Reengaging the Workforce During Tough Times

Brad Federman

"I am not sure I want to help this organization get where it is going. I have always been excited about my work and this place, but something has changed. I am overwhelmed, stressed, and I feel like a fish out of water. Most importantly, I don't trust senior leadership. It seems like they have forgotten what made us successful in the first place—our customers."

Although those words were uttered by one of my clients, they ring true for many individuals in the workplace today. Employee engagement is down. In the recent "Are You Thriving?" survey (completed in January 2010 by Performancepoint, LLC), 64 percent of those surveyed said they were not "thriving," and in the January 2010 Conference Board "I Can't Get No . . . Job Satisfaction, That Is" survey, only 45 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with their jobs. Too many employees are filled with bottled-up frustrations regarding their treatment and the treatment of those colleagues and friends who have lost their jobs. Employees are weary from rightsizings, transformations, surprises, and all the trappings that come from a downturn. People scurry to look even busier than they are. Others procrastinate out of a sense of depression. Associates become jaded by the breakdown of their culture and the jockeying for power that has overtaken the office. They struggle with the dissonance between their company PR machines that run 24/7 spouting idealistic messages and the reality of their workday. They are told they should be happy they have a job, but they are not. Employees are unhappy.

THE ROLE OF SENIOR LEADERSHIP

As employees grapple with longer hours, fewer resources, and higher goals, they begin to look for meaning. Typically, they expect senior leadership to lay out a path soon, but instead stories surface about more layoffs. Finally, when a company meeting is held, employees feel that they are given only platitudes from the CEO, who wasn't really candid and transparent. Employees want more from senior leadership. Today, senior leadership, in many ways, is more important than a direct supervisor these days. In another survey called "The Engagement Index" (2006) by Performancepoint, LLC, the respondents rated a lack of trust in senior leadership as the top reason for lower engagement levels. A survey conducted in August 2009 by YouGov for the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development noted that 81 percent of employees believe that senior managers need to restore or improve trust in their leadership. That is a sobering outlook.

WHAT EMPLOYEES REALLY WANT

Employees want to understand the senior-leadership perspective regarding the company's direction and strategy for attaining

goals. If circumstances require leadership to review the company's current course and determine whether a change is needed, this should be communicated to employees, not concealed. When things are difficult and candid responses are not forthcoming from senior leadership, employees start to make assumptions. Without knowing the facts, they imagine the worst scenarios for the future. Employees also need a voice. They want to share ideas, be heard, and know that their opinions matter. Unfortunately, communication tends to become restricted during challenging times, rather than more open.

When leaders stop demonstrating consistent humility and candor, employees begin to lose hope that they are in the right place. There may be a number of reasons why an

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employee should not change jobs, in particular during a downturn, but those reasons will not stop an employee from moving on. According to Career Builder, nearly 20 percent of workers plan to leave their jobs in 2010, based on a survey completed in November 2009. However, a much more damaging measure is the number of employees who physically stay but have left mentally and emotionally. When an organization's employees lack passion and focused determination, an organization cannot sustain a competitive advantage.

Now is the time to think about reengaging employees by providing them with direction and reason to become passionate about their jobs. As the economy recovers and the employment market shows signs of loosening, employees will not only wander off in spirit, but they will begin to look for other work, unless their employers find reasons for them to remain productive members of the organization. Even under difficult employment circumstances, the best employees are still attractive in the job market. Employers that reengage their employees now will benefit significantly.

EMPLOYERS SHOULD WANT THE SAME

Organizations that tap into the passions of their people and engage their minds and creativity will have a leg up as the economy improves. In study after study, employee engagement is shown to have a strong business impact. For example, data from *Employee Engagement: A Roadmap for Creating Profits, Optimizing Performance, and Increasing Loyalty* (Jossey-Bass, 2009) show that turnover rates in highly engaged organizations are up to 71 percent lower than those for other organizations.

