



Retirement
Services

Employee engagement.

Three keys to human resources success.



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White Paper by Vicki Hess

Executive Summary

Plan sponsors looking to improve their organizations' level of service, quality of work and in-house communications should consider focusing on their employee engagement. Vicki Hess examines the subject of employee engagement and gives advice to how you can improve and sustain your organization's employee engagement. She also explores the challenges and thoughts of leaders at organizations and offers ideas as to how they can change their behavior to improve engagement.

Hess' research, while primarily focusing on healthcare organizations, can be applied to any industry.



In recent years, senior leaders in healthcare have come to recognize how engagement drives every metric they measure. Patient satisfaction, safety, quality and finances are just some of the metrics that are influenced by the daily levels of staff engagement.

According to the *2019 National Health Care Retention & RN Staffing Report* by NSI Nursing Solutions, Inc., **“an overwhelming majority (83.3%) of organizations view retention as a ‘key strategic imperative’ yet less than half (39.4%) have translated these into a formal retention strategy.”** In *6 Shortcuts to Employee Engagement: Lead & Succeed in a Do-More-With-Less World*, Hess identifies three elements for improving and sustaining employee engagement.

Research shows that for long-term improvement to occur, organizations need to:

1. Drive a strategic focus on engagement at the organizational level
2. Facilitate hardwiring of tactics at the leadership level
3. Role model high levels of engagement at the personal level

In this white paper, these three elements are addressed from an HR perspective.



A photograph of a man with a beard and a woman smiling and looking towards the right. They are in a modern building with a glass and metal structure. The man is wearing a light blue blazer over a white shirt, and the woman is wearing a light blue button-down shirt.

Strategic focus.

Organizations that do well with employee engagement have a strategic focus which demonstrates the importance of the people who work in the organization. There are defined metrics around engagement which are evident in regular conversations and on measurement dashboards. The strategic focus is propelled by a compelling mission, vision and values. **The mission and vision provide the “what” and “why” and the values demonstrate the “how.”**

At an even more basic level, organizations that embrace engagement ensure a safe environment for all of their employees starting with their safety and security from a physical standpoint. This grows to include the holistic support of employees including emotional and financial support.

Another element of creating a strategic focus is communication that is open and honest. **Many employees become disengaged in a work atmosphere where communication is not a primary focus resulting in employees who don't know what's going on.** While an organization's leadership may be working diligently to honor and support their employees, they sometimes fail to communicate what they're doing. The void is often filled with gossip, rumors and false information. **In HR, you can be a great communication conduit between the senior leadership team and the frontline leaders and staff.**

Another key element of a strategic focus on engagement is achieved through fair compensation and benefits. At the most basic level this is why people come to work every day. They want to provide a suitable lifestyle for themselves and their families. **When organizations help provide guidance and information to employees on how they can best save and invest their money, it can amplify the value of the compensation and benefits over time. HR professionals should ask themselves what they are doing to support this.**

One last element for improving and sustaining organizational support is providing opportunities to employees for growth and development. **Opportunities for growth and development allow employees to connect with what makes them feel satisfied, energized and more productive.** At the same time, employees displaying these kind of behaviors help the organization to grow through innovation, creativity and high levels of performance.

Hardwiring leadership tactics.

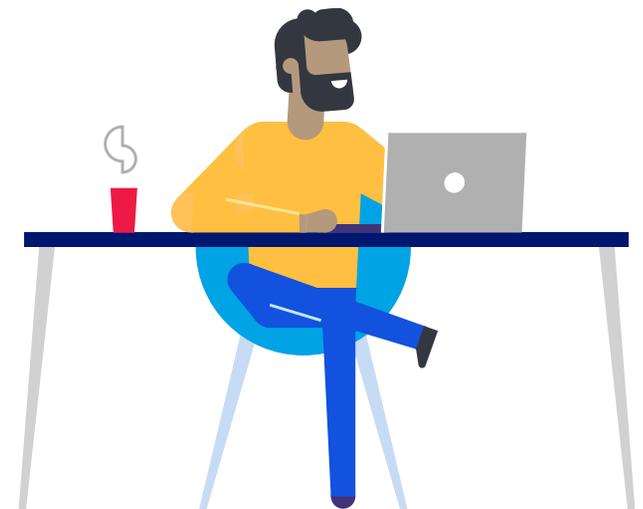
As HR professionals, it's important to contribute to hardwiring tactics that will drive engagement at the leadership level. A recent survey conducted of over 800 healthcare leaders, *Voices of Healthcare Engagement™**, gauged their thoughts about engagement of themselves and their employees. The survey questions included a self-evaluation of the leaders' actions and behaviors taken which have a direct impact on employee engagement.

