

Seven Secrets to Employee Engagement (Hint: It's NOT about the Benjamins)

By Roxanne Emmerich

"What can I do for you? You just tell me, what can I do for you?"

It's what every employee dreams of hearing from the boss. Too bad bosses rarely ask it. Why don't they ask? Because they THINK they already know the answer.

Maybe that's because they've seen the movie *Jerry Maguire*. When agent Jerry (Tom Cruise) asks his football player client Rod (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) "What can I do for you?", Rod says:

"Show me the money."

Rod tells Jerry to repeat it. Louder. "*Show me the money.*" By the end of the hilarious scene, Jerry, desperate to keep his client, is screaming the phrase into his cell phone, again and again:

"SHOW ME THE MONEY!!!!!!!!!"

No wonder so many employers think "show them the money" is the key to employee engagement. It's shouted at us from every corner of our culture.

Funny thing, though—it isn't true.

We know this by looking at sources EVEN more reliable than Tom Cruise flicks—namely, solid, systematic industry research.

So it's not about money. That's very good news. Why? Because any company that THINKS you have to pour money on employees to get them engaged will write off employee engagement efforts during tough economic times. "We just can't afford to do it right now," they say.

Honey, you can't afford NOT to pay attention to engagement, especially when the wind is howling outside. Hold on to your hair plugs and I'll tell you why.

Employee engagement is never, never, EVER a luxury

Here's a little sampling of industry research to make your teeth curl:

- Employee engagement scores regularly account for 45 to 50 percent of the variance in customer service scores. Three in four engaged employees think they can positively affect customer service. Only one in four disengaged employees think so.

- Engaged employees are five times less likely to have safety-related incidents than disengaged ones. And when they do, the cost is six times higher on average per incident for the disengaged employee. Got your calculator? That means a disengaged employee can cost you 30 TIMES as much in safety-related incidents. The Coors Company saved over \$1.7 million in safety-related costs *in a single year* just by improving their employee engagement program.
- Disengaged employees are over 85 percent more likely to leave their employers, leading to increased search, hiring, and training costs.
- An industry-wide study of life insurance firms found that companies with a high level of employee engagement outperformed those with low engagement by a whopping 200 percent in 2002.
- An internal study at one mortgage bank found that disengaged account executives produced 28 percent less revenue than those who were engaged.

This would all be fine news...IF most employees were engaged.

No such luck. A 2006 study by the Gallup Management Journal found that engaged employees make up an average 29 percent of a company's workforce, leaving a startling 71 percent who are "not engaged" or "actively disengaged." (*Cue offstage scream.*)

So now look me in the eye and say you "can't afford to work on employee engagement." Puh-
LEEZE.

"If it's not money...then what am I SUPPOSED to show them?"

I'm so glad you asked.

Engagement does not go up with salary—it goes up as the employee's emotional bond to the company does. That's why engaged employees are more willing to recommend the company to others and to commit time and effort to helping the company grow and flourish. They actually care about the company, not just the paycheck.

This bond is forged not by dollars but by more personal factors. Here are seven things that will help your employees stay engaged for the long term:

- 1. An employer who cares enough to listen.** The best way to know what your employees need and expect is to ask them—and to listen carefully to their answers. Whenever you find yourself acting on assumptions about what your employees want, take a moment to ask yourself—*How do I know that? Where did that information come*

from? If you can't trace it back to actual employee input, open your doors and open your ears.

2. Clear, consistent expectations. Remember the last time you were given an assignment with murky instructions? I'll bet good money you do. It's an awful feeling. Vague policies and unclear expectations can make employees feel irritated, unsafe, even paranoid. And yes, disengaged. They click into survival mode instead of focusing on how to help the company succeed.

So unless disengagement is your goal, take the time to go over your communications. Have somebody outside your own head read them for clarity. And offer a specific, simple way to get clarification if it's needed.

3. A sense of the importance of their work. One recent study found that an employee's attitude toward the importance of her job and her company has a greater impact on loyalty and customer service than all other factors COMBINED.

4. Opportunities for advancement. The chance to work your way up the ladder is a tremendous incentive for productivity, bonding, and engagement. Employees who are moving up are constantly challenged, which also keeps boredom and at bay. The idle brain is the devil's workshop, and all that.

But there's also a growing sense as you rise of being closer to the action, more significant, a bigger part of the team. Make sure everyone has a shot at it.

5. Good relationships with others in the workplace—especially the supervisor. If an employee has a bad relationship with his supervisor, you can chuck all other efforts at getting him engaged. For many employees, their direct supervisor IS management and IS the company. If that relationship is toxic, you can bloody well forget about asking the employee to put his shoulder to the wheel.

6. Regular feedback. Think employees are annoyed by feedback? They're much more annoyed by the lack of it. If you want to keep them moving forward, give them the occasional rudder report.

Don't forget *positive* feedback, which should ideally outnumber the negative by about 5 to 1. But don't go overboard either—too much positive feedback becomes meaningless and counterproductive.

7. Celebration and rewards for success. Not some lame "Employee of the Month" deal, *aack*. I'm talking real incentives and real celebrations. How do you know what your employees would like for incentives and celebrations? ASK THEM.

Make sure you set realistic targets, then reward and celebrate when they are reached. And don't wait for the end of a big project to celebrate. Pick landmarks along the way and go nuts when you hit them.

Moving from "The Company" to "Our Company"

Here's the Golden Ticket, folks. The Big Kahuna.

The heart and soul of engagement is *ownership*. As long as your employees feel they are working to help YOU make YOUR company succeed, engagement will be low. Once you get them to see themselves as partners in the endeavor—making decisions, staying informed, sharing in the company's ups and downs—everything changes. Engagement soars.

When Gamal Aziz took the helm of the MGM Grand Hotel & Casino in 2001, he knew there was a problem. Customer service numbers were nothing to write home about. Aziz knew immediately where to improve—employee engagement.

He didn't call together the hotel's top management to tackle the problem. He went straight to the source with a survey of the hotel's 10,000 employees.

The survey showed that the employees didn't know what was going on in the hotel on a daily basis—not even who was staying there or what conventions were being held. Being in the dark did not lend itself to a feeling of ownership, and made it hard for staff to give the level of service that would boost those customer service scores.

Aziz had a simple plan. At the start of every shift, there is a short meeting to let the staff know what's happening in the hotel on that particular day: "King Juan Carlos of Spain is our guest in the Skyloft Penthouse—please help us make him welcome. And we are once again hosting the convention for the Realtors' Association..."

Hear the language? *Our* guest, *we* are hosting. It may seem like window dressing at first, but these simple steps can begin to bring your workplace ever closer to a place of deep engagement and profound service.

SIDEBAR

We need to reference source for this...I'll follow-up with Dale

Employee engagement by the numbers

Employees who are "not engaged" in their jobs: 54%

Employees who are "actively disengaged": 17%

Employees who are "actively engaged": 29%

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Highly engaged who believe they can positively impact the company: 84%
Disengaged employees who think so: 31%
Average cost of safety incident at one corporation for engaged employee: \$63
Average cost of safety incident for disengaged employee at same firm: \$392

Roxanne Emmerich is renowned for her ability to transform “ho-hum” workplaces into massive results-oriented “bring-it-on” environments. To discover how you can ignite the passion of your employees, catapult performance to new levels, and boost the morale of your company subscribe to the Thank God It's MondayTM e-zine at www.ThankGoditsMonday.com .