



Creating competitive advantage through employee engagement

By Don Mroz and Shawn Quinn

On a recent trip to Europe, a flight attendant went out of his way to connect with people on the plane. A group of high school students were returning from a trip and were rather raucous, clearly bothering some of the other passengers and flight attendants. Instead of reprimanding or scolding the students, this flight attendant established a connection with them, bringing them extra pretzels and finding out about their trip. The students settled down without being told to do so, and it was obvious that the flight attendant was having a great time. He treated every person with respect, fairness and courtesy, all with a smile. Clearly he viewed what he did as more than just a job. He went far beyond what the other attendants were doing, or certainly more than his job description required, creating a much better experience for all.

Imagine if employees in your company treated each other, your vendors, your clients and all others in this way. The environment would let people thrive and allow for decisions to be made that would benefit the business.

While recently working in a large health-care site, we noticed that one supervisor of a call center was constantly cited for her outstanding performance. She created a climate of compassion and caring, while holding people accountable for their performances. She also maintained extremely high-quality connections

with colleagues and the people who reported to her. (High-quality connections is a term coined by Jane Dutton at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. It refers to mutual positive regard, trust and active engagement by both parties.)

She had gained the respect of people at every level of the organization. She was offered another job in a competing organization, with a hefty salary increase. She accepted the job, only to change her mind at the last minute (after employees had thrown her a farewell party), as she simply loved her job, her employees and the ability to make a difference in people's lives.

Research shows that employee engagement is the biggest indicator of customer satisfaction. If you have people behaving like the employees mentioned above, you are more likely to get customer loyalty. Not only will they be satisfied, they will only buy from your company and will encourage others to do the same. You will have created a powerful competitive advantage by using the resource of human potential.

Engagement is key to competitive advantage, and more and more studies are proving this. Recent research by Gallup, looking across multiple countries, shows that 10-20 percent of employees are truly engaged in their work. Another 10-20 percent are actively disengaged, not only unhappy but dragging others down as well. This leaves a large number of people who

are doing their jobs but don't necessarily love what they are doing or have passion for it. They do enough to get by but don't take things to a higher level of performance.

Surely there are numerous reasons for 60-80 percent of employees being disengaged. We have found one of the main reasons is that organizations may say on a card or poster that people are their most important asset, yet those representing the organization often behave in ways that lead to few people being engaged.

An Harvard Business Review report compiled from 12 different studies identified the actions of line managers/supervisors as one of the most important reasons for people being highly dissatisfied with their jobs. We have found that managers often fail to connect with their employees on a level that emotionally enhances the employee experience.

High quality connections to people we work with can lead to improved results, and it behooves managers to find ways to connect with the people who report to them, not only at a cognitive level but also at an emotional level.

Making sure you pay people fairly, provide a safe work environment, offer advancement opportunities and other items related to the job and career levels are all important, and much has been written about these topics. These are necessary for engagement, but they do not connect employees at the emotional level.

'A CONSTANT JOURNEY'

"Calling" is a word that loses many business folks but at the end of the day what it means is that an individual has passion for what he or she is doing. Everyone in any position can view their work as a calling from janitors to CEOs. Clearly the flight attendant and the health-care supervisor had this calling, or what we term "higher passion" for their jobs.

We know people who go home and work hard at restoring their cars, work on their computers or have a multiplicity of avocational pursuits and spend money to do so. They have a passion and care deeply. What if you could help people in your organization to feel that way about their jobs?

It doesn't mean you would stop paying them well, but you would take them to a higher level of engagement creating an important competitive advantage. Here are three ideas for creating an environment where people will feel more passion for the work they do in your organization.

1. Connecting people to the emotional aspects of what they do

Not long ago, while talking to a client who used to work for a U.S.-based company that creates and manufactures pacemakers, he shared that the CEO regularly brought the employees together in town-hall-type meetings in order to connect them to the importance of their work.

