

A new view on Employee Engagement

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"There is nothing permanent except change" as Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher once said. Organizations operate in a much more complex, dynamically changing and less predictable environment than a few decades ago. As prices, products and technology can be easily reproduced by competitors, organizations recognize that their real competitive advantage rather lies in intangible assets, such as their human resources. To be able to successfully meet the requirements of a more challenging business environment organizations need to manage their human resources more effectively than ever before. According to Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, *"Any company trying to compete must figure out a way to engage the mind of every employee."* (In: Buckingham and Coffman, 1999, p. 273).

Employee engagement has become a hot topic in the last few years as there is a general accord among consultants and practitioners that employee engagement is a key driver of business performance. Interestingly however, I haven't managed to locate even one academic research that would have proved a strong correlation between engagement and performance. It seems that there is a huge gap between what science really proved and what practitioners consider as a fact. The "Employee Engagement Maturity Survey" – which was conducted on behalf of Stamford Global in 2010 and 2012 with the participation of almost 150 European HR professionals – also supported this pre-assumption as in each year almost 100% of respondents thought that improved employee engagement has a direct and positive effect on the organization's better business performance. In each year app. 80% of responding HR professionals reported that employee engagement was a top priority or very important within their organizations, app. 65-68% of represented organizations had a developed employee engagement strategy, moreover in 2012 three out of four engagement strategies were clearly linked to business results (Kassim & Turner, 2012; Kassim, 2012).

These results let me assume that organizations are interested in employee engagement for the reason of improving their business performance. However I raise my concern that if material benefits are the real reasons behind the intentions of engaging employees than engagement initiatives may not necessarily be perceived positively by employees. Emotional attachment to the organization is a key component of engagement, which cannot be required as part of the employment contract. If engagement initiatives are being implemented within an organization, but in the same time senior and direct management do not show a sincere interest in employee's wellbeing than effectiveness may be jeopardized.

A great deal of various articles and researches present numerous lists of key engagement drivers offering diverse suggestions to effectively increase the overall level of employee engagement. While academic researches rather focus on revealing the main individual attributes that can be found in a significant relationship with engagement, literature of consulting institutes tend to propose organization-related interventions in order to create an engaging environment for employees. I find it interesting how these approaches all focus on what an organization can do to make employees more engaged but not many of them deal with the other side of the coin: What can employees do themselves to become engaged? (except e.g. Karsan & Kruse, 2011)

Employee engagement surveys usually consist of passive questions or statements, such as:

- "How satisfied are you with your involvement in the decisions that affect your work?" (Schneider et al., 2003)
- "Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?" (Q12, Gallup, 2010)
- "At work, have I had opportunities to learn and grow?" (Q12, Gallup, 2010)
- "My job inspires me." (UWES, Schaufeli et al., 2006)
- "My company inspires me to do my best work." (Towers Perrin, 2008)

These questions or statements however do not reflect on whether employees really want to be engaged and if they make any effort to have an impact on their environment.

While I studiously agree that organizations should really do their best to create an engaging environment, I also find it compelling to make employees engaged in becoming engaged, too. A simple technique – such as asking ACTIVE questions on a DAILY basis – could have a notable affect. Why don't we ask employees questions like these on a daily basis?

- Did I do my best to do my best work?
- Did I do my best to get the support I need to do quality work?
- Did I do my best to create opportunities for improvement?
- Did I do my best to express my opinion or new ideas?
- Did I do my best to find meaning in my work?
- Did I do my best to discuss progress with my manager?
- Did I do my best to understand how my job contributes to company success?
- Did I do my best to contribute to company success?
- etc.

(Source: Inspired by Kelly Goldsmith but adapted in a different way, Goldsmith, 2012)

Asking these questions on a daily basis may slowly create awareness across employees that instead of just passively expecting for things to improve they may also take responsibility for impacting on their own environment in a way that suits them best.

I would be curious to reveal if such an approach would make a difference in terms of employee engagement and individual as well as organizational performance.

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