

Title

Employee engagement masterclass

Lesson 1: Trust your employees and learn to let go

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A very distinct problem has been hovering over the workplace for decades: employee engagement -- or the lack thereof. Ever since [Gallup](#) began tracking engagement in 2000, engaged employees have never accounted for more than one-third of the workforce. How can companies overturn such a long standing trend? Start with management.

Text

Take a step back

Research shows that a 70 percent swing in employee engagement can be directly attributed to managers¹. So how can managers ignite engagement in the workplace? “One of the keys is to let go of control and empower teams,” says David Gram, Co-founder of Diplomatic Rebels and Head of ventures, Europe at LEGO Ventures, in Denmark. “The more layers of management and systems you have, the more complexity and fear of failing there will be.” Gram’s message of empowerment is backed by research², as studies show seven out of 10 employees consider empowerment as an important element of their engagement. One study also shows that empowered employees have engagement levels in the 79th percentile, while their disempowered colleagues only manage to hit the 24th percentile.

Steve Jobs once had this piece of advice³ for managers: “It doesn’t make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.” Thus, it’s not just about having the right people in place, it’s about creating a workplace where employees feel like they can experiment, take risks, challenge authority, share and support one another -- all of which leads to higher engagement.

Use positive reinforcement

Frances X. Frei, Uber’s former SVP of Leadership and Strategy, defined a formula for successful engagement when it comes to giving employees feedback. “For each 10 bits of positive reinforcement you give, you have earned the credibility to give one bit of constructive advice,” she says. Why the heavy emphasis on positive feedback? Because research shows that it works. In a Gallup study, 67 percent of employees who said their managers focus on their strengths rather than weaknesses were engaged,

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/167975/why-great-managers-rare.aspx>

² https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-empowering-your-employees-helps-improve-business_us_5a2eec0ee4b0bad787126f08

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/06/14/the-key-to-employee-empowering-leadership/#42bf5bc21267>

versus just 31 percent who were constantly reminded of their shortcomings⁴. Research⁵ goes on to show that focusing on positive reinforcement not only yields more engaged employees, but also employees who learn faster, are more productive and job hop less frequently.

Positive reinforcement is incredibly simple, according to Mia Mendis, CEO of Sodexo Benefits and Rewards Services/Inspirus: “It’s saying thank you for the work they do.” But this simple practice goes a long way. “Positive reinforcement connects people to the work that they do and to each other. It’s validating and it spans the entire spectrum of the employee experience.”

All about the numbers?

“If you give this (positive) feedback, you’re very likely to have highly engaged employees,” says John Frehse, Senior Managing Director of Ankura Consulting Group, LLC. “And it turns out that highly engaged employees are 22 percent more productive than disengaged employees⁶.” While Frehse and other researchers are quick to make the link between engagement and financial performance, Mendis adds a touch of caution: “Let’s just presume that if you treat your employees well, they will be engaged and that drives performance. But start talking about engagement in the context of employee experience because it’s the every single day experiences that ultimately drive engagement. That’s what you can influence as a manager or a leader in an organization.”

⁴ <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/182321/employees-lot-managers.aspx>

⁵ <https://hbr.org/2015/04/what-great-managers-do-to-engage-employees>

⁶ <https://hbr.org/2013/07/employee-engagement-does-more>