

7 Ideas to Get the Most from Your People

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In spite of amazing technological advances, the work of an organization is accomplished by people. People interface with the customer, make the product, deliver the service, plan and coordinate how work gets done, improve processes and systems, ensure quality standards, and return a profit. Technology has provided us with better tools and made us far more efficient and productive; but it is still people who do the work of an organization and are ultimately responsible for its success.

The business world recognizes the importance of human resources. Most companies claim, somewhere in their mission statements and values, that their employees are important. And yet most companies fail to use the intelligence and creative talents of their people. In practice, managers view their job as controlling rather than empowering their workers. They view them as “costs” or “tools” rather than capable, responsible human beings. As a result, in many companies, large and small, people are vastly underused.

A number of years ago, I sat in the cafeteria of a successful company and talked informally with an employee I’ll call Washington, a person with a good work ethic and high standards of personal integrity. I wanted to gain insight into the work climate and attitudes of people doing the core work of the organization, so I asked, “How productive is the average employee? To what extent do they work at their capability on an average day?”

He replied that most people put out somewhere between 50 and 60% effort. I was astounded. “So that means that, if people really cared and were truly committed, they could almost double their average daily production?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Most employees do as little as possible. If a manager or visitor is nearby on the floor, they work harder, but most of them don’t really care about the job they are doing.”

Research supports Washington’s observations. Yankelovich and Immerwahr reported in the Public Agenda Report on Restoring America’s Competitive Vitality that fewer than one in four employees (23%) say they work at their full potential. Forty-four percent report that they do the minimum possible and only work hard enough to keep their jobs. And three in four say they could be significantly more effective in their jobs.

Most of us don’t need hard data to understand that many companies don’t get the most from their people. We observe it regularly. Are the people you manage/supervise committed to give their best?

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Do you know of people who have “retired in place” and do the minimum possible rather than give their best day’s work? Have you ever witnessed people who even undermine the performance of the organization through their indifference, negativism, or even wilful acts of sabotage?

People want to succeed. The vast majority want to feel good about themselves and their work. They want to make a difference to the company and to the lives of their customers. And they have enormous capacity to do so when fully engaged and committed to their work.

The challenge of leadership is to create a culture in which everyone cares and contributes to the business, rather than just show up or do the minimum required. We need to find ways to allow people to use their intelligence and creativity to make decisions, solve problems, and contribute to the overall success of the business. Can you imagine what would happen if every employee worked at their full potential? Every business leader should be asking how to motivate their people to do their best because they want to rather than because they have to.

There are no quick fixes or simple formulas for creating a culture that unleashes the capability of people. It sometimes requires intervention in a number of dimensions of organizational life — challenging management philosophy and practices, communicating and aligning everyone to the business

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strategy, improving processes and systems, providing training in social and business skills, and so on.

Seven recommendations

Supervisors, managers, or leaders can implement these ideas to help their employees feel and act like true partners in the business. Doing so will increase employee engagement and loyalty and help you get the best from your most important resource.

1 Share information generously: Employees can't be fully engaged in their work if they're in the dark or lack vital information. I have a checklist of around 20 questions that I believe every employee should understand to feel like partners in the business. These have to do with the strategy and direction of the company, competitive landscape, feedback from customers, their personal or department performance, what is happening in other parts of the company. The more people know, the more valued and respected they feel and the better they're going to perform.

2 Address performance problems directly: Nothing demoralizes a staff more than a co-worker who doesn't care or do their share of the work. Such people drag down everyone around them. It is critical that managers learn to confront these problems directly and hold people accountable. Too often we ignore and let these problems fester and become toxic to the entire department. I've seen amazing turnarounds in a department or team when their managers developed the mindset and skills to be "firm but fair" in their treatment of employees.

3 Empower employees by encouraging them to solve problems: Problems should be resolved at the lowest level possible in the organization. Leaders must provide the information, training, and resources so this can happen. But solving problems when and where they occur engages people and creates a culture in which people know they make a difference.

4 Provide training and development: The best companies invest time and money in training their employees, knowing that the investment will be returned many times over in not only a more capable but also more loyal workforce. This training not only is technical but also includes business and social skills.

5 Share responsibility widely: There are many functions traditionally done by managers that staff/team members can take on, or at least be involved in, including setting goals, planning and scheduling, communicating with other departments, trouble-shooting problems, tracking performance. This doesn't mean that leaders give up control of these areas. They remain involved by setting boundaries, providing training, monitoring how things are going, and so on. But the more variety and responsibility people have in their jobs, the happier they are.

6 Listen: This is one of the most important skills leaders can develop. Employees have opinions and feelings which need to be expressed and heard in a safe relationship. If they can't express their negative opinions and feelings, they'll act them out in subtle, destructive ways. Listening takes time, but it also builds trust and ensures that you're dealing with real issues and getting to the root of problems.

7 Think "we": The best leaders involve people. It's not "I have a problem," but "We have a problem." Not "What can I do?" but "What can we do?" Not "My success" but "Our success." They create a sense of shared ownership in everything that's going on. This doesn't mean that every decision is made by consensus. But it does mean that people will perform better when they are involved in aspects of the business that affect them.

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Most organizational resources depreciate in value over time. Technology and software aren't worth as much in a year as when first purchased. But employees are different. They have the potential to add greater value to the company the longer they're employed. And one of the most important roles of leaders is to create a climate in which their employees thrive. Implementing these seven ideas will help you create that climate in your organization.

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