



# Articles

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## LEADERSHIP & MATURITY

Engaged employees like the work they do and frequently demonstrate certain behaviours:

- ☑ they are not afraid to ask questions,
- ☑ regularly commit to the customer's needs and their work,
- ☑ they are willing to put in time to get work done.

*They have a sense of accomplishment, and a maturity that is contagious.*

The following are ten steps to create a more positive workplace:

- ☑ Engagement
- ☑ Culture match
- ☑ Feelings of well-being
- ☑ Personalized recognition
- ☑ Communication that connects us all
- ☑ Involve employees in benefits
- ☑ Set Performance Standards
- ☑ Recognizing negative judgement calls hurts
- ☑ Being responsible for one's behaviour
- ☑ Compassion belongs in the workplace

Unfortunately there are not enough employees who can be described by the above profile. In fact, *most*

*employees feel stressed, doubtful about job security, and less invested in both their career and the organization that employs them.* This is most unfortunate - because the only real security that employees have is their knowledge and how to apply it, and a positive outlook.

The positive behaviours of your leaders and employees are important drivers in achieving workplace accomplishments versus having a trade union shadowing your front line leaders.

A Gallup Poll on Employee Well-Being showed a direct connection between well-being and employee performance. *Employees with negative feelings of 'well-being' were almost eight times more likely to be absent from work, twice as likely to give themselves negative performance ratings, and eight times more likely to look for a new job.* What more could a union organizer be looking for?

In the midst of global outsources, the trickle of returning jobs and negative economic pressures [even though many Fortune 500

corporations are sitting on more cash than is imaginable], many businesses expect senior leaders, even front line leaders and HR professionals, to accomplish more with less. *The competencies to achieve this require the ability to influence the most important asset of any organization: its people.*

A Positive Employee Relations™ culture is the antithesis of negative employee morale; and, through Values and Guiding Behaviours, actually promotes satisfaction among employees. Once the principles of Positive Employee Relations are understood, the key tenet to create employee satisfaction becomes employee engagement in their work and their relationship with their front line leader.

The following are some steps to consider:

☒ Engagement

Help leaders at all levels [especially front line leaders] understand that employee satisfaction [Herzberg's Motivation Factors] positively affects productivity and helps keep employees fully engaged and supportive of innovation and creativity. In other words, *engaged employees have a more positive perspective on change.*

☒ Culture Match

Employ and orient the correct 'new' hires. [Please remember that 'new' employee is a misnomer – everyone has been 'used'; ie: they have acquired views and opinions from discussions at the dining room table, from teachers and

professors, from summer jobs, etc.].

*Employ only those who have a culture match with the Values espoused by your organization.* We can always teach employees, whether office, retail, or plant staff, the necessary skills to make our 'widget' but we cannot teach them Values. [It is questionable if we should even try. Most employers are not psychologists trained in reshaping an individual's Value system.....and would trying to do so be in the ethical interests of the employee?]

☒ Feelings of Well-Being

Leaders at all levels can likely recall a military-hierarchy system of leadership. Those at the top think; those below administer; and those further down implement and do.

Though there are implicit vestiges of this leadership model in far too many divisions and departments of corporations, the health and viability of such practices are questionable. *In Positive Employee Relations we are teaching leaders that they need to listen more and talk less; to clear roadblocks so employees can do their work without bureaucratic red tape; and, in general, to be more understanding and empathetic to employees' well-being.*

Supporting this view is the belief that employees who are treated as individuals [as they may be in all places except the workplace] will respond positively to leaders who demonstrate a sincere interest in

their well-being. A feeling of well-being, on the part of the employee, is the bedrock on which sound relationships can be built.

Positive relationships lead to a deeper understanding by both parties. Satisfying the customer's needs and the employee's needs seem to have similar grounding at deeper levels.

☑ Personalized Recognition  
Implicit in Positive Employee Relations is the view that employees and customers have a symbiotic relationship. If the employees do not produce quality products or services on time and to the customer's specification, customers will take their business somewhere else. Losing a customer is a costly concern – or at least it should be.

We spend a lot of marketing dollars to find and secure customers. Then we provide them with all manner of gifts: company-inscribed pens, baseball hats, t-shirts, tickets to sports games, etc. Most often these gifts are provided at the discretion of the senior sales or marketing leaders or even the General Manager/CEO. We have, unfortunately, carried this practice into the Human Resource realm.

If we want to recognize employees for achieving a target or for receiving a complementary note from a customer, the HR leader or the General Manager/CEO usually

decides what will be an appropriate gift to recognize the contribution.

At this point, we have missed the real issue. *Employees are individuals and a baseball hat or a jacket with the company logo may be a poor way to respond to their contribution.* In all likelihood the employee's contribution is a result of his/her efforts and not that of their direct supervisor. If so, the employee had the wisdom and desire to 'go the extra mile' as an individual – so why not inquire as to what they would like? Instead of a company jacket, a dinner-for-two might be more appropriate.

If you are leading via a team approach, the same would apply – ask the team. They likely will not all want the same thing. *The best recognition is personalized! It is remembered. It is not a me-too gift.*

☑ Communication that Connects Us All  
Communication is a perennial issue for leaders. We have all heard or read stories of employers emailing employees about lay-off, compensation decisions like a reduction in benefits, or--worst of all--plant or business closure. These and similar types of 'expedient group communications', by leaders, are classic examples of 'Management Failure 101'.

A few decades ago it was MBWA – management by walking around. Decades later, even with exceptional social media, this

axiom is still viable and much needed.

