



RE-ENGAGEMENT

Opportunities for great leaders

By Professor George Kohlrieser – January 2011

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We are all aware of the numerous company hardships and collapses in recent years. Often unnoticed, however, is the human story of individual employees and their increasing disconnection from work. Never have as many people felt so disengaged from their jobs, and so removed from their leaders and the values of their company.

A recent global survey by the HR company Hewitt Associates shows employee engagement and morale declined greater in 2010 than at any other time in the last 15 years since the company began doing such research.

It is not only employee morale at stake. There is a clear link between employee engagement levels and a company's financial performance. According to Hewitt's analysis, organizations with high levels of engagement (where 65 percent or more of employees are engaged) outperformed the total stock market index even in volatile economic conditions. From customer satisfaction to productivity, staff turnover to sick leave (disengaged employees are more likely to take sick days), a company's bottom line is seriously affected.

The cause of such wide scale disengagement is not to be found in company balance sheets, but instead in the minds of company leaders. Research demonstrates that the way a leader thinks and behaves has a critical influence on employees' feelings about their job and organization. When a leader creates a bond with employees and engenders a sense of security and trust, he or she is able to keep them committed, highly motivated and deeply engaged, inspiring them to do and be their very best.

Adapting to change: Opportunity or danger

Change for engaged high performers is always about opportunity; change for the disengaged is always about danger. Today, change is a constant placing huge stress on those who cannot embrace it. By its nature, change requires that managers encourage innovation and support employees to venture out of their comfort zones to take risks. Success is fuelled as much by new ideas and identifying new opportunities and strategies as it is by dedicated hard work.

It is often said that people naturally resist change and as such hold back from seeking difficult high performance goals. However, brain research shows that the opposite is true. People do not naturally resist change – they resist the pain of change and the fear of the unknown. When the leader is someone who can be trusted, who creates a trusting environment and who communicates the benefits of change, employees will follow in seeking the benefit of that change.

The human brain actually thrives on challenge, curiosity, new learning and change. This is not to say that change is pain free. Indeed, it is often accompanied by a very real sense of loss for what might have occurred or the danger that lies ahead. Yet, by letting go of old ways and by acknowledging the loss with compassion, leaders and their teams can constructively move forward. Ineffective leaders focus too much on the frustration, the problems and the pain instead of mobilizing energy towards the positive benefits in the future. Athletes offer a good model for this – true champions must overcome and “oversee” the pain, the frustration and even the seemingly insurmountable obstacles in order to reach new levels of performance.

The Secure Base Principle

In today’s environment, success is therefore dependent on feeling secure in order to seek change, challenge and take risks (even in times of uncertainty). It is essential that leaders serve as “secure bases” for their employees so that the brain’s defensive and over protective system can be turned off. A secure base leader can create a foundation for a feeling of safety and allows people to overcome their anxiety and the feeling of being threatened in order to explore, be creative and to take risks.

The goal of a secure base is not safety in itself, but rather the foundation to actively seek challenge, new learnings and change. Imagine everyone in an organization striving to fulfill their potential. Secure base leadership is about developing strong and enduring relationships with employees that allow them to do just this.

Opportunities for great leaders

One of the biggest mistakes made by leaders is to place too much focus on cost-cutting, revenues and facts and figures. In the process, people and relationships are forgotten and a lack of engagement creeps into the culture. The most successful leadership is about “playing to win”. Most people are, in fact, hijacked by their anxiety and are playing too defensively – “playing not to lose”.

The calculated risk-taking and readiness to adapt and change that is required of cutting-edge companies means that leaders have to be able to re-direct the mind’s eye of an employee or team to

focus on the vast world of possibilities and opportunities. Unfortunately most managers do not create enough trust to do that and thereby promote employee disengagement.

Great leaders are able to find and encourage intrinsic motivators in people that drive them to achieve the highest levels of performance where challenging goals, tough feedback and relentless learning is a way of life. These intrinsic motivators are always based on internal values, meaning and purpose. Such great leaders encourage their teams to think and act with intrinsic motivation to make people, teams, organizations and the world a better place beyond just driving growth and profits. You cannot expect employees to be positive and fully engaged if the leader's motivation is not intrinsically driven by values and purpose.

An engaged workforce led by inspired leaders is the foundation that drives success and allows organizations and economies to rise out of the toughest of situations. What I call "leading at the edge" requires an artful mix of focus, motivation, inspiration and courage so as to constantly push one's boundaries and to strive for what yesterday seemed impossible.

Reaching peak performance is aiming for the highest results and not being afraid to learn from failures along the way. The secure base leader is an important key for organizations to drive competitiveness, innovation and creativity to successfully emerge as a winner. To be risk adverse in the current climate is to stagnate. Leaders that can take this opportunity to transform negative, disengaged teams into highly energized employees are ready to face what changes lie ahead.

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