

business issues

MIND READING FOR MANAGERS

BY KIM SEELING SMITH

How to fully engage your staff in five easy conversations.

DID YOU KNOW THAT, ON AVERAGE, only a fraction of your staff might be bringing their “A game” to work every day?

According to companies like Aon Hewitt and the Gallup Organization, this number is about one in five. The rest? At best they are bringing their B or C games; at worst, their main goal is to keep from getting fired.

Countless companies dedicate a sizeable chunk of their annual budget to solving their employee engagement issues, when in reality most engagement issues—as well as performance and behavioral problems—can be solved through conversation. Five of them, to be precise.

But most managers don’t talk to their staff frequently enough, know how to talk to them or know what to talk about. Managers are unaware as to how to plug into their employees’ minds and figure out what they really want and what they need to be fully engaged—and productive.

There are no psychic forces at work. Getting into the minds of your employees to glean the information needed to increase not only engagement, but also productivity, in your workforce can be as simple as conducting the following five “FOCUSed” conversations.

Conversation 1: Feedback

There are two types of feedback that fall under this conversation. First, give praise where praise is due. Studies have shown that a vast majority of employees do not feel appreciated enough for the job they do. Praise, it seems, is a scarce commodity in the workplace. So if your staff is doing a good job, be sure to let them know.

Conversely, one of the key factors in employee engagement is the ability to have your say. Be receptive to your staff’s feedback. Who knows, they may just come up with a brilliant idea that makes a huge difference for the team or company.

Conversation 2: Objectives

Most performance issues stem from a disconnection between what the manager perceives as meeting objectives and what the staff member perceives as meeting them. To drastically reduce performance issues, managers must both clearly define and articulate expectations—yet few do.

Your employees need to know what they must do to be successful in their jobs and how that success will be measured. And you need to have a clearly defined yardstick by which to

objectively measure performance. Aligning their expectations with yours will result in less frustration and anxiety—on both your parts.

Conversation 3: Career Development

Many studies list career development within the top three factors that employees gauge to determine whether to stay with their current employer or look for another job. Yet many managers typically avoid this topic like the plague for one of three reasons:

1. They don’t understand how to manage their own careers.
2. They are afraid that if they help their staff manage their career better, they may be surpassed on the corporate or shop ladder.
3. They are afraid to talk about career development because they don’t feel they can meet the employee’s expectations. (This is especially true in smaller companies or niche functions where there is not a lot of vertical career opportunity available.)

Helping staff manage their careers makes good business sense. Ensuring that they understand what opportunities exist within your company, something they may not recognize without your help, will lessen their likelihood of looking outside of it.

Find out what your employees’ priorities are and have open, honest conversations about how your company can help them achieve these priorities, even with any constraints you may have. Suggest and recommend internal opportunities to learn, grow and develop and they will at least delay, if not completely avoid, looking for external ones.

Aligning your employees’
expectations with yours will result
in less frustration and anxiety—
on both your parts.

Kim Seeling Smith is an international human resources expert and author of the newly released book *Mind Reading for Managers: 5 FOCUSed Conversations for Greater Employee Engagement and Productivity*. For more information on Kim, please visit <http://igniteglobal.com>.



Conversation 4: Underlying Motivators

This conversation helps to uncover those intrinsic factors—“currencies of choice”—that have been shown to be much more highly motivating than extrinsic ones such as pay and benefits. By tapping into each individual’s currencies of choice, you will help uncover what they need to go the extra mile. Conversely, once they do, they need to be recognized appropriately for it. The old adage “praise in public, correct in private” is only half true. Many people don’t respond well to public recognition.

Identify the drivers of each individual staff member to unlock productivity and unleash potential, then recognize them appropriately when they do go that extra mile.

Conversation 5: Strengths

According to the Gallup Organization, teams whose members play to their strengths most of the time are:

- 50% more likely to have low employee turnover
- 38% more likely to be highly productive
- 44% more likely to earn high customer satisfaction scores

Strengths can be defined as the innate abilities or behavioral patterns that are neurologically hardwired into our brains between the ages of 3 and 15. The context of the behavior will change over time, but the patterns remain the same. So those children who share their toys in the sandbox at the age of 5 may very well become 15-year-olds who volunteer at the local charity. And 20 years on they may become the 35-year-olds who are the most collaborative in the workplace.

Strength identification also requires a very minor time commitment; as little as two hours per week can make a world of difference. If you can help your staff determine behaviors that come naturally to them, you will find that their stress will decrease and they will become more engaged—and of course more productive.

Tapping In

There is no reason to spend mass amounts of time and money on “engagement” programs when all it takes is tapping into the minds of your personnel. By first hiring the right staff and then employing the five FOCUSed conversations, managers can significantly increase overall employee engagement. Communicate with your staff frequently, effectively and about the things that really matter to them, and your business will be better for it. ■