

Here's Why Your Employees Are Just Not That Into You

by David Lee Oct 10, 2012

Are you frustrated with employees who seem to be more “It’s all about me” than “How can I help my employer?”

Do you wish your employees shared your commitment to your organization’s goals and success?

If you can relate, join the club.

As you undoubtedly know if you’ve been in management, HR, or OD for any length of time, employee engagement research has repeatedly shown that the majority of employees do not report being highly engaged.

In other words, the majority of employees are not particularly “into” their employer, the organization’s well being, or its goals.



Recognizing and appreciating, but it's not working...

If you're like most employers, you conduct the requisite engagement survey, put on the requisite employee appreciation events, and institute the requisite employee recognition programs.

And still, the majority of your employees still don't seem to care. Would you like to know why?

I might not know you, but this I DO know...

While I might not know you or your organization, interviewing employees in focus groups over the years has given me an insider's view into what moments of truth leave employees feeling a less interested in making a contribution. Their stories also illustrate how many of these negative moments of truth strung together chart a steady downward trajectory in morale and engagement.

I also know how different it is to work with companies who are having morale problems and labor / management conflict versus employers who are known for being a great place to work. I've noticed how very differently HR staff and managers from the two groups treat me — which provides a diagnostic for how they treat their employees.

Finally, I know what I observe and have learned from high performing companies with passionate, committed, engaged employees — think Zappos, Southwest Airlines, and Ritz Carlton — and what they do very differently than their counterparts.

So, here's what I've found. There are seven major reasons why employees stop caring, why they go from being an excited new hire into what Gallup describes as a ROAD Warrior — Retired on Active Duty.

See how many in the following list ring true for your organization and you will have important clues as to why you're people are “just not that into you.”

7 reasons your employees are not that into you

1. Employees don't know what game they're in, how it's played, and what the stakes are. The majority of employees don't understand their employer's vision, business goals, strategy, brand promise, key initiatives, and marketplace realities, according to a survey of 23,000 employees conducted by Harris Interactive. Their research revealed that only 37 percent of employees understood what their employer was trying to achieve and why.

To dramatize the seriousness of this, Stephen Covey translated this sad reality into a soccer analogy. He wrote that if the typical organization were a soccer team, only four (4) out of the 11 players would know which goal to shoot on. Imagine trying to compete — especially in an ultra- competitive arena — with the majority of your team not even knowing what game they're supposed to be playing. If you're the typical organization, you're exactly in that situation.

Besides compromising their ability to perform well, not knowing the big picture leads to disinterest. How can you get excited about something you know little to nothing about? To examine how well your employees understand the game you're in, how it's played and what the goal is, reflect on how well leadership at all levels communicates to employees your mission and vision in real life terms, rather than slogans and platitudes. Think about how much your employees know about:

- Your business goals;
- Your Key Result areas;
- Your most important initiatives;
- Your brand promise and brand differentiation;
- How your business works and how the pieces fit together;
- Marketplace realities and what that means to your business.

The more they know, the more they are likely to care.

2. Employees don't know EXACTLY how to make the biggest contribution. Seeing the "Big Picture" isn't enough. Employees need to understand how their "Small Picture" directly affects the "Big Picture." In other words, each employee needs to know specifically what behaviors and actions on their part do the most to help you achieve the important business results you desire.

In the previously mentioned study by Harris Interactive, only 20 percent of employees reported having a line of sight between their job and their employer's goals. Reprising Covey's soccer analogy, that's like having only two of the eleven soccer players knowing what position they were supposed to play and how to play it.

The more your employees know how their work makes a difference and HOW to make a difference, the more they care.

3. You don't give employees a reason to care about contributing. Knowing WHAT their employer is trying to achieve and HOW they can help make this happen are not enough. Employees need to have a WHY. They need to care about actually making that contribution.

The issue of caring gets to the heart of employee disengagement. Employers who have employees who don't care — i.e. they have disengaged employees — typically relate to their employees very differently than employers who have employees who DO care.

Employers with employees who don't care often possess the following characteristics:

- Leadership does not communicate in inspiring ways about how what the organization does matters in the world.
- Leadership acts in ways that communicate "We don't care about you. We don't respect you," and so employees reciprocate by not caring about what leadership wants.
- Employees get worn out from a culture of mediocrity being tolerated, commitments not being kept, and feedback and requests being ignored.

- Employees feel like their own manager and/or their employer has a "User's Mentality." They demonstrate this by being "all over it" when they want something from their employees, but don't respond to employee concerns or requests.

4. Managers don't know how to create an environment that fosters passion, courage, a desire for excellence, and a willingness to go the extra mile. Because they manage in ways that are inconsistent with human nature, they don't know how to create an intrinsically rewarding work experience out of which inspired work naturally springs forth. Instead, the environment they create fosters beleaguered, resentful, listless prisoners.

5. Employees are set up for the "Agony of Defeat" rather than the "Thrill of Victory." When employees are onboarded ineffectively, when they don't get the tools, training, time, or resources to do their jobs well, they get to experience the soul-crushing "Agony of Defeat" day in and day out. With defeat becoming the norm, employees naturally become demoralized. They stop caring and they stop trying, or they leave to go to an employer where they can feel the "Thrill of Victory."

Examine how well you prepare new employees to succeed at their jobs, and whether you provide all employees with the tools, training, information, and support they need to do an excellent job and feel the "Thrill of Victory" on a regular basis.

6. Bad behavior and poor performance go unchallenged. Few aspects of work life poison the work environment like disrespectful and dysfunctional behavior going unchallenged. Not only does it damage morale, productivity, and customer service quality, it damages respect for management. Similarly, allowing poor performance — or even mediocre performance — to continue helps drive out the top performers and leaves behind the "C" players.

How strong is your management team, top to bottom, in addressing bad behavior and poor performance? Often, the single most effective thing a manager can do to turn around the emotional climate of her team is to fire the bad apples.

7. Employees feel unappreciated. What we appreciate appreciates. What we take for granted depreciates. When employees feel like the sacrifices they make, the extra effort they put in, and the great job they do is taken for granted, they gradually learn that what they do doesn't matter. They stop feeling like it matters, so they stop doing it.

Conversely, if you continually recognize, appreciate, and celebrate high performance, small wins, and the behaviors that make your business's goals and success possible, you'll get more of those behaviors and, more employees who care about you, your employer and making a valuable contribution.

What to do with this

- Use the above list as a self-assessment tool to see where you might have opportunities to improve.
- Engage your management team in focused discussion about these seven areas to get their perspective on what areas need the most work.
- Do focus groups to find out how well employees feel you are doing in these areas and ask for ideas on how you can improve.
- Identify "bright spots" in your organization — leaders who are already doing a great

job in any of the above areas – and use them as teaching stories for the rest of your leadership team.

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