

Introduction – The Cycle of Disengagement

No matter what industry you are in, I am sure that at least once in your professional life you have come across a disengaged workplace. For those of you reading this who have worked across multiple businesses or multiples sectors in your career, you may have come across many disengaged workplaces; your key reason for moving on from one workplace to another may have been the unhappiness of the previous workplace.

The term employee engagement was coined in the 90s and has become the forefront of human resource practices today; it is no longer sufficient to employ employees, now you have to engage with them if you want to keep them happy and hang on to them.

During my professional life I have had the pleasure of working in some extremely busy, almost relentless workplaces, yet somehow nearly everyone was engaged; I've also worked in some businesses where the pace of work was relatively relaxed and yet everyone was moaning and no one was happy. I've also been on the receiving end where as an employee I was very disengaged and frustrated, in fact that very reason saw me move from one particular employer pronto!

The problem of creating an engaged workforce often lands at the feet of management or HR, but in this book I will show you how the problem lies with everyone in the workplace and I will show you what part everyone has to play in fixing the problem. Management and employees must both contribute to engagement.

What is the difference between a happy workforce and an engaged workforce?

You might think that a happy workforce is an engaged workforce, well actually no, the 2 things are not necessarily the same thing. You might find that some employees are happy: happy with their salary, happy with their working hours, happy with their line manager, happy with the colleagues they work with – they work hard, stay loyal and don't leave the company. But are they engaged?

What is being engaged?

Being engaged means being so embedded in the organisation and the work they do, that employees are actively contributing every day to move the organisation forward, improve sales, gain/retain customers and literally going over and above the call of duty. A happy employee does not necessarily go

over and above, so they aren't necessarily engaged. If you have happy but not engaged employees they might resist attempts at change as they won't want anything to change their current state of happiness and you might find problems moving your business forward; they might just get stuck in their ways.

Why might an employee be happy and not engaged?

Well Penny Loveless, director of Pecan Partnership says 1) Lack of awareness, 2) Lack of belief and 3) It's easier to stay in denial and smile. ⁱ

However, having a happy workforce that isn't engaged is not exactly a bad problem to have, at least you can work up some engagement ideas and generally start to encourage them towards engagement as well.

If you have an unhappy workforce that is completely disengaged, you do have a huge cultural issue and a larger mountain to climb. That being said, nothing is impossible and after reading my book you should have some inspiration on what to do next.

Imagine you have that awful situation of an unhappy workforce. Why should you want to fix this problem?

Why is an unhappy workforce a problem?

Well firstly, no one likes sitting around listening to people moaning, whinging, whining and complaining. Whether it be in the morning around the coffee machine or in the 'have you got 5 minutes?' request for a quick chat that turns into a two-hour moaning session; I am sure no one actually enjoys hearing the moaning!

You see, once the moaning is over there is actually a serious part that comes with addressing the issue.

You will need to investigate, identify and fix the problem that's been raised. This takes time, money and resources, distracting the relevant manager / HR person / co-worker from other activities. Ignoring the problem only leads to it festering away until it becomes worse and often unbearable.

What happens if that complaint actually becomes a formal grievance?

Well, then you've got a whole realm of formal processes, meetings and outcomes that will follow, a most unpleasant atmosphere whilst all this is going

on and you must not forget that the 'accused' in the scenario is also an employee who, despite their alleged actions, needs consideration.

Once the seed of unhappiness is sewn it spreads, from a minor moan to a formal grievance; from a couple of small whinges about a colleague or manager to a formal complaint of bullying and harassment, and let's not forget how accessible services such as ACAS are to employees and before you know it, you might have a case of constructive dismissal and be heading towards an employment tribunal. This all becomes a very nasty, expensive situation.

It's not just the employees implicated in the scenario; employees talk, no matter how much you say 'keep this matter to yourself' it won't happen. A workplace is like Chinese whispers, before you know it the whole team is involved and everyone has an opinion.

So what's the end result?

Unhappiness can most certainly lead to disengagement. Disengagement then becomes a cycle:

A disengaged workplace = lower productivity = higher employee relations issues (grievances and disciplinaries) = more leavers = more recruitment = more training = lower capacity to produce results = less customer satisfaction = more pressure on the rest of the team = more stress = more leavers = you have no business left!

Breaking the Cycle of Disengagement

We need to break the cycle of disengagement:

- 1) creating a happy workforce is the first step in the process.
- 2) Moving them from happiness to engagement is the second step.
- 3) Keeping them engaged is the third step.

This book is a simple guide to instilling a culture that everyone can abide by. No HR Degree is needed, it's not rocket science, just some simple guidelines and checklists for ensuring your workplace is on the path to happiness, then engagement and finally staying engaged.

ⁱ <http://www.personneltoday.com/hr/employee-engagement-are-your-happy-workers-disengaged/>