



EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND RESPECT: Key HR Issues for 2016

By Robert Lavigna, IPMA-CP

A Dec. 29, 2015, Huffington Post article identifies ten key human resources trends for 2016. Based on a P World survey of 60 HR leaders from around the globe, the most significant trends are

- Employee engagement and culture as top priorities
- Building relationships instead of implementing programs, shortened to “relationships, not programs”
- Keeping workforce skills up to date
- Improving the employee experience
- Employee well-being and resilience
- Developing the human side of business
- Big data analysis
- Reinventing performance reviews
- Data-driven recruiting
- Consolidation of businesses

It is noteworthy that employee engagement continues to be a top priority. The HuffPo article came on the heels of Deloitte Consulting’s 2015 Global Human Capital Trends report in which 87 percent of the 3,300 respondents identified improving engagement as important or very important. This was double the proportion from the 2014 Deloitte survey, and two out of three responding organizations reported that they were updating their employee engagement and retention strategies.

It is clear from these studies and other research that employee engagement is still a front-and-center issue for HR leaders around the world. But it is also interesting to note that in addition to listing engagement specifically, seven of the other ten issues on the 2016 trends list also have direct links to employee engagement: focusing on relationships rather than programs, maintaining workforce skills, improving the employee experience, promoting employee well-being, developing an organization’s human side, using data better and ensuring that the performance management process is effective.

As I wrote in the March 2015 *HR News*, respect in the workplace is integral to engagement. Closer examination of several key HR trends highlights the link.

Relationships, Not Programs

As I have written and spoken about at length, approaching employee engagement as a “program”—especially an HR program—is a recipe for failure. Instead, improving engagement needs to be an organizational strategy that emphasizes creating positive and respectful relationships in the workplace, especially between managers/supervisors and frontline employees. This is a key—maybe the key—to creating a culture of employee engagement.

Keeping Workforce Skills Up to Date

Engaged employees believe that their organizations value them and are committed to their development by offering opportunities to keep skills current and to acquire new skills. In return for this respect, employees deliver discretionary effort that goes beyond what their position descriptions require. Consider millennials: While I always hesitate to stereotype an entire generation, research clearly shows that younger employees crave opportunities to develop their competencies and their resumes. If we do not help them, they will go somewhere else. We need to respect millennials, as well as their need to develop competencies.

Improving the Employee Experience

The link between a positive work experience and engagement should be obvious. Enabling employees to be productive, make a difference and feel good about their work helps employees do several things. These include understanding their roles and responsibilities, tracing the line from what they do and the accomplishment of their organization’s mission, receiving constructive feedback, feeling supported, and believing their opinions count. When employees feel respected, they are more likely to be engaged.

Focus on Employee Well-Being and Resilience

After extensively researching employee engagement and employee well-being, Gallup has identified five aspects of employee well-being: career, social, financial, physical and community. Career well-being is driven largely by the employee’s level of engagement. According to Gallup, having a job that is disengaging can be worse psychologically than having no job at all.

Employers who understand the power of well-being, communicate this to their employees and create opportunities for employees to enhance their well-being have a competitive advantage. Doing those things also signals respect. Of course, an employer cannot singlehandedly ensure each employee’s well-being. Employers can, however, create opportunities by doing things like enabling employees to balance their work and personal lives, stay physically and mentally healthy, have social connections at work, access financial information and counseling, and even engage with their communities.

Developing the Human Side of Business

Nowhere is humanizing an organization more critical than in government, where our primary—and sometimes only—resource is our people. The industrial, Frederick Taylor-assembly line approach to work belongs to the last century. Today, we must rely on our human capital. This means measuring engagement and acting on the results to improve engagement, thereby maximizing performance and productivity without being manipulative. We must understand what our colleagues need, including respect, and work hard to meet those needs.

Big Data Analysis

In HR, we are pretty good at counting what we are responsible for but less good at measuring outcomes. We can count how many candidates apply for our jobs, how many we hire, how many performance appraisals are delivered, how many employees attend training, how many grievances are filed and so on. What we are not so good at is measuring whether we have recruited and hired the right people, if performance discussions and appraisals help employees develop and be engaged, if training truly improves individual and organizational performance, and whether we have productive employee and sound labor relations.

We need to get better at assessing impacts and predicting the future through data. It can no longer suffice to calculate attrition over the last year; rather, HR data should show what turnover will look like in the future and what the implications of that trend are for organizational competencies and performance.

This new approach to data also applies to assessing the level of engagement, discovering ways to improve engagement and tracking whether the needle of engagement is moving in the right direction. For many organizations, this means conducting an annual employee survey. However, there is increasing momentum toward collecting more frequent and real-time employee data through pulse surveys and with mobile devices.

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Reinventing Performance Reviews

According to one of the respondents to the P World survey, reinventing performance reviews is the “hottest topic” in HR. In the federal government, this is exemplified by recent guidance to agencies from the U.S. Office of Personal Management that explicitly focuses on the link between effective performance management and employee engagement. Also in the federal government, research done by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board revealed that effective performance management is the most important differentiator between high-engagement and low-engagement federal agencies.

Here again, respect is critical. We need to respect our employees enough to make the performance management process work well. Managers and supervisors specifically need to clarify expectations, provide frequent feedback and have candid discussions about performance, strengths and developmental needs. Too often, these discussions focus on the piece of paper (the appraisal) rather than the conversation, where the real value lies.

We also need to understand that performance management is a competency and not always a natural skill. If we want our managers

and supervisors to be good at performance management, we need to train them on it and then hold them accountable.

The conversation about improving employee engagement is occurring around the world. Engagement is a top priority for organizations, including (and especially) in government, and respect in the workplace continues to be integral to improving engagement.

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What to Do?

First, and foremost, employees must take care of themselves. If you do not take care of yourself, no one else will—least of all the organization. When individuals work in a toxic environment, they put themselves at risk for physical problems like loss of sleep, weight gain and high blood pressure. Emotional problems like depression, anxiety and anger can also develop, as can relationship difficulties. So keep exercise, sleep, friendships and hobbies that renew you in your life.



Second, make sure you surround yourself with supportive friends and family members who can give you objective feedback on your work circumstances. We need others who can help us cope with the stress from work, and who can honestly tell us when we need to consider looking for another job.

Finally, determine how much longer you want to work in a toxic setting and begin to explore other options. One thing you want to avoid is leaving in a manner that puts you in a desperate position with no job or income and mounting bills. If you are thinking about leaving, start now to explore options and take steps to make yourself desirable in the job market.

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