Employee Engagement in a Government Entity

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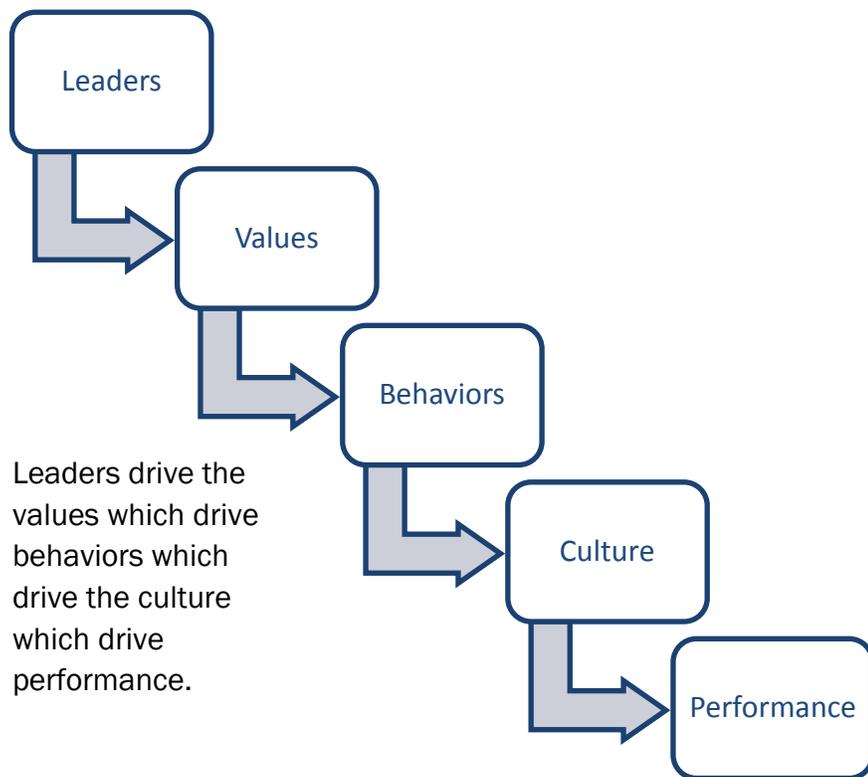
North Dakota Department of Commerce

January 2015

The following white paper outlines employee engagement and company culture from a government agency perspective. This outline could also be applicable to non-profit organizations with similar stakeholders and funding processes. This white paper cites specific examples that the North Dakota Department of Commerce has implemented throughout the past decade in order to increase employee engagement, retain employees and shape its unique company culture in to what it is today.

As Robert J. Lavigna puts it in his book *"Engaging Government Employees,"* there are key factors that distinguish the public sector from the private sector, including political leadership that changes frequently; hard-to-measure goals and impacts; complicated, rule bound, and sometimes irrational decision making; multiple external stakeholders with power and influence; older, more educated, and more white-collar workforce; strong civil-service rules and employee protections; heavy union influence; limited financial tools to influence and reward employee behavior; public visibility of government actions; and more positively, a workforce that is intrinsically motivated toward public service[1].

What Is It?

 A company's culture is a statement of its values that influences all actions associated with the organization. The building blocks of a company's culture are its core values.

Leaders drive the values which drive behaviors which drive the culture which drive performance.

The above diagram is from the book *"Built on Values"* by Ann Rhoades. If a company does not have core values or leadership does not follow the outlined core values, employees will naturally emulate the values their supervisors demonstrate, which could directly work against the efforts of the organization. Supervisors need to remember that every single thing they do and say can directly affect their employee's engagement level.

Why does it Matter?

A positive company culture creates happy and engaged employees.

Increased employee engagement in a government setting leads to better organizational performance, which tends to lead to increased satisfaction in customer service and promotes public trust and confidence in government[1].

Higher levels of employee engagement correlated with fewer average days of sick leave and less lost time due to work-related injuries or illness. High levels of employee engagement were also linked to fewer workplace discrimination complaints. Higher levels of employee engagement correlated with higher scores on agency program results, as measured by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget Program Assessment Rating Tool[1].

Engaged employees have an emotional and purposeful commitment to his or her organization. They have an understanding of the organization's strategic plan, and how all of their actions are helping move the needle in those specific strategies.

They enjoy coming to work, they are innovative, have positive attitudes and go above and beyond.

Dale Carnegie did a study on over 1,500 employees to dig further into what creates engaged employees, and what key attributes are present within these engaged employees. What they found was that 71% of employees are not engaged. They broke employees into three segments. Fully engaged employees stay with the organization longer, contribute to the bottom-line and commit to productivity and quality. Partially engaged employees concentrate on tasks not outcomes, want to be told what to do, do it, get paid and go home. Disengaged employees sow seeds of negativity, sabotage progress and express mistrust and animosity.

In state and local governments, a 2012 engagement survey jointly conducted by the payroll firm ADP and the nonprofit International Public Management Association for Human Resources revealed the following about engaged public-sector employees:

- They are twice as likely to stay at their current jobs.
- They are 2.5 times more likely to feel they can make a difference.
- They are 2.5 times more likely to recommend their workplace to others.
- They are three times as likely to report being "very satisfied" in their jobs[1].

How to Develop Your Culture

How Does Culture Change?

A powerful person at the top, or a large enough group from anywhere in the organization, decides the old ways are not working, figures out a change vision, starts acting differently and enlists others to act differently.

If the new actions produce better results, if the results are communicated and celebrated, and if they are not killed off by the old culture fighting back, new norms will form and new shared values will grow.

What Does Not Work in Changing a Culture?

