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Returning to the basics: Staff engagement

Organisations must deliver on their outcomes, whether they involve maintaining their profit levels or providing customers with a better quality of service. They cannot do it alone. Their ability to achieve their mandate to shareholders or to the state depends on their people assets. Relying on capital, infrastructure, equipment or sophisticated digital systems cannot provide the intrinsic attachment needed to achieve business goals. Only people can. Employees have talent, tenacity and time which must be unlocked by creative employer led strategies in order to attain organizational objectives. However, this is not an easy task for employers to do in a constrained space where revenues or grants have declined, operating costs have escalated and employees' pay cheques can barely satisfy their needs much less for their desires. Yet the organizational workload has increased in a survival mode and employees are being asked to do more with less with a feeling of stagnation where their compensatory desires are too distant to have hope and personal development needs are partially met. Managers and leaders need to reshuffle their thinking like a deck of cards and use inside the box thinking strategies to tap into the potential and motivation of staff to get the job done. The case for returning to "old school ways" of activating staff to apply discretionary effort to the task and organisation goals is created. The time has come for returning to the basics of staff engagement.

Let us address the elephant in this article, "how can staff be engaged when remuneration packages are years out of date with no improvement in sight?" Whilst this realization represents an uphill battle for many, leaders must think creatively in leveraging organizational resources and market opportunities in benefitting staff. An entrepreneurial climate must be developed where businesses must seek financial earning opportunities to earn income so that staff can be rewarded for their inputs. In these desperate economic circumstances with rising living costs, staff are only willing to commit to endeavours which can directly contribute to their "bottom line". Executing business ventures, seeking grant funding for research and launching new product lines where employees get a transparent slice of the "pie" can turnaround the disquiet employees experience due to outdated remuneration packages. Whilst some staff may contend that they shouldn't have to apply extra effort to earn monetary incentives to buffer their stagnant salary, it might be the only recourse given strained circumstances. This is where leaders communicating the "gravity" of the economic space to all in order to

get staff to identify with the innovative thinking and the alternative ways of looking at the compensation challenges.

Contrary to perception, remuneration, bonuses and financial incentives are not the only way to tap into the potential value vault of staff. Non-financial methods which are linked to the job content itself can engage staff towards their job duties and organizational outcomes. For example, providing staff with training opportunities can equip staff with the key competencies to aid their effectiveness in performing their job duties. Moreso, low cost and creative training such as supervisor mentoring, webinars and short online courses can meaningfully impact their personal and career development. Organisations must no longer hide behind meagre funds plight for staff training and development. Furthermore, leaders must remember that staff not only has tacit experience about the work process but ideas for improvement. As such, opportunities must be created in meetings and brainstorming sessions for staff to provide feedback on company matters. Valuing employees' ideas and providing updates on their suggestions can create not only "employee voice" but ignite a commitment towards the work process. Such initiatives must be cemented with middle and senior management creating a creative problem solving mindset and transformational leadership behaviours in getting staff to apply discretionary effort and "go the extra mile". This end state is the value add with engagement strategies which results in staff productivity and deep seated intrinsic commitment to the organizational cause which cannot be measured on a payroll slip.

In engaging staff, it is the simple leadership gestures which matters. Asking staff "how was their weekend?" or "how is the work coming along?" in a genuine sense can unlock staff's reluctant thinking. Starting meetings by recognizing staff for their contributions to organizational milestones, however trivial or large they might be, can stimulate staff motivational bearings to contribute even more. Above all, leaders who take time to communicate with staff on pressing company matters, such as compliance issues, difficulty in paying company bills and other threats to organizational survival can get staff to adjust their expectations and even commit more to the work process. Keeping staff in the information loop or as some would say in the "circle of trust" can tap into staff engagement and talent bank. Moreover, the measures contained in this article should not be a "one off event" but enshrined in the norms and practices of

leaders and managers as the cornerstone of an engagement culture. If not, firms will never be able to realize the essential ingredient to creative problem solving at the workplace.

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