Meaningful work: The key to employee engagement
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Work-Life Column

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Lexington, KY - Employee engagement has been getting a lot of attention in the business community for the past few years as researchers consistently find that organizations with engaged employees — employees who put forth more effort than required — are far more productive and profitable, have better quality products and services, enjoy greater customer loyalty and have fewer problems with absenteeism and turnover than organizations with disengaged employees.

It’s no wonder that nearly every organization wants engaged employees. So what must an organization do to get engaged employees? An abundance of research, including research conducted by University of Kentucky’s Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin), finds that meaningful work is the key. The employee engagement surveys that iwin conducts for some of Kentucky’s top companies consistently find that meaningful work is the biggest predictor of employee engagement, not pay, not benefits, not coworkers or bosses. It’s meaningful work, every time.

People have strong motivation to seek meaning in their work. Employees want to feel worthwhile, useful, valuable and as though they make a difference.

According to researchers at Boston University and George Washington University, meaningfulness is influenced by several factors:

- The work role — Is it challenging and does it allow for creativity, variety, learning, and autonomy?
- Sense of self — Do employees feel they can bring their whole selves to work and fully integrate themselves into their work?
- Work interactions — are relationships with coworkers and clients rewarding and based on respect and appreciation?

According to Bill Kahn of Boston University’s School of Management, there must be a balance between the employee’s work requirements and their own personal purpose, values and interests. The more employees draw upon their true selves to perform their roles, the better their performances and the more content they are with their roles. Disengagement occurs when the employee does not have a personal connection to their work role, which leads to poor performance.

Although meaningful work may be perceived as an individual employee issue, there are many things that managers can do to promote it:

- Use realistic job previews in the interviewing process to ensure job candidates know exactly what tasks the job entails and can assess whether they will get satisfaction from them.
• Learn about employees’ goals and determine which roles would enable them to express themselves best.

• Give employees autonomy and allow them to make decisions pertaining to their work and solve their own work-related problems. This enables employees to use their creativity and allows them to be innovative.

• Give employees opportunities to learn new skills. Expanding one’s skill set and gaining a sense of mastery is exciting and satisfying.

• Give employees thorough information about the organization, how it works and how it is performing. Let employees “see the books” and explain how their roles are vitally important to the organization as a whole.

• Develop supportive, trusting relationships with employees and demonstrate your concern for them.

• Give performance feedback. Let employees know how they are performing, praise them for good work and help them improve areas of low performance.

These ingredients will make work more meaningful for employees and enable them to truly thrive.

Associate Professor Christine Porath of Georgetown University studies thriving and will be speaking at iwin’s Innovative Employer Roundtable in May. She argues that giving employees a chance to learn and grow is essential to thriving. Businesses can promote thriving by giving employees decision-making discretion, sharing organizational information with them, giving performance feedback and by eliminating incivility from the workplace. In addition, Porath explains that employees can use certain strategies to promote their own thriving.

First of all, take a break. Breaks, even short ones for a walk or lunch in the park, can renew the spirit and create positive energy. Second, look for opportunities to be creative and to make your work more meaningful. Keep an eye out for projects and tasks that you would enjoy and talk to your supervisor about incorporating them into your role. Similarly, realize that you are influenced by those around you, so spend your time with co-workers who energize you, not those who deplete your energy.

Eric Ward also encourages thriving. He took over as president and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Bluegrass in February 2012, when the organization was in shambles and near closure.

“Morale was extremely poor, and employees were frustrated with the previous top-down leadership style that discouraged new ideas and creativity, which therefore led to mediocre performance,” he said.

Ward shook things up by telling employees that he valued their enthusiasm and new ideas and was implementing a bottom-up leadership style, by which all employees would be leaders. Ward gave employees “permission to be great” and to make Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Bluegrass great.

Ward said that employees embraced the concept, and within nine months they were a completely different staff.

“Morale was at an all-time high, and the staff was functioning as a true team, working collaboratively and moving the agency from crisis management to growth and innovation,” he said.
The Institute for Workplace Innovation is currently beginning a series of studies on meaningful work. If you or your organization would like to participate in a focus group or survey, please contact us at meredith.lepley@uky.edu.

*Meredith Wells-Lepley, Ph.D., is acting co-executive director at UK’s Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin). For more information on meaningful work and other workplace issues, visit [www.iwin.uky.edu](http://www.iwin.uky.edu).*

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