

The Engagement Challenge

The company was in trouble: The value of its stock had dropped to just \$1 a share. So the CEO decided to level with the workers about just how bad it was—and he laid out a plan to turn things around. The employees responded with renewed dedication and effort that helped the business rebound, and the stock price has since jumped to \$20 a share.

It goes to show that transparency and confidence in an organization can inspire employees to be engaged—meaning they're involved, enthusiastic and committed to their work.

The need to increase engagement is pressing. Recent surveys show that it is on the rise, but the overall picture is still pretty bleak. Only about 34 percent of U.S. workers—and 13 percent worldwide—report that they are engaged at work, according to [Gallup data](#).

Those numbers translate into more than just a shortage of smiles around the lunchroom. Engagement correlates with productivity, customer service and profitability. So, for example, organizations with strong employee engagement scores generate revenue growth at a rate 2.5 times higher than companies with lower marks, according to the [Hay Group](#), a management consulting company.

Stats like that aren't lost on the C-suite: At least 85 percent of business leaders globally believe engagement is important, according to [Bersin by Deloitte](#), a research and advisory firm.

But that number should be 100 percent, says Robin Erickson, Bersin's vice president of talent acquisition, engagement and retention. Among the benefits, she notes, are lower turnover, better customer loyalty and improved safety. "All of those are bottom-line reasons organizations should care about employee engagement," she says.

Many factors can impede meaningful engagement. These include organizational tumult, distrust of managers, job market unease, and a lack of cohesion among workers and teams.

But organizations that try to buy their employees' enthusiasm and commitment are likely to be disappointed. While higher pay and better benefits generally improve a worker's satisfaction and overall contentment, they don't truly drive engagement and the extra effort that comes with it, engagement experts say.

The good news is that companies can improve engagement by paying more attention to their employees. The great news is that doing so doesn't have to involve spending large sums of money. Rather, leaders must act deliberately and thoughtfully. It won't work to simply grab ideas from other companies without first making sure the practices fit into your own organization's culture. Just because something works at Google doesn't mean it's right for you.

That said, most strategies for driving engagement share common goals, such as helping employees to feel valued and emotionally connected to their work. To that end, here are seven approaches to driving engagement that can be tailored to suit any culture or budget.

1. Supply the Right Tools

One of the most important drivers of employee engagement may also be one of the most overlooked: making sure employees have all the tools they need to succeed in their roles. Deloitte’s [Global Human Capital Trends 2016](#) report refers to it as providing an “enabling infrastructure” and lists it as the top driver of engagement globally.

A company’s infrastructure includes the tools and processes people use to complete their work and the organizational capabilities they have at their disposal, explains Don MacPherson, a partner in the employee engagement practice at [Aon](#) in Minneapolis. “Particularly in large organizations, there are barriers to employees getting things done,” he says. “It has an effect on employee engagement.”

For instance, if security protocols require people to remember four or five different passwords to log in to the software they need to do their jobs, workers can become frustrated. They—and the company—likely would benefit from simpler procedures.

“Business is getting more complex,” MacPherson says. “But engaged employees need to be able to move quickly to be effective in a changing world.” That means ensuring that all workers have the right equipment and aren’t operating in an environment that is so inefficient or bureaucratic that they can’t get anything done. “Companies with employees who have both the psychological investment in their jobs and the resources to adapt to a changing world are better positioned to survive disruptive market conditions,” he explains.



2. Give Individual Attention

One challenge to boosting employee engagement is figuring out which approach will work best in a multinational, multiethnic, multigenerational workforce. The answer could well be different for each person.

At Timberlane, a Philadelphia-area shutter manufacturer with 70 employees, Brandi Yanulavich, a people and culture specialist, gives applicants a test from [The Predictive Index](#) that analyzes their individual tendencies. She shares the results with managers so they know which new hires want public recognition, for instance, or who hates speaking to groups. That data is also used to match workers with the tasks they feel most comfortable doing. In one instance, a salesman thrived when, as a break from his day-to-day desk job, he was given a role training new employees.



The survey results also help the company hire people who are well-suited to particular jobs, which leads to higher engagement, Yanulavich says. And the results help managers better understand their own communication styles and what motivates their teams.

Absent a personality assessment, there is a simple, low-tech, no-cost approach that managers can use to find out what each of their employees wants: Ask them.

Some preferences, however, appear to be almost universal. For many people, increased autonomy and responsibility in their jobs can lead to higher levels of engagement. Often, the flexibility to decide when and how they complete tasks also motivates them to do better work. Fortunately, many employers appear to be getting that right. More than 70 percent of workers say they are satisfied with this aspect of their jobs, according to the Society for Human Resource Management's [2016 Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement](#) survey report.

3. Provide Training and Coaching

Creating a culture that fosters continuous development does more than help workers build the skills they need to do their jobs. It also communicates that the organization values its employees and believes in their potential.



“The more the employee feels the company is investing in their future, the higher the level of engagement,” says Brad Shuck, an assistant professor at the University of Louisville who specializes in organizational development.

Fortunately, a huge training budget isn’t needed to create a meaningful development program. At Timberlane Inc., a key focus is on cross-training employees so that workers learn how to perform other people’s jobs in addition to their own. For example, office staff periodically head to the manufacturing floor for a few hours to sand or assemble blinds so they have a broader understanding of the organization and how it operates.

