



MOST SAFETY LEADERS WHO ARE TRYING TO GET EMPLOYEES ENGAGED DON'T HAVE A STRATEGY FOR DOING SO.

THE PRINCIPLES OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Successful change is almost always a series of steps, not a huge jump.

More and more of my consulting work involves management or leadership teams who have set goals but are struggling to get the workforce engaged in accomplishing them. Sometimes the problem is simple resistance, which is generally created one or more of three ways: workers don't understand the goals; workers don't like or agree with the goals; or workers don't like the messenger bringing the change.

But more often the problem is that managers don't understand the process of building engagement and ownership. They think that communicating the goals or dictating that they must happen will do the trick.

I have helped literally hundreds of organizations get the employee engagement they wanted in their change or improvement efforts, and the following are among the principles I most often impart:

START WITH STRATEGY

Quite frankly, most leaders who are trying to get employees engaged don't have a strategy for doing so. They tend to think that a vision or a set of goals is a strategy, or that a list of action items is a strategy. They are not! Strategy is a prescribed methodology to win.

Good strategy creates a unique position from which to accomplish the desired goals and reach the vision. How many of your employees would describe your leadership actions as "unique?" A good strategy includes a precise plan to get and utilize employee engagement. It directs worker actions toward the desired goals and visions, and aids in their workplace decisions. One reason leaders struggle is precisely because they don't have a strategy to direct their efforts.

PEOPLE SUPPORT WHAT THEY HELP CREATE

There are several ways to begin to build support for new efforts, but creative involvement is the one I find works best and most often. Early involvement in change efforts tend to build a sense of ownership and pride. Workers will try harder to make their own plans work than they will the plans handed to them by leaders.

This does not mean you let workers decide



what to do. That was decided in the strategy. You let the workers help decide how to do it. Leaders create the strategy and workers help fill in the tactics. Without any creative input, it is difficult or impossible to get workers engaged adequately to ensure the success of the effort.

EAT THE ELEPHANT A BITE AT A TIME

One of the most common mistakes leaders made in the past decade is trying to do too much at once. Successful change is almost always a series of steps, not a huge jump. Trying to do too much often creates a sense of overload and early failure.

Motivation is delicate in the early stages of something new and should be nurtured rather than mashed under an impossible load. The adage that "the way to eat an elephant is a bite at a time" should be a guiding principle of change. Map out the change so everyone knows where they are going and how long the journey will take. Change maps also keep people from feeling lost and turning back to familiar ground and undoing the progress.

Then, take the journey a step at a time, beginning with smaller and easier steps and progressing to larger and more complicated steps as progress is made and people become more experienced and capable. Measure the progress and celebrate milestones along the way. Congratulate those involved and those who helped to keep motivation high.

IF YOU DON'T GET IT IN THEIR HEADS, YOU WON'T GET IT IN THEIR HABITS

A team of site leaders recently told me they had

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decided on three safety improvement goals and had been working hard to accomplish them. I asked them if I walked out on the shop floor, how many employees could name the three? If they can't name them, they are not focused on them. If they are not focused on them, they are not working on them. If they are not working on them, they are not happening.

Work habits are formed through repetition. Repeating actions that are not already habitual takes concentration and conscious effort. All change efforts should begin with getting the change targets into the mindset of the people who need to make the change happen. This often requires more effort than leaders expect and requires the assistance of first-line supervisors and informal leaders from within the worker culture.

PEOPLE DO THINGS FOR A REASON

Change needs direction but it also needs reinforcement. Actions that receive positive reinforcement get repeated, and repeated actions become habitual. Catching workers making the targeted changes and positively reinforcing their efforts isn't just nice, it is necessary!

When you see workers not making the changes, the best response is to find out why. You may be working against other influences in your workplace, and you may not discover them unless you ask.

COMMUNICATE ONLY METRICS THAT MOTIVATE PEOPLE

Not all the metrics that leaders use should be communicated to the employee base during change efforts. Metrics that are beyond

the control of the average employee, metrics that might make workers think there is an ulterior motive to the change efforts, or metrics that create unhealthy internal competition should be kept among leaders.

When change efforts are underway, the best metrics are measurement of improvement toward goals of the targeted improvement areas. Like the old United Way thermometer, seeing progress toward goals tends to motivate effort to reach the goal. The clearer the connection between individual efforts and success metrics, the more workers can see how they contribute to success.

All too often the metrics that are shared during change efforts are either meaningless or misleading to workers. Try to use process metrics and avoid lagging indicators where possible. And remember, approximate measurements of the right things are better than exact measurements of the wrong things. Don't fall into the trap of measuring what is measurable rather than what is important.

It is not enough to decide to change. You need a process to make the change happen. **EHS**

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