Creating Engagement:
Start with Respect, Continue Engagement with Friendship and Love
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Employee engagement is critical to achieving high levels of business success. Employees who feel engaged and committed toward their work and company proactively seek ways to increase their performance. They also tend to stay in jobs longer than people who see work solely as something they "have to do" as opposed to something they "want to do".

In my previous post I discussed how critical mutual respect between the employee and company is to increasing employee engagement. Establishing respect with employees is more then a concept or behavior, to be successful it requires that companies put methods in place to ensure employees understand and feel supported in their roles. Until these are in place, efforts to increase engagement through other means are likely to be ineffective and may even decrease employee engagement.

Most methods used to increase engagement can be placed into three general categories: love, friendship, and respect. Respect requires ensuring employees know what things they are expected to achieve, making sure they feel supported toward achieving them, and are recognized for their achievements.

But how do you create engagement through love and friendship?

Creating Engagement Through Love
Employees who love their company, its culture, and what it stands for often go well beyond their normal daily job duties to support its success. Examples of companies known for creating this type of engagement include Starbucks, Google, and Southwest Airlines. Creating engagement through love requires three things:

a) Well-defined company mission and culture rooted in tangible beliefs and values
b) Track record of leadership decisions that illustrate commitment to these value
c) Strategic HR methods that attract, select, and retain employees whose beliefs align with the company's values while screening out employees who are not a good fit with the company

Companies whose employees are so engaged that they can be described as "loving the organization" tend to share several characteristics. Their leaders talk about their values all the time, using them as a constant guiding principle for business decisions. The company can point to former high performing employees who were let go because their actions did not align with the company's beliefs (i.e. they achieved the right things the wrong way). Similarly, long-tenured employees in these companies can provide examples of leadership decisions that reflected a commitment to long-term values even if the decisions were contrary to achieving short-term financial goals.

While having employees love their work or company is a noble goal, it just isn't realistic for a lot of jobs and people. First, many people don't expect or want to love their jobs. This doesn't mean they aren't good, committed employees, but they don't view work as the central priority in their life. Their job is just not something they are ever going to "love", but they may still be committed to doing it well. Second, research shows that people who feel extremely passionate about their jobs are often hard to

manage[1]. They get frustrated if the company is not putting enough resources into doing the absolutely best job possible. Last, there are some jobs that few if any people are ever going to truly love.   For example, jobs that require performing unpleasant, tedious, or extremely difficult tasks.   This doesn't mean employees don't care about these jobs, but the nature of the work frankly isn't something we'd expect people to passionately enjoy[2].   Sometimes work really is just a way to get money.   Employees in these jobs can be engaged in terms of appreciating and value their work, but they probably aren't going to love it.

Creating Engagement Through Friendship
Employees who feel a personal connection to their co-workers are more likely to proactively do things to help out their fellow employees and the company as whole.   Friendship is particularly critical for driving engagement in jobs that are highly stressful, routine, or otherwise unpleasant. Liking the people we work with can make difficult tasks tolerable and can be the difference between a job we hate and a job we enjoy.

Companies that emphasize friendship and foster a sense of connectedness place high value on team building and social technology to create bonds between employees.   They encourage employees to focus on common goals and to actively support one another through collaborative working arrangements.   They may also invest in programs that encourage employees to build friendships with their co-workers based on common social interests (e.g. intermural sports teams, clubs based on common hobbies or non-work pursuits).

Using friendship as a method to increase engagement can be very effective, but it can backfire if not managed appropriately.   This is particularly true if the company has not established a clear sense of respect with its employees.   The most extreme example is employee unions, where employee loyalty toward each may be driven by a shared frustration with the company's failure to show adequate respect toward its workers.

If you want love and friendship, start with respect.   Methods that focused on love and friendship can be tremendously effective in helping companies achieve the highest possible levels of employee engagement. However they are not always practical or necessary – there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Employees don't always need to love their jobs or feel a strong sense of friendship with their coworkers to be engaged and effective in their work. Providing a foundation of mutual respect is often enough to create adequate levels of employee engagement. The key is to remember that healthy love and friendship is always rooted in respect - no matter the setting.

What's been your most effective strategy to engage employees? Share your experiences in the comments below. Follow me on Twitter @stevenhunt and join the conversation about Employee Engagement using the hashtag #EngageTalent

Click here to watch the replay of my webinar 'Take this job and love it: The power and challenges of employee engagement'.

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[1] Britt, T.W., et al. (2010). Self engagement as a predictor of performance and emotional reactions to performance outcomes. British Journal of Social Psychology, 49, 237-257.
[2] Hunt, S.T. (2002). On the virtues of staying "inside of the box": does organizational citizenship behavior detract from performance in Taylorist jobs? International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 10, 1-8..