

Coaching for Engagement and Retention

By Beverly Crowell and Beverly Kaye

In today's tough economic times it seems pretty crazy to be talking about employee engagement and retention. If so, then crazy is what all smart managers need to be a little of right now. Today, more than ever, employees are stressed out, wiggled out, and even a little freaked out by what's happening in the economy. News reports detail who is losing what, where, and when. Distracting? You bet! Intimidating to those with good jobs? Most definitely!

All employees, even the best and brightest, can't help but be affected by the economic downturn— wondering what's next, who's next, and if it will be them. In fact, the stress is thought to be greater and last longer for those who survive cutbacks. Those who are not at risk of losing their jobs have to pick up the slack created by a leaner workforce and increasing responsibilities, as well as take part in restructuring and realignment.

Organizations are spending big money in annual employee satisfaction surveys and action plans to sustain a workforce that is engaged and productive. These action plans generally create new programs, resources, changes in policy, and some measurable, short-term victories. An organization we've been in touch with recently found that lack of career development opportunities was cited by employees as a key source of dissatisfaction. A team was assembled to address the problem and as a result, a state-of-the-art career resource center was created. Great news, except for the employee who asked his boss if he could go to the center one day and heard, "You don't have time for that right now. I need you to get the work done at your desk."

For this manager and many like him, engagement and retention consists of the annual employee satisfaction survey and the "tedious" action plan that has to be created as a result. What he fails to realize is that all the best plans can and will fall short if they aren't supported. That's where coaching for engagement and retention can create a sustained and measurable difference.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, disengaged workers cost the U.S. economy more than \$300 billion annually. The task of re-engaging those who "quit and stay" falls on the shoulders of the leadership and management team. While many managers know the importance of engaging this talent, the "how" is often left up to chance.

Coaching for engagement and retention reduces the risk and empowers leaders in any organization to tap into their employees' discretionary effort and bring that energy into the workplace. When the coaching relationship is directed at these issues, it helps managers find simple, yet meaningful, ways to engage this talent beyond everyday distractions.

A skilled engagement coach must begin by understanding the unique employee engagement and retention challenges of each manager. This work is done through the manager, not directly with individual employees. If employee engagement, satisfaction, or culture surveys are readily available, the coach can work directly with the manager to study the results and identify key issues and opportunities. The good news about these surveys is that they provide a great place to begin analysis because individual managers can learn about the engagement needs of their team. They are only a start, however. The true value comes from frequent conversations. Surveys set the tone, but it's the conversations that set the direction.

Managers have a huge impact in retaining and engaging people. Employees want this relationship. They feel engaged by their work and cared for by their organizations when they are able to have open, honest, two-way conversations about their ideas, careers, motivations, and challenges. They need managers who listen to their perspectives, offer their own points of view, and provide encouragement, guidance, and opportunities. If individuals feel heard, understood, and valued by their manager, they commit more of their energy and enthusiasm.

One of the difficulties that a coach will most likely encounter is that although managers have the best of intentions, they feel that time is their enemy. Coaches must work with managers to help them realize that time isn't the enemy, but their perceptions are. The reality is that engagement builds or diminishes in every interaction between a manager

and an employee. So it's often not just about doing more, but "doing with purpose." Purposeful engagement, simply put, is the ability to focus on employee talent in every interaction. It's the realization that, as a manager, you don't necessarily have to do more to engage your employees, but you need to commit to specific actions that meet the engagement needs of each employee. The ongoing challenge, however, is that what employees want or need is as different as each person, so no "one-size-fits-all" approach will work.

Once a manager accepts this responsibility, the coach can serve as a resource to generate ideas based on what managers are learning in their conversations and interactions with employees. The coach works with the manager to demonstrate the difference between engagement and performance. Managers and employees alike are accustomed to talking about performance-what engages us is a different story. Good engagement conversations can feel like you're "peeling an onion" with the objective of getting to the true motivations of each employee.

An employee wants more opportunities to learn and grow? The manager might consider the following:

- Conduct a career conversation to learn more about their unique skills, interests, and values. Offer your perspective, discuss trends and options, and co-design a career action plan.
- Link employees to others inside or outside the organization who can help them achieve their professional goals.
- Take time to mentor your employees. Share your success stories and failures. Teach organizational realities and let your employees mentor you too.

Another employee doesn't feel valued by you or the organization? Build loyalty by trying the following:

- Recognize employees for a job well done. Offer praise that is specific, purposeful, and tailored to each employee.
- Notice your employees. Pay attention as you walk down the halls and say hello to them by name.
- Get honest feedback and a clear picture of how you look to others. Do you have any high-risk behaviors that may be getting in the way of your efforts?

All your employees want to work in an environment that they love. Try implementing some of the following:

- Have fun at work. Do something new or different, or create an environment where it's okay to laugh and smile.
- Show enthusiasm for what you do; it will encourage others to do the same. Disengaged managers will have a tough time engaging their employees.
- Values define what we consider to be important. The more employee values align with their work, the more they will find it meaningful, purposeful, and important. Ask your employees, "What makes for a really great day?" or "What do you need most from your work?"

So much of coaching for engagement revolves around commonsense approaches to good leadership. Alas, common sense is often uncommonly practiced. The coaching partnership can do more than provide insight to managers; it can also be the motivation managers need to do what they know should be done. Managers with engagement coaches often remark that it's the coaching that reminds them to put these commonsense strategies into practice. Here are some examples of the actions managers in one organization implemented:

- Helped a "disengaged" direct report open up about real concerns, which led to productive career discussions about future options and receptivity to performance improvement ideas in the short run.
- Conducted a series of relationship-building phone conversations with remote employees, combined with intentional in-person get-acquainted meetings when onsite to build trust and rapport with new direct report staff.
- Conducted monthly debriefings after each closing period to identify what went well and what could be improved the next month.
- Created motivational Monday morning e-messages to the group as a way to get the week started positively. The manager received many compliments from the team for doing this.

The true mark of success happens when managers assume the role of engagement coaches in their organizations. While managers can be the catalyst for good engagement and retention, it's the employee who must step up to identify what actions they can take to find more satisfaction in the workplace. Managers with a good handle on engagement can empower employees to take control of their own workplace satisfaction.

Engagement and retention are critical in today's workplace. If the coaching relationship goes well, it will extend beyond the individual manager and his/her team. It will impact others in the organization. Coaching for engagement and retention can create managers who think of their talent first and employees who truly commit to bringing the best of their capabilities to the organization.



Beverly Kaye, Founder and CEO of Career Systems International, is an internationally recognized authority on career issues, focusing on retention and engagement in the workplace. She is the author of *Up Is Not the Only Way: A Guide to Developing Workforce Talent* (Davies-Black, 2002[1997]) and the co-author of *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay* (Berrett-Koehler, 2001 [1999]) and *Love It, Don't Leave It: 26 Ways to Get What You Want Out of Work* (Berrett-Koehler, 2003).



Beverly Crowell, Senior Consultant for Career Systems International, specializes in the fields of employee engagement and retention, career development, and coaching. She currently provides employee engagement and retention coaching to senior leaders in the healthcare and food service industries.