

Of Square Pegs and Round Holes

In today's environment, employee selection is more critical than ever. And in a climate of continuously doing more with less, rigorous talent management is key to your success. Learn how to create a confident, engaging organization, fit to survive our new economic reality!

By Chris Pauwels, MSc (Eng), MBA

Chris joined ADVISA in January of 2007 as a Consultant. Before joining ADVISA, he held various positions as General Manager with international manufacturing companies. He joined the Lakeshore Business Institute to support the Muskegon Community College.

ADVISA uses Predictive Index® as its main assessment tool.

We are living in economically tough times. Large corporations proudly announce how many people they will cut from their payroll to restore profitability. Smaller companies hang on to their people as long as they can, but economic reality forces them to do what was unthinkable a short time ago: even their most loyal employees have to go.

This creates stressful conditions for the ones left behind: they have to find a way to merge various responsibilities, take on a double load, and they have to stick it out because the alternative is worse.

And we top it off by demanding not only the extra effort, but also complete commitment to the job! We want our people to be "fully engaged". We need them to not just be "our legs", we also want them to be "our brains". And thus the beatings will continue until morale improves!

Plenty of research clearly established that truly engaged employees create superior business results.

So the beatings should continue?

ENGAGEMENT DEFINED

In 1987, Herzberg stated in a re-write of his most renowned article "How do you motivate employees":

"If I kick my dog, he will move. And when I want him to move again, what must I do? I must kick him again! Similarly I can charge a person's battery, and then recharge it, and recharge it again. But it is only when one has a generator of one's own that we can talk about motivation."

Or perhaps the way Ralph Stayer, CEO of Johnsonville Sausage describes how lack of employee engagement feels, does it better for you:

"My willingness to do whatever it takes to succeed is what fueled Johnsonville's growth. In 1980 I hit the wall. I realized that if I kept doing what I had always done, I was going to keep getting what I was getting. And I did not like what I was getting. It felt to me like the only person who was excited about Johnsonville was me. And I began to feel like a baby-sitter for my executives and staff." (Flight of the Buffalo; 1993)

Ralph was looking for extra commitment from his people: their willingness and ability to contribute to the company success; the discretionary effort they put into work, in the form of extra time, brainpower and energy. The effort brought to bear by employees who not only like what they do, but actually love it!

Your single biggest challenge in today's business climate is to manage your workforce in such a way that they bring this love for their job to

work, willingly, every day. That is what will create your competitive advantage in a global workplace. Customers will frequent your restaurant, will stay at your hotel, will use your bank, will choose your hospital or will prefer your dealership, if they sense that your people truly care. And in a world where entire factories, let alone machinery and office processes, can be uprooted and moved to low cost countries at the drop of a hat, what else can we work with to make a difference?

HOW TO CREATE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT?

Too many years in manufacturing, and a few years of traveling around from company to company as a consultant, have taught me that there is no silver bullet. But there are some common threads.

Of course you come across those unique individuals who manage to inspire people by their natural instincts and qualities: you read about them in Fortune Magazine, The Harvard Business Review of USA Today. Or they write their own books. But most successful companies don't have these famous people leading them. They engage their people through working on 3 main aspects of their business:

- Create common goals and direction.
- Know your people: pay attention to what makes them tick, listen to them and make them feel special and unique.
- Practice solid talent management.

CREATE COMMON GOALS AND DIRECTION

Most organizations have gone through the value-mission-vision stage. By now, these documents are covered in dust. Many are still displayed in reception areas and board rooms. But most managers don't really pay attention to them anymore. So it is not really surprising that many people site "lack of direction" as the single most irritating factor in the company they work for.

We forget that the goal of these documents was to bring people together around a common theme. The end result was never as important as the road to get there; the discussion was to be the catharsis. Time spent on your value-mission-vision statement can be invaluable!

