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SIGNIFICANCE OF FIRST TIME MANAGERS IN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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Abs tract:-*Employee engagement has gained importance over the years as a way of improving retention and productivity. Organizations have undertaken several initiatives to improve engagement levels of their employees and yet surveys find them lacking where it matters. Employees often look at these surveys with disdain and another annual chore.*

In this article we explore what employees seek from employers, some of the employee engagement practices, who is best placed to engage employees, the challenges to developing an engaged workforce, and what organizations could do better.

Keyw ords:*Employee engagement , Managers , Employee Engagement.*

INTRODUCTION

Organizations have been laying increasing emphasis on employee engagement in recent years. It is generally believed that engaged employees contribute better to organizational goals and are likely to stay longer in the organization. Organizations will therefore develop programs that they believe will keep employees engaged. We look at some of the factors that improve and impede engagement, what are some of the inherent challenges to developing a more engaged workforce, and how organization can provision for a better engagement model.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Employee engagement programs evolved from a need for better retention. Views on what engages employees have also been evolving over the years and continue to do so.

In the early days it was felt that satisfied employees would stay longer and hence a lot of effort was devoted to activities that the leadership thought would keep employees satisfied. Employee Relations executives within the HR function of smaller organizations would organize birthday parties and fun events for colleagues. As organizations grew this would soon become a logistic challenge and gave way to group birthday celebrations. The personal 'touch' that organizations strived for would ultimately get lost. Tenured employees would nostalgically recall how their chief executive made it a point to attend every colleague's birthday in the 'good old days.'

The advent of BPOs in India saw the focus move to 'facilities'. It was felt that providing more facilities was a way of caring better for employees and keeping them satisfied. Home pick-up and drop facility, whether legislated or not, became the norm. Organizations also started competing with each other to provide better benefits like free or subsidized food at the office cafeteria, gymnasium for a healthy work life, term life insurance, medical insurance for self, family and parents, and tie up with medical institutions for services at discounted rates.

Employee Assistance Program is a relatively new type of facility that organizations have started providing to their employees. It is like graduating from the physical to the emotional level. The service is outsourced to organizations specializing in arranging counseling services to people going through stress or emotional upheaval in their lives. Employees are encouraged to contact such service providers through email, web, phone or chat facilities to seek help and guidance in dealing with their specific situation. These service providers also hold speaker sessions for their client organizations on topics of general relevance like parenting, stress management, managing relationships, etc.

Since organizations keep benchmarking their offerings with others in the market, the early starters soon lose their advantage. There is little entry barrier for organization in introducing facilities for employees. A major reason why organizations are unable to maintain their competitive advantage through such facilities is that these facilities are provisioned through outsourced service providers. These service providers approach target organizations and offer the same services to all. Employees now look at these facilities as a hygiene factor – something if not provided is a negative, not something for which they would hold on to their jobs.

MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Organization soon realized that pursuing employee satisfaction was futile and that employee engagement was more relevant. It is important to understand when employees consider themselves truly engaged so we are able to devise meaningful engagement interventions. Organizational surveys reveal some very basic needs that employees have. These include being treated with respect, having a manager who helps them and cares for them, knowing the role that they play in contributing to the organization's objectives,

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feeling connected with the leadership team, being provided with opportunities to learn, to use their skills and to grow, and last but not the least fairness and transparency.

Clearly these needs are soft in nature and quite subjective. Respect, care, being helpful, learning, growth, connectedness, fairness and transparency are all very subjective terms. While employee engagement surveys may capture the needs at a high level, most of the subjectivity stems from details that are not captured. Employees may differ largely in how these needs should be met. Inability of organizations to understand the diverse nuances and put in place a credible mechanism to address them may be the single most important reason why employee engagement levels continue to be cause of concern in many organizations.

IMPACT OF SUBJECTIVITY

Subjectivity only helps to compound the problem. Even as organizations put together a task force to address employee needs, the impact is suboptimal due to several reasons - problems may have been generally addressed at the macro level, solutions may not have been tailored to the requirement of specific groups, the masses may not be aware that someone is working to make a difference, lack of involvement in the change program may create a feeling of disconnect. All these reasons may make employees feel that their suggestions are not acted upon and make them lose trust in the entire process. It is not uncommon to find employees feeling that the employee engagement survey is another chore that they have to go through year after year.

