

6 WAYS TO ENGINEER PUBLIC-EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



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Here's a troubling statistic: According to the latest Gallup report on state and local government workers' engagement, a median of only 29 percent of them are engaged at work. What's worse, 17 percent of public workers are "actively disengaged." Those employees are "busy acting out their unhappiness," in Gallup's words, undermining the accomplishments of their engaged co-workers.

Some disengaged employees leave. The real problem is the ones who stay. Many of them are mentally leaving their workplaces long before they exit the building for good. These quit-and-stay employees are particularly toxic. Their negative attitudes and poor work habits are highly contagious, resulting too often in customer frustration and anger, poor quality of services and decreased team performance. Cells of disengaged workers can create a cancerous effect on the overall health of an organization.

Employee engagement should be a top priority for public-sector executives who, by failing to build trust and develop their employees, are contributing to the problem. Having a high-performing workforce is fundamental to performance and organizational viability. An engaged workforce can increase innovation, productivity and overall performance. A disengaged workforce can be counted on to undermine those goals.

A variety of researchers have explored the issue of worker engagement, and while they have approached it in somewhat different ways, nearly all agree on a few key elements: The more engaged an employee is, the more proactive he or she is likely to be when approaching a task, willing to go the extra mile when serving a customer, creative in problem-solving, open to taking ownership over his or her job, likely to explore root causes when things go wrong, and encouraged to think strategically.

Clearly, while high employee engagement doesn't guarantee high organizational performance, there is a strong linkage. Here are six actions an organization's leader can take to improve employee engagement:

Hire the right people and place them in the right jobs/roles. The entire recruiting process is an opportunity to engage with future employees. Make sure to include in job ads the reasons the position exists, the desired qualities of the ideal candidate ("an adventurer who embraces change and wants to make a difference," perhaps), and what the organization's mission is ("to improve the quality of life for our residents and build a strong, vibrant community"). A candidate who believes in an organization's mission and the importance of the position being sought is more likely to become engaged.

Provide a strategic framework for people's work. When employees know the context and overarching purpose of their work, they tend to approach it with a clearer sense of purpose and meaning. Research shows that a clear line of sight between an employee's work and the organization's strategic objectives is a driver of positive behavior.

Utilize an effective performance management/appraisal system. The process for setting goals, providing meaningful and timely feedback, and holding employees accountable is essential. There's no substitute for a well designed and well executed performance management process.

Ensure that executives, managers and supervisors are credible. Leaders need to be perceived as caring about their people's success, seeking to understand each person's strengths and providing employees with every opportunity to use those strengths. Great managers empower their employees by creating and sustaining a trusting working partnership.

Create and cultivate a culture of personal responsibility. In some ways, a job and an employer are like a car. People who don't treat their careers like a rental car but instead like their own vehicle are more engaged in their work and believe that they are responsible for their own success. Creating a sense of personal efficacy is crucial to a fully engaged workforce.

Support continued personal development. More than helping employees build the skills they need to do their jobs and increase their promotability, it also communicates the organization's values and its belief in a worker's potential.

Nurturing employee engagement should be woven into managers' own performance expectations, and they need to be able to execute on those expectations. It won't be easy to get that 29 percent statistic up to where it ought to be, but the payoff in performance will be worth the effort. Disengaged employees stay for what they get from the organization. Engaged workers stay for what they can *give*.



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