

## Fighting Employee Apathy

Do the people in your workplace really care? Or are they just going through the motions? Every manager needs to know the answer, because it makes an enormous difference to the performance of any organization. Engaged employees are not just happier than apathetic ones, but they're inclined to do their best—far more than the required minimum—for their employer. That extra effort can make the difference between successful enterprises and also-rans.

Apathy and engagement, like other aspects of workplace culture and attitudes, depend on factors that are not easy to measure or control. They're not just about money. Individual personalities are crucial. No two people will react to a particular job in the same way. "In terms of interest in a job, people are as different as their thumbprints," says Samuel Culbert, a professor of management at the University of California, Los Angeles.

### Recognizing apathy

But Culbert and other experts say apathy is not hard to detect. "Look at the [employee's] face. You can tell," Culbert says. "People who don't care look like they don't care."

Bob Ruotolo, an organizational development consultant with Phoenix, Ariz.,-based Murro, Ruotolo & Partners, says apathy can show up in various types of behavior, depending on the emotional makeup of the employee. Apathetic people can be "detached, unfocused, without much of an attention span," Ruotolo says. "Their energy may be low. They may be easy to anger, argumentative or defensive."

Anna Maravelas, a Minneapolis, Minn.,-based therapist and consultant, says apathy can be reflected in a "defeatist attitude" and lack of energy in an organization, along with clock-watching: "People either check out or become over-concerned with their breaks and vacations," she says.

### "I hear you" vs. "I don't care"

Just as apathy manifests itself in many ways, depending on the individual, there's no one magic bullet for solving the problem. But all solutions start in the same way—with listening. When supervisors see signs of apathy in an employee, the first thing to do is to find out what's on the employee's mind. "Don't ask them a question that threatens their job," says Culbert. But do ask them something like, "How are you doing today?" or, "Is there anything interesting going on for you?"

Ruotolo says just the act of showing interest in an employee can be helpful because it "breaks the negative thought process, the idea that no one's noticing."

One cause of apathy and one barrier to engagement is the belief among employees that they're virtually invisible—that no one notices them or cares what they think. For that

reason, a boss's "I hear you" is an antidote to the employee's "I don't care."

### **The employee's responsibility**

What managers find out in such conversations could run the gamut—from simple boredom with the job, a workplace newcomer's social isolation, or trouble off the job that affects the employee's mood and performance at work (in the latter case, Ruotolo says referral to an employee assistance program may be the best course). Whatever the cause, a supervisor (or higher-level manager) typically cannot solve the problem by himself. As Ruotolo puts it, the employee has to take responsibility for his attitude and future.

Employers need to offer employees opportunities to learn new skills that can prepare them for more advanced jobs. But it's up to employees to take advantage of the training opportunity.

### **Building engagement**

The best solution to apathy is to keep it from growing in the first place. All levels of management have a role in doing this, from executives in charge of compensation plans and human resources, to the supervisors and middle managers occupied with team building and employee recognition in the office or on the factory floor.

Managers who deal most directly with the workforce may have little say in company-wide issues such as pay and benefit policy. They may have more control over job assignments, and, if so, they might be able to rotate work more if the jobs are repetitive and lack room for creativity. These managers play a central role in creating a positive workplace culture and making sure that all employees are recognized for their efforts.

Activities designed to build engagement can be formal programs, such as contests and monthly employee recognition, or informal actions such as one-on-one chats, open-door policies and impromptu acts of employee recognition such as a staff lunch or dinner on the boss's dime. All these initiatives can be used to build what Maravelas calls a "culture of appreciation." The keynote in such a workplace is that employee contributions are recognized publicly, both by managers and fellow employees.

Maravelas says managers can get this ball rolling by asking three people from the workplace to act as a task force, giving them a small budget and one-year term (the last thing most workplaces need is more permanent committees), and asking them "to come back with five ideas about how we can build positive energy." The ideas can be simple, like the staff meetings at one of Maravelas' corporate clients, where an employee's name is pulled out of a hat and everyone tells what they value about that person and his work.

Bosses also can build engagement in the way they talk with employees about a subject the employees know well—their own jobs. Culbert says managers should ask

employees, “What can I do to make the job easier, more interesting and more efficient for you?” If the employee does have some ideas and then sees them acted on, a double message of empowerment is delivered: The employee has been listened to with respect, and the employee has actually had an impact. “Bosses are always asking, ‘What can you do for me,’” says Culbert. “They have a more positive impact in asking people, ‘What can I do for you?’”

### Resource

*Don't Kill the Bosses!* by Samuel Culbert and John B. Ullmen. Berrett-Koehler, 2001.

Sources: Bob Ruotolo, PhD, founder, Quantum Performance Institute, and partner, Murro, Ruotolo & Partners; Samuel Culbert, professor of management, UCLA Anderson School of Management; Anna Maravelas, founder, TheraRising.com.

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