



Engaging and Retaining Employees in a Down Economy – What Managers Can Do

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Times are Tough

While it is no longer in a “free fall,” the economy is still floundering. Companies, large and small, are struggling, and employees are unhappy and worried. They are unhappy about their increased workload and the longer hours required of them and worried about when the next layoff might occur and whether or not their job is safe. There is little managers can do about the economy or how well their companies are riding out the storm. However, there are things they can do to maintain the morale and productivity of their employees during these challenging times. It’s called employee engagement, and it matters more now than ever.

Employee Engagement Defined

Some employees barely make it to work on time, mindlessly drift from task to task, doing only what is required and showing little enthusiasm for their work. Meanwhile, other employees are excited about coming to work and exude energy no matter the task, going above and beyond minimum expectations and always looking for ways to get the job done and satisfy customers. Experts use the term “employee engagement” to describe the continuum between these two types of employees from disengaged to highly engaged.

Engaged employees are committed to their organization and its bottom line; have tremendous pride and job ownership; put forth more discretionary effort in terms of time and energy; and, on average, demonstrate significantly higher levels of performance and productivity than those who are not engaged. The Gallup organization has collected data that confirms this: engaged employees generate 38% higher customer satisfaction scores, 22% higher productivity, and 27% higher profits for their companies.

Simply put, employee engagement is the emotional ties or connections employees have with their place of employment and how well an employer is meeting its employees’ needs for challenging work, growth and opportunity, sense of belonging, motivating and caring leadership, and being valued and rewarded for their contribution.

Managers Matter Most

Managers are the linchpin to employee engagement. They have an enormous impact on the climate in their group. The items mentioned above—challenging work, growth and opportunity, sense of belonging, etc.—are all within the control of the frontline manager. And keep in mind...employee engagement is a **contact sport**. Managers cannot engage their employees by sitting behind their desks answering emails and taking phone calls. They have to get out in the workplace and actively interact with their employees.

Employee Engagement Playbook for Managers

What follows are some practical tips and techniques managers can employ to engage their employees.

Know Your Employees

- Meet with each of your employees and find out what is important to them and what motivates them to perform. Think of it as a “stay interview” vs. the more common “exit interview” where you find out about issues, after the fact, as the employee is walking out the door. Examples of the types of questions you might ask are:
 - What do you enjoy most about your work?
 - What frustrates you about your work?
 - What do you see as your top three strengths? Are you utilizing them in your work? If not, how can you and I make that happen?
 - Are you getting the amount and types of feedback you want?
 - What do you want to get better at? What are some new skills you would like to learn?
 - What would you like to be doing three years from now?
 - How can I help and support you in your current job as well as help you achieve your long-term career goals?
- Find out the birthdays of each of your employees. Create a calendar to remind you to send them a personalized birthday card on their special day. If possible, throw a small party for the entire team to celebrate the occasion.
- Learn about employees’ interests, hobbies, family, etc. to build a personal relationship and create an emotional connection with each of your employees.

Grow Your Employees

- You don’t need a training budget or a formal training program to help employees gain new knowledge and learn new skills. The best learning happens on the job. Reflect on those “stay interviews” conducted with each of your employees and figure out ways to integrate what they want to learn into their current roles. What tasks of your own could you start delegating? What special projects, task forces, or committees they can participate in? What “free” online training is available that you can point them to and provide them time during the workday to attend? Don’t be shy about asking the employees themselves for ideas.
- Remember the book *the One Minute Manager*? The premise of that book was that it only takes a minute to coach and mentor your employees. So, make a commitment to step away from your desk during each day to observe, interact with, and learn more about what your employees are doing in their jobs and what challenges they might be facing. Use the time as an opportunity to provide feedback to correct and/or fine tune their performance. It will also help you identify ways you can better support them and remove obstacles to their ability to better perform their jobs. Employees want to do a good job and grow, but they can’t do it in a void. As all the great athletes know, feedback is the breakfast of champions!
- Share business-related articles with your team. Create opportunities for them to discuss and look for ways to apply their learnings on the job.

Involve Your Employees

- Meet with your team and go over the latest customer satisfaction scores. Ask them to suggest things they can do individually and collectively to create a better customer service experience. Make sure they suggest things that are within their control. Write these suggestions down, send them back out to the team (shows commitment!), and start implementing them right away. Continue to meet on this topic and work with your team to track and monitor these suggestions to see how they are positively impacting customer service.
- Rather than you alone responding to upper management's request to cut costs, involve your team in the effort. They will think of many more creative ways to do this than you might have come up with on your own.
- Make a list of problems needing to be solved and pick one you think the team can address. Host a 10-minute kick-off meeting explaining the problem and invite the team's involvement in coming up with a solution. Post the problem on a flip chart in a central location for people to list solutions as they think of them over the coming days. When ready, bring the team back together to discuss the different solutions in terms of pros and cons, ease of implementation, etc. Then have each team member vote on their top three. Host a 10-minute wrap-up meeting to explain the results of the vote and share which solution you'll implement on behalf of the team. Not only will you be involving your team in solving problems, you'll also be teaching them new skills such as critical thinking.

Recognize Your Employees

- Most managers know it is important to recognize employee effort and contribution. However, knowing is not the same as doing. Try this simple exercise taken from the book *42 Rules of Engagement* by Susan Stamm to practice giving more praise. For the next three days, come to work with ten pennies in your left pocket. Each time you express appreciation to one of your employees, move one penny from the left pocket to the right pocket. At the end of the day, you have a concrete measure of how much praise you are really giving out. Try to increase your "score" by at least one penny each day. And remember, bosses and peers are also hungry for some positive words so include them in your efforts. After a while, you won't need the pennies anymore; giving praise will be a new behavior that comes easy and effortless to you.
- Make sure employees know that you value their hard work and sacrifices during these times. Allowing someone to leave work early or come in a bit later are simple but meaningful ways to let the employee know you appreciate all their hard work and effort.

Inspire Your Employees

- Re-prioritize their work. Start by recognizing that fewer staff members simply cannot do everything the group did before. Ask your team to rank order all of their current work deliverables and focus on those that they (and you) consider mission-critical. Non-essential work should then be prioritized separately based on its relative importance to your group's contributions to the company's continued profitability.
- Now is the time to beef up your communication efforts. Regular communication is always important, but it is critical during difficult times. Remember, there is no such thing as too much information. When explaining what's going on with the company and why changes are necessary, be as straightforward as possible. Employees need to be confident that their managers have a solid plan for navigating what may now seem like stormy seas.

- Have an open door policy and maintain a tone that invites questions and unscheduled drop-ins. This will go a long ways in helping you manage the rumor mill and keep the “water cooler” talk to a minimum.

Managers + Engagement Efforts = Employees Who Choose to Stay

In good times, employee engagement is the difference between being good and being great. In bad times it is the difference between surviving and not. Employees will remember how the organization treated them when the chips were down. If managers employ the suggestions provided in this article, there is a greater likelihood that when the economy improves, employees will choose to stay rather than leave to look for greener pastures.

Improve Your Employee Engagement Efforts – Human Capital Consulting Partners Can Help

- Employee engagement survey development, implementation, interpretation and action planning
- Frontline manager skill development in employee engagement and retention strategies
- Communication effectiveness training
- Team building
- Executive coaching