

Ignore front-line leaders at your peril

Employees who need the most care often paired with least-prepared leaders

We've all heard the old adage, "Employees join great companies, but quit bad managers." It's true. Based on research, the key driver of engagement is the relationship with one's direct manager. If line managers are disengaged, their employees are more likely to be disengaged themselves. However, we woefully under invest in supervisory training.

A recent survey by *Canadian HR Reporter* and the Human Resources Professional Association highlights the impact of bad managers on employee engagement, turnover and morale. The survey of 793 HR professionals found 73 per cent believed managers who bully, speak inappropriately to staff, play favorites and are disrespectful pose a significant problem. About one in 10 managers are considered to be "problem managers," according to more than one-half of the survey respondents.

Just imagine what the results would be if companies were able to turn things around and engage these managers. Front-line leaders can truly make or break engagement efforts because they are perfectly positioned to transmit key information up and down the ranks. Clearly, if front-line leaders are not in alignment with the company's engagement goals, the chances of success are slim to none.

For years, I've found it ironic that the employees who need the most care — entry-level staff — are entrusted to managers who have, on average, the least experience and who are often lacking in the very communication skills required to establish trust and create alignment. On the other end of the spectrum, senior leaders who have honed their communication skills over the years and have accumulated years of practice in leading people are most likely directing senior executives who are self-sufficient and independently motivated.

In other words, those who have the skills are leading people with nominal need, while those who lack the requested skills and experience are leading those with the greatest. This attenuation of leadership traits at the first line manager level can be a tremendous stumbling block to engagement that



■ GUEST COMMENTARY

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requires ongoing training and monitoring.

The biggest guns in the engagement arsenal are people leaders who actually have the ability to lead people. Many line managers achieve the position for the wrong reasons: tenure, technical ability and personal ambition. And, unfortunately, the ability to lead people is a trait almost everyone thinks they've got. Those who would never venture an opinion on a technical issue may have completely misplaced confidence in their communication and team-building skills.

This hindrance to engagement is magnified by the fact very few line managers are being assessed on their people skills as a core competency, let alone as a requirement for advancement. One of the biggest mistakes organizations can make is to assume an outstanding employee is also an outstanding succession candidate.

Timberland, a footwear and clothing manufacturer based in France, is well-known as a best-in-class employee engagement and leadership company.

"We don't care if someone is a great accountant," says John Pazzani, Timberland's former chief culture officer who is now a vice-president. "He or she is not going to be an accounting supervisor unless they exhibit leadership traits that are consistent with Timberland's four core values: humility, humanity, integrity and excellence."

If you don't make engagement a job requirement and measure one's effectiveness in engaging staff, line managers won't find the time to do it. They're being asked to do

so many other things — they need to be trained in and evaluated on leading people.

A critical step to build engagement is to treat line managers as part of company leadership, including making sure they receive critical communication in advance of the general employee population. They need to learn the issue, policy change or strategic plan thoroughly, including what has already been challenged or debated. They also need the opportunity to ask questions. They may need time to digest a policy change and to think through how to incorporate it into their group's work. Most of all, they must appear informed when they transmit the information to staff. Otherwise, their authority is diminished and they will have a difficult time showing genuine support of the new information. They may become cynical and cynicism at the line manager level is arsenic in the engagement well.

Line managers must also be told, in taking on responsibility for leading people, they forfeit the right to vocal cynicism. To attain or retain a line management role, it must be understood success does not only mean keeping the numbers up, it means providing hope, guidance, inspiration and vision. If line managers disagree with a corporate mandate, they need to discuss it with those above them and not express their displeasure with those below.

Take a hard look at the organization. Who are your best managers or people? What are the behaviors and traits that make them so good? It can't just be they're easy to work for.

Make a list of your discoveries. These are the behaviors and traits that define success in your organization and the traits you must cultivate in each and every line manager. Be prepared to make an investment in the development of people skills in the same way you would in technical development.

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