



The Truth About Employee Disengagement

People Problems? How to Create People Solutions for a Competitive Advantage.

Brad Wolff

Brad Wolff specializes in workforce and personal optimization. He's a speaker and author of, *People Problems? How to Create People Solutions for a Competitive Advantage*. As the managing partner for Atlanta-based PeopleMax, Brad specializes in helping companies maximize the potential and results of their people to make more money with less stress. His passion is empowering people to create the business success they desire, in a deep and lasting way. For more information on Brad Wolff, please visit:

www.PeopleMaximizers.com.

Most companies struggle with employee disengagement. It's costly in productivity, profitability and stress. Gallup's engagement survey data published in 2017 found that 2/3rds of U.S. workers are not engaged. American companies have invested billions of dollars per-year for many years to solve this problem. The results? The needle still hasn't moved. How much has your experience been similar? Could this data simply reveal a general misunderstanding of the true causes of disengagement?

The Acme Corporation was suffering a 41% turnover rate. A recent survey showed that 85% of their workforce was disengaged. The general attitude of apathy, complaining and cynicism permeated the culture. This was puzzling to management since they attempted multiple efforts to improve engagement. These were well planned and executed programs such as

team-building exercises, social events and pay raises. All showed early enthusiasm and positive survey results that generated optimism. Unfortunately, the magic always wore off within a few weeks. In despair, Acme engaged a firm with a very different philosophy than their other advisors. This firm focused on helping executive leadership understand the root causes and solutions. Within 9 months, disengagement improved from 71% to 26% and turnover dropped to 19%.

The door to solving this dilemma opened when Acme management acknowledged that since their previous solution attempts were ineffective, their current way of seeing the problem must be flawed. This wisdom, humility and openness paved the way to learn the true root causes of their disengagement. Once root causes are clearly understood, the solutions usually become obvious.

Fixing engagement issues: What works?

The first step is for the company leaders to take an honest, objective view of the company culture (beliefs and behaviors that determine how people interact and do their work) that impacts and drives the way people think and behave. That's why lasting change occurs when focusing at the culture level rather than specific individuals. Below are the relevant human psychological needs that are the actual root causes of people's engagement level. Examples of mindsets/philosophies that effectively address these needs follows each need. Engagement will improve when management's actions align with people's psychological needs.

1. To feel valued and understood. Management earnestly listens to employees' concerns, opinions and ideas with the intent to understand and consider their merits before responding. This replaces the common responses of defending positions or punishing employees for expressing contrary viewpoints. Management isn't required to agree with the employees. What's important is the sincere effort to listen, understand and consider their inputs.
2. To express our gifts and talents. Management puts a focus on aligning roles and responsibilities with the gifts and talents of the individuals. We all bring a substantially higher energy and engagement (and productivity) when we do work that we like and are good at. As legendary management consultant Peter Drucker said, *"A manager's task is to make the strengths of people effective and their weaknesses irrelevant."*
3. Meaning/purpose in what we do. This means that employees have a clear understanding of how their work impacts the mission and vision of the organization. Don't expect them to figure this out on their own. People are much more motivated when they realize that their efforts truly matter.
4. Internal drive for progress or development- Employees are at their best when there is *"healthy tension"* (not too low, not too high) to meet clear and reasonable standards. This means fair and consistent accountability and consequences based on performance relative to agreed-upon standards. Being too nice and lax harms engagement since people inherently desire growth and realize



that standards and consequence help them do this. People are motivated when they focus on: *"What did I achieve today?" "What did I learn today?" "How did I grow?"*

What doesn't work:

In short, anything that doesn't authentically address the root causes of disengagement is doomed to fail. If the message is *"look at this nice thing we just did for you"* rather than *"this is how we value you as human being"*, it's highly likely to fail.

Examples of the *"nice thing we just did for you"* include most team-building events, social mixers, company newsletters, upgraded office environments, etc...

Even pay and benefit increases have an initial rush soon followed by the familiar *"right back where we were"* rebound effect. That's not to say companies should not do these things. They're nice add-ons after the day to day essentials of human psychology are

authentically addressed.

In summary, it's understandable that we gravitate towards easy, quick-fix solutions to our problems. There are plenty of people to make these suggestions and sell them to us. They also don't require us to identify our own personal contributions to the problems which we'd prefer to avoid. However, as in most things in life, there is no substitute for working at the cause-level and creating new habits of thinking and behavior. If you're serious about creating the high engagement level lead to more profits with greater ease and personal satisfaction, this is what it takes. As a bonus, openly addressing personal challenges that make you human will increase your effectiveness and fulfillment in every area of your life.