Also, data from the Engaging Success Report commissioned by the U.K. government (July 2009) demonstrates:

- Profitability is 12 percent higher in engaged firms.
- Engaged employees have 43 percent fewer sick days.
- Engaged employees have 62 percent fewer accidents.

Organizations that reengage their people, especially around customer service, will be able to gain market share, strengthen relationships with customers, and beat their competition.

THREE ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES THAT CREATE A SUCCESSFUL WORK ENVIRONMENT

Workplaces that have strong engagement levels are more fun. Of course, stress still exists and people may work long hours and struggle with certain challenges, but organizations that support an engaged environment are more collaborative and respond to the market more rapidly. The big question is why? What may be observed in most instances is that once a workforce is engaged, there is renewed energy in creating and maintaining connections, renewed curiosity not only about the job but about others in the workplace, and, finally, a higher level of resourcefulness.

Connections

Organizations that breed engagement breed commitment. Commitment means having a duty to something or someone. Words like *dedication*, *devotion*, or *responsibility* describe commitment. Commitment drives engagement and accountability. People make commitments to themselves, colleagues, managers, and even to ideas. Whether implicit, explicit, conscious, or unconscious, commitments affect our behavior.

Each commitment we make is based on connections—a mutually beneficial bond that forms an interdependent relationship between two or more things. When organizations focus on a dedicated effort to strengthen connections with their employees, they cement shared bonds with those employees, which, in turn, heightens employees' commitment to the company and generates enthusiasm for the company.

One of the most powerful ways an organization generates commitment is by tying the business strategy to a larger cause or higher purpose. One of the best examples I have ever witnessed regarding this is the purpose my client St. Jude Children's Research Hospital has articulated and the commitment that is manifested by its staff across all levels.

St. Jude is the first and only pediatric cancer center to be designated as a Comprehensive Cancer Center by the National Cancer Institute. It is internationally recognized for its ground-breaking work in finding cures and saving children with cancer and other catastrophic diseases. Founded by Danny Thomas, St. Jude freely shares its discoveries with scientific and medical communities around the world. St. Jude is the only pediatric cancer research center where families

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never pay for treatment not covered by insurance. No child is ever denied treatment because of the family's inability to pay.

St. Jude's mission is to put itself out of the business of treating cancer—it wants to cure cancer. Employees at St. Jude work harder and more creatively and resourcefully than most for-profit entities I have encountered. All employees, not just doctors and medical staff, are encouraged to interact with patients and families. The cafeteria is a perfect example. It was built for the entire St. Jude community to utilize. Each employee stays connected to the mission of St. Jude in a very personal way. When you ask employees why they work at St. Jude, they typically provide the

same or similar answer—"For the kids." They are not there to be an accountant or administrative assistant. They are working there because they are helping to find a cure.

Curiosity

A key to reengaging employees is consistently asking two important questions. The first question is "What is your current interest?" (The second question relates to resourcefulness and is described later.) How curious are you about the colleague you will meet with later today, the interviewee you will meet, your team, and your customers? Sincere interest and curiosity in others will create more trust. The reverse is also true. If individuals primarily display self-interest, others are less likely to trust them.

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Because human nature ensures that we are self-indulgent, the challenge is to rise above the natural inclination toward self-interest. Typically, a heavy emphasis on self-interest can lead individuals to focus on either past events and their consequences or how potential future events may affect them, causing them to miss out on the present. If they are preoccupied with the past or the future, they can't be truly connected and committed to others around them.

Organizations should encourage employees to reduce multitasking and manage distractions—to focus on the present. Employees often feel they must multitask to complete all their work,

but many studies show multitasking is very unproductive. Organizations should promote the idea of learning from mistakes that happen due to honest effort (versus punishing employees for a mistake). When organizations create a culture of curiosity, they assist employees in becoming resilient and managing their own personal change—to see the benefits to temporarily suspending one's agenda and being curious about someone else. Cultures of curiosity have less politics and stronger collaboration and problem solving even with external customers and partners.

