Staff Morale and Engagement in Schools

What school leaders can do to maximise staff effectiveness

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Staff engagement is a VITAL area in all organisations, especially schools. In difficult, challenging times, when significant changes are being implemented, accountability has increased and schools are expected to do more with less, the **engagement** of staff is EVEN more important.

Engaged staff are both WILLING and ABLE to operate at a higher level, to give more at work, to give maximum contribution to achieving the school's goals. Engaged employees not only understand what needs to be done but also care enough to apply discretionary effort. Staff who are fully engaged are committed to their work and achieve a great sense of satisfaction. But it's not something that you can mandate or delegate, it isn't easy!

One of the key factors is the employee's discretionary effort. Where staff view their work as worthwhile, personally satisfying and appreciated, they are more likely to put in optimal effort and *'go the extra yard'*.

Where staff are not feeling satisfied they disengage and do the minimum that is required of them. Disengaged staff have a negative impact through both their limited contribution and the damaging impact they have on other's morale.

Full engagement represents an alignment of maximum job satisfaction *("I like my work and do it well")* with maximum job contribution *("I help achieve my school's goals")*.

Improved results
are the prize of
the MORE engaged
workforce.

In this paper we review the research on Employee Engagement and identify key factors school leaders can apply to boost staff morale and increase employee engagement.

This paper analyses the Employee Engagement Report conducted worldwide by BlessingWhite in 2011. Responses from nearly 11 000 participants have been analysed. Statements from their report are presented in blue and then analysed for their relevance for leaders in schools.

KEY FINDINGS

Fewer than 1 in 3 employees worldwide (31%) are Engaged.

Nearly 1 in 5 (17%) are actually Disengaged.

The percentage of Australian / NZ respondents who were engaged was slightly better than the worldwide average at 36% Engaged. If these results are reflected in schools, about one third of your staff are Engaged and about one in five are Disengaged.

Is that TRUE at YOUR school?

Print out a staff list and reflect on who you believe are Engaged, who are Disengaged and who are somewhere in between. Your results might surprise you.

There is a strong correlation between engagement levels and age, role / level and tenure in the organisation. Older employees and people in positions of power and authority are most likely to be Engaged. So are long-term employees (7+ years with an organisation).

Generation Y are among the least engaged.

The research suggests another possible reason for lower engagement levels: Twenty-something employees often have unrealistic notions of career progression but at the same time lack clarity about their strengths, goals, or preferred working conditions. That combination makes it difficult for them to achieve maximum job satisfaction or contribution on the job.

Is that TRUE at YOUR school?

Are your older staff more engaged?

This seems to be at odds with the observations of many school leaders who report that older staff in schools are more resistant to change – "I've seen it all before!"

Are your Gen Y staff engaged and satisfied? Is retention an issue?

Engaged employees stay for what they give (they like their work and are able to contribute);
Disengaged employees stay for what they get (a secure job in an unfavorable employment
market, a desirable salary and favorable work conditions).

Is that TRUE at YOUR school?

*Has the GFC, concerns about employment alternatives and retirement options led to
disengaged staff staying in schools rather than leaving or retiring?*

What can be done to re-engage experienced staff?

Trust in executives can have more than twice the impact on engagement levels than trust in immediate managers does. However, consistent with past studies, employees are more likely to trust their immediate managers than the executives in their organisation.

Managers are not necessarily doing the things that matter most. The actions that correlate the most with high engagement are not always the ones that receive the most favorable ratings. And in some regions relationships trump skills, that is, employees' knowledge of their managers as "people" behind their titles appears to impact engagement levels more than manager actions.

Employees worldwide who know their manager well "as a person" are more likely to be engaged. This correlation is greatest in Australia/New Zealand and North America. In fact in those regions, an employee's knowledge of his or her manager as a person may be more important than what the manager actually does.

Middle leaders in schools are in a very important position. Their 'buy in' to change initiatives is essential as teaching staff are more likely to trust them than the school Principal, Chair of the Board or Executive Director. They are key leverage points in helping individual employees align and commit with the objectives of your school. Their effectiveness is determined not only by what they do but also by who they are and the relationship they have with their team members. Employees must trust in both the team leader's ability and their character. It is important that they understand their leader's motivation. It is essential that leaders at all levels get to know their team members and what motivates them. It is important to understand their talents and also their unique engagement drivers.

Taking the time to check-in with an employee to ensure that they are on the same page and that the leader is doing all that they can to support him or her demonstrate their your commitment to the employee's success. It strengthens the work relationship, which is a key engagement driver.

Employee engagement is the responsibility of the entire workforce. As soon as it is relegated to a team of innovators, everyone else abdicates responsibility. As soon as it is an action plan to pursue in addition to daily priorities, "real work" gets in the way and the initiatives falter.

Engagement surveys without visible follow-up action may actually decrease engagement levels, suggesting that organizations think twice before flipping the switch on measurement without 100% commitment for action planning based on the results. Even less likely to be engaged are the employees who indicated "a lot of talk, but no action."

To reap the rewards that a more Engaged organization promises, your entire workforce needs to be accountable for their piece of the "engagement equation" every day. Expect, empower, and equip individuals, managers, and executives to drive engagement and results every day. Don't relegate engagement to an annual survey and annual action-planning exercise.

Engagement is everyone's responsibility and can't be the work of a 'project team' or an additional activity added on. It needs to be integral to the way the school operates. Schools are people places. The best leaders in schools are the ones who develop the best relationships.

