

Great leaders inspire and engage great employees

By Yvonne Thompson, CHRP, CHSC
MA (Leadership)

Are leader born or made? This is a long standing question that I am not sure anyone has the whole answer to. Most would answer yes. Some leaders are born while others are made. It today's business environment Leadership and formal leadership programs are a critical part of organizational effectiveness.

Leaders come in all shapes and sizes, but the most successful, most respected leaders are those who take seriously their responsibility *to lead* – that is, to inspire, enable and support those around them. Effective leaders know that they accomplish much more by actively working with those around them, rather than shutting themselves into an isolated corner office. Exceptional leaders commit to being better leaders tomorrow than they are today by continually refining their leadership skills. These skills include creating positive relationships, providing meaningful challenges for employees, being 'real' or authentic as a person and giving employees the opportunity to contribute to the organization's overall goals.

Ask the question

Leaders who want to enhance their leadership skills and be more effective should contemplate questions such as: How do I engage my employees in order to expose their unique talents? How can I increase the productivity, commitment and loyalty of my employees? How can I increase the sustainability and capacity of my organization through the engagement of the teams in my organization? A recent Manitoba-based research project set out to answer these questions by exploring the leadership factors that have an impact on employee engagement.

Before getting into the details of the study and its findings, let's define "employee engagement". Anyone in a leadership position is likely familiar with the concept, but how many leaders could actually define the term – and the practice – meaningfully? The following description is well researched and documented:

“Employee engagement is a heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for his or her organization, manager or coworkers that, in turn, influences him/her to apply additional discretionary effort to his/her work” (Gibbons, 2006, p. 5). In short, employees who have a heightened connection to their organization, supervisor and coworkers and who make additional effort in their work are considered “engaged”.

With that definition as the foundation, the research project solicited input from employees in Manitoba companies that were members of QNET. A group of 10 front-line employees representing companies in the financial, public and manufacturing sectors participated in two focus groups, while 25 individuals – front-line employees, managers and board members from Manitoba companies in the manufacturing, financial, communication, consulting and public sectors – participated in a World Café (an innovative group-conversation-based research method).

During the sessions, employees were asked to describe their experiences at work: When did they truly love coming to work? When did they feel most engaged? What circumstances encouraged them to participate fully in company priorities? They were also asked to describe the leadership factors that were present during the time when they felt most engaged with their work.

The focus group sessions unearthed patterns and relationships between the employees and their organization, manager and coworkers. Four significant themes relating to leadership emerged: positive relationships existed in the workplace, employees were challenged through change initiatives, leadership was experienced as authentic, and employees were given ample opportunity to contribute.

Focus Group Themes and Sub-Themes

Primary Theme	Total Times Theme Emerged	Sub-Theme	Total Times Sub-Theme Emerged
Positive relationships	112	Transparency	35
		People focus or humanistic approach.	33
		Mutual respect and trust	27
		Optimism	17
Challenge through change	54	Growth and development opportunities.	26
		Greater change through teamwork	18
		Meeting deadlines and goals	10
Authentic leadership	33	Authentic relationship and the flat organization	20
		Authentic feedback and connection with senior leaders	13
Opportunities to contribute	31	Contribution to team	16
		Contribution through unique talents	8
		Contribution that impacts the company	7

Positive relationships & environments

Employees described a positive work environment and positive relationships across all levels of the organization (from the front line to the executive office) as follows:

- transparency of actions and decisions exist
- employees are treated with dignity and respect
- a true sense of optimism pervades the workplace
- a genuine focus is placed on the well-being of employees
- leaders care about employees as people
- employees are treated fairly and equally, including senior executives being treated as all other employees are
- open and transparent communication is practiced
- employees are well informed about the organization and the specific projects or tasks to which they are contributing

The data generated by the employee participants indicates that employee engagement is increased in relation to the willingness of an organization to increase information flow and create transparency. When trust and mutual respect are present between coworkers, and in particular between workers and supervisors, positive relationships can result. Said one participant: "If my employer respects me and I respect my employer, then I'm going to be engaged." Another said: "Trust is really important. If you trust the person, you can get on with the things you need to get done."