Too often even the actual strategy is a mystery! Small companies are often lead by the original entrepreneur, and she is surprised to hear her immediate co-workers don't comprehend the strategy she has spent many a waking night to develop. And the same disconnect easily develops in a larger organization, where the plan devised by the top is just not disclosed to the troops, or as a minimum, not understood. A few tips to avoid this disconnect:

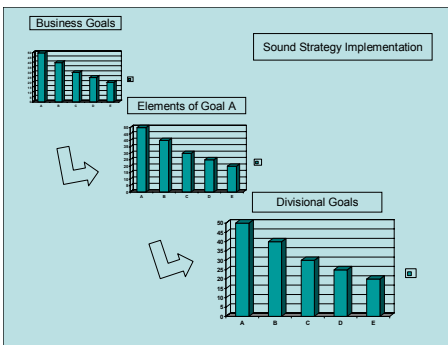
- Verbalize your strategy in a clear and concise way: the shorter and simpler, the better. Use a pictorial if possible.
- A strategy is not a dream. Make it a call to action, an achievable and believable goal that everyone, from top to bottom, can believe in.
- Engage in true dialogue. Take it from Alan Greenspan:

"I have never found the arbitrary use of authority to control an organization either effective, or, for that matter, personally interesting. If you cannot persuade your colleagues of the correctness of your position, it is probably worthwhile to rethink your own."

- Every team member on your payroll needs to have clear goals, directly linked to the overall strategy.

Demonstrate your commitment to these goals by a clear prioritization: how critical is the strategy if my contribution is just part of my day-to-day tasks, and many other goals also need to be achieved?

- If you don't have the discipline to follow a strategy, then don't waste time putting one together! Now I live by the dictum "What is the point of having a mind if you cannot change it!" You'd better change the strategy if you discover a better one! But be consistent, and follow your plan until you come up with a better one.



- Follow up. Make sure the individual's goals are met. Find out why deviations occur. Use your Plan-Do-Check-Adjust cycle. Get people to assist one another where needed so the overall goal does not get compromised. Jump in where your expertise can help, or throw more resources at the issue. Demonstrate your commitment to achieving the goal by your actions!

- Visualize your strategy, the cascading goals and the progress made. Peer pressure never hurts!

Following this process with rigor will make sure people understand how they feature in the overall goal of the company, and why their noses should point in the same direction. Exceptions cannot be tolerated as it will dilute your chance of getting to your overall goal.

KNOW YOUR PEOPLE: CONNECT ON A PERSONAL LEVEL!

Napoleon advised his stepson, the viceroy of Italy:

"Work with your ministers twice a week: once with each of them

separately, and once with them all together in Council!"

The corporate culture is set by the top, no doubt. And as corporate culture filters down, it gets diluted by the messages your staff add to it. The further the culture has to travel, the more dilution occurs. The immediate manager ultimately becomes the main reason why people disconnect. He is even cited as the main reason why people (voluntarily) leave the organization.

So what is it that makes people disengage, even if you have put in all the effort to create common goals?

We all tend to make the classic mistake when we deal with other people. Out of our goodness we apply the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you!"

As if we were all the same people, and the differences between us did not matter...

If life were that simple, we would have achieved the goals set by the famous engineers of the earlier part of the 20th century. Taylor and Gilbreth would still run the management roost, we would have nailed the human psyche once and for all, and we would all march to the same drummer. Some cultures try to achieve just that. A famous Chinese proverb says *"the nail that sticks out gets pounded."* But in the Western world we celebrate the uniqueness of each individual, and we see our strength in diversity.

It's kind of important to learn some more about the way different people make decisions, how they prefer to communicate, how they process tasks and how they value information, isn't it?

And what is the implication of this for you as a leader of people?

Various tools to gather that type of information exist in the market, many merely describing basic behaviors. Many are developed for special circumstances: medical, personal relationships, marriage counseling etc. But the use of a well researched tool, validated for the workplace, compliant with EEOC and ADA rules so you can use it in hiring, can become a wealth of information for you on how to deal with your people as individuals.

