Soft Leadership and Engaged Leadership

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M. S. Rao

Introduction

> *"There are only three measurements that tell you nearly everything you need to know about your organization's overall performance: employee engagement, customer satisfaction, and cash flow. It goes without saying that no company, small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it."* — Jack Welch, former CEO of GE

Employee engagement has become a major challenge globally. Research shows strange findings. Gallup Management Journal's semiannual Employee Engagement Index shows that only 29% of employees are actively engaged in their jobs, while 54% are not engaged, and 17% are actively disengaged. Right Management found similar results with only 34% of employees fully engaged, while 50% are completely disengaged. A recent Global Workforce Survey (West, N/D) of 85,000 full-time employees of large- and mid-sized firms revealed abysmal statistics. Only 14% of the employees surveyed worldwide were highly engaged in their jobs. Sixty-two percent were moderately engaged at best. A disturbing 24% revealed that they were actively disengaged. Everyone accepts that human resources are the key to economic growth and prosperity. The leaders at all levels find it challenging to engage their employees effectively in the workplace. Employees are either overly engaged or poorly engaged within the organizations. Engaging employees effectively as per the organizational goals and objectives improves the bottom lines.

M. S. Rao (✉)
MSR Leadership Consultants, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

What Is Employee Engagement?

"Engaged employees stay for what they give (they like their work); disengaged employees stay for what they get (favorable job conditions, growth opportunities, job security)." — Blessingwhite's The State of Employee Engagement 2008

Employee engagement is about connecting the hands, heads, and hearts of the employees with the vision and mission of their organizations. Andrew Carnegie once remarked, "Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results." Development Dimensions International (DDI) defines engagement as "the extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for doing it." The other definitions of employee engagement are as follows:

"The extent to which employees commit to something or someone in the organization, and how long they stay as a result of that commitment."

"Loyal employees (versus satisfied employees) stay because they want to. They go above and beyond the call of duty to further their company's interests."

"Engagement is the state in which individuals are emotionally and intellectually committed to the organization as measured by three primary behaviors: Say, Stay and Strive."

"The extent to which employees put discretionary effort into their work in the form of brainpower, extra time, and energy."

Tim Rutledge, author of *Getting Engaged: The New Workplace Loyalty*, describes an engaged employee as one who is committed to, fascinated by, and attracted to the work. When employees are engaged they care about the company's future and are willing to go beyond the call of duty in order to help their organization exceed. Both practitioners and academics agree that engaged employees are cognitively vigilant and connected to the organization. David Zinger, says in *Let's Co-Create an Employee Engagement Charter, The Employee Engagement Network*, "Employee engagement is the art and science of engaging people in authentic and recognized connections to strategy, roles, performance, organization, community, relationship, customers, development, energy, and happiness to leverage, sustain, and transform work into results." It is very challenging to engage employees as they have different expectations and aspirations. Additionally, cultural and generational factors matter a lot to engage them effectively. In fact, engaged employees are effective and are passionate about adding value to all stakeholders especially customers.

Employee engagement is intangible. It can be felt when employees enjoy returning to organizations to contribute their best to improve organizational bottom lines. It can be felt when companies are chosen as the best places to work and are branded successfully.

Causes of Employee Disengagement

Frances Hesselbein quoted, "Dispirited, unmotivated, unappreciated workers cannot compete in a highly competitive world." There are many reasons for employee disengagement. Here are some of the reasons—the toxic organizational environment, lack of value system within the organization, lack of inspired leadership, bad bosses, organizational politics, and huge gap between the expectations and realities. To ensure employee engagement, leaders must create value system, bridge the gap between the expectations and realities, and eliminate organizational politics.

Advantages of Employee Engagement

"Employees who believe that management is concerned about them as a whole person – not just an employee – are more productive, more satisfied, more fulfilled. Satisfied employees mean satisfied customers, which leads to profitability." — Anne M. Mulcahy

There are innumerable advantages with employee engagement. It increases employee retention and loyalty. It improves performance and productivity to give competitive edge over others. It minimizes employee turnover and maximizes their morale. It provides customer satisfaction and improves the organizational bottom lines. It ultimately improves shareholders value. Hence, senior leaders and CEOs must follow the slogan of "employee first, customer second, and shareholder third."

Jim Harter, a chief scientist at Gallup, outlines the advantages of employee engagement as follows: engaged employees are more attentive and vigilant; they look out for the needs of their coworkers and the overall enterprise; they personally "own" the result of their work and that of the organization; they re-create jobs so that each person has a chance to do what they do best; and they help people see the connection between their everyday work and the larger purpose or mission of the organization (Baer 2013).