Another Performancepoint client, a large hotel chain, offers an example of how employers can overcome self-interest and develop curiosity in the workplace. The client had a group of internal consultants, each with a strong background in hospitality, whose role was to improve the service and performance of each hotel property. Before consulting with managers of each property, the consultants pored through reams of data; the file for each property was literally a foot high! On the basis of the data, they diagnosed the problems of the property, but they did this before ever talking with anyone who actually worked at the property!

When the consultants visited the properties, they already had determined what the problems were and the solutions. They completed a report and checklist of all of the changes the property needed to make and sent it on to property management. When the consultants followed up a few months later, they found that, for the most part, their recommendations were ignored. We were called in to analyze why the internal examination and problem solving failed. We found that clearly the process that was used created self-interest—the initial diagnosis, the determined

fix for the problems, and even the agenda for the time spent with property management all emanated from the consultants without any input from property management.

Based on our recommendations, the hotel chain revamped the entire consulting process, including how these internal consultants receive feedback and are evaluated. Now the consultants' role is to be curious about and collaborative with the property management, instead of walking in with a preset agenda. The agenda is owned by the property management, not the consultants. This puts much less pressure on the consultants and lets them bring all their great experience to bear on the clients, and the property managers know they've been listened to. The property managers drive the agenda, and now the checklists get completed. The consultants and hotel chain have received some of the top accolades in their industry and have weathered the economic downturn much better than their competitors.

Resourcefulness

Everybody wishes to be on a successful team. But success does not just happen; it takes work and intelligent risk. Success has to do with how resourceful and creative we are. Our ability to be resourceful depends on our "present motive." Earlier we mentioned that there are two important questions that should be asked to ensure employees are engaged— the first having to do with curiosity, as described earlier, and the second question is "What is each employee's present motive?" If an individual's present motive is focused on opportunity, or on what is possible, then that individual will be more resourceful and creative at solving problems. However, if the focus is on risk, or avoiding mistakes, the

individual will play it safe and achieve less. The central conditions that affect our ability to focus on opportunity are fear, concern, and stress. The less we are able to manage our fears and stresses, the more likely we will search out safety and hold ourselves less accountable.

Organizations that create cultures that focus on positive personal accountability and ownership help employees learn how to reduce fears, manage stress, and foster supportive relationships to fall back on during challenging times. These organizations tend to be more innovative and healthy, both on and off the balance sheet. A simple yet powerful example of this is a high-tech client of

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ours in the United States. The company was understaffed and employees were overworked. The company had recently gone through a merger and attempted to eliminate duplication of effort, but the two cultures had not exactly melded. All of this had taken a toll on the organization.

Senior leadership was task-driven and in turnaround mode. They had not thought about their values and how those values should play out during these difficult times. Their focus was on self-interest (not the interest of others), and their present motive was risk avoidance (not opportunity). The pressure was on, and some senior leaders handled the pressure by berating and belittling employees instead of trying to understand their concerns.

Revenue was down, profits were in the red, and the organization struggled to maintain the

pride it once had. In fact, the company lost $21 million that year. Company leaders decided to invest in an engagement survey process and work to reengage their employees. The results of the survey were devastating, to say the least. In the open-comments section of the survey, employees commonly utilized name calling and four-letter words. This was the opportunity they had been looking for to vent their frustrations, as senior leaders had not really listened to them during this difficult time. They could finally voice their fear and anger without repercussions—and they did.

Working closely with senior leaders to ensure a positive follow-up, we helped to manage the survey feedback and action planning. We held focus groups to better understand the survey results and found that both significant and small organizational changes needed to be made and that employees felt the culture was not safe or inclusive. Due to this fear, employees often interpreted communication and policies from their leaders from the worst possible perspective. But there was some accuracy to the employee's perspective; often the communications were not sent in a manner that created confidence or reduced stress.

