



Fuels Learning Centre
A new approach to training on the safe
handling of fuels.

Why Employee Engagement Matters And What You Can Do About It

Jan/Feb 2014

By Bill Egbert

This article first appeared in the Jan/Feb 2014 edition of Propane Canada magazine.

One of my favourite parts of facilitating a course entitled “Achieving Extraordinary Customer Relations” for a national propane retailer was when I asked participants to describe their worst and best customer service experiences. While the point of the exercise was to illustrate the negative impacts of poor customer service on the organization, the underlying reality is that high customer satisfaction cannot be achieved through interaction with disengaged employees.

An ever increasing body of research continues to make the point that employee engagement has a direct impact on key business performance. For example, organizations with higher employee engagement benefit from higher staff retention rates, happier customers resulting in increased revenues and repeat business, improved safety rates, often above industry norms, and greater efficiency and productivity.



So what does the term “employee engagement” really mean?

When asked to describe an “engaged employee,” people will often describe enthusiastic people who can be counted on to roll up their sleeves when it matters, help other team members without being asked, take extraordinary steps to satisfy customers, accept new job challenges and tasks, and show flexibility in the face of changing workplace priorities. Every manager wants employees that can be described this way, yet this goal seems elusive. Study after study continues to show that on average, only around 30% of employees describe themselves as “engaged” or “highly engaged” and another 45% describe themselves as “partially engaged.” The majority of employees know how to keep doing competent or passable work to keep the paychecks coming in but are not really engaged in their work.

Two factors affecting Employee Engagement

So why are we seeing these disappointing engagement statistics in spite of well-intentioned efforts to engage employees? Two factors deserve attention.

First, many organizations are trying to improve employee engagement solely through organization-wide engagement surveys designed to assess engagement, identify successes, and point to areas for improvement. While these surveys certainly paint a broad picture of engagement, they are not as helpful when it comes to understanding and acting on the needs of unique individuals, which is

essential to sustaining engagement. Surveys are best for identifying organization-wide issues and opportunities and their success is dependent on making visible changes based on results. Failing to respond to survey feedback can very easily increase skepticism and disengagement and amount to a missed opportunity.

Beyond relying too heavily on a single tactic (i.e. surveys), another important factor contributing to less-than-desired engagement is arguably what is taking place (or not taking place) between employees and their managers.

Let me explain the second factor. Something important to remember is that engagement is a personal choice, based on criteria defined by each individual employee. No two employees have the same needs or motivators, so it is important to identify what motivates each employee individually. This can only be achieved through direct and deliberate conversations and collaboration between the employee and his or her immediate manager.

In many organizations, especially small and medium-sized ones, managers are often not supported in carrying out the conversations and collaboration that can foster engagement. Managers certainly try to engage their employees, with varying degrees of success, but without the needed skills or tools, their efforts often fall short of the mark. Fortunately, there are a number of tools and training programs available to assist managers in acquiring these skills. If you look at your own organization, to what extent do such conversations and collaboration take place, and how effective are they?

As we are seeing (and if this is any comfort), the propane industry is not unique in its need to address skills gaps and an aging workforce.

Tools to help to achieve increased engagement

So how can organizations achieve greater employee engagement overall? Further, if identifying an employee's unique motivators, aspirations and concerns and providing ongoing assistance in achieving the employee's goals is essential for engaging employees and these are skills that many managers lack, what can the organization do?

Very simply, I am advocating a balanced approach – one that combines the macro and the micro: Organization-wide surveys provide good value and should be combined with greater attention and support to employee-manager collaboration,

which has a great impact on individual engagement. To go the distance in engaging your employees you need both the macro and the micro. A one-sided approach emphasizing surveys won't fully achieve your goals.

Fortunately, there are some excellent tools available to assist managers to strengthen employee-manager collaboration and increase employee engagement at the individual level. These provide managers with the skills they require to understand and act upon the individual needs of their employees. By creating the environment where employees choose to be and remain fully engaged you are also setting up your organization to be an employer of choice among desirable candidates who may be considering many employment options.

When I think back to the days I was facilitating customer service workshops, I heard a number of great stories involving customer service nightmares and horrible bosses and we shared a lot of laughter. However, when the conversation shifted to describing great customer service experiences, many of the participants observed, in their own way, the commonality of great customer service experiences – fully engaged employees.

Everybody has the capacity to be fully engaged. The challenge is to create the environment where employees make the choice to be and remain engaged. More attention to individual employees and their unique needs is a great start if your goal is to create a more engaged workforce.

About the Author

Bill Egbert has over 35 years of experience within the propane industry with a focus on training and development. As the former General Manager of the Propane Training Institute, Bill has extensive experience in developing courseware and systems related to the safe handling of fuels. Bill also has extensive experience as a skilled facilitator in such topics as process quality improvement, customer service, and administrative processes and procedures. As a learning and development professional, Bill has a passion for helping organizations create engaging workplace environments. Bill is Vice President, Operations of the Fuels Learning Centre and can be reached by email at bill.egbert@fuelslc.com.