The CEO would select specific customers and have these people share their stories. One customer was a 70-year-old man who coached gymnastics and was unable to do so anymore because of his health. He looked out at the employees and asked them if they wanted to see what their product had done for him. He began to do back flips across the stage! After many such customer stories, the employees were laughing and crying and feeling good about what they do. The CEO would then have these customers spending a day with people on the assembly line and other places throughout the company.

Leaders and managers need to understand the importance of helping people connect to the emotional aspects of what they are doing through their work. Just as importantly, they need to realize that managing such emotions is a constant process, as the feelings become weaker over time.

2. Understanding, living and aligning personal and company values

Values are often listed on organizational walls or on plastic cards, but the only time values matter is when employees and customers experience

them on a daily basis. When someone is being interviewed, does he experience the values of the company in the process? How about a year later, do new employees still experience the values of the company from their leaders, managers and colleagues? Are employee values aligned with the values of the organization? If they are not aligned, then soon there are a number of people living different values. This dilutes the culture.

If employees feel they are being asked to act outside of their own value set, they feel dissonance. They either adjust their behaviors to fit in, or they act out and cause problems for the organization. Sometimes such employees just leave the company. Most of the time, people will go along trying to fit in by getting their job done, but they will not do so with passion and excellence. It's not that certain values are right and others are wrong. What is critical is the alignment of one's personal values to the organization's values. This alignment is necessary to create high levels of engagement.

3. Treating hiring practices as essential

Whenever we are in a high-performing organization, we are always amazed at how much time is spent in hiring the right people. Great organizations understand that people are truly their most important asset.

A colleague of ours who used to work at Goldman Sachs said that a candidate there would be interviewed by 28 people, many of whom were senior partners. If any of them didn't think it was a good fit, the candidate was out.

However, in too many organizations we still see that hiring the right people is not a priority. Instead, we utilize managers to try and quickly plug holes or gaps, only to find that they are spending far too much time managing people out of the organization. By simply not hiring the right people, they are worse off than when they started. Even more than the content of the job, we find it

important to understand what the new hire values and if she has passion for the job you are hiring her for. Specifically indentifying what values and strengths are needed for the new hire is critical. Values and strengths are hard to change, but capabilities and the other things we usually look for can be developed. Hire carefully and adjust the roles of some people currently in your company in order to create increased engagement. Letting employees do what they are truly good at and enjoy will help to bring out the best in them and provide a competitive edge.

With that said it is important not to be confused. Connecting people to the importance of what the organization does is important; however, remember that what people do on a day-to-day basis may feel very far from what the organization produces.

Someone may, for example, work for a company that does a great deal for animals, but he happens to work in Human Resources. Though he loves pets, he also needs to have passion for HR work. The manager plays an important role in hiring the right people and then connecting them to things they have passion for.



We have found that engaging people is a constant journey, certainly not a destination. When employees are totally engaged, they flourish in the environment and provide extraordinary performance by practicing virtuous behavior, seeking out the best in everything. They tend to thrive at work and make high-quality connections with everyone, from colleagues and managers to customers.

This ability to be totally engaged in work can lead to great benefits for the people who come in contact with them, but also for the organization as a whole. It produces better relations, a stronger organizational culture, a more productive workplace and improved customer service. ☺



An organizational development consultant for more than 20 years, **Don Mroz** is a partner in *Waves of Change Consulting*, an international organizational development consulting firm, specializing in leadership, organizational change, strategy and positive approaches to work. He also works with the *Competing Values Company* and is working with **Shawn Quinn** in the development of *Lift Consulting*. Don taught for six years as an adjunct professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He may be reached at donmroz@wavesofchange.com.



Shawn Quinn is a partner at the *Competing Values Company* and teaches in the Executive Education Program at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. He is working with **Don Mroz** to build *Lift Consulting*, which works with organizations interested in applying research from the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship. He is the coauthor of *Leading Innovation: How to Jumpstart Your Organization's Growth Engine*. He may be reached at squinn@competingvalues.com.