According to the Towers Watson 2012 Global Workforce Study, companies with an engaged workforce experience 6.5 fewer days absent, 41% lower retention risk, and 3X higher operating margins (Lanier 2017).

According to Kruse (2012), a study of 64 organizations revealed that organizations with highly engaged employees achieve twice the annual net income of organizations whose employees lag behind on engagement.

Engaged Leadership

"Appreciate everything your associates do for the business. Nothing else can quite substitute for a few well-chosen, well-timed, sincere words of praise. They're absolutely free and worth a fortune." — Sam Walton

Currently employees are not engaged effectively. As the war for talent is rising globally, the emphasis on employee engagement is gaining momentum. Everyone admits that employees are assets, and human resources are more precious than machines. When the leaders want to get the tasks executed by their employees, they find it challenging. Hence, it calls for engaged leadership.

Engaged leadership is about empowering and engaging the employees to increase organizational performance and productivity. It can be defined as the seven step process of selecting the right talent, building trust and loyalty, managing work, driving performance, influencing through personal and referent power, partnering within and across teams, and training and grooming employees as leaders. It is to ensure alignment of all stakeholders to accomplish organizational goals and objectives.

Tools and Techniques to Engage Employees Effectively

"Connect the dots between individual roles and the goals of the organization. When people see that connection, they get a lot of energy out of work. They feel the importance, dignity, and meaning in their job." — Ken Blanchard

There are some global companies that have actively engaged their employees including Cummins, DHL Express, Southwest Airlines, Zappos.com, Google, and Virgin because they emphasized the theme of "employees first, customers second." Here are some tools and techniques to engage your employees effectively:

- Build trust. According to Joe Mechlinski, the CEO of EntreQuest and the author of *Grow Regardless*, "When employees lack engagement, deadlines start getting missed. Meetings start or end late. People start throwing out 'The T Word,' trust." You might hear an employee say they don't trust that their colleague will deliver as promised. They might not trust that the company will live up to the customer's expectation. Once trust goes away, not much else matters. Without trust, employees focus on assigning blame, instead of delivering results. Hence, lead by example and be transparent to build trust (Altman 2015).
- Ensure that employees feel positive at work and that they can clearly see how their work can contribute directly to the organization's goals and vision.
- Listen from all sources to get ideas and insights to engage your employees effectively. Sam Walton, founder of Walmart, rightly remarked, "The key to success is to get out into the store and listen to what the associates have to say. Our best ideas come from clerks and stock-boys. It's terribly important for everyone to get involved."
- Find out the aspirations and expectations of your employees and assign them tasks accordingly. Identifying whether they are attracted by financial or nonfinancial motivational incentives helps ensure effective employee engagement.
- Allocate roles and responsibilities based on their strengths. Give them challenging tasks to enable them to come out of their comfort zones to execute their tasks effectively.

- Emphasize stretch goals. When employees stretch, they unlock their hidden potential. For instance, Jack Welch emphasized stretch goals and succeeded in GE.
- Encourage job rotation. Job rotation helps employees learn something of everything about other areas to make them more competent and grow as leaders. Job rotation is divided into vertical and horizontal where vertical job rotation helps grow higher level within the organization while the horizontal job rotation helps understand the functions of other areas at the same level.
- Improve employees' attitude as it helps improve their behavior and performance to deliver goods effectively. It ultimately boils down to serving customers and clients proactively resulting in increased shareholder value.
- Create healthy organizational culture and climate for employees to contribute their best. Ensure that the organizational culture is free from organizational politics.
- Ensure that every employee feels heard, valued, and appreciated for their achievements.
- Empower your employees. Give them freedom to make decisions. Respect their failures. Let them learn lessons from their failures to grow as successful leaders.
- Ensure that employees have enough time to interact with one another to enable them to draw ideas and learn from each other.
- Encourage creativity. When employees come to you with their innovative ideas, listen to them attentively and provide your wholehearted support irrespective of the outcome.
- Don't micromanage. It helps them discover their hidden potential. You will be amazed to see them coming out with creative solutions. Offer them assignments and adequate time to breathe to execute their tasks. Give them freedom to work as they will surprise you with their performance.
- Deal people differently. Apply different strokes to different people as people are different with unique egos, emotions, and feelings. Dale Carnegie rightly quoted, "When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion."
- Take initiative to inspire your employees as they prefer to work with good leaders than under bad bosses.
- Provide wellness programs to your employees to ensure emotional well-being resulting in employee engagement.
- Encourage your employees if they enjoy performing community service by giving them time off from work. It helps them grow holistically as persons and builds the image of your organization.
- Provide them with feedback to enable them to assess their strengths and concerns. It helps them overcome their concerns to grow as better performers and leaders.
- Value your employees as people, not as workers. Meghan Biro rightly remarked, "Employees engage with employers and brands when they're treated as humans worthy of respect." Additionally, respect them as valuable people with skills rather than people with valuable skills.