As you develop a sense for different personalities, and as you start understanding what makes you special and unique, you will learn to treat your employees in a way that truly makes them feel appreciated. They will see that you, as a leader, understand that you are not Superman or Woman, but just a mere individual who is willing to bridge the gap across all these individualities.

I have seen competent leaders who have stood in front of a platoon, and all they saw was a platoon.

Great leaders stand in front of a platoon and see 44 individuals, each of whom has aspirations, each of whom wants to live, each of whom wants to do good!

Norman Schartzkopf

Does this sound like a boss you would respect and be willing to go the extra mile for? Does this remind you of the famous “7 Habits”? Or of books like “Good to Great” or “First, break all the rules”? So how about putting these great theories to work for you?

AND SEE THE REAL YOU...

Have you ever tried a 360 review tool? I see this as the ultimate gift: true confidential feedback by your boss, peers and subordinates on how they see you. Not the way you are and believe is right, not the way you want them to see you, not your intentions, but the actual way they see you. Not for use by your boss, but uniquely for use by you.

This is a unique experience for every manager in your organization. They will achieve instant personal growth, and combined with a true action plan, turn into better leaders as a result. And true leaders make people want to follow them.

HAVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON BOARD.

So you have taken note and adjusted your ways based on the above. You established clear common goals, and treat individuals for maximum effect.

So what else? How about results?

Let's talk performance appraisal. Obviously you evaluate performance based on results achieved, as well as on the way these results were achieved. You established a Balanced Scorecard per individual with a direct view to the overall strategy. And you have thought long and hard about how to match bonus and salary adjustment to performance. Sounds obvious, but you would be surprised to see how many people do a poor job at this. Some issues:

- Don't reward obedience. Yes-men are the biggest threat to your business!
- Don't reward your personal likes and dislikes about people. Rewarding your personal likes only displays your inability to bridge the personality gap!
- Don't let an official appraisal be a surprise. Don't use the occasion to dig up old cows, accuse or point to failures. Instead talk about the future. Make it a motivating experience.
- Don't put your head in the sand. Not all your people are stars. Force yourself to do a ranking. Know which are your most valuable players, and have the guts to point them out. And do justice to them by dealing with the poor players.
- Follow a comprehensive process, where you take time away and involve some outside help, to review your team. Note who has potential to do better, and put a development plan together for them. Look after your stars and make sure you keep them engaged! Create opportunities for them to shine. Use their talents!

It surprises me how we find it natural that people join a sports team based on ability and performance. Not everyone can join the Red Wings. We boo the poor performers and turn the stars into millionaires. But we don't have the same determination when it comes to the team that runs our business...

OF SQUARE PEGS AND ROUND HOLES.

You have spent time and effort on defining what tasks need to be

achieved, and you made sure all are on board with the goals and understand and agree to their role to achieve the goal. (we established the “holes”) And we learned more about the different “pegs” , how to deal with them and how to sort them.

But: did we do all this in the right order?

Not according to Jim Collins, author of “Good to Great”:

“A genius with a 1000 helpers will first decide what to do, then get highly capable helpers. A “Level 5 Manager” builds a superior team, then together with the team, a good plan”

Perhaps we should have started this article where it matters the most: with your selection of the right people. Reality is that you have a team with experience, knowledge and a skill set that is vital to your business, and cleaning the slate and starting all over is a dream only the most radical managers would even consider. But when given the opportunity to hire, or promote, a new team member, do it as well as possible!

In today's economy, with rising unemployment, people chase whatever opportunity for a salary they can get. So the need for a solid selection process is critical. Make sure you specify the hard and measurable skills you require clearly, but be even more specific about the soft qualities you are looking for. Look clearly at the job itself, and the characteristics that will make a candidate successful. Use a solid tool to establish the personality profile of the job. Look at the personalities of boss and peers, consider the corporate culture and then specify the type of person you want in that position. A risk taker or a risk avoider? A people person? Driven for independence and results, or the ultimate team player? Your evaluation, and your matching selection of your employee, can save you a lot of money down the road.

And no one can afford to lose months or even years of growth trying to make a new hire work!.

Chris Pauwels