During the focus group discussions, optimism was a frequently cited leadership factor. That is, a positive approach by leaders of the organization to business, projects and key initiatives was important to employees. Leaders who are able to be optimistic, even in the face of challenges, appear to enhance employee engagement.

Challenge through change

The employee participants talked a lot about their desire for work that would provide growth and development opportunities for them. Many of them described, in very positive terms, their experience of growth when involved on a team engaged in implementing a significant change initiative. Having responsibility for a major project tied to a specific goal and leading to a significant change for the organization was considered a valuable experience that enhanced their level of engagement.

Change doesn't just happen in an organization; change is sparked by individual "change agents". Leaders must put time and effort into identifying change agents within their organization. Obviously, not all employees are comfortable with change, but every organization has change agents just waiting to be engaged. Participants agreed that change agents could form transformational teams responsible for identifying change opportunities, including planning and

implementation. The World Café participants suggested that those employees who enjoy change could also be given responsibility for initiating change and taking responsibility for implementing projects that would introduce change into the organization.

Authentic leadership

A third important leadership attribute that emerged out of the focus group and World Café discussions was authentic leadership. Participants said they want leaders to provide feedback to them that is grounded in a sense of genuine connection – engagement – with the employees. They want leaders to actively commit to their leadership responsibilities and to undertake ongoing leadership development. Interestingly, participants described authentic leaders as those who "act flat even when [the organizational structure is] not". That is, leaders are most respected when they do not rely on their hierarchical position to command respect. Leaders are most respected when they treat employees across all levels of the organization, themselves included, as equal to one another.

Opportunities to contribute

The final attribute defined during the sessions concerned the importance for employees of being able to contribute to the growth and productivity of the organization. Identifying an individual's unique talents and then building on those strengths was seen as an important factor in engaging employees. Participants brainstormed ideas for how leaders could use assessment tools to identify individual strengths and personal preferences among employees. The data generated by the employee participants indicates that, generally speaking, employees want to contribute to a team, be valued for their individual contribution and understand the impact they have on the overall organization.

Now what?

The data generated by this research project provides practical information that can be used by companies and organizations of any size that are interested in

enhancing employee engagement. While different organizations will take different approaches in a different order of priority, every organization that wants to connect most effectively and productively with employees must commit to a leadership program.

Such a program must reflect the organization's mission, vision and values and must focus on the leadership factors that enhance employee engagement. It should provide opportunities for the development of leadership skills that nurture authenticity, transparency, optimism, respect and trust.

For example, creating authentic relationships can be accomplished in part by having the organization and the leaders "act flat" within the hierarchy. In the words of one of the research project participants, this means "allowing leaders to step in and out of leadership roles as needed." Of course, every development opportunity must include evaluation of the participant and reflection by that participant of their experience in the program. Assessment tools can help identify the gifts and unique talents that each individual brings to an organization. These tools can also identify gaps in leadership competencies that can, in turn, be used to personalize self-development plans, training and coaching programs for individuals.

Every effective leadership program must include opportunities to help participants learn how to create authentic personal connections with employees across all levels of the organization. And, in this 21st century workplace in which we find ourselves these days, every leader must learn how to effectively adapt to different generational needs and to honor the gifts that each team member brings to the organization.

Just do it

No organization can thrive in today's challenging times without effective leadership – at the top, in the middle and on the front lines. Of course, the best way for an organization to enjoy effective leadership is to recruit leaders who match the

organization's identified leadership competencies. But if your ranks are not already filled with leaders, commit the time and resources necessary to train those who hold leadership positions or who show the promise of leadership. Leadership development is not a luxury, but an essential priority for every organization that wants to realize its vision of success. Your investment will pay off in improved employee engagement, which will lead to improved company-wide productivity. How can that not be worth it?

Yvonne Thompson is Principal Consultant with Change Innovators Inc., a Winnipeg-based HR consulting firm. She recently completed her Masters in Leadership through Royal Roads University in Victoria, B.C. Contact 204-897-8480 ythompson@changeinnovators.com

