

Employee Engagement Programs Institutionalize Leadership Behaviors

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There is ample evidence that employee engagement programs drive bottom-line results. By gathering such initiatives as incentives, training, recognition, and rewards into one cohesively communicated and measured program, they strengthen the internal brand and inspire employees to contribute towards organizational goals in a mutually beneficial manner.

What is less evident, but no less important, is how such programs build good leaders and have a significant impact on company culture. A well-designed engagement program – particularly one with a strong recognition component – creates a framework on which to build the social relationships needed for success. It also provides the tools and direction needed to ensure that the interactions between leadership and the team is in line with the values and brand attributes the organization has defined, both internally and externally.

Disparities In Perception

What makes a great leader? In his *Forbes* article, “What is Leadership?” Kevin Kruse writes, “Leadership is a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal.” A leader uses social influence to engage teammates. Interestingly, a 2009 survey by researcher James Zenger found employee perceptions

of what makes a “great leader” to be remarkably different. In fact, a mere 12% of the survey’s respondents considered those with strong social skills to be great leaders. Those with strong results focus were seen as great leaders by only 14%. When both the skills were combined, however, 72% of respondents believed the individual would be a great leader. Since it takes the confidence of followers to lead, this is an important revelation.

Matthew Lieberman, writing for the *Harvard Business Review* in his article, “Should Leaders Focus on Results, or on People?” points to a recent study that shows only one percent of leaders are rated highly on both social skills and goal focus. He suggests, “We need to create a culture that rewards using both sides of the neural seesaw. We may not be able to easily use them in tandem, but knowing that there is another angle to problem solving and productivity will create better balance in our leaders.”

An engagement strategy, incorporating recognition programs, can contribute to the development of such a leadership culture. Recognition programs not only acknowledge and reward employee efforts, which align to organizational values and goals, they also require an action on the part of a manager or senior leader. In an ideal world of social intelligence, these leaders might see employees

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doing the right thing and naturally and authentically express appreciation or gratitude. This is unfortunately not the case in many workplaces.

When a recognition program is in place, it quickly becomes clear that the expectation of the manager is to recognize, reward, and reinforce the laudable actions taken by employees. Valued actions are specifically defined as part of the program design.

Additionally, recognition programs provide the tools needed to connect to employees. Among other possibilities, eCards, online platforms with rewards points, and recognition events are easy ways for managers to acknowledge the work of their teams. Online tools also provide the built-in tracking and reporting that can help leaders to gain understanding and provide support where needed. In many cases, adherence to programs, and the use of defined recognition tools, is now part of managerial performance reviews, which resonates with even the most results-focused managers.

Appreciation boosts engagement for the employee whose extra effort has been noticed. At the same time, organizations are engaging leaders and teaching them to be better and more inspiring. By putting mechanisms in place to know when it is appropriate to recognize accomplishments and how to go about it, an organization can guide this social dynamic between manager and employee. What would otherwise be a strictly social interaction, subject to the strengths or weaknesses of the manager, becomes institutionalized in support of organizational goals.

Aon Hewitt captures the importance of this relationship in its paper, “The Multiplier Effect: Insights into How Senior Leaders Drive Employee Engagement Higher.” The paper reports, “There is a strong emotional component to how senior

leaders drive engagement within organizations. They are personally aligned with the organization’s values and utilize various initiatives to bring employees closer to the goals and outcomes of the organization... Only engaged leaders can create engaged teams.”

An employee engagement and recognition program connects leaders with the success of their teams and improves the chances that they will not only establish, but also participate in, a culture of excellence. When an organization creates a program of mutually beneficial behaviors and reinforcement, employee engagement is deepened, the social dynamic between managers and employees is improved, leaders inspire more confidence, and the brand message and values are delivered throughout. ■



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