

13 Things Every HR Professional Can Do to Improve Employee Engagement

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1. **Conduct interviews to identify sources of disengagement and *involve employees in coming up with solutions*.**—If done well, these interviews will provide you with more detailed, in-depth, usable information than an engagement survey will. Make sure you involve employees from different departments, positions, and generations because their “[engagement recipes](#)” will be different. By involving employees in creating solutions you are more likely to have useful solutions and...you tap into two major drivers of engagement: the opportunity to solve problems and the chance to make a difference.
2. **Share articles with management on how engagement affects their ability to deliver results, and their role in employee engagement.**—Don’t expect all managers to recognize the important role they play in employee engagement, even if it’s obvious to you. Also, because becoming better at this takes time and effort, they need to believe it will be worth the hard work and discomfort of trying new behaviors and having difficult conversations, both of which are required on the road to improved engagement.
3. **Help supervisors understand why it’s in their best interest to be a mentor and coach, not just a boss.**—This is especially important with Millennial employees who place a high value on having a supervisor who cares about them, their well-being, and their professional development. Regardless of the generation of employee, mentoring and coaching enables supervisors to get far better results from employees.
4. **Help supervisors engage in ongoing professional/career development conversations with their direct reports.**—This addresses two critical drivers of employee engagement. First, it helps employees grow professionally—something especially important to Millennials. Second, it communicates “I care about you,” another powerful driver of engagement, especially with Millennials who, as a generation, grew up with far more adult interest and attention than did previous generations.
5. **Help supervisors work with employees to connect their interests and talents with real problems that need to be solved.**—The more employees get to use their strengths, the better they perform. By working with them to find ways to use their unique interests on the job, you help create a [customized work experience](#), which leads to [greater engagement](#). This again is especially important to Millennials, who want to bring their whole person to bear at work, and

see work and life as an integrated whole, not as two separate facets of their existence that need to be compartmentalized.

6. **Help supervisors appreciate the importance of giving ongoing feedback and make sure they have the training and coaching to do this well.**—Giving [constructive feedback](#) is an area even good supervisors typically fall short in. While it’s unnerving for anyone to feel like they are “flying blind” at work in terms of what their supervisor thinks about their work, it is even harder for Millennials, who, as a cohort, grew up getting a never-ending stream of feedback and encouragement. While the word “constructive” typically implies negative, improvement-oriented feedback, here it means any feedback designed to guide and shape behavior. Thus, an important component of giving ongoing feedback is [giving positive feedback that identifies and reinforces desirable behaviors and performance](#).
7. **Encourage and coach all managers to be more “relational”**—Being “relational” means being the opposite of being impersonal, “all business,” and transactional. It means using the same courtesies, pleasantries, and thoughtfulness one would extend to friends, family members, and neighbors. It doesn’t mean being BFFs with employees, it means being more human. Supervisors who connect at a more human, “heart to heart” level are easier to bond with and to care about. This affects how interested employees are in pleasing their supervisor and how much they care about contributing to their team and employer goals. To put it in negative terms, if employees don’t feel an emotional bond to their manager, they are far less likely to put their heart into their work.
8. **Encourage and coach all managers on the importance of showing genuine interest in employees as human beings, and as individuals, not just as a means to an end**—This is also part of being relational, but goes much deeper. It’s the difference between being a User of People and a [Servant Leader](#). Research on employee engagement has repeatedly shown that employees place a high value on having a manager who cares about them as person. They do not want to be viewed by their employer as just a “number” or “cog in a great big wheel.” Furthermore, engagement research shows that having their manager show interest in their professional development is also a powerful driver of employee engagement.
9. **Experiment with Reverse Mentoring**—This is the practice of [younger employees mentoring older employees](#), not just on how to be more tech savvy, but also in understanding the new generation of employee’s perspectives on work, life, what motivates them, and what de-motivates them.
10. **Create your own version of “The Dynamic Dozen”**—In [this program](#), created by US Bank in Minneapolis, high potential Millennial employees are brought together throughout the year and involved in a number of activities that help them learn from senior executives more of the “big picture.” They learn more about the bank’s strategy, how its run, and issues senior leaders discuss. As part of The Dynamic Dozen program, the group provides consulting to project

leaders and departments seeking the Millennial perspective on their project or initiative. They also choose a project which provides value to the bank. For instance, one year, the team chose to research how to make the customer experience more welcoming, especially to the new generation of consumers. Many of their findings and recommendations were later instituted, which both satisfied a core engagement driver—the desire to make a difference—and provided tremendous value to their employer. By creating your own version of the Dynamic Dozen, you provide opportunities for your most ambitious, talented employees to learn, grow, and make an impact, something all talent wants in a work experience.

