Ready, Set, Engage!

By Julius E. Rhodes, SHPR

I N THE 19TH CENTURY, an individual whose philosophy is widely misunderstood said that people are disconnected from their work and each other. Now mind you, during the 19th century there was no internet and nothing remotely related to the technology we take for granted in the 21st century. Today's cellphones and personal devices have more computational power than the machines that helped launch the first manned space flight.

It's not surprising that engagement is and will continue to be a highly relevant issue in our personal and professional lives. But what do we mean by engagement, and how do we make it a reality in our myriad roles?

According to a 2009 report by the Human Capital Institute, engagement can be defined as "the extent to which employees enjoy and believe in what they do, feel valued for it and are willing to spend their discretionary effort to make the organization successful."

We need discretionary effort, and we need it all the time, but that isn't realistic. The central question becomes how to create an environment where discretionary effort is exercised as an almost unconscious act? In other words, how do we get to the point that it occurs naturally and organically without anyone giving much thought to it?

Before I share my belief on how we get there, let me say this: We hire adults and turn them into children. No one consciously hires a bad employee. We see something in every new hire that leads us to believe he or she will add value to the team, but it doesn't always work out that way. This is how I believe we can enhance engagement and get the discretionary effort we desire:

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1. **Onboarding:** This has to be a well-thought-out and executed process, and it doesn't begin on the new arrival's first day of employment. It begins from the first point of contact with a candidate. We should always believe that if a person merits contact from our organization, he or she could potentially be an employee of the firm. I can't tell you how many times I've worked with employers who treat initial contact with a candidate as if they are doing the candidate a favor by reaching out. The reality is that if a candidate didn't have something to offer, you wouldn't be contacting the person at all.

2. **Departmental introduction:** The technology a new employee needs is likely on the desk on day one, but people need connections with others as well. Introducing the new hire to the other members of the team and vice versa is essential to developing awareness and cohesion.

3. **One-on-one with the manager:** Typically when a new employee comes on board everyone is relieved; the position may have been vacant for a while and they want to hand off whatever they've been doing to the new person and walk away. Not so fast. The manager needs to spend some dedicated time with the new employee, not just to welcome the person to the team but to lay out 90-day goals and objectives and establish an open-door policy for questions. This is by far the area with the greatest lost opportunity to create engagement. When this is lost, it cannot be regained.

4. **Interpersonal support:** It must be known and shared by every member of the team and throughout the organization that high levels of trust, cooperation, and support are required.

How It Works

I remember a situation when an employee of a major firm had a negative experience with a client. The client demanded a personal apology from the individual, and the second-level manager insisted the employee write a personal letter of

apology. How do you think that made the employee feel? And what was the impact on other members of the team?

Now, I'm not saying that an apology might not have been in order, but you can't have an engaged workforce if it doesn't feel supported. In this case, the correct approach would have been to have the individual's manager speak to the aggrieved party and assure them the issue was being handled internally. That way, the employee was not subjected to such a gut-wrenching scenario, the client received validation for his or her feelings, and there were no negative repercussions within the organization.

In the end, if we are to achieve the levels of en-gagement that will take us from where we are to where we need to be, it will require effort—daily, consistent, and sustained effort.

By the way, if you're wondering who said people are disconnected from their work and each other in the 19th century, it was Karl Marx. Just goes to show you that things are not always as they seem. Ⓟ

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