

performance perspectives

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Getting employees focused again: The connection between recognition and engagement

By Mike Ryan, SVP, Madison Performance Group

As a follow up to my last Performance Perspective, I want to examine the “do more with less” imperative that became the operating mantra for organizations everywhere. Overemployed workers have been trying to keep pace with the increasing and often shifting demands placed upon them. The impact has been hard on all workers, but it’s been especially difficult for those, who up until recently, have been the most engaged. These employees struggle to complete—even prioritize—all the work that they are being asked to accomplish. In some organizations the accumulating pressure to “get it all done” combined with an absence of support, encouragement, and appreciation has paid a toll. Its compromised relationships with managers and coworkers alike and it has diminished employee loyalty. In simple terms it’s eating away at engagement scores within those businesses.

How can HR reverse this trend?

As HR struggles with the same resource restrictions that cramp the rest of the enterprise, the question that needs answering is this: What solution can HR bring to the table that will help alleviate employee uneasiness without straining the budget? The answer lies in promoting the use of recognition; specifically by strengthening senior level support, giving managers the

tools they need, and monitoring utilization for maximum impact. The time is right for HR to reposition recognition as the cost effective solution in the company’s quest to restore a sense of clarity and focus within its employee ranks. This edition of Performance Perspectives is the guide for doing just that.

“Role clarity” and its influence on employee engagement

“Role clarity” is an emerging influencer in the employee engagement equation. Uncertainty occurs among employees when roles aren’t clearly defined and workloads increase, and disengagement simultaneously occurs when, feedback and encouragement become more and more limited. When employees don’t have a “clear and reiterated” sense of their mission, meaning where they should be focusing their efforts, or how those efforts support the “big picture”, they tend to drift into the “disengaged” category. Companies that have lost, or are losing the emotional commitment of their workforces, can attribute that falloff to the employee’s declining sense of significance. In that regard two factors are major contributors 1/ the reduction of recognition and the status that comes with it and 2/ the mounting pressure to get more done without a clear sense of why the work and the role they play in completing it is important. ¹

Managers are the pivot point in defining which direction employees go

No one within any organization is more focused on achieving higher levels of engaged employees than HR. But in actuality, it’s the frontline managers who are the most influential in determining that outcome. Good managers, those who lead by setting clearly communicated goals and providing both encouragement and feedback on a consistent basis, have a much more positive influence on an employee’s attitude than any other influencer. In their writings, Blessing White has demonstrated a compelling correlation between a manager’s propensity to encourage employees and a worker’s subsequent levels of engagement. ² Hay Group, as well, has also demonstrated that the motivational ability of frontline managers is a considerable contributor to employee motivation and engagement. ³ So with the manager/employee influence well stipulated, It would seem that HR would be doing both sides a service by offering recognition tools that 1/ help communicate priorities, which is ideal for employees who are crave role clarity and 2/ reward accomplishments, which is helpful for managers who require tools to help them prioritize work and reward employees who exceed expectations.

1. A New Framework of Employee Engagement, Castellano, Rutgers University

2. Blessing White, Employee Engagement Report Card, January 2011

3. The Changing Face of Reward, Hay Group 2010

How recognition clarifies employee roles

Most people look at recognition as a reinforcement tool, and while it's a key component its only part of its value. At Madison we apply a strategic approach to employee recognition, which makes goal setting easy and communicating program information and results more personal. Our web-based tools allow managers to establish meaningful objectives and communicate effectively and efficiently in real time. A well-designed recognition system gives managers another—and perhaps more powerful—platform to communicate expectations and explain why outcomes are indeed priorities. This interchange of information, not only helps the employee see the big picture, but it also reaffirms the role they play for the organization

Our clients know that the act of recognition also conveys a keener sense of role clarity to others that hold similar responsibilities. Nothing dignifies an employee's role more than being told they are doing a good job. People want to know that their mission—and all their efforts leading toward accomplishing it—are meaningful and aligned with the organization's overall direction. And yes employees want to be acknowledged for their efforts of course. But what is also valuable to employees is seeing others in similar circumstances being celebrated. Seeing how success is redefined through the actions of others—which is a fundamental part of the recognition story telling process—reinforces the shared ambitions of everyone who does similar work. In that regard our recognition solutions clarifies and celebrates the value of the “role” for everyone who has it.

Ensuring success

HR can create and introduce employee recognition tools, but how can they get managers to use them? In our long and successful history of implementing these solutions, Madison has found three axioms that remain true and play a definitive role in ensuring success.

1. Executive support is essential. One of the reasons recognition has taken a back burner in some organizations is because senior management has been focused on

what they perceived to be the more immediate needs of the organization. However, within the c-suite attitudes towards talent appear to be changing. Earlier this year, over 1200 global CEOs ranked the need to attract and retain the best employees as a top priority. And a clear majority said they intend to leverage the power of non-cash rewards—including recognition—to motivate employees.⁴ Remember frontline managers are also employees with managers of their own and they may not be getting this direction from the top. The first thing HR needs to do is to find a senior level spokes person who can refocus the conversation. Executive sponsorship is a best practice within companies that enjoy highly engaged workforces. If attracting and retaining the best people is indeed your organization's priority your managers must hear that from the top and (like any other employee) must understand their roles and responsibilities in cultivating talent at the local level.

2. Tools that simplify get utilized. The best intentions do not always guarantee results. You need a recognition solution that is both simple and reliable or else managers will not embrace it with any degree of consistency. Let's face it, your managers, like the employees they manage, have too much on their plate already. They do not have the time—or the inclination—to manually; determine employee eligibility, shepherd approvals through the system, balance award budgets or track related outcomes. Our flexible web-based tools automate all those functions and more—including the bevy of exceptions that can occur when organizational changes occur. You want your managers to use the tools you put in place to reignite higher levels of engagement, not to struggle with the mechanics of giving awards. Remember in the case of recognition system utilization, efficiency is what makes programs effective. HR would be wise to partner with a company like Madison who can deliver on both levels.

3. “Track & act” see the best results. As business structures become more decentralized and increasingly virtual, having easy and up-to-date insight into day-to-day program utilization is essential. HR sponsors that deploy and use

our tools are able to accurately assess all the “vital signs” of program utilization (things like budget utilization, issuance sequencing, etc.) and are in a better position to make meaningful suggestions on where and how the program's impact can be improved. This gives HR a more strategic role within the organization—something that their CEOs are expecting from them. And for companies that are looking to more clearly understand—and subsequently influence—the ongoing relationship between recognition activity and employee engagement scores—our ability to easily combine and analyze multiple data sets from other systems also represents another new best practice.

Summary

For all employees the lack of “role clarity” brought on by shifting expectations, mounting workloads and limited feedback within the workplace is a problem for both employees and the companies they work for. It's especially difficult for workers who had been engaged—who want to do well, who want to contribute at high levels—but now struggle with focusing on all the work that they are being asked to accomplish. The frustration that has developed as a result is compromising relationships with managers and hurting engagement levels.

But there is a remedy. Companies that use recognition tools and provide solutions to help their managers set objectives, reward outcomes and encourage success with ease and accuracy—are more equipped to maintain their employee's commitment and focus. Not only do their managers receive a platform that allows them to guide and encourage employees, HR executives who have implemented recognition of tools on behalf of the enterprise find these solutions help them to manage and direct their recognition investments with more precision. With CEOs expecting HR to play a more strategic role in managing talent retention moving forward, the moment has never been better for HR to implement an employee recognition solution.

4. The Growth Reimagined, 14th Annual CEO Survey, PriceWaterHouseCoopers, 2011