Employees are not payroll numbers; we need to talk with them – we need to know them as fellow human beings. Like it or not, we are connected to our employees. On a higher level, *we are all part of a collective consciousness. We disregard or disrespect this connection at our own peril.*

For example, don't send an email.

- ☑ Phone
- ☑ Even better, walk across the office to the other person's office.
- ☑ Better yet, get out on the plant floor.
- ☑ Visit your retail facilities regularly.

Business survival is as it always was, a key free-enterprise imperative. We achieve business success through planning, managing and leading others. But, the reality is that the 'we' and the 'others' are all in the same boat.

We must all paddle in the same direction. While in this hypothetical boat we all talk, argue, socialize, disagree and compete - regardless of who the leader is. This is 'human nature'. In the boat we communicate without technology and we find ways to agree and survive – the alternative is just not acceptable.

This *leadership of communication belongs to everyone*; not just those

promoted [or anointed] by the CEO. Those who manage people – especially in Human Resources – have a critical task in front of them.

☑ **Involve Employees in Benefits**  
If we espouse that 'employees are our greatest asset', why would we risk diminishing this 'asset' by reducing benefits? Benefits are important to employees' health and well-being. This is doubly true if the employee has a spouse and children. Instead of playing the game of 'get fit or lose benefits' we should respect the integrity of all our employees – and not let the insurance or health care industry act as an official spokes-person for management.

*We should be emphasizing the 'benefit' of the benefits.* No employee can be engaged with his work if his at-home spouse is pregnant and there is no insurance because he is obese or a smoker -- or the real goal is to meet the stock market's expectations.

Employees are appreciative of the benefits they receive. If they are not, they will demonstrate their frustration in the workplace. Don't expect them to champion your Vision, Mission or Values if you significantly reduce or remove their benefits.

This is an open [and possibly engraved] invitation for a trade union to champion the disgruntled employees' cause[s]. Reducing employee benefits – and reaping the consequences – is not smart

thinking even if the shareholders get 25 cents or \$1.00 more in dividends.

At this point, to completely disregard the employees who helped achieve the organization's present level of financial success and to out-source your manufacturing, for example, is morally and ethically corrupt. Remember high school science 101 - every action has a reaction. *Honour your 'greatest asset', do not dishonour them.*

If the senior leaders have a long-term financial problem, talk to your employees. There are more heads on the shoulders of employees than there are on the shoulders of leaders. *When faced with a reduction in benefit costs, let the employees know the facts and options; they could come up with solutions that may surprise you.*

Why? Because employees who understand their benefits feel appreciated and more secure, which helps minimize their stress and improves productivity. People like this feeling and will go to lengths to protect it. Why would you discuss the future of benefits without involving the employees?

☒ Set Performance Standards  
The satisfactory completion of the work/job is the *raison d'être* for hiring anyone – manager or employee. If we use the Positive Employee Relations model, each individual job responsibility would be accompanied with the guide of a Performance Standard.

Performance Standards speak objectively to the quality and timeliness, etc., of each individual job responsibility. This way the job holder knows, at the beginning of any performance or review cycle, what is expected of him/her? There are no surprises and the employee may know 'how well they are doing' before their manager does.

This approach to performance feedback places some responsibility on the job holder. I think that is a good thing: *it is via this responsibility that the employee learns to critically evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.* Doing so is more meaningful than having the manager go through a checklist indicating that the employee achieved an 8/10 or a 3/10 on this or that responsibility. The numbers are, in the abstract, meaningless.

If we want employees or managers to improve their performance two critical factors must be in place:

- ☒ the employee must understand why a certain area needs improvement and what that improvement entails, and
- ☒ the employee can identify their own areas of concern before anyone has to tell them they were not achieving the Performance Standard.

In one sense, this is engagement with the job.

☒ Recognizing Negative Judgement Calls Hurt  
No one, employee or manager alike, appreciates negative feedback, especially when they are working with tight deadlines. Work



is not always a joy [sometimes reality is not always pleasant].

There are always errors within and without the employee's control. Accidents [by definition] are generally not foreseen and not planned for. *When things do not go 'well' the employees and managers involved are generally not receptive to critical or negative feedback from senior leaders.* Reactions like, "This is unacceptable," "Our customers deserve better from us," or other judgement calls never add to the quality of the problem solving.

*To listen without judgment when employees or managers are stressed, is an 'art' that senior managers/leaders must have available at a moment's notice.* Criticism or cynical judgment calls always have negative consequences.

#### ☒ Being Responsible for One's Behaviour

Life is full of surprises and they, all too often, occur at work. If you [employee or manager alike] have made a mistake in your work; or you have spoken out of turn, leaving someone or some group offended, the time to speak up is now. If you have done something wrong, apologize.

To accept responsibility for your actions is a sure sign of maturity. *The opportunity to settle misunderstandings or to resolve disputes through direct communication is never greater than now.* It surprises many that

when they speak out and correct their wrong-doing; their 'net worth' to the organization seems to grow. This is another one of those consequences for actions taken.

#### ☒ Compassion Belongs in the Workplace

Compassion and empathy are qualities that separate the outstanding manager from the average manager. This in no way implies 'softness' or 'lack of backbone' on the part of the manager. *Compassion and empathy are qualities associated with experience and/or maturity.*

To express interest in an employee's or customer's well-being is a sign of sincere interest. Just saying, "Let me know if there is anything I can do for you or your family," demonstrates to the employee [or customer] their value to you and the organization.

My experience is that a showing of compassion outweighs, when measuring the duration of the impact, that of a wage adjustment. If we are insincere in showing compassion it will be like the matador waving the red cape in front of the bull.

Use these ten steps: *Positive Employee Relations means engaged employees.*

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