CONNECTIONS TO GROWTH

TACTICS AND TECH THAT ENGAGE YOUR TEAM
Cultivating employees’ personal and team growth aligns training with your company’s performance goals

Engaging Employees

As business assets go, “employee engagement” can seem difficult to pin down. Its meaning can differ from one person or company to another, and soft concepts often fail to make executives’ short lists of business priorities. But even if we can’t define the precise characteristics of employee engagement, we can quantify the impact and cost of disengagement—and the picture isn’t pretty.

The 2015 edition of Gallup’s annual survey on the subject found that just 32 percent of employees were engaged, 50.8 percent were “not engaged,” and 17.2 percent were “actively disengaged.” And in the course of conducting the survey each year, the company has determined that organizations’ fortunes have a direct tie to these figures.
Higher rates of employee engagement correlate to lower absenteeism, turnover, shrinkage, safety incidents, and product defects—and on the positive side, to stronger customer metrics, increased productivity, and greater profitability.

Given that those metrics capture many of business owners’ priorities, employee engagement merits recognition as a key driver of overall performance. As a leader, you can improve those measures of success by taking responsibility for motivating your team members, cultivating their skills, and leading them to stronger individual achievement and overall company results.

It Starts with Accountability and Trust

At any company, success and growth have their seeds in mutual confidence; team members and leaders must demonstrate and be able to rely on reciprocal trust. Just as you need assurance that your employees will deliver on your expectations, they need to know that they can count on your support in getting their work done.

“Trust is really one of the foundations of demonstrating leadership,” says organizational consultant and coach Emil J. Sadloch, president of Sadloch Development Associates. “One of the key practices of leaders is to model the way.” That means honoring your commitments, not throwing people off guard or putting them on the defensive when priorities shift, and exhibiting consistent authenticity in your actions. These traits all help your employees to get a sense of your character and give them a basis for having confidence in you as the leader.

Executive coach Nathalie Salles, co-founder of Abundant Strategies, calls this process “earning the right to lead” and tells business owners that their actions, not their titles, confer that right. Part of the process involves learning to speak about the company and its mission in a way that will be meaningful to the team.
“While it’s quite important to think about a strategy, it’s also very important to be able to tell stories that will mobilize and engage the people who work for you,” she adds.

The goal is to guide employees toward an emotional connection to their work and to balance their responsibilities and accountability with empowerment and authority to act. When you have communicated the company’s mission clearly and everyone understands the goals and outcomes you’re targeting, team members understand their roles and are in a position to fulfill their obligations.

Creating that climate also promotes open communication and encourages employees to

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**HOW ARE WE DOING? FEEDBACK TOOLS**

Each of your employees has a unique perspective on your company—what’s working well, what needs improvement, and what opportunities you may be missing.

Because listening is one of the keys to leadership, you need to create mechanisms and procedures for inviting and reviewing employee suggestions and input. By making clear that their feedback is welcome and valued—and that they can offer their opinions without fear of repercussion—you can create a more participatory and productive work environment.

Tools for providing feedback include:

- **DecisionWise.** This employee engagement survey software features a dashboard that delivers an instant, image-driven overview of survey results, including scores broken out by category and a word cloud drawn from comments. To dig deeper into any result, click on the related link.

- **SurveyMonkey.** You may know it best as a service for conducting market research and soliciting customer feedback. But the company also offers an employee engagement survey and template.

- **Vetter.** This mobile-enabled virtual suggestion box offers safeguards like anonymity options and moderation of ideas before they go public. These features can help your employees feel more confident about expressing their opinions and providing the information your business needs to thrive.

- **HighGround.** This software delivers real-time results to allow for “immediate insight.” The company’s goal is to “change the way you manage performance” as well as employee recognition and rewards.

- **Free Suggestion Box.** Mobile-friendly and web-based (so you can use it without having to install any program or app), this is a 100 percent anonymous tool for soliciting comments on anything from your company’s vacation policy to its business model.

- **Helprace.** This cloud-based customer service application is designed to strengthen customer relationships. Engage your employees by asking for their input on customer surveys—you may get more constructive answers when your team identifies the right questions to ask.
offer their input. Formal and informal mechanisms for submitting proposals—whether at monthly brainstorming sessions or via virtual suggestion boxes—show that you welcome and value team members’ thoughts and will act on good ideas, wherever they originate.