According to the MacLeod Review (MacLeod and Clarke 2009), a recent report prepared for the UK Government "Engaging for Success: enhancing performance through employee engagement," there are four key enablers of employee engagement: a compelling strategic vision, engaging line managers, employee voice, and integrity. TNS Employee Insights (2014) offers eight tips to engage your employees as follows: get to know your employees, provide basic training for your employees, develop your people, recognize your employees, encourage teamwork, build a customer focused team, coach your employees, and act on employee feedback.

Wellins et al. (2015) conducted ten studies across six client organizations and seven job families correlating a number of our proprietary test items with employee engagement survey scores. It found that engagement was significantly correlated to the following six factors: attachment to the job, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness to experience, achievement orientation, and self-efficacy.

Both disengaged and over-engaged employees are liabilities as disengaged employees lose focus on organizational objectives and over-engaged employees get stressed out. Hence, there is a need to strike a right balance between them to keep employees excited to contribute their best.

There are innumerable advantages for employees also to engage effectively. Paul Marciano, Ph.D., in his book *Carrots and Sticks Don't Work* writes that an engaged employee brings new ideas to work; is passionate and enthusiastic about work; takes initiative; actively seeks to improve self, others, and the business; consistently exceeds goals and expectations; is curious and interested; asks questions; encourages and supports team members; is optimistic and positive; smiles; overcomes obstacles and stays focused on tasks; is persistent; and is committed to the organization (Lanier 2017).

Some employees join companies purely for monetary reasons and ultimately end up with disengagement and disenchantment. Hence, before joining any organization, the employees must understand themselves and find out the organizational culture whether it suits them to enable them to enjoy their work and deliver their goods effectively. Additionally, it is the role of leaders to connect employees emotionally with the organizational roles and responsibilities. Remember, increased employee engagement leads to increased organizational bottom lines. Hence, it is essential to emphasize on engaging employees actively into their tasks.

Employee Engagement and Leadership Development Training Programs

"To build a culture of engagement it is important to incorporate training on intrinsic motivation and employee engagement into management development programs." —Kenneth Thomas

Imparting leadership development training programs helps engage employees effectively. There are several advantages associated with leadership development training programs. They update the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees. They enhance employees' performance and productivity to achieve organizational

excellence and effectiveness. They improve the image and brand of the organizations. They keep the leadership pipeline ready to enable the second rung of leaders to take over senior leadership positions in case of any organizational eventuality.

Role of CEOs in Leadership Development Programs

"The best CEOs I know are teachers, and at the core of what they teach is strategy."
— Michael Porter

There are some CEOs who are passionate about building next generation of leaders. They walked their talk and shared their knowledge through teaching and training programs to their employees. The list of such CEOs includes Jack Welch of General Electric and Roger A. Enrico and Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo. Roger Enrico became a leadership educator after leaving as CEO. It is obvious that leaders build leaders, not followers.

When CEOs are actively involved in training and grooming their employees as leaders, the employees become more engaged and loyal to their organizations. It also conveys a strong message to the senior management that the organization is committed to developing its employees as leaders. The brand image of the company goes north direction. Hence, CEOs must involve in leadership development training programs actively as it indicates company's commitment to learning and development. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric (GE), walked his talk. He had a vision and was passionate about sharing his knowledge and building leaders. Hence, CEOs must demonstrate their vision, passion, and commitment to leadership development training programs.

What Is Soft Leadership?