Here's an example: All employees were required to sign a policy dealing with security concerns regarding customer data, part of which stated that an employee would be fired if he or she didn't follow the policy to the letter. The policy was important and necessary. However, at the time it was communicated to employees, there were unfinished computer-system upgrades going on that put the policy in question because the instability of the data systems could cause an employee to violate the policy even if he or she clearly had no intention to violate the policy. Communication around this policy that could cause

someone to be fired was not clear and, due to the current environment of fear, employees saw it as a set-up. Senior leadership was completely unaware of the employee's perspective—they were just trying to get their ducks in a row.

A number of actions were taken over the next year to create more dialogue, reduce fear, and help senior leaders work more in the present and hold themselves accountable for creating a healthy culture. One leader was let go because he was unable to behave in a manner that represented the stated values of the organization.

The next year, the company repeated the survey; the engagement scores significantly improved. The company's bottom line improved as well, with an $11 million shift toward the positive. Employees and senior leadership developed significantly more trust toward each other and worked hard to reduce the fear that was so prevalent before. We trained the leadership group to lead the feedback and action planning sessions for the second survey, and the process went very well. The good news is they have continued to see improvement in engagement scores and in their financials. They are no longer surprised by the survey results because they have a more open and healthy culture.

UNLEASH THE PASSION

The combination of connections, curiosity, and resourcefulness not only results from, but also promotes, engagement and reengagement. If employers want to reengage employees, they must engage each employee as a whole person. Employers must help employees unleash their passion and feel comfortable in doing so. The following lists some actions employers can take to help reengage employees, despite

challenging events within the organization or the marketplace:

❏ Provide employees with opportunities to voice their concerns and listen to what they have to say. Most employees have ideas and opinions but often few places to share them productively. Use a survey. Meet in small groups. Take your employees out to lunch just to talk. Hold a monthly conversation (not a meeting or an update). Demonstrate your curiosity when listening to them, especially if you disagree.

❏ Make engagement a part of your business strategy. If you have not already shown how your engagement scores affect customer loyalty, profitability, or revenue generation, you should. Let everyone see how engagement can drive the success of your organization. Senior leaders should begin to discuss engagement along with finances, marketing, and other functions at their regular meetings. Find a way to monitor the pulse of your workforce throughout the year so you are not waiting for the next survey to act.

❏ Avoid common mistakes. Do your homework. Read a book or two on the subject of engagement. Most importantly, take a comprehensive, holistic view of the process. Too many companies put the weight of the world on their managers' shoulders. Employee engagement goes beyond manager training and accountability.

❏ Encourage everyone in the organization to think as an owner and hold them accountable. Teach all employees about engagement. Help each employee to see the positive impact they can have on their work environment and colleagues. Facilitate employee efforts in building their connec-

tions and commitment within the organization. Assist them in finding and directing their passion.

❏ Embed engagement into your culture. Look at your organization and make engagement a part of your regular business activities. Fold engagement into team meetings, division meetings, and shift meetings. Change regular generic events such as birthday celebrations, and find a way to make them personal.

❏ Support your managers. Evaluating managers on engagement scores can only go so far. Attempting to treat certain managers remedially with a three-strikes-you're out policy is reactive. Give your managers tools and practices they can utilize throughout

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the year to create engagement. But first things first, make sure you have the right people in management positions. Create a strong promotion and transition process to avoid mistakes.

❏ Be sincere. Your employees will know it if you are not. Organizations fancy employee engagement because, if done correctly, it can help drive positive customer loyalty and financial results. Nevertheless, when employers begin to ignore the fact that people drive the business forward, efforts toward employee engagement will be perceived as manipulative. Employers who are sincerely concerned with employees' welfare and business outcomes are more likely to succeed.

Reengaging employees does not need to be an overly complicated or difficult task of changing the organization's entire approach to engagement. Frequently it is about refocusing efforts or adding complementary efforts. The keys to reengaging employees are to connect with each of your employees, demonstrate a sincere interest in them, and create a safe environment in which they can thrive.

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