

5 BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING EMPLOYEES AT WORK

... Even if They're Working from Home!



INTRODUCTION

Out of sight, out of mind? That's likely how many remote workers feel these days. In fact, before the Covid-19 crisis, an alarming **84%** of employees said they weren't fully engaged at work, according to ADP Research. The economic consequences of such poor engagement levels meant approximately **\$7 trillion** in lost productivity globally, Gallup reported.

What, then, did the mass exodus from office buildings and workspaces do to employee engagement levels? It likely made them plummet even further.

But in the wake of the move to a remote work environment, many organizations have been forced to revamp how they approach any number of activities: from holding meetings to processing transactions to sharing and protecting information.

If that sounds familiar, why not also use this time to build a dynamic employee engagement program? Here we present five best practices to get you there!

1. Get a clear view of what matters to your employees.

As Colleen Matijasick, Communications and Sustainability Manager at Pandora Jewelry explains, “Employee engagement fosters trust, loyalty, and motivation. It forms the emotional connection between the team member and the organization.”

To establish that emotional connection with employees, you first need to work hard to understand what’s important to them. It might be issues related to social responsibility, or wellness, or career development. Gaining insight will enable your organization to build related initiatives and find out what employees want to hear about.

Through employee pulse surveys, Ms. Matijasick says her team was able to discover that employees wanted to learn about their colleagues’ work, functional area projects, and what the organization ‘stood for’ globally.



Results from pulse surveys conducted at the end of 2018 led to the creation of Team Shine and a series of ongoing initiatives under four main pillars: **LIVE (work/life balance), LEARN, CONNECT, and APPLAUSE.**

“With ‘Team Shine,’ we developed Team Spotlights to highlight the work of team members throughout North America. And we started to host ‘Power Hours,’ 60-minute sessions where anyone can join to learn about new products, new initiatives, functional areas, or career development. These keep everyone connected to all aspects of the organization. Now team members know that if we’re talking about LIVE or LEARN, it’s a direct result of their feedback. It shows that we listen and care about their ideas,” she adds.

In this way, the company ties its corporate values to what matters to employees and deepens the emotional connection.

2. Communicate from all levels of the organization.

One of the biggest challenges for many organizations is leadership engagement. That's because leaders often focus on business decisions at the highest levels and forget about the folks in the ranks doing the work. Yet, a 2014 Global Workforce Study by Towers Watson found that in companies where both managers and leaders demonstrate effective engagement strategies, 72% of employees are highly engaged. And companies that work toward establishing leaders and managers who are effective communicators can expect to have more highly engaged employees, higher job retention rates, and an easier time attracting new employees.

Sharyn Nerenberg, senior director at Hughes Network Systems, says it can be helpful to create an internal infrastructure to guide how communications are disseminated and by whom.

"One approach is the Pyramid strategy. At the bottom of the pyramid is the 'one-to-many' mass communications. It's all the channels we utilize to reach employees, like emails, digital signage, and the intranet," she says.



In the middle of the pyramid is the "manager as messenger" strategy, where mid-level managers are provided guidance and support materials for disseminating information to their respective teams.

But there's an art to this strategy, says James Ylisela, co-founder of Ragan Consulting Group.

"Communication in the middle, with the managers and supervisors, is a problem for many organizations. That's where messages get stuck, going down and coming back up the chain. Communicating well has to become part of their regular daily lives, it's not about forcing the manager to share a PPT with their team."

Doing it well, he said, may require special training or coaching, until it becomes a strong skillset.



At the top of the pyramid are the executive leadership communications, utilizing town halls, video broadcasts, and all-hands meetings, that are used sparingly.

“Maybe you put the leader on video or create an internal podcast. There are so many interesting ways to communicate with the workforce, but you need to get leaders out of their comfort zone, get them a little nervous,” he says. “We’re all going through a lot of changes right now, so it might be the perfect time to do that.”

3. Promote a two-way flow of information.

Equally important is to establish a two-way fluid flow of communications that will consistently carry information from the top levels of leadership to the bottom ranks, and then back again. To do this effectively, however, you must eliminate the fear of repercussions. Managers must establish a safe place where employees can provide input and voice their opinions without being afraid that their job or position will be at risk. At the same time, organizations must also be honest and transparent with employees.