"Imagine life is a game in which you are juggling five balls. The balls are called work, family, health, friends, and integrity. And you're keeping all of them in the air. But one day, you finally come to understand that work is a rubber ball. If you drop it, it will bounce back. The other four balls — family, health, friends, integrity — are made of glass. If you drop one of these, it will be irrevocably scuffed, nicked, perhaps even shattered. And once you truly understand the lesson of the five balls, you will have beginnings of balance in your life." — James Patterson, Suzanne's Diary for Nicholas

Soft leadership is leading through soft skills and people skills. It blends soft skills, hard skills, and leadership. It emphasizes on the significance of precious human resources. It helps in managing the emotions, egos, and feelings of the people successfully. It focuses on the personality, attitude, and behavior of the people and calls for making others feel more important. It is an integrative, participative, relationship, and behavioral leadership model adopting tools such as persuasion, negotiation, recognition, appreciation, motivation, and collaboration to accomplish the tasks effectively.

Soft leadership is not a submissive leadership or a lame duck leadership but an assertive leadership where soft leaders adopt pleasing and polite communication to execute the tasks. It is a blend of courageous leadership, thought leadership, servant leadership, and inspirational leadership. Succinctly, soft leadership can be defined as the process of setting goals, influencing people through persuasion, building strong teams, negotiating them with a win-win attitude, respecting their failures, handholding them, motivating them constantly, aligning their energies and efforts, and recognizing and appreciating their contribution in accomplishing organizational goals and objectives with an emphasis on soft skills. It is based on the right mindset, skill set, and toolset.

Rao's 11 Cs and Soft Leadership

Leadership basically depends on three aspects—how you communicate with others, how you make decisions, and how you take action. When you can execute these three activities effectively, you become a successful leader. However, to evolve as a soft leader, you must communicate with an emphasis on soft skills; make decisions by blending your head, heart, and gut; and take action keeping the ground realities and goals in your view without compromising task-orientation. There are 11 Cs that constitute soft leadership. They are character, charisma, conscience, conviction, courage, communication, compassion, commitment, consistency, consideration, and contribution. It is highly challenging for people to cultivate these 11 characteristics. However, if people possess more than six traits, they get into the fold of soft leadership. Here is the diagram (Fig. 16.1) connecting 11 Cs that collectively constitute soft leadership.

Soft Leadership Is an Ideal Leadership in the Digital Era

Soft leadership is the best fit for the digital age. It helps lead knowledge workers effectively. Previously there were more manual workers who needed various leadership styles. However, in the present rapid changing digital scenario, the knowledge workers need a different leadership style—soft leadership style. The knowledge workers are ambitious, intelligent, and tech savvy. They have totally different expectations and aspirations than their predecessors. They have an advanced mindset, toolset, and skill set gained through unique professional experiences. And soft leadership is the ideal fit for their needs.

Currently the employees are more diverse than ever, and this offers both opportunities and threats. Opportunities include creativity and innovation to improve products and services; and threats include looking at differences, not similarities. Hence, we must convert this threat into an opportunity by celebrating diversity in the workplace. It also calls for unique leadership style that brings employees into one common platform to achieve the organizational goals and objectives.
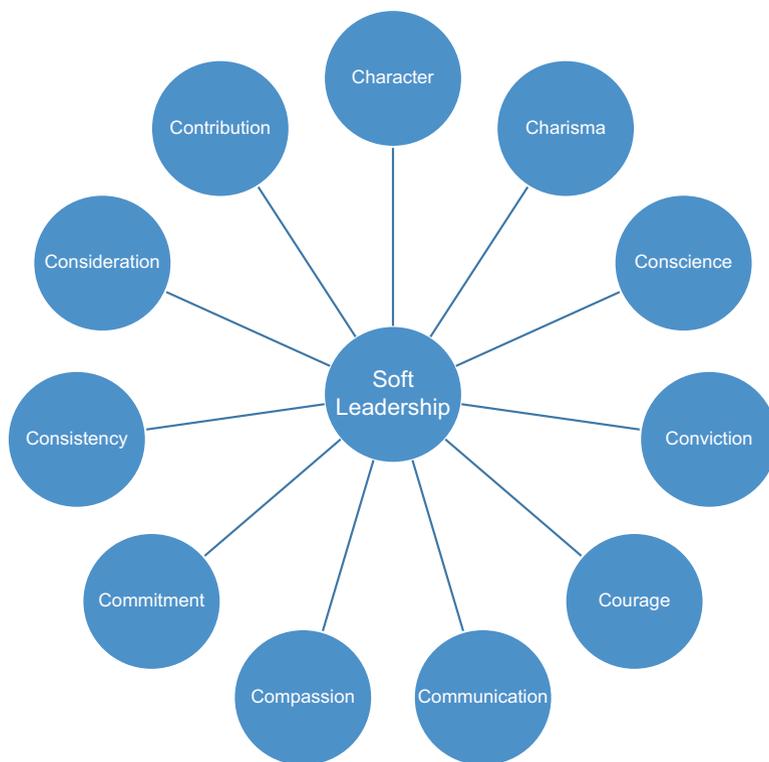
Fig. 16.1   The 11 Cs of soft leadership