Train the Team

As leader, you’re also the team coach, and one of your most important jobs is helping employees to achieve continued professional development and growth. Whether you’re implementing formal or informal mentoring programs, setting up a cross-training system, or balancing personal and industry-specific skills growth, training creates an opportunity to strengthen employees’ expertise and strengthens their connection to the company.

This comes back to promoting two-way communication in, for example, the annual review process. Instead of just having your employees complete a self-evaluation, initiate a conversation about what they’d like to learn in the coming year. Look for ways to tie the interests they’ve expressed to upcoming projects that create openings for them to make use of the skills they’re developing. By allowing them to take ownership, either independently or with the guidance of a mentor, you show them how their personal goals align with the company’s performance targets.

This, in turn, fosters a stronger commitment to the business and a feeling of investment in its future. But equally important is nurturing a sense of allegiance to colleagues and the team as a whole. As their role model, you can set the tone for shared appreciation of and pride

TEAM-BUILDING TECHNOLOGY

As the runaway success of Pokémon Go demonstrates, people enjoy group activities that incorporate use of smartphones. Those activities can be a workplace asset, as well, as corporate team-building activities integrate an element of technology.

Teambonding, a 20-year-old company whose events promise “a great time while fostering strong, authentic bonds between people who work together,” offers an interactive platform for tablet- and smartphone-based scavenger hunts. Called GoTek High-Tech Scaventures, it uses gamification to engage your team in problem-solving exercises. It also uploads photos and video to the event manager for entertaining use in the wrap-up session.

American Outback offers a smartphone team-based Code Break activity app for group problem-solving. Its brain teasers include “mind puzzles, logic problems, riddles, and more” that you and your team race against the clock to solve. Its goal is to “inspire participants to put their heads together to find the answers and earn points.” Another of the company’s team-building apps, Random Acts of Kindness, integrates photos, videos, and texts into activities that blend community service and team building.
in individual and collective accomplishments. Team-building exercises can help to enhance that bond.

**Empower the Team**

Some companies measure their performance targets numerically, whether that means sales quotas, number of customer service calls fielded in a certain time period, or increased efficiency in production times. But there’s a move away from numerical outcomes and toward an environment in which “employees do their best within general guidelines,” Sadloch says. “Organizations are trying to trust that employees will act in the best interest of the organization—but the boss has to set general guidelines for performance and support employees as they carry out their work.”

This approach can make it more complicated to assess individual employee performance, but it can also make those assessments more meaningful. “There’s a capacity to say, ‘Okay, you’ve reached your target or you haven’t,’” Salles says. “What can be a little bit more challenging is to ask, ‘Have you done it in a way that has helped the team grow?’”

Of course, you’ll still have quantitative measures of success and numbers that you must hit to remain competitive and positioned for growth. But by shifting the focus to what’s best for the company beyond those numbers, you again open up channels of dialog that can help promote more robust performance.

Your announcement of a more ambitious revenue goal, for example, might prompt a discussion about the impact that higher sales or geographic...
expansion might have on your fulfillment, distribution, and customer support teams. The goal is not to have them air concerns about how the higher volume will hamper their work, but rather to collaborate on a strategy for ensuring that they have the staff and tools necessary to play a role (and be recognized for their contribution to) the new venture’s success.

“The leader has to say, ‘Here’s the realistic opportunity for us all. Here’s the potential that we can achieve. Here’s the stretch that I see us working toward. Let’s discuss, and let’s work together to make sure it happens,’” Sadloch says. “That give and take is positive and creative in moving the organization forward.”

By enlisting your employees as allies in achieving the company’s goals, giving them the authority necessary to carry out their responsibilities, and showing them your support, you build a team that’s equipped to meet immediate and long-term challenges. Leading people in a culture of that caliber positions your company to optimize its agility, its capacity to innovate, and its prospects for sustainable growth.

**TRAINING RESOURCES**

To make the most of your employees’ abilities, you need to optimize your skills as a team leader. These online classes, webinars, and articles can support your professional development as you coach your team to peak performance.

**AMERICAN MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION**
- Helio Fred Garcia shares strategies and tips from his book *The Power of Communication* in this Q&A, “How to Use Communication to Build Trust and Inspire Loyalty, as Well as Lead Effectively.”
- In this excerpt from his book *Leading Leaders: How to Manage Smart, Talented, Rich, and Powerful People*, Jeswald W. Slacuse discusses trust as a type of business capital and explains how to earn and keep it.
- In this article, Chris DeRose and Noel Tichy, co-authors of *Judgment on the Front Line: How Smart Companies Win by Trusting Their People*, explain “Why Getting the Best from Your Employees Starts with Frontline Leadership.”

