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Energize Your Employees

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Did your "job EKG" ever go flat? Did the feeling of challenge change to a feeling of routine? Did you think something was missing? Did you start to look around?

Unfortunately, your most valued employees are the also the ones most likely to suffer this sense of job discontent. They are savvy, creative, self-propelled, and energetic. They need stimulating work, opportunities for personal challenge and growth, and a contributing stake in the organizational action. If good workers find the job with your company no longer provides these necessities, they may decide they have outgrown the place and will consider leaving.

Some employees, perhaps not the obvious stars, but people with solid potential, suffer discontent yet stay on the job. Instead of leaving for the next challenge, they find ways to disengage. Their departure is psychological rather than physical. It shows up in counterproductive activities like absenteeism and mediocre performance. These individuals simply withhold their energy and effort, figuring, "What's the point anyway?"

How can you win them back?

Energize the Job

Energizing a job means structuring ways for employees to get the growth, challenge, and renewal they seek without leaving their current jobs or organizations.

Changing what your employees do (content) or how they do it (process) is the key. Energizing allows employees to take on different tasks and responsibilities or to accomplish them in ways that promote personal autonomy and creativity. An energized job promotes setting and achieving personal and group goals; allows employees to see their contributions to an end product or goal; challenges employees to expand their knowledge and capabilities; has a future beyond itself; and gives employees room to initiate, create, and implement new ideas.

How do you energize the job? Try asking your employees questions like these:

- Do you know how your job is important to the company?
- What skills do you use on the job? What talents do you have that you don't use?
- What about your job do you find challenging? Rewarding?
- In what areas would you like increased responsibility for your current tasks?
- What would you like to be doing in the next three to five years?
- In what ways would you like your job changed?

Don't Fall Into the Fix-it Role

Remember, this is an important discussion and doesn't have to be handled in one conversation. Don't feel as if you have to have all the answers, and don't let yourself become the problem-solver. These discussions should be collaborative. Both of you need to do the creative thinking that is necessary to bring back the "juice" of the job.

Here are some ideas for helping your employees enrich their work:

- **Form teams.**

Self-directed work groups can make a lot of their own decisions. They can redistribute work, so that team members learn more, have more variety, and follow more projects through to completion.

- **Touch the customer.**

For example, a computer systems troubleshooter might be more effective knowing the needs of real people and units rather than responding only to problems as they occur. Assign one troubleshooter to one department and make her accountable for the computer system. Give her a client. Clients can be inside or outside the organization. It's amazing how many employees never see them.

- **Rotate assignments.**

New responsibilities can help an employee feel challenged and valued. Employees can acquire important new skills that add depth to the workforce. Do rotational assignments sound like chaos? Suggest the idea and let your employees propose the "who" and "how" part; you'll be surprised at their expertise in making it happen smoothly.

- **Build in feedback.**

Do more than annual reviews. Find ways to develop peer review and client review opportunities. Employees want to know about their performance, and continual feedback allows them to be their own quality-control agents.

- **Broaden participation.**

Employees are empowered and motivated when they take part in decisions that have an impact on their work, such as budget and hiring decisions, or ways to organize work and schedules. Involvement allows employees to see the big picture and enables them to make a contribution they find meaningful.

- **Nurture creativity.**

Untapped creativity dwindles. If employees rarely think for themselves, they lose the ability to contribute their best ideas. They simply go through the paces, under-motivated and disengaged. You can help by asking for and rewarding creative ideas, by giving employees the freedom and resources to create, and by challenging employees with new assignments, tasks, and learning.

Set Energy Goals

Each employee should set energy goals. You can help by asking individuals and teams for those goals each year. Be sure they make sense to the individual, the work group, and the organization.

Test the motivating potential of an energy goal by asking your employee any or all of these questions: (1) What's in it for you? How will it help you gain more confidence and competence in your current position? (2) What's in it for your work group? How will it increase/enhance your contribution to your work group or department? (3) What's in it for the organization? How does it address a current relevant business need?

Workplace boredom is a major cause of turnover. If you fail to take steps to discover when your talented employees' jobs have become routine, you run the risk of losing them, physically or psychologically. Energizing the job is not tricky or difficult. But it does require staying alert to opportunities for all your employees and encouraging them to suggest ways to energize their own jobs.

Some concepts and strategies are taken from Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay, Berrett-Koehler, 2005.

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