Soft Leadership Is the Future Leadership

Stephen R. Covey once remarked, "Always treat your employees exactly as you want them to treat your best customers." Globally the philosophy of "employees first, customers second, and shareholders third" is gaining momentum. Keeping this philosophy in view, the global organizations need leaders who can navigate their organizations through a network of relationships. Presently the days of positional power work less and referent power works more. Above all, the global organizations must be networked, flat, flexible, and diverse. Hence, soft leadership can work for any company and country regardless of its size or budget.

The days of command-and-control leadership don't work anymore. What works presently is trust-and-track leadership. As the world is changing rapidly, the knowledge, skills, and abilities essential for employees are changing rapidly. The employees are reinventing themselves to keep pace with the rapid changes in technologies. Additionally, they are more focused on their careers and are ready to sacrifice their families to fast-track their careers. Their expectations and aspirations are rising. Hence, leaders at the top must reinvent with their leadership styles, tools, and techniques to lead their employees in this digital age.

Soft Leadership Is Engaged Leadership

"I consider my ability to arouse enthusiasm among men the greatest asset I possess. The way to develop the best that is in a man is by appreciation and encouragement." — Charles Schwab

Soft leadership helps engage employees effectively. Most employees crave for partnership rather than leadership. They crave to work with partners rather than under bosses and leaders. They crave for importance and recognition. They appreciate to be part of the decision-making and love to be empowered. They are career oriented and thrive working under challenging conditions. Hence, soft leadership helps engage employees effectively and deliver goods effectively. Hence, soft leadership is an engaged leadership.

Active Involvement of CEOs in Employee Engagement

"Early in my career, one of the first business lessons I learned was this: It's impossible to win the hearts and minds of people unless you clearly establish goals and values and reward people if they act in a way that leads to the fulfillment of those objectives. It quickly became clear to me that if you want to make sure your customers are treated well, you have to make sure you treat your employees well and recognize their efforts." — F. Robert Salerno, CEO of Avis

Aon Hewitt's (2011) research and experience indicates that talent is more successfully managed in organizations where senior leaders take active ownership of the leadership/people agenda; HR priorities are clearly embedded in the business strategy; employee communication is constantly open, honest, and transparent; leadership strategy is measured by outcomes; key talent is built by experience, exposure, and feedback; and talent is more built than bought (75% internal; 25% external). It outlines facts and perceptions about senior leaders as follows:

- Senior leaders are typically more engaged than other employee groups.
- The gap between engagement levels at the top of an organization and those lower in the organization is smaller in high performing organizations.
- Employees' perceptions of senior leaders tend to be less positive than their perceptions of middle or immediate line managers.
- Engaged senior leaders improve engagement at lower organizational levels, particularly the critical middle managers who in turn build engaged teams.

The Gallup findings indicate that when executive teams are highly engaged, the organization's managers are 39% more likely to be engaged. Hence, senior leaders especially CEOs have an important role to play in engaging their employees effectively. They are the strategic thinkers, visionaries, and decision-makers who understand the organizational ground realities very well. When they are involved, it demonstrates the organization's commitment to employee engagement. Hence, they must walk their talk and must involve actively in employee engagement (Harter 2015).

Although it is the responsibility of every executive to ensure employee engagement, it is the senior leaders and CEO who must take more responsibility to drive the process of employee engagement. They must ensure opportunities for their employees and impart leadership development training programs to them. It helps their employees build their knowledge, skills, and abilities and enable them to deliver their goods effectively. It minimizes stress and ensures job satisfaction and employee engagement.

Simon Sinek quoted, "When people are financially invested, they want a return. When people are emotionally invested, they want to contribute." Hence, leaders must adopt both financial and nonfinancial incentive to motivate their employees. Mostly it is the nonfinancial incentives rather than the financial incentives that work for employees.

Sylvia Vorhauser-Smith writes in her Forbes article titled, *How the Best Places to Work are Nailing Employee Engagement*, as follows: Google has created an environment for employees to thrive that goes beyond stocking its kitchens with free gourmet food and on-site laundry service. Its corporate culture is one of the reasons it is consistently ranked a great place to work. Google GOOG +1.15% values the opinions of employees and hires new associates by committee. It communicates an environment of playfulness from whimsical doodles to April Fool's Day jokes. She further mentions that DHL Express takes employee engagement seriously in the office, on the roads, and in the air. It has an incredible culture of thanking employees, whether that's through monetary rewards, honoring top performers at its annual Hollywood-style black-tie event, or pinning notes of appreciation on the company corkboard.