Let's take a look at the first challenge: one-on-one meetings. **What could you do in your HR role to promote the idea of regular one-on-one meetings for leaders to connect with staff members? How could you drive an organization-wide discussion about meetings that typically take away time from one-on-one meetings?**

Time is one hurdle with holding regular one-on-one meetings. Another big hurdle is that some leaders don't know what to talk about with their direct reports. **Many managers struggle with how to have a conversation beyond “How's everything going?” or “What's going well?” and “What needs work?”** HR professionals can work with their leadership staff in providing ideas for basic communication with their staff.

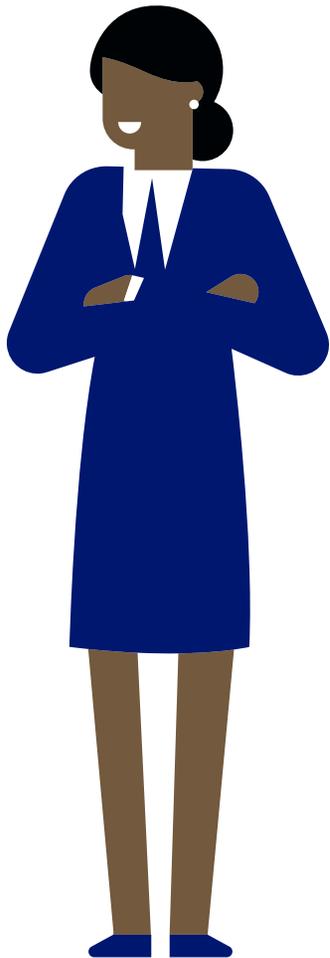
Top three areas that leaders rate as most challenging in employee engagement include:

- 1 Holding regular one-on-one meetings to connect with staff members
- 2 Connecting staff members' daily tasks with their internal motivators
- 3 Providing feedback to staff members who aren't performing adequately at their assigned tasks



*Source: Report “Voices of Healthcare Engagement™” by Vicki Hess, RN, MS.

Hardwiring leadership tactics.



One-on-one meetings can be done in person or virtually. HR professionals can hold virtual meetings with clients as a way to role model how conversations between leaders and staff might take place.

The second challenging behavior discovered in the survey for leaders was connecting what staff members do with their internal motivators. Simply asking the question, **“What makes you feel satisfied, energized and productive at work?”** is a great start. Defining internal motivators can be key to help with employee engagement. In your HR role you can share this information with leaders and role model the behavior yourself with your HR team.

Imagine if every leader in the organization asked this question during the hiring process and then held regularly scheduled meetings with their direct reports? Have you ever written something down after you’ve done it, just so you could get the thrill of checking it off your to-do list? That’s an example of an internal motivator. Discovering internal motivators of your current staff and potential employees can have a positive effect on improving and sustaining employee engagement.

HR professionals should work to determine the ways they can help leaders better understand the internal motivators of their staff and how they can connect that to what they are doing on a daily basis.

The third element leaders identified as most challenging is providing feedback to staff members on how well they are performing assigned tasks. Teaching leaders how to communicate effectively in a non-emotional, data-driven way can be tremendously helpful when it comes to employee engagement.

Employees respect and appreciate leaders who are direct and assertive in their communications. Providing positive and negative feedback to employees in a professional manner is essential to employee engagement.

As an HR professional, it is essential to have the skills to communicate effectively when it comes to both positive and negative employee behaviors. Sharing those skills with other HR staff members can be very helpful. Hardwiring tactics for leaders is a way to ensure that the employee engagement messages and reinforcement are spread throughout the entire organization. Start with a meeting in HR where the three most challenging elements are discussed and discover ways you can impact them. Don’t forget to reinforce the behaviors leaders are most proficient at because you want them to continue those positive behaviors.

Role modeling high levels of engagement.



If you want long-term improvement to occur with employee engagement another key responsibility for HR staff and leaders is to role model high levels of engagement at a personal level. HR staff should look at body language and listen to what the staff has to say when making decisions about role modeling. For example, one question to ask would be, “How does your department look to visitors?”

