Magazine Articles: A Culture of Engagement

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One of the most common challenges vegetation managers face is maintaining a strong and experienced workforce. How can you retain skilled employees, many of whom are seasonal and temporary? Sheila Margolis, Ph.D., president of Workplace Culture Institute, discusses ways to create a stronger workforce by engaging with employees on a personal level.

Q: What does a "culture of engagement" mean in practice?

A: When we talk about "engagement," we're really talking about maintaining a fully engaged workforce. This goes beyond the traditional concept of "employee satisfaction." True engagement requires becoming more people-focused and really connecting with employees — understanding what motivates them and makes them feel successful.

And there's really no single formula. Different things engage different people. What an individual finds engaging can vary by person and by culture — though basic human nature also plays a role. For example, the values often attributed to family — being open and caring — engage most people simply because we are all human.

Q: How do shared values apply to retention?

A: Workers who feel connected to a company's values and culture are more likely to stay with a company. This can be just as true for part-time, temporary or seasonal workers as it is for full-time, permanent workers. People typically don't stay at a workplace where their contribution isn't recognized, or that doesn't reflect who they are or align with what is personally meaningful to them. Creating a culture of engagement with shared values can help alleviate this.

Shared values fall into two distinct categories and provide the common ground from which employees become engaged with your company. Philosophy is the company's prime value that captures its founding spirit or distinctive character. Priorities, on the other hand, consist of the strategic values that allow a company to be competitive and thrive. Both of these value sets are extremely important to the workplace "culture fit" between employer and employee.

Q: Why is "culture fit" relevant?

A: It's very difficult to train people out of their natural character. If you hire people who naturally share your company's values, they will be a more natural fit. So, it's extremely important to screen for culture fit.

Look for behavior that reflects those values. The more consistently employees align with your company's culture, the more successful they are likely to be. If employees truly connect with your culture, they will be more invested and willing to make a meaningful contribution to your company.

Q: What are key components of employee engagement?

A: Successful employee engagement typically requires that employees are emotionally attached with a strong desire to remain a part of the company. Such employees are generally more willing to go above and beyond the formal requirements of the job.

People want to feel personally invested in the work they do. They want to feel they are developing their skills and potential, and that they are challenged to accomplish more. They also want to feel appreciated, recognized and rewarded, and to have a sense of caring and workplace community. They want to feel they are achieving something, and that the work they do *matters*.

Q: How can employers encourage this type of engagement?

A: First and foremost, by *communication*. Start talking — and listening. Internal communication is considered the leading factor in overall employee satisfaction, with most workers citing increased two-way communication as the one thing they would change if they could.

Workers appreciate feeling informed and also that management listens. To that end, it's extremely important for managers to provide meaningful information, ask the right questions and really listen to the answers. Giving people the opportunity to express themselves promotes a sense of engagement like nothing else.

Q: What information should managers share?

A: Too often, supervisors don't let workers know how their work fi ts into the larger picture for achieving company goals. Managers must create opportunities to discuss the company, its strategy and its direction. After all, the future of the company is the employee's future, too.

Managers must also ensure that they outline tasks and communicate their expectations clearly — including goals, progress and problems — providing both positive and negative feedback, while not dwelling on the bad but on what can be done better. Feedback needs to be immediate and specific, and managers should allow time to discuss.

It's also important that managers demonstrate that they care about what matters to their employees, and that they support their employees' development. Of course, that may mean matching individual preferences and strengths to tasks, as well as providing opportunities for training and improving skills. It can also mean removing obstacles to success, and rewarding people for good work in a specifically personal way, tailoring recognition to the individual.

Q: What types of questions should managers ask?

A: Managers can start by asking themselves whether the workplace provides a culture of openness — one in which people feel free to talk. Managers also can ask themselves, "What have I learned from my employees this week?"

To demonstrate their desire to foster feedback, managers can ask workers open-ended questions and practice active listening to help gather more information about their challenges, their work and their personal lives.

When managers truly care for workers and their welfare, they will be rewarded with trust and respect. Trust and

respect for leadership helps drive a company to greater success. Ultimately, when workers are treated as whole people, they are more fully invested, engaged employees.

In the final analysis, a company is only as great as the people who work there. If you want to truly engage — and retain — valued employees, you've got to get personal.

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