

Thriving Workplace Cultures Are Built on Engagement

Effective evaluation tools and communication are keys to fostering motivated employees

By Betty Lonis

The common misconception in the humanresources is that there is a guidebook to guarantee happy employees. In reality, the secret to employee engagement varies from company to company, even in the mortgage industry — and, more importantly, from employee to employee. It cannot be defined by generation or geography. Instead, it is determined by personality, individual desires and the interactions that occur between colleagues.

Although the importance of corporate culture seems to have only caught on in recent years, the truth is it is a timeless concept. Company culture has always been important, but the nature of its importance has changed over time. Today, more people prioritize company culture because they feel comfortable doing so.

When we think of company culture, however, we have to define what it means. In part, it is defined by these questions: “What is it like to work at that company?” and “Who do I get to work with?” Many prospective employees ask themselves these questions to determine how an organization’s values, priorities and workforce align with their own beliefs and desires — which is a measure of whether the organization is a good fit for them.

In the final analysis, a company’s culture is defined by its people. Successfully attracting, engaging and retaining talented people, then, are keys to fostering a healthy company culture — one that nurtures opportunities for engagement and career advancement.

Attracting talent

Many companies, including those in the mortgage industry, are focused on attracting young professionals. Consequently, they seek to understand what younger people value in the workplace.

For example, many millennials — the rising generation of young adults now in their 20s and early 30s — are focused on advancement, given they are in the early stages of their careers. They seek out workplaces where they can learn a lot and advance quickly — all while taking on more responsibility and making influential contributions. A major obstacle for companies, therefore, is keeping young people challenged and engaged at work — while also providing them with plenty of opportunities for career development.

An important tip to keep in mind when catering to young mortgage professionals, whether they are starting careers as loan processors or originators, is to remember that they appreciate and desire frequent feedback beyond the traditional annual performance review. They want to be coached and rewarded for their efforts.

Many millennials also value flexibility and work-life balance. They make quality of life a priority and devote as much focus to activities outside the workplace as they do to their professional endeavors. A good way to assure potential hires understand a company’s work environment is to be clear about what is expected of them as an employee of the company.

In the big picture, however, flexibility, work-life balance and advancement are career

goals that are common across all generations. They are not unique to the young professionals entering the workforce. While there are interesting group dynamics at work with the millennial generation that might be worth considering from an engagement perspective, how engaged individual employees are depends, in large measure, on personality, personal desires and experiences.

Many people who are part of the baby boomer generation, for example, also value pursuing some degree of volunteer work or community service. These efforts have become more popular and apparent in recent years, in part, because many millennials feel they have permission and more opportunities to pursue those life choices — whereas many employees in the past may not have felt that same sense of empowerment. Work environments are arguably more collaborative now and work-life balance a higher priority than in past decades. This change has benefited employees across all generations.

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Engaging employees

While many mortgage offices spend a great deal of time focusing on mortgage originators who can produce high sales numbers, it is also critical to focus on support staff, such as operations and corporate personnel. It doesn't matter how many loans your brokers or loan officers originate if turnover in your support staff means loans are not getting closed on time. Mortgage companies must analyze whether support staff are still engaged and, if so, what has kept them engaged, so more resources can be put into engagement strategies that work.

The reality of the workplace is that some people stay at a company for years and even decades because their roles provide security and consistent income. Others feel a sense of loyalty, or a fear of leaving a comfortable job for something unknown. A company must ask why many of these employees seem to be working on auto pilot and then determine what steps can be taken to make them more engaged in the workplace.

Then, of course, there are people who stay with a job long term because they truly love what they do and feel they are contributing to an organization. At mortgage companies, there are no doubt loan originators who have developed long-standing relationships with customers and have been top sellers for decades. These engaged employees are great resources. Chances are, because they are satisfied and successful at work, they will be more willing to provide feedback on what motivates them. That insight can help the company improve and increase engagement among all employees.

Understanding a company's employee population on macro and micro levels is vital to advancing employee satisfaction and engagement. In addition to proactive individual conversations, anonymous employee-satisfaction surveys also are a great way to gauge employees' engagement level. Beyond using this method as an analysis tool, surveys can include an opportunity for participants to make suggestions on how to improve company practices.

Improve communications

Communication is another key to understanding how employees feel about their workplace and to ensuring employee satisfaction and fulfillment. People want transparency. They want to understand what is happening at a company and also how that will impact them.

For example, the TRID consumer-disclosure regulations adopted this past fall seriously impacted the way many mortgage companies operate by requiring changes in mortgage documentation and the mortgage-processing timeline. Employees must be kept up to speed on these kinds of transitions so they understand them and can continue to be engaged, successful and contribute to the overall success of the mortgage company.

Mortgage-company employees also want to understand how their activities impact the organization. Much of the responsibility to foster constructive communications falls on managers. Managers should speak with employees frequently about individual performance, as well as the company's overall performance. Having these conversations will allow managers to decipher what motivates

mortgage originators and others to do good work. These conversations also let employees know that their opinions and ideas have true influence on the future of the company.

Creating a sense that employees are valued can be challenging, however, because it means something different for each employee. Some people appreciate public recognition, while others prefer a simple "thank you" in private. Another strategy for demonstrating that employees are valued is to invite staff members who show promise to an occasional senior-level meeting. A manager also could set up individual lunch meetings with employees to discuss their progress, or to simply check in on how they are doing.

If the goal of a meeting with an employee is to advance engagement, the best approach is to engage in an open dialogue, rather than creating a situation where employees feel interrogated or bombarded by a series of probing questions. A helpful way to begin might be to say, "Help me understand what's happening from your perspective, so we can provide better service to our customers."



There is no secret weapon to establishing and maintaining employee engagement. The right evaluation tools and smart communication strategies, however, can improve understanding of what motivates employees and the chances of really connecting with employees — which leads to increased engagement levels for everyone. ■