Two-way communications don't only have to occur in formal settings. They can involve leaders and managers simply finding more ways to connect, share, and listen.

Ms. Matijasick remembers an example from a former employer when a new leader was prone to walking the halls, introducing himself to people, asking questions, and starting conversations. His approach was vastly different than his predecessor's.

"He was far more approachable," she recalls. "That led to more trust because he was so relatable. And whether he had good or bad news, he stood in front of the team and said, 'This is what is happening, this is why, this is what we're going to do, and here's how it impacts you and the rest of the organization.' That was in stark contrast to our prior leader, who would just send an email."

Mr. Ylisela agrees, "Not everything has to be high tech. Some solutions require walking around more. Ask people how they're doing. You won't believe the impact that can have on engagement and morale. People remember that."

In a pandemic work environment, that might require a little bit of extra creativity and the willingness to connect in other ways, maybe by text or even an old-fashioned phone call.



What Did You Say?

90% of workers said they are more likely to stay at a company that takes and acts on feedback.

44% of employees who thought their company was "horrible at acting on feedback" intend to look for a new job, compared to 28% who thought their company was "awesome at acting on feedback."

Source: 2020 Engagement & Retention Report, Achievers

4. Use a range of robust communication channels.

As part of your plan, consider offering employees a choice in how they access information and think hard about the make-up of your workforce.

“With five generations in the workplace, what’s important to one person is not going to be important to others. You need to figure out how to reach all of them without offering 745 different options!” Ms. Matijasick says. “With so many information channels—like email, apps, Yammer, Slack, the intranet—you have to strike a balance between using them all and using them well to drive engagement and get the result you want.” Yammer, which is part of the MS Office 365 suite, is a hybrid enterprise social networking service.

“In the work from home experience, Yammer has been a great tool. It’s allowed us to add a human element to our interactions and share what we’re all going through. It’s become a platform for letting us have some fun when we do not see each other in person,” she says.

Be sure to get the most out of your tools, though. Gallup Research shows that while **72%** of companies use social technologies in some way, very few are anywhere near to achieving the full potential benefit.



5. Measure, measure, measure.

With any communications effort, it is important to conduct regular performance evaluations to see what’s working and what’s not. Are employees receiving communications too frequently or not often enough? Do they feel like leadership hears and values their opinions?

“It all comes back to measurement. You can be doing all kinds of communications activities, but if nobody is reading or looking or acting upon it, then you have to ask, ‘What are we doing?’ You may have a lot of output, but what are the outcomes?” says Mr. Ylisela.

Again, consider annual engagement surveys. “We survey to see how team members feel about everything from compensation to management to perks to performance. We want to know how we’re doing in terms of communicating. Are we living our values? What are we doing well? What do we need to improve?” Ms. Matijasick says. Her team compares results to prior years and benchmarks them against other companies of similar size and structure.

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Such data is often exactly what leadership wants to see Mr. Ylisela says. “When you find an enlightened leader, someone who really understands the value of measurement, that’s key. But most leaders understand data. They make decisions all day long, based on data. If they want everyone to pay attention and for employees to be engaged, they’ll be interested to see what’s getting traction and what’s not.”

“When it comes to engagement, people look at whether the employee is happy or not, but that’s not always what it’s about. It might be about how they’re performing on the job, and that means something too,” says Ms. Matijasick.

When communications are done well, she adds, it plays a huge part in increasing productivity and overall morale, which leads to more engaged employees.

The opposite is also true. “When you look at companies with bad communications, you’ll see employees that feel lost or have poor productivity, and you’ll see their turnover is high.”

For now, you may not be in a position to welcome everyone back to the office. Still, you may be able to foster the kind of open, honest, two-way communication that not only engages employees but motivates and inspires them to do their best work—even if it’s done from their couch.

McKinsey reported that when employees are connected and engaged, organizations see an increase in productivity by **20%** to **25%**.

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