**SCORE**
- The organization offers this recording of an hour-long webinar entitled *Building a Team That Can Build a Successful Business.*
- In “7 Tips for Leading and Growing Your Business as a Team,” SCORE presents “ideas that can help you foster great team work”—including some designed to help you break counterproductive habits.

**U.S. SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (SBA)**
- This article, “Being a Leader,” notes that leaders today must be learners and teachers, and it reviews the characteristics they must develop to assume the role successfully.
- “Do You Have Your Employees’ Respect?” This article poses that question and offers a strategy for assessing rapport with your team and addressing problems in relationships with employees.

**COURSERA**
- The University of Michigan’s *Leading Teams* course teaches how to “build your team, improve teamwork and collaboration, sustain team performance through continuous learning and improvement,” and align individual and team goals.
- Managing Talent, also from the University of Michigan, reviews “key approaches to measuring performance and evaluating your employees” and steps you can take to “develop and coach your talent so that they can realize their full potential at work.”
- The University of London offers this course, called *The Manager’s Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Managing People at Work.*
CASE STUDY

It’s About Trust

As a remote owner with a core staff composed of contractors, Asbury Arts Center founder Jeanne Glogowski depends on two-way accountability

When Jeanne Glogowski founded the North Florida Dance Center in Green Grove Springs, Florida, in 2005, she was in a 1,000-square-foot studio with one other employee. After about a year, she saw an opportunity to fulfill a greater need in the community, and in 2007, expanded to add music, tumbling, taekwondo, and art classes, relocated to a 4,000-square-foot space, and changed the name of the business to Asbury Arts Center.

Today, Asbury Arts Center serves about 200 families whose students take approximately 500 classes each year. “Our faculty has grown to two salaried employees and between 15 to 20 contractors at any given time,” Glogowski says.

Managing from a distance

With the business more settled during the past few years, Glogowski recently moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area, and is running her company remotely. “When you’re not there every day, you really do need to depend on your team, and they need to depend on you,” she notes. To some degree, she ensures a smooth operation by hiring contractors who are degreed, experienced, and certified in their own specialties. But, she says, as a remote owner, accountability remains key to ensuring the success of Asbury Arts. She points out a few core related issues.

■ Open communication. Every employee and contractor gets a comprehensive manual describing company policies, job description, and expectations. Beyond that, “I want to be accountable to my team, and I want them to be accountable to me, so I have a completely open-door policy.
“While we have conversations constantly,” Glogowski says. “Whether it’s in person, on the phone, via email or online video conferencing, and even through social media, I’m constantly in touch with my people.”

**Being the first line of defense and a resource for her people.** When you’re dealing with an array of families, it means you’re dealing with a wide range of personalities, so conflict is bound to arise. Whenever a parent has an issue with a staff member, Glogowski makes sure that she or the studio manager deals with it before any employee.

“I know that when we have a situation where a parent comes to us with concerns about a program or instructor, it goes through my office first,” she asserts. “It’s critical that our people know they’re supported first and foremost.”

While her people all come to the table with complete qualifications, Glogowski gives them other tools they need to do their jobs, such as safety and first-aid training or extended training that they might need to deal with specific age groups.

**Empowering the team.** Because the instructors are largely contractors and bring solid credentials to the table, “I don’t want to micromanage every single detail of what they’re teaching,” says Glogowski. “While we have a documented curriculum that sets out learning goals, they have the ability to make their own artistic and instructional decisions. We want to make sure we’re setting the bar high on education, but we also want our people to know that they have a level of creative freedom.”
**Formal meetings and bonding.** Each year, outside the meetings Glogowski holds with her management staff, she brings the company together at least three times—at the beginning of the year to define goals, at mid-year to assess where the company is, and at the end of the year to discuss success in reaching overall goals. At the same time, she uses these meetings to promote bonding, taking everyone out for dinner or drinks in a less formal setting. “It’s a good way to combine those functions, especially since I’m not in town that often,” she adds.

Beyond those measures, Glogowski says, “I’ve learned that the longer I’ve been doing this, the more I realize how important it is simply to say ‘thank you.’ It might mean a little note or some other token of appreciation for an instructor who does something extra for their student. I just need to let them know they’re appreciated. For me, those little efforts are the glue that holds everything together.”