CEOs must be mindful of the employees in their organizations as they need to feel a sense of well-being to run the race well. They must ensure career advancement of employees. For instance, mentoring is a big priority at MD Anderson Cancer Center. Its formal mentoring program helps employees develop professional goals and connect with colleagues (Vorhauser-Smith 2013). This commitment to growth at all levels—not just senior leaders—shows employees there's a future for them. They must engage in social interactions outside work—Cummins has a commitment to the communities where it lives and operates. More than 27,000 Cummins CMI -0.23% employees worked on community service projects in 2012, a 63% increase over the 16,500 employees who participated in the company's Every Employee Every Community (EEEC) initiative in 2011. Participation in these events is a great way to strengthen relationships and adds an enjoyable social dimension to work. When colleagues feel connected, productivity improves (Vorhauser-Smith 2013).

CEOs Must Evolve as Chief Engagement Officers

CEOs must align their employees with strategy. They must groom line managers who have the biggest impact on the engagement of their team members. They must know how to communicate the organization's stories—Southwest Airlines has a reputation for outstanding employment branding. Being fast, fun, and

friendly is part of their DNA. Even those who don't work for the organization have the perception that it's an innovative, fun, and cool place to work (Vorhauser-Smith 2013).

CEOs must build leaders, not bosses, because employees prefer to work with leaders, not under bosses. They must adopt best practices from others to engage their employees. They must give their employees a flexible and supportive environment. For instance, Google has a bowling alley and yoga rooms. Free food, yoga classes, happy hours, commute buses with Internet access, and even free laundry service have now become commonplace in high-pressure companies across a wide range of industries. These are no longer just "perks"; they are essential elements of making work fit into our lives (Bersin 2015).

Leadership is all about learning continuously and adapting the techniques that suit your environment and organization.

Employees follow their leaders with remarkable clarity, trust, compassion, stability, and hope. Hence, CEOs must demonstrate them to engage their employees effectively. In a nutshell, they must become role models to their employees.

CEOs must communicate well with their employees. They must walk their talk. They must lead by example to win trust and confidence from their employees. They must evolve as transformational, charismatic, authentic, participative, and soft leaders to engage their employees effectively. Precisely, they must become chief engagement officers.

There is a myth that employees succeed due to their educational background, experience, and expertise. However, the fact is that they succeed because of their behaviors and traits. Hence, CEOs must develop soft skills in employees to improve behavioral skills, engage in the work, and succeed professionally.

Emphasizing organizational culture helps enhance employee engagement. Hence, instead of giving high salaries, the CEOs must provide healthy organizational culture and climate to ensure career advancement for their employees. To summarize, CEOs must recruit the right talent; create a healthy organizational culture; build their knowledge, skills, and abilities constantly; motivate them to deliver goods effectively; and recognize and reward them to engage their employees effectively to achieve organizational excellence and effectiveness.

CEOs must engage their employees' heads and hearts to accomplish their organizational goals and objectives. Instead of emulating other companies, CEOs must draw their own blueprint to engage their employees with a long-term strategy. It must be based on organizational culture, vision, value system, and the availability of resources. They must note that what worked for other organizations might not work for their own organizations.

Summary

"Employee engagement is an investment we make for the privilege of future proofing our organization's productivity and performance." — Ian Hutchinson

As parents engage their children effectively in personality development, organizations must engage their employees in professional development and career advancement.

Employee engagement is here to stay. The present and future organizations cannot survive without employee engagement.

Employee engagement either makes or breaks organization. Some companies are chosen the best places to work because their employees are engaged effectively and are emotionally integrated with their organizations. Research indicates that workers have three prime needs: interesting work, recognition for doing a good job, and being let in on things that are going on in the company. Therefore, all stakeholders including CEOs must strive to engage their employees effectively to improve organizational bottom lines. To summarize, employee engagement is a two-way street. It is a win-win for both the employees and employers. Hence, both employers and employees must take ownership of their roles and responsibilities to achieve organizational excellence and effectiveness.

"I am convinced that nothing we do is more important than hiring and developing people. At the end of the day you bet on people, not on strategies." — Larry Bossidy CEO, Allied Signal

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