

Reengaging the Disengaged: The Leaders' Role In Engagement (Part 3)

Leadership plays a critical role in employees' engagement. Christopher Stewart, Gallup's Group Vice-President rightly points out, "Leadership sets the tone... people join corporations because of their reputation, but 70 per cent leave because of poor management."ⁱ It confirms the proverbial saying, "People don't leave organizations but leave bad bosses."

According to some, "Asian leaders are more 'task-driven' and tend to 'overlook the personal touch.'" Being a highly-productive leader does not make you a good leader. What can leaders do to engage their employees?

1. Earn the right to lead

Leaders are not there because of their position. We can only lead because we have earned the right to lead. One chief ingredient is integrity. Integrity includes having strong moral character, being honest, admitting failure, recovering from failure and keeping to promises.

Peter Chao, an outstanding leader who still has his core leadership team for thirty-five years, writes, "When a leader is self-absorbed and self-serving in their stance and style, followers will be alienated and the organization broken."ⁱⁱ

We also earn the right to lead by developing our emotional quotient. This emotional maturity has to do with self-awareness, self-management, and other-management.

"In the past, companies tended to have a negative, 'we-don't-want-this-touchy-feely-stuff' reaction. But now it is being regarded as a business issue... If your people can't manage teams, relationships and solicit feedback, the feeling is that there may be something wrong." writes psychotherapist David Swink.ⁱⁱⁱ High EQ leaders equals better profit.

2. Establish a shared culture

Leaders create culture.

The most important job of the leader is to build a climate of trust. The Great Place To Work Institute studies organization cultures and uses one yardstick to measure climate: TRUST^{iv}. Trust involves respect, pride, integrity, fairness and camaraderie spirit.

There is a strong cause and effect between the trust climate and the company's profit. Their recommendation is that leaders' main responsibility is to build trust first. We often put the cart before the horse by focusing on profit first rather than trust.

Another aspect of trust has to do with producing quality products and services. Howard Shultz, CEO of Starbucks, in one of his leadership talks, explains his philosophy of business, “Starbucks is about building trust.” He went on to explain that in 1958, 90% of viewers believe in the promise of the products in advertising but in 1999, trust in advertising has reached an all time low – only 7%!

So, one of his first duty as CEO is for people to build trust in Starbucks by delivering consistently high quality product and service.

3. Enunciate the future

In a Gallup Study on employees’ engagement, “Singaporean leaders were rated less visionary, less optimistic, less willing to challenge old ways of doing things, less likely to sacrifice their self-interest.”^v No wonder employees feel disengaged.

Effective leaders define reality. If they are honest, they are fearful of the future but not depressed about it. They keep reminding people of what’s important. They ‘manage the meaning’ by keeping the passion quotient high. They are mission maniacs to counter bureaucracy that has forgotten what’s important.

They create a shared understanding of the present and common destiny of the future.

4. Encourage the heart

In another survey done by SMA, it was found that, “Money is not the foremost among the motivators. But the following are: appreciation for jobs well done, good working relationships, trust and autonomy, team spirit and open communication.”^{vi} I call this encouraging the heart.

We need to restore pride in their work. In his article “How To Lead Now: Getting Extraordinary Performance When You Can’t Pay for It,” in *FastCompany* magazine (August 2003), John Byrne indicates that instilling self-esteem in workers, or pride building, will bring out the best from people as it forges emotional bonds that are every bit as critical as fiscal ones. Leaders have to feed the souls as well as the wallets of their followers.

Peter Chao writes, “In days of recession, most businesses adopt tougher and more autocratic styles of leadership aimed at squeezing the most out of a fearful and groveling workforce whose jobs are on the line. However, Byrne asserts that “if businesses are to grow their way out of the current economic malaise, they will have to get more productivity out of their people – not by cutting and slashing, but by nurturing, engaging, and recognizing.”^{vii}

We encourage by making affirmation a way of life. This involves a change of paradigms and perspectives. Instead of concentrating on the negatives - what our employees have not done -, we focus on the positives - what the employees have done. Peter Drucker said, “Great managers tend to build upon people’s strengths and make their weaknesses irrelevant.”

Finally, affirmation also recognizes and celebrates success constantly. This gives employees hope in a despairing work environment.

In practical terms, small things count. An employee remembers when the boss thanks his wife for being supportive when the employee has to do overtime. He may not have remembered his salary increment but he remembers the boss' simple 'thank you'.

Another simple yet impactful behavior is for leaders to practice M&M, i.e. Mix and Mingle. Leaders need to come down from their pedestal, get to know their employees and understand their needs and struggles. Don't always depend on our managers' for their assessment of the employees' feedback. Mingle with your people. We will be surprised by what we might find out.

We encourage our employees by committing to their development. Results of the poll of 60,000 Singapore workers suggest that training is a big factor in employee satisfaction.^{viii} Our Labor Chief, Mr. Lim Boon Heng, is right when he says, "So how can an employee feel committed if his employer is not committed to training him?"^{ix}

5. Empowering talent

Today, people matter. As Harvard Professor Christopher Bartlett in setting out this 'power to the people' era in his award-winning book *The Individualized Corporation*, says, "The end in mind for managers is to engage and energize your people...If you are a good senior manager, talented employees are not a threat to your position. They are your badges of honor."^x

Great leaders abandon the ego for the development of other people's talents and become midwives of other people's ideas.

Peter Schneider, Director of Animation in Walt Disney, does not know how to draw but has hundreds of animators working under him. He speaks about talent management, "Leaders understand and practice the power of appreciation. They are connoisseurs of talent, more curators than creators. They are 'deep listeners'."

A managing director of an IT multi-national corporation told me, "My job as a leader is to look for people who are smarter and more competent than me. In today's environment, the leader cannot do everything. I must empower them to do what they are hired to do." No wonder my friend is a top earner and high achiever in his organization!

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ⁱ Chia, Sue-Ann (2003). Study soon what makes a S'pore boss. The Straits Times. Singapore.

ⁱⁱ Chao, P. (2003). Profile of Southeast Asian Evangelical Church Leaders and Their Leadership Needs. A Research Article written for Peter Drucker's School of Management.

ⁱⁱⁱ Branson, L. (2000) High EQ = Better Profits. The Sunday Times. March 26, 2000. Singapore.

^{iv} Great Place To Work Institute. www.greatplacetowork.com

^v Singapore Organizational Leadership Index 2003. Media Release by the Singapore Institute of Management and The Gallup Organization. Singapore.

^{vi} Batacan, F. (2000). Workers here value human touch. The Sunday Times. (30 July 2000). Singapore.

^{vii} Chao, P. (2003). Profile of Southeast Asian Evangelical Church Leaders and Their Leadership Needs. A Research Article written for Peter Drucker's School of Management.

^{viii} Chia, Sue-Ann. (2002). Lousy Boss? Then take charge of your own career. The Straits Times. September 16. 2002. Singapore.

^{ix} Chia, Sue-Ann. (2002). Lousy Boss? Then take charge of your own career. The Straits Times. September 16. 2002. Singapore.

^x Bartlett, C. (2000). Engage and Energize Staff. The Sunday Times. (10 December 2000). Singapore.