

Is Your Company Confusing Employee Engagement with Employee Satisfaction?

By Leon Kaye | May 31st, 2013



Adam Lowry and Eric Ryan of Method, a company with a culture of “weirdness”

Like many business terms, employee engagement is one attracting a lot of attention, focus, discussion and even controversy. And like any good business term, it has now devolved into a buzzword, where many of us talk about it but have no idea what it really is. Now some evidence suggests “engagement” is not all what it is cracked up to be.

As an Inc. article recently noted, engagement means little if the result is merely a work-life balance—though in this age where almost all of us are wired and therefore working after hours, balance is clearly in favor of work anyway! Of concern to some human resource professionals is whether employee engagement programs are truly resulting in greater **engagement** or if workers are simply more **satisfied**. Companies invest in these programs, after all, in the hopes that happier employees will be more loyal, perform at a higher level be proud stewards of the company’s mission, or contribute to the organization’s corporate social responsibility agenda, such as through volunteering or in some kind of community work.

Clearly the balance is tricky. A high-performing employee who feels the organization gives little in return may feel disengaged and therefore could be sending his or her resume elsewhere. Then you have the workers who do enough to get by, let colleagues pick up the slack, but of course feel “satisfied” . . . but they are not engaged, either. As human resources consultant Bernice Bowmaker Falconer explains:

Engagement is not satisfaction. Yes, it is true that a happier or more satisfied employee is more likely to have an increased level of discretionary effort, but more importantly – there are employees that are happy simply because they don’t feel the need to do much. This is the

dilemma that has organizations questioning both the importance and relevance of measuring engagement.

Of course, in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, most businesses have done a good job purging the ranks of the marginal performers. And in an era where the “H” in HR stands for “Head count” more than “human,” it behooves HR professionals even more to find effective ways to measure employees’ engagement and develop ways to motivate them even more—and therefore retain them. Take what occurred at the consultancy Boston Consulting Group: after the firm started a pilot “predictable time off” policy, (i.e. no emails, phone calls, nothing electronic) one night a week, teams with this new “PTO” were more motivated and engaged than teams who were constantly wired and on-call.

In the end, less fuss should be made over the semantics of using terms such as “engagement” and “satisfaction.” There are other words that may not make business consultants salivate, but they get to the point. Take the word “happiness,” the culture of which Tony Hsieh has long instilled in the online shoe mecca Zappos. Hsieh is on the record of bluntly saying the company will not hire those who do not fit the culture and will fire those who do not carry such a spirit once they are on board. Method, the home cleaning products company founded by Adam Lowry and Eric Ryan (**pictured above right**) is another company placing a huge emphasis on work culture—even if it means weirdness. Both companies have thrived overall the past several years. The consultants and HR mavens should take notes from them.