

## Finding and motivating engaged employees

*Short case studies and research papers that demonstrate best practice in rewards*

Stephen L. Guinn



Stephen L. Guinn is a Managing Partner of PSP Metrics.

Are your employees fully engaged in their work? A recent study showed that most employees are not – indeed fewer than one third are reported to be fully engaged (BlessingWhite, Inc., 2011). How do you know?

Have you ever thought about how your employees feel after a day's work? Do they feel good about the work they have done? Do they feel they have accomplished something, helped someone, learned something, and made a contribution to the enterprise? Are they satisfied that it was time well spent? Do they feel that problems are being resolved? If not, they are probably not looking forward to coming to work tomorrow.

More and more, employees are asking what work is all about. The answer is that it is about more than the money. Yes, they need a paycheck and you can buy their time, but money does not buy motivation or engagement.

### What really motivates employees?

How do you engage and motivate employees? Research shows that factors such as salary, benefits, and job security represent only a small part of employees' job satisfaction (Christensen *et al.*, 2012). These factors are important, but they only keep workers from being unhappy and give you, at best, average performance, even if the salary,

benefits, and job security are above average. Eighty percent of motivation comes from what PSP Metric's noted researcher Fred Herzberg called "motivating factors," such as recognition, responsibility, learning opportunities and meaningful work (Herzberg, 1968).

So how can you incorporate these "motivating factors" into your workplace? Before you do anything else, first be sure to select the right workers. Yes, it is actually possible to select employees who are predisposed to engagement. There are behavioral competencies such as conscientiousness and desire to be helpful to others, as well as goal and achievement orientation, that can be measured through psychometric testing. Further, employees are less likely to be motivated to do a good job if they do not have the skills and ability to do it. These, too, can be measured through testing. In fact, hiring employees who are predisposed to engagement is itself a motivating factor for other employees.

Selecting employees who have the positive attributes to be fully engaged in their jobs helped one Southeastern steel fabrication plant to not only reduce its turnover from 50 percent to 5 percent over a two-year period of time, but also helped to significantly reduce safety accidents and incidents. The managers at this plant discovered that engaged employees

pay more attention and are better able to anticipate consequences of actions (Source: PSP fieldwork).

### Keeping the momentum

When you select employees who have these positive attributes, they will want to learn more and grow in their knowledge and responsibilities. You will need to continue to train these employees once they are on board and have a mechanism through which they can self-check their work and also receive feedback on their performance. Most companies will find that training in and of itself is a motivator if employees are being trained to do meaningful work and are given the opportunity to improve their skill set. This is not to say that you cannot give your employees routine work. Most employees will not mind doing routine work if you have demonstrated how important it is to the ultimate goals of the company.

A recent study reported in *Harvard Business Review* stated that a high percentage of top young managers are in a non-stop job search. Dissatisfaction with development, training, mentoring, and coaching are important reasons why many of these young professionals make early exits. Many younger managers and professionals expect continuous learning opportunities, both formal and informal, as part of their motivation for continuing to work for their employers (Hamori *et al.*, 2012).

Data also show that employees are more engaged when they have supervisors and managers that deal with problem issues quickly and fairly, and remove obstacles that prevent them from doing their job as well as possible. They tend to disengage when problems or issues are not solved or are not demonstrably being addressed (Amabile and Kramer, 2011).

### Communication is key

Through our employee opinion surveys, PSP is finding that communication is increasingly

becoming an important tool for engagement. In fact, in recent employee surveys both salary and hourly employees have rated communication as being just as important as compensation.

Employees want to know what is going on in the company from its present to its future. They want to have open and direct communications from higher-level management about the challenges the business is facing and what the company is trying to do to respond. Employees want to receive information on the good and the bad, and have a chance to ask questions and give their perspective on issues. They also want senior management to truly understand how the work gets done and they would like some degree of recognition and appreciation. Employees want senior management to be interested in them as human beings and not simply as human capital.

Larger companies often hold town hall meetings with open invitations to employees, where the CEO and other top executives appear in person to discuss particular topics and answer questions. This way, employees see a face, hear a voice, and are able to make a human connection that cannot be made through email or the intranet. While you cannot always make promises in these exchanges, you do help motivate employees by engaging them, exchanging information and, most of all, listening. All of this goes a long way towards creating a positive work environment and atmosphere.

### Surveys as a form of engagement

Employee opinion surveys are also a good way to communicate with employees at all levels. They provide an opportunity for workers to express their views and have senior management listen to what they say. Companies that utilize employee surveys often uncover problems that they were not aware of. By addressing these issues and taking them seriously, you demonstrate your

commitment to the employees and in return, you obtain better than average performance from them. Employee surveys are also a good vehicle for receiving feedback on the employee's perception of fairness in decisions and opportunities within the workplace. Employees who feel that employers play favorites are much more likely to be disengaged and to give just enough effort to get by.

In a Midwest manufacturing company, management followed up an employee survey with teambuilding exercises to improve communications and working relationships between two facilities. Utilizing a train-the-trainer approach, groups of salaried and unionized leaders in one facility have learned to deliver a PowerPoint presentation on communications as well as conduct teamwork training. While the jury is still out on the ultimate result, already both facilities are seeing positive changes in communications and cooperation, and problems are being headed off before they turn into grievances (source: PSP field work).

### An ongoing process

Keep in mind that an attempt to encourage employee engagement is an ongoing process and not a one-time event. If you want to motivate employees and have above average performance, you need to continuously provide meaningful work and opportunities, along with performance feedback, communication and recognition.

In summary, to enhance employee engagement in your company, you need to pay attention to the following:

- Select employees who are predisposed to engagement.
- Provide training opportunities.
- Provide mechanisms for self-checking work and receiving feedback.
- Provide opportunities for recognition/appreciation.
- Address problems quickly.

- Conduct regular employee surveys.
- Create communication opportunities with senior executives.
- Remember that it is an on-going process.

## References

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## About the author

Dr Stephen L. Guinn is a Managing Partner of PSP Metrics, a Pittsburgh-based consulting firm that has assisted local, national, and international businesses in improving the quality and productivity of their

human capital for over 60 years. He has expertise in executive development and succession planning, plant startups, employee surveys, 360 reviews and the use of psychometric testing for selection and development. Dr Guinn has numerous articles on achieving organization change through employee selection and development and a book chapter on psychological testing in business. Stephen L. Guinn can be contacted at: [sguinn@pspmetrics.com](mailto:sguinn@pspmetrics.com)