Some group decides what the new culture should be. It turns a list of values over to the Communications or Human Resources departments with the order that they tell people what the new culture is. They cascade the message down the hierarchy and little to nothing changes.

It's not easy to change the culture of an organization. You can't expect to put everyone through eight-hour training and have them come out holding hands and singing "Kum Ba Yah." You have to reinforce that through behaviors they can replicate.

Research has uncovered strong evidence that public servants are motivated differently that private-sector workers. In large part, government employees are attracted to public service primarily by the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the people government services.[1]

Start Small. The North Dakota Department of Commerce created a Culture Club.

The purpose of the Culture Club is to: engage employees, build all Commerce employees into one group of people acting as a team, increase employees interactions with Commerce employees outside their team, improve transparency among employees and create fun for all <u>who want it</u> (underlined because not everybody wants to have fun at work, and you can't please everybody).

Step 1: Create a survey to measure your employee engagement level.

There are plenty of free surveys online, Gallup and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has a free one available through SurveyMonkey.com. You need to create a benchmark to show progress made and where weaknesses are.

Step 2: Evaluate or re-evaluate values.

Survey employees to develop new values or reevaluate old ones; then ask, "What behaviors demonstrate these values?"

If your employees don't understand your company's values and what behaviors exemplify those values then you are missing an opportunity to achieve greater success.

Values must be defined by behaviors that any employee can recognize and emulate[2]. Creating a values blueprint is a natural step after the values have been put in place.

The example above is JetBlue's values blueprint. It clearly lays out their values and actions that are associated with these values. These are everyday ways that employees can live out the values and build on that culture that the company is known for having.

Step 3: Develop traditions and practices.

Employees want four things:

- o regular and candid communication with their supervisor,
- o access to leadership,
- o recognition and
- o close working friendships.

The combination of these four things will lead to high levels of engagement in your organization.

Regular and Candid Communication with Their Supervisor

Seventy-five percent of people who voluntarily leave jobs don't quit their jobs – they quit supervisors. Employees want to feel valued and appreciated by their supervisors. They desire a relationship that has frequent communication with their supervisor. This can prove difficult in occupations that require frequent traveling, but it's not impossible. Some examples of practices that support regular and candid communication with supervisors include:

- o Scheduling performance evaluations on a regular basis, possibly quarterly, bi-annually or annually. Setting goals and expectations at each meeting that can be measured and discussed at each meeting leaves both employee and supervisor understanding what is required of them.
- o Scheduling weekly or monthly meetings, depending on preferences, to visit about current projects, answer questions and to give employees one-on-one time to connect. Conversations don't have to include just "work talk", employees want to feel like their supervisors care who they are as a person, not just as an employee.
- o Conducting 360 degree reviews for your team shows employees that their supervisors care about how they are perceived by employees and gives employees the opportunity to provide genuine feedback in a non-confrontational manner.
- o Holding frequent team meetings to bring the group together to build team spirit, possibly do some team building exercises, discuss upcoming projects and deadlines and to celebrate successes.

Access to Leadership

Remember, employees will naturally follow in the footsteps of their leaders. Leaders must set the expectations and then stick to them as well as enforce them. Being accessible to staff shows you're available, you are one of them and you care what they have to say. Examples of leadership being accessible include:

- Ask their opinions by creating committees of employees to solve problems or poll employees to gain buy-in and interest.
- If you survey employees, you should always follow-up with a "here are the results" and "here is what we plan on doing with these results."
- Create transparency by sharing news about where the organization is going, layoffs, potential issues, etc.
- Notifying staff immediately about news that could affect them before they hear about it in the media or other staff as it shows consideration and caring.
- Keeping an internal blog written by senior leadership on personal and professional happenings helps staff learn about other areas of the agency and other leaders they may not interact with often.
- Leadership/managers setting aside a specific amount of time daily or weekly to walk around the office and visit with their staff.

Recognizing Employees

Employees thrive in being recognized for a job well done, most often in front of other staff but not always. They want to see that their work is being appreciated and that their effort has not gone unseen. Examples of leadership recognizing employees include:

- Posting job announcements for internal employees to apply first for shows loyalty to your current workforce.
- Service awards recognize employees for longevity and dedication.
- Creating a weekly call-out of "jobs well done" on Intranet or employee newsletter.
- Encouraging professional development of staff and their continual learning process motivates staff to always strive for better.

Close Working Friendships

The final thing employees need in order to be engaged in the workplace is close working friendships. Tony Hsheih, CEO of Zappos, says that the easiest way to determine the level of employee engagement in your office is to find out if your employees have friends at work. Here are a few examples of creating close working friendships:

- Creating office rituals of coffee with management, or lunch with the CEO on the first day of employment.
- Host an annual picnic for staff and/or families.
- Dependent upon size, throw birthday parties, retirement parties or holiday parties.
- Create a social intranet that entices employees to interact outside their immediate team
- Hold costume contests, judge decorated offices or offer free breakfast for staff to gather and mingle.

Budget/Fundraising

Non-profits and government entities don't have the luxury of setting aside profits for a culture budget. This is where thinking outside-of-the-box is a must. Creating a petty cash fund that allows funding to be put toward engagement initiatives is a possible idea. Others include silent auctions, asking local vendors for donations, holding fundraisers and possibly raising funds through "Jeans Days" or "Jeans Weeks" to collect funds. Be sure to track all income and payments when collecting personal dollars from staff.

Sources:

1. Engaging Government Employees, Robert J. Lavigna, 2013

2. Built on Values, Ann Rhoades, 2010

3. Zappos Inc.; Three-Day "Culture Camp", September 30-October 2, 2014.