

CREDIT UNION JOURNAL



THE NATION'S LEADING INDEPENDENT CREDIT UNION NEWSWEEKLY

November 5, 2007

The Benefits of an Engaged Employee

Focus on Employee Relationships to Drive Member Relationships

By Ron Schmidt



Cultivating a corporate culture of engaged employees results in great benefits to your credit union.

“Engaged employees produce more, make more money for the company, and create emotional engagement and loyal customers.

They contribute to good working environments where people are productive, ethical and accountable. They stay with the organization longer and are more committed to quality and growth...than non-engaged or disengaged workers. Employees who feel disconnected emotionally from their co-workers and supervisor do not feel committed to their work. They hang back and do the minimum because they don't believe anyone cares. These employees lower the bar for themselves by doing the least amount of work necessary.” - from the book “Power of Engagement” by Him Loehr and Tony Schwartz.

Success in business is based on how successfully we form relationships. How successful we are in forming relationships is based on how we treat and communicate with others. Therefore, it makes sense for an organization whose business is based on relationships with members to have engaged employees who are trained to effectively communicate with them.

What makes employees effective certainly relates to their talents and interests. In the workplace, matching employee abilities to organizational needs is the easy part. Once you have service providers in the best position to assist your

members, the real question is: “What keeps them engaged?” What is the connection between what they can do and what they actually do for the credit union and its members? What can organizations do to provide an environment that allows employees to do what they want to do rather than simply what they have to do? What are the barriers that prohibit this from happening and how can we build bridges to make it a reality?

To answer these questions, let's go through some principles on how we should engage with others. We'll call them “tenets of engagement.” While P.M. Forni calls these tenets of “civility,” let's apply these to engagement; listen, apologize, be aware, be inclusive, speak kindly, show respect, tell the truth, seek agreement, take responsibility, and accept constructive criticism.

Affirmation Is A Strong Communicator

Affirmation is a strong communicator and a strong connector. Being affirmative is directly related to how well you engage with others, which is essential for communication and building relationships.

How we make eye-contact and our overall body language is integral to “making the switch work,” to keeping us connected and engaged, to cement that relationship.

Affirmation in a work setting breaks down isolation between co-workers and aids social support in a community or an organization. Put another way: It's difficult to build relationships with others

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in a community or an office without affirmation, and without acknowledging others.

Let's examine a management team with a contrary view on the benefits of engagement. Joe works hard, goes beyond the call of duty but receives little or no feedback. "Good job" and "We appreciate what you do for us" are rarely spoken by members of the management team (and indeed rarely uttered by the chief executive-since it all starts at the top.) Eventually Joe starts to doubt himself-"Maybe I'm not doing a good enough job, maybe they don't like me, maybe I don't fit in." Thus the slide begins, and eventually his energy and commitment to the organization start to wane. Joe feels anonymous and disconnected from the organization. Feelings of anonymity may even trigger issues of undesirable employee behavior. The result: Another disengaged employee! How can this be prevented? What obstacles are in the way and what bridges need to be built?

Barriers In Corporate Settings

There are barriers in corporate settings that stifle relationships. We often see individuals differently in an organization than in a social "group" setting. Similarly, the "control" or "controls" we create make employees act unnaturally. Under normal conditions, most employees would embrace the "tenets of engagement," but in a "controlled" environment they may not. The values we are raised with are not necessarily the values we are "allowed to have in the office. What happens when those values clash? We have a breakdown in civil behavior toward co-workers and customers, which raises issues of behavior and how we treat others.

For example, Mary Anne represents HelpMe Credit Union. Her superior told her, when she was hired 15 years ago, that she would serve the members. HelpME has grown to \$1 billion over the years and with a new chief executive has implemented structure and conformity policies. Every employee is instructed to abide by these policies and procedures to protect the credit union. Mary feels that she is unable to assist members like in the old days because the corporate culture has shifted away from an emphasis on serving them. So what happens when new procedures aren't beneficial to members? Who wins and what is the effect on the Mary Annes of the world?

When workplace "controls" interfere with employees' natural ability to embrace the "tenets of engagement," relationships within the organization become less meaningful. Employees become less willing to interact with co-workers, and are inclined to just "do their job" before heading home. At the end of the day these employees add "less value" to an organization, not more. "Controls" often act as a barrier to engagement. Ultimately "controls" can be contrary to an individual's self worth.

"Organizations become good when processes are well designed and executed by employees doing what they need to do for the organization. Organizations become great when the environment allows employees to do what they want to do for the organization. Clearly the 'magic' of any successful organization lies in the discretionary effort of people." -D. Porter.

When that effort is fostered and supported, you enable engagement and all of the success that derives from it.

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