While organizations may deal with other subjective factors more effectively, the factor of fairness poses considerable challenges – especially with respect to performance management and opportunities for growth. Career development and growth in the organization are prime reasons why people take up assignments. The fact that organizations are structured like pyramids means that not everyone can move up the ladder at the same pace. This poses the toughest challenge for managers – especially if all team members were to perform at the same level and displayed equal potential. A manager would be forced to choose one person for promotion. This would raise concerns among employees about the fairness of the decision. The fact that such difficult situations do not exist where all team members have the same caliber does not help. The outcome would be the same if a manger were forced to choose one of two.

Many organizations use the bell curve to moderate performance scores as part of their performance management practice. Again, similar to the situation described above, if everyone were to perform at the same level, managers would still have to grade them differently to fit into the bell curve. Imagine the impact on employees where some organizations routinely let go the bottom 5% every year. How would they feel about the fairness of the system? How would it impact their engagement level?

Unfortunately, till we find a replacement to the pyramid model for organization structures we will continue to face engagement challenges. Organizations have been attempting to flatten the pyramid, but how flat can it get? It is yet the most functional model we have. We have an opportunity to enhance employee engagement by addressing

other employee needs. Like in most cases, it is the 80-20 rule that applies here too.

ROLE OF FIRST TIME MANAGERS IN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Given that most of the factors that contribute to better employee engagement are subjective in nature, how do we address employee needs better? Close examination of these needs indicates that a large number are related to employee-manager interaction. Managers have considerable opportunity to influence factors such as being treated with respect, being helpful and caring, presenting the bigger picture to team members, providing opportunities to learn and grow, and transparency. How much effort does the organization put in sensitizing managers about these factors and equipping them to manage colleague expectations more effectively?

Given that organization structures are pyramids, we end up with the largest number of employees reporting to first time managers. Statistically, therefore, first time managers are best placed to impact overall employee engagement. Unfortunately, first time managers are also the worst placed to bring about this impact. More often than not, they have been promoted on the back of great performance in an individual contributor role. They are likely to have a high task orientation and low people orientation. There is a direct correlation between low people orientation and low employee engagement. Not helping first time managers improve their people orientation is a choice that we do not have.

The engagement challenge is further compounded by the fact that first time managers are also the largest population among people managers. It is a logistics challenge to groom such a large number of managers and oversee their development and progress. It is tempting to provide them with a level of support that one can get away with and then pick up those who manage to progress on their own for further development. While this may sound as a pragmatic approach, it severely impacts the organizations ability to connect and make a difference among its largest employee base.

MAKING ENGAGEMENT WORK

The engagement model needs to be worked upon at two levels. The first level involves development and training of first time managers. Engagement is all about listening, understanding and supportive action. Employees must see their voices being heard and acted upon. First time managers need to be trained to be receptive to their team members and provide the desired emotional support to their colleagues to make them feel respected and cared for. The trust based relationship developed through emotional support and respect will alleviate many of the other challenges that result from employee expectations and are not in the managers' control. They will better appreciate the limitations that the pyramid organization structure imposes on decisions related to their career progression and reciprocate to their managers with empathy.

At the second level, organizations need to build credibility for their actions by involving employees at all

levels. A separate informal pyramid structure within the organization with groups at successive levels aligned to teams in their respective functions will generate greater visibility for actions being taken on employee feedback. Small work groups aligned to first time managers will be more effective in establishing connect with the masses and confidence that solutions are being worked upon upwards from the grass roots level.

Focused group discussion is a great way to connect with small teams to discuss why they have provided the feedback that they have and what they believe can be done to meet their expectations. It makes people feel heard and provides them an opportunity to be part of the solution. Most important, one can capture the diversity of nuances behind the survey responses.

CONCLUSION

It is not difficult to see that that an effective employee engagement model must address the emotional needs of employees. Organizations may not be able to satisfy everyone through career progression or huge salary packets, but they can definitely strive to create experiences for employees that make them feel wanted, cared for and respected. Despite the enormity of the task, organizations need to help first time managers improve their people orientation and connect empathetically with their team members.

True, it will require extraordinary effort to put this machinery in place, but the results can also be expected to be extraordinary. Focus on development of first time managers will mean a richer employee base at the start of the leadership funnel which is better able to engage employees – relate one to one with them, empathize with them, counsel and coach them - to deliver greater productivity and performance.

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