

# Is Your Key Talent Engaged?

By Steven C. Coats

**L**ike many of you, I cannot get through the day without hearing something about employee engagement. It has become the strategy “du jour” for many organizations, with plenty of classes, surveys and metrics supporting the effort. And there are plenty of firms, large and small, now very active in this arena.

So where are you on this topic? Is employee engagement a vital issue for organizations, or more of an interesting, but mostly overhyped notion like so many before it?

It would be wise for you to pay attention to this issue - because it has a great deal of impact on your success now and in the future.

One factor of success on which almost everyone agrees is the need to have the right people in the right jobs. Many companies today are spending a great amount of time and effort in attempting to identify and further develop their “Key Talent,” so they will have the best people in those important jobs. Although definitions vary, these are the people identified as

future leaders of the organization, and those who clearly need to be “on the bus.” There should be no question that developing key talent is a major source of sustainable competitive advantage for everyone.

## Current State of Engagement

So consider these recent findings from Watson Wyatt Worldwide. It seems there has been a “disturbance in the force” with key talent. They discovered the percentage of top talent who:

Would recommend their organization to others:

**Down 20%**

Are satisfied with advancement opportunities:

**Down 26%**

Want to remain with their firm:

**Down 14%**

Believe mgmt has ability to grow the business:

**Down 29%**

And one other interesting finding they provided:

The overall level of engagement of top talent:

**Down 25%**

Now you may feel inclined to dismiss these findings, since they are representative of only one study. However, look closely at other current research on the topic, and you will see similar trends and conclusions from a number of the recognized experts in the field.

## What Is the Potential Impact?

Convinced yet or not, the meaty question for you to answer is this: what if these findings are indeed accurate? To take the question further, what if your own top talent is, in fact, becoming less engaged in and committed to your future? And what if your solid contributors, who are not yet prized as key talent, are following suit? Should this be of concern to you?

Let’s add another pertinent and perhaps troubling trend to this discussion. There are more and more warning signs indicating that as the economy begins to pull out of its tailspin, many of the top players are going to start making moves to other organizations. Think about it – if you have not done much of anything to keep talented people engaged during the tough times, why would you expect them to want to stay with

you when new opportunities open up elsewhere?

So, when you most need a pool of capable people ready to capitalize on and advance your own new growth opportunities, they may no longer be there. Forget about the wasted investment on those who have left, or the excessive costs of recruiting, hiring and training new people. What is the long-term cost of being forced to remain idle, when your competitors are rapidly moving forward with renewed vigor from their highly talented, devoted and engaged associates? Chances are good that your recession has just been extended.

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*When your top talent becomes less engaged in their current work, they are very likely becoming actively engaged in seeking more fulfilling work elsewhere.*

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### **The Leadership Factor**

Keeping people engaged is more than a series of activities; it is an important leadership issue. And from a leader's perspective engagement requires you to think carefully about the relationships you build with other people and the decisions you make which affect them.

On the relationship side, there are many actions you can take to

maintain and even increase commitment. The end game is to ensure that people continue to be passionate about, and have their full hearts in their work. Letting people know that you value their contributions, providing them challenging growth opportunities, recognizing them, listening to them – these are but a sample of behaviors you must demonstrate as a leader. For people, especially top talent, to remain engaged, they must be led, not just managed.

So do not make the mistake of directing all of your energy into determining the very best survey to use to collect data about everyone's level of engagement, while completely disregarding the need to get their feedback on how well you are actually leading them. Your leadership is one of the biggest factors as to why they feel engaged or not, and whether they will choose to stay in the long run. Never forget that.

You must be also mindful of the decisions you and others make and the messages you send throughout the organization. Just recently, news about the sudden resignation of a highly admired top performing leader hit the hallways of an organization. This person's boss, a senior leader, is silently feared, even despised by a growing number of highly regarded people due to his deceitful, oppressive behaviors. And key direct reports who do not submit are soon sent packing.

In the minds of many, executive management has chosen to ignore their core values and tolerate this

behavior. Do you think this will cause other highly talented people to at least question whether this organization is really the place for them? Your decisions, what you do – and do not do – influence the commitment level of your people in ways you may not fully understand. You must be aware of the kind of fallout which inevitably occurs from situations such as the one just described.

At the present time, many organizations still find themselves in difficult times. This is one of those periods where a number of people, including key talent, are thankful just to have a job. Levels of uncertainty and fear are high. This has led to more hesitancy in risk taking, and more self-imposed pressure to not screw up. When times are tough and jobs are scarce, associates often feel personally vulnerable and much more dependent upon their organizations. It is in this kind of circumstance, when the true leader you are will be most clearly demonstrated.

### **Leadership Is a Choice**

For example, you can choose to take advantage of the situation and exploit your associates. Frequently reminding them they are on thin ice and preying upon their job insecurities is one way to get them to buckle down even more. You can capriciously impose higher objectives, force them to work longer hours and likely disregard many of their needs. After all, they no doubt feel at least somewhat indebted for the chance to still be working, so they will do whatever it takes

to remain on the payroll. Right? Logically, there is really no need to waste any time or effort on keeping people more engaged. You do not have to. They will comply, because they have to.

Or you can make another choice. In spite of the fact that the organization may currently have more leverage, you as a leader can still choose to inspire others, to appreciate and encourage them, to challenge and test them, and to let them know how vital they are to the future success of the enterprise. You can choose to work at increasing their levels of engagement and bonds of commitment.

For you see, leaders know that when it comes to results, commitment trumps compliance. Committed people outperform those who are merely following orders. As the less engaged remain primarily focused on their own self-preservation, highly engaged and committed people are also deeply invested in helping

the entire organization remain successful. And it is your engaged talent who are going to be the best source of the innovative ideas and solutions, which will be essential for your organization to rebound.

Always remember that one of the chief responsibilities of a leader is to build an organization that prospers over time. Growth and prosperity require capable and committed people in the right positions today and tomorrow. There is no better time to be taking a close look at and gathering feedback on the engagement/commitment issue from all of your people, including those you have identified as top talent. Then you must step up as a leader and commit yourself to strengthen their capabilities and buy-in, instead of creating compliance or even animosity.

Regardless of whether you define engagement in a three or four piece pie chart or survey associates with a twelve question

inventory or one of some other number, you will discover that a real boost in engagement ultimately requires more effective leadership. You will have to interact with individuals in better ways and work continuously to create a more desirable overall environment, if you intend to positively change associates' perceptions and performance levels, so they want to stay on your bus. Engagement is much more than popular organization-wide labels, revised performance management categories and new strategic initiatives. It is personal.

Never lose sight that the kind of leadership you demonstrate in today's tough times will long be remembered, especially as overall market conditions improve and external opportunities become more prevalent for your identified stars. Think very carefully about the memory you are most likely creating for others, through your actions right now!

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