11. **Continually collect and share stories of the difference your organization makes through your employees' actions.**—Connecting employees with The Why, with “Here’s why we exist” “Here’s the good that we do in the world” is one of THE most important things an employer can do to improve engagement. This is especially true for Millennial employees, who place an especially high value on working for an employer who is doing good in the world, and to feel that they are making a difference in the world. The telecom Ericsson is one of the best at [doing this](#) as is the medical device manufacturer Medtronic. Medtronic’s website displays [inspiring stories](#) that communicate “Because of your hard work, these people’s lives are made better” (for more of these stories, google “Medtronic stories”). They also fly in patients whose lives have been saved by their medical devices to tell their story to employees. Connecting employees to The Why not only satisfies the human need to feel like they matter (i.e. they are making a difference in the world), it is also a powerful resilience-enhancing practice. During challenging times, if employees feel emotionally bonded to the mission and vision, they are more stress resistant and determined, than if they only focus on the day to day grind and frustrations of the change, along with the the challenges and uncertainty it brings.

12. **“Celebrate the Awesome” by continually sharing stories of employees being excellent and embodying your values, like Ritz Carlton does.**—Sharing stories of employees being awesome provides inspiration, celebration, and education. When employees hear examples of their co-workers performing with excellence and doing amazing things, it inspires them to improve THEIR game. It also lets everyone know “We notice and appreciate when you perform with excellence and go the extra mile”. Sharing these stories also act as virtual reality training videos. When told well, listeners can see the story unfold in their mind and thus what precisely excellence looks like. Stories of awesome also show what important cultural values look and sound like in real life. At Ritz Carlton, [these stories](#) become part of the daily team huddles, reminding employees who they are and what’s possible, and priming them to look for opportunities to [wow their guests](#). Doing this regularly with your employees helps you provide inspiration, celebration, and education on a regular basis.

13. **Communicate the importance of training and coaching for your managers, because they are Ground Zero for engagement.**—You will never improve employee engagement over the long term without actively involving your supervisors and managers at all levels. As Gallup’s research has shown, [managers are THE most important variable in the employee engagement equation](#). If

managers continue to see employee engagement as an “HR Thing,” employee engagement initiatives will fail. As HR thought leader [Gary Hamel](#) notes: “...the foundations of ‘modern’ management were laid by people like Daniel McCallum, Frederick Taylor, and Henry Ford, all of whom were born before the end of the American Civil War in 1865.” Thus, most managers are using a “human technology” as old as the telegraph. There is no way such Old School approaches can engage today’s employees, nor can they unleash the innovative and productive potential required of today’s knowledge work-centric economy. Investing in training does NOT mean putting managers through a one-day seminar on supervisory skills. It means addressing this mission critical factor with the seriousness and investment it deserves. Furthermore, to truly reap the benefits that professional development can provide, including coaching as part of the process will multiply the impact many times over.

Now What?

If you are serious about improving employee engagement—and reaping the rewards it brings—share this article with senior management. Next, start off with recommendation #1 as this will enable you to identify low-hanging fruit—those things that are having the largest negative impact. It will also enable you to identify “bright spots”—those departments and teams in your organization that are highly engaged, and to learn what it is those managers are doing to create that environment.

About David Lee: David Lee, the founder of HumanNature@Work, helps employers improve employee engagement, customer service, and morale, through his work as a consultant, trainer, and coach. He has worked with organizations and presented at conferences throughout North America and Australia.

David is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety, Powerful Storytelling Techniques*, and nearly 100 articles and book chapters on topics related to employee engagement, leadership development, and “how to have the conversations that get you the results you want.”

Recently, his work has focused on the central role productive relationships and productive conversations have on business results, with this being the take away message:

“Every better business result you want requires having a better conversation.”

For information on David Lee’s “How to Turn around Your Engagement Efforts So They Deliver Results” program, or to bring him into your organization or association as a speaker, either email him david@humannatureatwork.com or call 207-571-9898.