One important discussion taking place is with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and healthcare workers being able to find joy in service to others. The same idea certainly applies to human resource staff finding joy in their roles. Joy is a choice. When we are connected to what makes us feel satisfied, energized and productive (engaged), it is much easier to connect with joy.

Top three areas that leaders rated themselves as most proficient in employee engagement or leadership included:

- 1 Recognition of staff for excellent work performance
- 2 Asking for staff members' opinions on changes that took place in the department
- 3 Providing staff members with opportunities for growth and development

In the *Voices of Healthcare Engagement* survey **one of the top three things that leaders self-evaluated as being most proficient** at is finding joy in the growth and progress of direct reports. This is exciting. Within their roles in HR, professionals should ask themselves if they find joy in the growth and progress of their clients.

The second area where leaders felt most proficient regarding engagement of self is personally connecting to the mission or vision statement of the organization. How often do you talk about the mission, vision and values of your organization?

The third behavior that leaders ranked themselves as proficient is welcoming and initiating change. Leaders who embrace change are more likely to be engaged in their work. Make sure your HR team is welcoming and initiating change as well.

Improving personal behavior.



It's also important to look at the three elements that leaders evaluated as most challenging for their own behavior. **The first one is managing their own emotions.** Are you providing tools for the HR staff and leaders to effectively manage their own emotions?

The second area leaders found most challenging was creating boundaries for oneself and others. This is very interesting because the reason that many employed in healthcare stay in the profession is because they care so much about serving others. Sometimes when one has a service mindset boundaries can get blurred.

Top three areas that leaders rated themselves as most challenged with their personal leadership included:

- 1 Managing their own emotions
- 2 Creating boundaries for oneself and for others
- 3 Taking time for reflection and self-awareness

It likely happens in HR as well. What are you doing and what conversations are you having around creating boundaries for HR staff in a positive and professional way? When talking about boundaries, it doesn't mean having your door closed in your office all the time or not showing up when you need to. It is essential that time off of work is spent actually off and that staff don't feel like they have to be connected 24/7.

This leads to the third area that leaders found most challenging which was taking time for reflection and self-awareness. Have you talked about reflection and self-awareness in your HR team meetings? Have you shared tools for reflection and self-awareness? Hopefully you have some type of peer review where staff get feedback from their colleagues to improve their self-awareness.

What if throughout the day people were skilled at taking moments of reflection and self-awareness to check in and ask themselves, **“What do I need to do to get back to choosing joy?” Or, “What support do I need to make that happen?”**

Finally, one method that is said to improve communications is to take a moment to “stop and breathe.” If employees in organizations were encouraged to take a moment before reacting when they encounter challenges, it could transform the way people respond. Encourage this among your HR team as well.

Keys to achieving success.



As HR professionals, you are in a unique position to influence employee engagement without “owning” it outright. By improving your own knowledge level, sharing tools and resources with others and role-modeling your own engagement, you can make a positive difference.

To improve employee engagement, human resources teams should focus on three elements — individuals, leaders and the organization itself. Taking into consideration all three of these elements, human resources staff need to:

- **Drive a strategic focus on engagement at the organizational level**

Place a strategic focus on the importance of the people who work at the organization. A common trait in organizations that do well with employee engagement is to make their employees feel appreciated. By implementing better communications, fair compensation and improved benefits, employees who feel they are valued will display greater engagement in their daily tasks.

- **Facilitate hardwiring of tactics at the leadership level**

Work with senior leadership to help ensure they understand the concepts discussed in this paper. They can facilitate better one-on-one meetings with staff, examine the internal motivators of individual employees, and use feedback to reach out and understand their employees.

- **Role model high levels of engagement at the personal level**

Human resources as well as senior leadership should serve as role models to employees by exhibiting high levels of engagement to employees.

- **Improving personal behaviors**

Organizations that can overcome challenges such as managing their emotions, eliminating boundaries, and taking time for reflection and self-awareness, can make a positive difference in employees’ engagement.

More About Vicki Hess

Vicki works with healthcare organizations and associations nationwide to mitigate the root causes of employee disengagement. While constantly monitoring industry trends, and doing research on her own, Vicki zeros in on what's working (and what's not) and customizes solutions to complement each organization's culture and place on the engagement journey. She works with organizations and associations across the country to positively impact employee engagement through consulting, workshops, retreats and keynote presentations.

Her unique views on patient and employee engagement are evidence-based, relatable and real world. Organizations that implement Vicki's ideas experience increased productivity, safety, quality, retention, client satisfaction, creativity and more.

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