

Employee Engagement: benefits in difficult economic times. An approach to implementation

By Peter Burton

In the years I worked as an entrepreneur, the nearest thing I found to a ‘silver bullet’ was getting our employees highly-engaged in our businesses. We did this by giving them our respect, being open with them, trusting them, and giving them autonomy. I call this ROTA management: respect, openness, trust, autonomy. Today, evidence has accumulated that highly-engaged companies massively outperform their peers. Their people are enthusiastic, creative and productive. Above all they self-regulate: in an open environment, they see clearly what they need to pay attention to. Highly-engaged companies are always great places to work, so absenteeism and staff churn are naturally low.

Openness and trust, in my view the most important of the ROTA ingredients, both need to be seen as two way processes. Not only should management be candid about what is going on in the company and make it clear what is expected from the workforce. They must also actively encourage their people to think how company performance can be improved and set up easy-to-use ways for their ideas to be fed back to managers and colleagues. This concept is an essential part of ‘engagement’, as confirmed by recent studies by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, The Institute of Employment Studies, and Ipsos/Mori

- having opportunities to feed your views upwards (CIPD)
- freedom to voice ideas, *to which managers listen* (IES) my italics.
- allowing people the opportunity to feed their views and opinions upwards is the single most important driver of engagement (Ipsos/Mori).

A model for facilitating this ‘ownership behaviour’ which impresses me is described by Nancy Kline in her book *Time To Think*, where she describes how to create a ‘Thinking Environment’ in which people regularly have time and opportunity to develop their best thinking. Advice on implementing this model is available in the UK from Emily Havers at SPRINGLILY. For more information click here

www.springlily.co.uk.

High-engagement is an asset in good times, but is hugely important in times like the present. As the FT reported recently, a typical workforce shows paralysis and anxiety in the face of possible redundancies. Performance falls off, exacerbating the effects of recession. Highly engaged employees in contrast are much more resilient whether or not redundancies actually take place. In this context, I would like to emphasise that engagement should not be confused with 'satisfaction'. Merely 'satisfied' employees do not bring the benefits of engagement or high productivity to the organisation.

Recommended reading:

Time to Think: Listening to ignite the human mind. Nancy Kline (1999). London: WardLock

Human Resource Management, Employee Attitudes and Workplace Performance. David E Guest and Neil Conway (2007) Department of Trade and Industry, URN 07/.