees that have been asked to risk their own health to meet the new societal demands brought on by the pandemic.

Every day, we are reminded of the toll the pandemic is playing on employees. You can hear it in employees' conversations and see it play out live on Zoom conference meetings. The daily news is filled with employees' reactions to their company's actions in response to the pandemic. Some companies like Amazon and Google made national news as employees expressed concerns to the press.

How employers treat their employees and how employees perceive their company during this challenging time will have a long-term impact on employee engagement levels for years to come. We saw proof of this in the years that followed the 2009 financial crisis. During that crisis, many companies failed to demonstrate compassion and their actions did not facilitate trust. As companies focused on the economic downturn, they failed to take steps to keep their employees engaged. As a result, many companies experienced decreased productivity, reduced customer satisfaction and higher levels of attrition for years after 2009. Similarly, their brand was impacted for years to come as potential new hires used social media and networking to uncover past employees' perceptions of their employers.

Organizations that take steps now to prevent a long-term disengaged workforce will reap benefits not only in the short-term but for years to come, after the pandemic is history. Even as companies work hard today to contain costs, there are a number of simple, low cost actions all employers can take to keep their workforce engaged.

High Impact, Low Cost Employee Engagement Actions

- Ensure alignment of the leadership team. Senior leaders set the tone and are responsible for making sure all managers model the tone and deliver consistent messaging.
- Constant, transparent communication with employees is key, especially in trying times. Companies can keep employees informed through various channels, including corporate-wide virtual meetings, manager 1:1 meetings, and electronic updates.

- Develop a culture and expectation that all managers check-in with their employees on a regular basis. By checking in with employees and listening, managers will develop an understanding of each employee's concerns, needs and goals.
- Establish and communicate the go-forward vision for the company so employees can understand and support the vision.
- Create an informal or formal mechanism to take the pulse of employees. Then ensure senior management receives this important feedback and as needed, takes actions in response to the feedback.

Regardless of the specific impact the pandemic is having on your business, the key to successfully and rapidly getting back on track at the back end of the pandemic will in a large part depend upon your workforce. By focusing on these employee engagement best practices, employers will foster a culture where employees are motivated to help the company achieve its goals. An inspired workforce will work hard to achieve productivity and sales goals. A disengaged workforce will complain to customers and resign when the job market picks up. Given the strong link between an engaged, motivated workforce and corporate success, there has never been a better time for companies to focus on employee engagement.



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