Coaching is another key ingredient for engagement. That’s the case at Louisville, Ky.-based Yum! Brands (the parent company of Taco Bell, KFC and other restaurants). All 130,000 corporate employees are given midyear development plans and 360-degree reviews to help them identify skills to improve. Managers have a key role in the development process. HR leaders help maximize the effectiveness of coaching by counseling managers not to cancel one-on-one coaching sessions and, if necessary, to reschedule them as soon as possible rather than letting them slide. That reinforces the organization’s commitment to its workforce.

“We want our employees to reinvent themselves [and to] elevate their skills and elevate their contributions,” says Shelisa Gautreaux, senior director of corporate HR at Yum!.

Some company leaders worry that providing substantial training opportunities no longer makes sense given that today’s workforce is characterized by frequent job-hopping. But investing in employees can build loyalty and engagement, as well as help to attract new talent, says Fred LeFranc, CEO of the consulting firm [Results Thru Strategy](#) in Charlotte, N.C. The Container Store, for instance, provides more than 250 hours of training in each employee’s first year. And not coincidentally, LeFranc says, the organization has been rated by Fortune magazine as among the best places to work for 17 years straight.

4. Listen to Employees

Effective leaders pay close attention to what workers have to say and then act on the feedback, according to the [2016 Trends in Global Employee Engagement](#) report from Aon. That's one of the reasons annual employee surveys are being increasingly replaced or augmented by quarterly or monthly pulse surveys and performance conversations are occurring more frequently. Not only does a comprehensive approach to listening help an organization pinpoint and quickly address problems, it makes people feel valued.

"We give more to those places where we feel our voice matters," Shuck says.

At Whole Foods, entire teams get a say in whether to hire new workers at the end of their probationary period. This approach communicates to employees that their views are important, LeFranc says. In addition, managers get valuable insights about the worker who is being assessed.

Along those lines, Deloitte's human capital trends report cites lessons learned by an electric utility after it experienced a major power outage. After reviewing employee feedback, company leaders determined that the problem could have been predicted and prevented. The organization now uses text analysis to monitor comments from line workers and detect potential problems.

5. Get Social



Engaged workers feel emotionally invested in their jobs. A simple way to help employees care more about their workplace is to foster closer connections to colleagues. In a workplace where teams are increasingly important, healthy personal relationships are a key ingredient. And there's virtually no end to the types of events HR can sponsor, so keep an open mind.

There are many no- or low-cost options that often involve asking employees to contribute their own time or talent. As long as workers are approached in the right way, taking this tack can help people feel valued and appreciated for what they bring to the company. At Timberlane, for example, woodworkers built a beanbag toss game for employees to use during company parties. Another employee volunteers to cook a turkey in his fryer every year for the Thanksgiving potluck.

"Employees who enjoy being here really put forth the time and effort and want to make a great product and do what they can for the customers," Yanulavich says. "It's caring [about] what you're doing and who you're doing it with."

6. Serve Others

Service projects are another opportunity to help workers cultivate closer relationships. And they're rarely expensive to implement.

More important, they fulfill a central need among employees: finding purpose through work. That's a top driver of engagement, according to the Deloitte report.

"We all want meaning in our lives and want to work for an organization that's contributing to the community and is socially responsible," MacPherson says.

Before becoming director of employee benefits at the Galena Park, Texas, Independent School District, Colleen Martin, SHRM-CP, worked at an oil field safety inspection company. It employed many seasonal workers for tedious jobs such as monitoring machine dials all day.

To help break the monotony, Martin organized several service projects. Those activities, she says, "made them feel they weren't out there alone."

Employees built homes on the weekends for Habitat for Humanity, sent personal cards to troops in the Middle East and donated to an orphanage. Martin saw business results from the service projects: "When you asked [employees] to go above and beyond [on the job], they were good with doing it because they knew you were a company that cared," she says.

7. Recognize Proudly and Loudly



It's no secret that rewards and recognition can increase engagement. To that end, organizations need to clearly broadcast the meaning of the company's work, LeFranc says, because that message gives people a clearer idea of how they fit into the mission of the company and what kinds of behavior will be rewarded. At Disney, for instance, workers know that the customer experience is paramount, and they're recognized for creating a magical atmosphere. That, in turn, helps them connect to their jobs, he says.

Too often, though, gifts and bonuses are doled out with little fanfare. Not so at Yum! corporate headquarters. The leaders there pull out kazoos, tambourines, horns and cowbells. Each month, a different company head leads a band of employees as it marches around the building playing "music" in honor of the six or so people chosen for recognition, gathering dozens more people as they go.

"It's a little zany," Gautreaux says. "It's a little out of character for a corporate environment. But it highlights us."

Yum! has 1.5 million corporate and franchise workers. Recognition is a companywide priority, and local leaders figure out what that looks like for their particular location and culture. The awards themselves are things you could probably pick up at a dollar store: a cape and sunglasses, an Albert Einstein bobblehead doll, and some chattering teeth.

Gautreaux says the recognition motivates the individual winners and serves as a “booster shot” for engagement throughout the organization. “At the end of the day,” she notes, “people respond to being appreciated.”

Tamara Lytle is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

<https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/1016/Pages/7-tips-to-increase-employee-engagement-without-spending-a-dime.aspx>

HR Magazine, October 2016