

Driving employee passion

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What influences employee passion? Jim Lawless argues good leadership is key and offers tips for those struggling with disengaged staff.



A recent Blanchard study found that meaningful work, collaboration, fairness, autonomy, growth, connectedness with your leader and connectedness with colleagues are all key in influencing employee passion.

While most trainers wouldn't argue with the assertion that these are all important in generating employee satisfaction, there is limited value in lists such as these that offer simplistic ideas and very little to feel passionate about. Here are some thoughts on how trainers can take these points and develop them into something more practical to help the leaders we work with inspire passion in their people.

Meaningful work

Let's think about hotels for a moment. It's a pretty safe bet that the directors of a global hotel group find meaning in their work. The difficulty is in ensuring that the night receptionist at the hotel's Slough branch feels a similar sense of purpose or passion. Important though, because that person might well leave a big impression on me. Because the company agenda is set so far away, the danger is that it will seem remote to junior staff, particularly those based far away from head office. Effort is rarely spent creating a sense of purpose in these members of the team.



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Now let's move from hotels to fans, be they football supporters or Eastenders viewers, whose loyalty is derived from feeling that they have, firstly, a thing that they want to be a part of and, secondly, a part to play in the success of the thing – be that willing on their team or participating in the post-soap analysis the next day. In the workplace, through a mixture of involvement, a degree of local level autonomy and well constructed communication that works on the leadership 'why' as much as the traditional management 'what' and 'how', new initiatives and strategies can be given a wholly different chance of success, where all staff feel part of it. The whole aim is passion and engagement rather than compliance. That is a winner.

Collaboration and connectedness with team

Collaboration and connectedness are both about feeling part of a team. The trend for team building through outdoor activities such as go-karting and orienteering weekends has waned. Why? Due to the cost of the activity, skilled staff are rarely available to facilitate an understanding of how this translates into meaningful relationships back in the office, so real change is rare. Coming back to football fans, the cheering crowds seen at games every Saturday haven't been on any paintballing away-days. They didn't need to. They already have a common purpose. Their sense of team comes from their understanding of the goals of the team and their part in delivering them (to turn up every week and cheer the players on) and the part others must play (the manager, players etc). The same applies in business. Understanding the goals of a business, the part an individual has to play, the parts played by others and how they can work together to achieve the business goals is an important part of teambuilding. But how much attention do we pay to giving the individual real understanding of the vital nature of their role – and of the role of the person next to them?

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Autonomy

Giving people the independence to carry out their work with as much autonomy as possible is a sign that they are trusted. This is a much more effective way of making your people feel trusted and valued than continually telling them that 'people are our most important asset' when the reality doesn't back up the cliché. They are clearly not if you don't trust them! As a leader, however, it can be hard to let go, especially if their style is different to yours.

There has been much hype around coaching and many excellent (and some poor) coaching initiatives. I still strongly believe that giving ownership through coaching is the most effective way of allowing autonomy within a framework for delivery of agreed results. It is not a soft option. Done well, it is a genuinely stretching and often scary option. Autonomy with responsibility is a powerful inspirer – and motivator.

Recognition

The importance of communicating meaningful recognition of what your people have achieved cannot be underestimated. The world's first professor on leadership, John Adair, has said that "recognition is the oxygen of the human spirit". Everyone needs to know and to feel that their contribution towards the business goals are noticed and appreciated. This is a key tool in the leader's bag. You can radically increase engagement by ensuring that the recognition is, and feels, genuine.

All these factors come together under the banner of leadership. As anyone who has ever had the experience of being badly led or managed can testify, it can have a drastic effect on job satisfaction. As trainers we can play a valuable role here. We need to instil in the leaders we train the importance of driving passion and give them

practical ways to do it. We need to help them to see that the job of conducting the orchestra cannot be delegated. That the practical elements of good leadership need to be in the diary – and to remain there as other demands compete for attention. We should encourage leaders to remain visible and in touch with their whole team, no matter how large, encouraging the sense of connectedness with their leader identified by Blanchard. We must also encourage our leaders to take risks, to trust their people to do their jobs. And finally we need to help them to see how they can and must lead by example when it comes to driving passion.