

Alaniz: Are You in Tune with Your Employees?

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A recent Gallop poll found that only 34% of employees are engaged in their jobs. 53% of employees are not engaged, doing the bare minimum to simply remain employed. And 13% are actively disengaged. Those employees would rather be almost anywhere else than at work. While there are likely many reasons for this lack of employee engagement, and they no doubt vary among employees, one of the most common is a feeling that their employer cares little to nothing about what they think or what is important to them. The focus always seems to be on production and rarely on the people that are producing. In some workplaces even a sincere “good morning” is lacking, much less a genuine effort to solicit the employees’ concerns. The purpose of this article is to suggest some proven methods that employers have successfully utilized over the years to obtain employee feedback on issues of concern to them. Such feedback is critical if the company has any hope of truly being in tune with its workforce. The methods outlined here are really nothing more than common sense, things all of us have heard for years. The goal is to create more engaged employees that willingly support the company’s values and mission. The question is how to get there.

Daily Conversations

Managers and supervisors, as part of a respectful relationship with the employees they supervise, are in a position to obtain direct feedback on a one-on-one basis in their daily interactions if they make a sincere effort. However, employees must feel comfortable that they can speak honestly and directly without fear of repercussions. Letting them know that candid feedback is welcomed may help open the dialogue. Assurance of non-retaliation by anyone, including other employees, for what they share is sometimes needed. In addition, the reaction to the feedback they share can be critical. And it is important to remember that such conversations are not the time to defend or argue. It is a time to listen respectfully and make an effort to understand the employee’s perspective on whatever issue they choose to discuss.

Exit Interviews

Many successful companies continue to conduct the time-tested “exit interview” to try to obtain information on why employees have chosen to move on. Management can learn a great deal from such interviews. Most employees that are willing to take the time to be interviewed

will generally be candid about their reason for leaving. In today's hyper-competitive job market employees often leave for only minor improvements in pay and/or benefits. Millennials for example, who on average move from one job to another every 14 months, are willing to move to gain such minor improvements as one or two more days off per year and are willing to admit it when asked.

There has been some criticism of exit interviews because they provide little "real time" input that might have triggered policy changes that convinced a particular employee to remain. Yet they do have value, especially if regularly reviewed to identify patterns in the reasons for employee departures. Sometimes those patterns dictate the need for an immediate change in employment policies or personnel. In general, they provide a "big picture" perspective on employment conditions in your workplace.

Stay Interviews

More recently, forward-looking employers have begun to conduct "stay interviews". As the name implies, they are intended to secure information about what the company is doing right, why has the employee chosen to remain on the job. Who is selected for a stay interview is not critical as long as a broad spectrum of the workforce is interviewed. Most companies take a sampling of relatively recent hires as well as long-tenured employees. The information obtained facilitates confirmation of what is working and what is not in the area of employment policies. They should therefore be conducted on an on-going basis to be most effective.

Open Door Policy

The most commonly used program for obtaining information on what is of concern to specific employees is the old problem-solving standby, the "open door policy". Most employers have such a policy in place whether it is explicitly stated or not. While employees are free to speak with any member of management or supervision they choose, most employers suggest that employees start with their immediate supervisor and escalate the issue through the management ranks until the matter is fully addressed. Some companies even permit access to the company president or CEO if the employee so desires. However, the "open door policy" approach has at times been criticized as one in which management more often only pays lip service to it and in reality, permits managers to hide behind the open door. If employees are fearful that they may be the focus of management blowback for complaining or if they believe that complaints to management more often result in little or no action, or worse yet, retaliation,

the open-door policy becomes nothing more than management double talk and will not be used. To be most effective it has to be publicized to employees to the fullest extent possible. More importantly, it has to be seen as a true and consistent means of having workplace concerns addressed by management. Employees need to see it in action.

Suggestion Box

A suggestion box as a means of soliciting employee concerns, as trite as it may seem, has the advantage of permitting employees to raise concerns or problem in complete anonymity. They have been in use in many workplaces throughout the country for generations. Some, and perhaps most employees, prefer to remain anonymous when complaining. Like open door policies, suggestion boxes are only used when employees are aware that they exist and that management welcomes and responds to their use. Routinely reporting on issues that were raised through the use of the suggestion box helps call attention to their effectiveness. It is also preferable to have more than one suggestion box per facility. They should be located where employees congregate and spend free time, such as employee cafeterias or lunchroom. A suggestion box outside the manager's office will likely go unused.

Senior Management Participation

It goes without saying that senior plant management, especially Human Resource professionals, should manage by walking around. Being visible on the production floor on a regular basis helps send the message that management invites employee input and make themselves available to the employees to listen. It is much more likely that an employee will take the opportunity to raise a concern where they are more comfortable talking, the production floor, than in a management office. But management contact with employees should not be limited to the local team. Some of the most effective communications come from one-on-one conversations between visiting corporate executives and hardworking employees. Numerous major companies, including such giants as Wal-Mart, routinely have their corporate executives engage the hourly workforce about issues of concern whenever they visit a company facility. Some executives make such plant or facility visits so frequently that they are on a first name basis with many employees. It can be some of the most valuable time these executives spend in the interest of their company. Knowing what your employees think about how they are treated and what issues may be of concern enables management to not only react to immediate problems,

but also to anticipate what policy changes should be considered going forward for the company as a whole.

Conclusion

The means and methods discussed here for pro-actively seeking out employee problems and concerns are obviously not the only effective methods available. Periodic employee evaluations, employee surveys and similar methods are also quite useful. Whatever means an employer adopts to try to be in tune with their employees' concerns will no doubt be welcomed by employees. How the employer responds to that information will be the ultimate proof that they care what their employees think.

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