

Long before we can consider the issue of keeping employees engaged, we need to address the precursor issue of getting employees engaged. This speaks to a connection between the organisation (what it is and what it stands for) and the people who work in it. The very notion of addressing the connection between the employees and the organisation as though they are two separate things is evidence of what the real issue is.

In today's world, there appears to be a pervasive sense of detachment from many institutions - family, neighbourhood, community organisations and the workplace. Relationships seem to be getting more transitory and temporary and are characterised by less and less personal commitment and loyalty for any extended period of time. People step in, do what they have to do and exit when it is convenient for them.

This seems innocuous enough in that in a work setting, people essentially exchange goods and services – my time and expertise for an agreed upon compensation package. But the notion of employee engagement seems to speak not so much to the “letter of the law” issues but the quality of the exchange. For an organisation, it is not just the issue of time and outputs but the sense of enthusiasm demonstrated and energy expended by staff. These are demonstrated in the willingness of staff to innovate, to make suggestions, to challenge, to participate in dialogue and exploratory discussions and to demonstrate a sense of “we-ness” over time.

It is clear that these issues go beyond the utilisation of experience to deliver service and results. It is more than a cognitive appreciation of what the job requires and the need for employees to give a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. The deeper fundamental issues reside in what might be described as the affective or “emotional” domain – a sense of identification and belonging, the meaningfulness of the work and the sense of mutual respect and value present in the working relationship. As we have discovered in our practice, understanding and developing Emotional Intelligence is a cornerstone of employee engagement.

Employees are people and people enjoy being identified with something that boosts their sense of self and feelings of pride. Leaders of organisations would do well to tap into and promote the identity of their organisations. The difficulty with this is the pervasive pressure to focus on the next quarter's targets and results. That is fine but the energy and drive to do that comes not from the employment contract but from the pride that people feel in their organisation. Inevitably, this pride is about what we have been, the difference we have made and what we stand for.

Great societies are shaped and sustained by lore and legend - the stories that are told and that transmit the values and spirit of the group. Life is a story. Each day is a story but we seem to have lost the art of story-telling. Stories engage people as they are transported to another place and another time. Woven into

stories are the lessons about what we stand for and what we value. Stories debunk the myth of overnight success and reinforce notions of effort, triumph through difficult times and commitment to a cause. These are part of the foundation on which employee engagement is built. Our work with organisational story-telling has over time surfaced deep revelations and insights for newer employees, rekindled excitement for the jaded and aligned everyone around the fundamentals and future of the organisation.

Far too often, employers and organisations ignore at their peril, the successes and triumphs of the recent past. The Appreciative Inquiry® approach to organisational life focuses on discovering what has gone well. Working with this methodology, we have time and time again led organisations to a place of stunned surprise at how well they have done and what their people have accomplished and overcome. Employees identify with that. They see themselves in the organisation and its results. The organisation's successes are theirs.

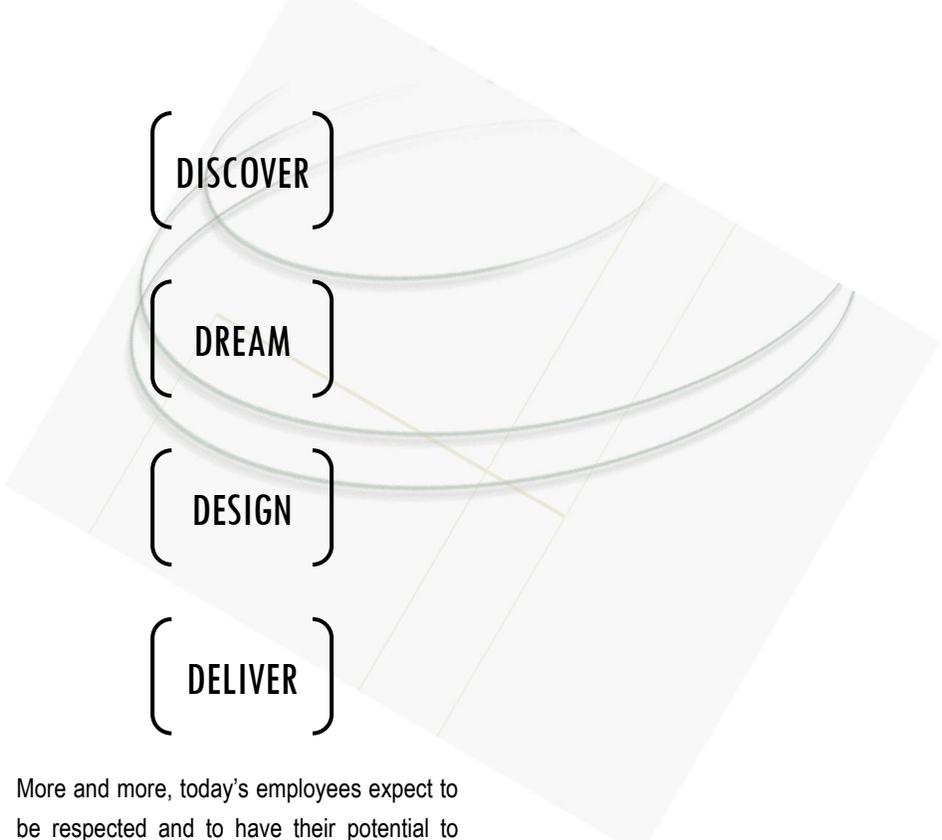
The sheer energy and vibrancy generated by this exploration becomes an essential aspect of their willingness to shape a desired future. Being part of a successful past becomes a driver towards tomorrow. The sense of possibility, the pride, the feeling of belonging all become contributors to crafting the road ahead. Ideas flow, possibilities are put on the table, things previously seen as problems become doorways to innovation. This “dream phase” of the process unleashes individual

potential in a group setting. People begin to see their relevance to the organisation and the organisation's relevance to them. Co-creating engages staff. The ideas, the products, the targets, the processes, the possibilities become theirs. Nothing engages employees like the opportunity to put something in, to build something, to shape tomorrow.

And then they bring their power to design and deliver. These two phases of an engagement process unleash the ability of employees to influence organisational success. In their hands is the ability to retard progress or fast-track the organisation towards massive success. Operating on the assumption that they are competent to do their jobs, the key to engagement is establishing the space, the platform on which they can dream, design and deliver. In this space, with input from all, there is meaning in the work they do. The approaches are theirs. There is purposefulness about it.

Meaning and purposefulness are not forces that push employees to perform but attract them towards excellence. It allows them to function not as operational cogs but as active and conscious participants and co-creators of the organisation's future.

The one additional dimension to ensuring employee engagement is the posture adopted by the leaders in the organisation. Today's world is one in which the traditional, tried and tested approaches to authoritarian leadership have been challenged and found wanting.



DISCOVER

DREAM

DESIGN

DELIVER

More and more, today's employees expect to be respected and to have their potential to contribute valued. In that context, the fundamental assumptions about what leadership is and how it is to be demonstrated are being tested. Our years of applied practice in the field of leadership development have shaped many leaders to arrive at a place where they live the core concept of influence rather than control while opening the door for employees to demonstrate their own form of responsible leadership by positively influencing the space in which they work – employee engagement at its finest.

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