Individuals need clear direction on what the school is trying to achieve. They also need to understand their own values, interests, talents and aspirations. Leaders within the school can coach individuals in their quest to achieve both organisational and personal goals. It is important that executives clearly communicate the strategy and set the tone. Ultimately individuals need to own their own engagement.

Executives: Trust, Communication and Culture

As an executive, you have significant impact on engagement levels. You need to speak with passion about engagement and results, but if you don't have the trust of the workforce your message will be lost or twisted. Communication needs to be a priority – in frequency, appropriateness and depth (the "what" and "why"). You also must be diligent in holding yourself and your peers accountable for building a culture that fuels high performance and engagement.

Employees who trust their managers or executives are more likely to be Engaged. Employees are more likely to trust their immediate managers than executives. We find that even in well-run companies, half the workforce typically does not trust the senior team. Australia / NZ 71% trust their manager, 55% trust senior leaders.

Only half (55%) of employees in Australia / New Zealand report that they trust their organization's executives. This figure is lower than it was in 2008, when trust in executives was at 64%. In contrast, nearly 3 in 4 Australian / New Zealand employees (71%) trust their immediate managers.

The importance of trust is underscored by its correlation to engagement levels. In Australia/New Zealand, 81% of Engaged employees trust executives compared to just 19% of the Disengaged. The gap between the perceptions of Engaged and Disengaged employees is not quite as large when it comes to trust in managers. It is still substantial however: 89% of the Engaged trust their immediate managers compared to 42% of the Disengaged.

The study clearly suggests that employees tend to flee bad managers, although they won't necessarily stick around for a good one.

Executives need to:

Commit or quit. If executives don't monitor and manage their own engagement they will bring down the workforce – fast. Fortunately, they tend to be nearly twice as Engaged as individual contributors. Yet they are not immune to the forces of disengagement. They need to reflect regularly on why they joined and why they stay. Some executives are sufficiently self-aware of what energizes them and what drains them so that they bow out or reshape their role if their personal passion wanes. Sadly many are trapped in "successful" leadership roles that no longer provide challenge or meaning.

Pay attention to the engagement of direct reports. It's easy to assume that higher-level managers can engage themselves without executive support. Yet less than half of their direct reports are actually engaged. If they expect leaders at all levels to coach their people to higher levels of engagement but don't do it themselves, they undermine their message. Executives must also:

Set a clear direction. To be Engaged employees' interests must align with organizational goals. That can't happen if the organization's direction and definition of success are not well-defined. A clearly communicated strategy also builds workforce confidence in the competence of executives – which reinforces trustworthiness.

Build a culture that fuels engagement. Culture has been likened to the tide: As the tide rises, so do all the boats. The collective words and actions of all leaders shape organizational culture. A culture of engagement is not just warm and fuzzy. Executives must drive results and engagement by weeding out any practices or other barriers (e.g., bad mid-level managers) that undermine high performance and a thriving workplace. Culture change takes time and our research suggests that it will be difficult for many executives given the low scores received worldwide for creating an environment that supports high performance.

Inspire commitment and trust by clearly communicating the "what" and "why" of decisions. In the same way students must "show the math," explaining how they reach correct answers in algebra class, leaders need to share the rationale and personal motivation for critical decisions. Actions, too, need to demonstrate visible personal commitment to the success of the school. The consistency of communications and actions then creates trust.

Talk about engagement with passion. Executives need to weave "engagement" into the daily workplace conversation. This requires managing employee expectations that engagement is not something that organizations do to employees or something that is a short-lived priority once a year. Instead they need to talk about engagement as an outcome when all levels of the workforce focus on what matters most – to them as individuals and to the organization.

These guidelines clearly apply to School Principals. The best School Principals recognize that schools are people places. They put time and energy into build trusting relationships with their staff, clearly communicating the school's goals and emphasise the "what" and the "why?"

REFERENCES

Global Engagement Report, 2011, BlessingWhite, Princeton NJ

APPENDIX
Guidelines for Engagement Reviews

Engagement reviews enable you to:

► Learn / confirm the employee's point of view on job satisfaction and personal success.

► Answer questions and provide clarity on what maximum contribution looks like.

► Demonstrate your support.

► Begin a regular, ongoing engagement dialogue.

Engagement reviews are not the time to provide performance feedback, conduct a career coaching conversation or share all your thoughts on what the employee should do. Those conversations may come after the engagement review.

Tips for a meaningful discussion:

► Set a positive tone of partnership. This is not a performance appraisal!

► Talk about the importance of the employee's job and how it fits with the school's larger goals.

► Discuss your employee's top priorities. *Many leaders find gaps in perception, which can have a negative impact on engagement.*

► Ask "What support do you need from me?" and "What kind of feedback is most useful to you?"

► Talk about ways to use the employee's talents (the ones that this person enjoys using).

► Ask about job conditions — What gets in the way of great accomplishments? What gets in the way of a great day at work? What does the employee enjoy most?

► Discuss how you work together. It's not enough to agree you should meet "regularly." Clarify what that term means to you both.

► Agree to meet again. You can't have one discussion and check off the box that you've addressed your employee's engagement successfully. Engagement levels are dynamic. This conversation lays a foundation for specific discussions about performance, development or career management. It also establishes a common language you can use to check-in quickly – and regularly – about engagement issues.

BlessingWhite, 2011, Global Engagement Report