

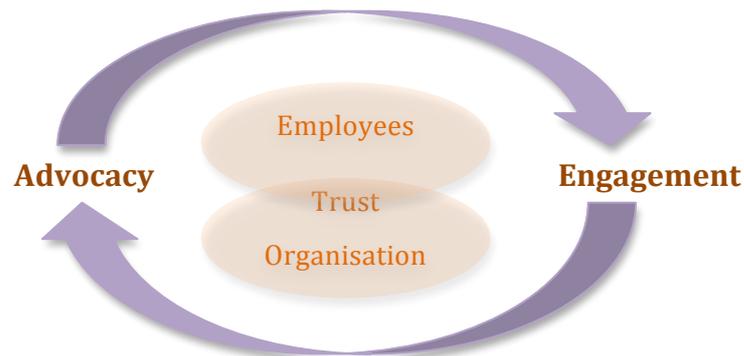


Employee Advocacy and Engagement

The conundrum... ..

- 🌸 Engaged employees talk positively and promote their employer and industry or service.
- 🌸 The public trust their friends, colleagues and industry employees more than they do managers or executives.
- 🌸 The more employees advocate for their employer and industry, the more connected and engaged they feel.
- 🌸 Most employees are not engaged!

Clickz 2014



You know the scene; someone mentions a specific café and another in the crowd says they make the best coffee, or alternatively say they'd never drink coffee from there. Or a restaurant is mentioned and people talk about their good or bad experience, which can influence others' decisions about eating there. When a friend or relative is going into hospital they are highly likely to ask someone who works there for a recommendation, about what to expect, whether they'll be safe and get the best treatment. Some inquiries can elicit horror stories from staff so even if their friend attends that hospital they approach it wearing negative lens and on the lookout for bad things as opposed to appreciating all the good things that happens. Every little mishap will confirm their fears and their friend's warning.

Employers advocating for staff can make a significant difference to public image and impressions. When an employer advocates for their employees, who are after all, a business's biggest asset, the investor (employer) is creating the optimal environment for a good return.

So what does this mean for employers, managers and leaders? It's a simple equation really – if the boss shows genuine care for their employees, their employees will show care in return. And the reverse is true - it's the law of reciprocity. The same goes for every task, project and process employees are expected to contribute to – if their contribution isn't recognised and acknowledged they are less likely to put in a good effort or to go the extra mile. If staff know that when times get tough or things go wrong their employer is behind them to support and appreciate them they feel good about their work and reciprocate. If they know their boss speaks well of them they will, in return, speak well of their boss and their workplace. Instead of feeling blamed for every problem staff will feel like they are part of the success. This will lead to a culture of trust and engagement. (*Management.Issues 2009, Adonis 2015*)

The most influential factor on engagement is the culture, a culture where employees trust their employers as well as their service or industry. This boosts morale and leads to individual and team effectiveness and satisfaction. The alternate culture gives people an excuse to disengage and not do a great job – hey, it's what they feel is expected of them! (*TLNT 2013*)

A scenario:

Shane was a great manager; he always seemed to be the one at the center of achieving outcomes and the hero of the moment. In fact it seemed like his department wouldn't survive without him and that his staff followed his buoyant, enthusiastic leadership. He didn't say much about his team, in fact the only time he spoke about his team was when goals were not being reached, which usually came down to one or a few people not completing tasks or doing a job properly. But they seemed to get over those hiccups and it wouldn't be long before Shane was presenting another achievement at the next meeting.

The staff seemed to be always busy but they didn't look real happy. They were rarely seen with Shane unless he had handpicked one or two of them to do a particular task, and then they were seen following him everywhere looking happy and compliant. This pattern became fairly routine, just the individuals changed depending on what project was underway. However, they could look like best friends one day and strangers the next.

When a staff member, Rebekah, was completing her mandatory code of conduct training she became aware that all was not well within the team and there was potential for conflict. She realised there was inequity in how people were being treated and how work was allocated. When she raised this with a couple of colleagues it became evident that their work was regularly overlooked and presented by Shane as his work. When they were consulted about their views on a project only Shane's ideas were ever mobilized and he didn't really listen to them. They also realised that he spoke negatively and blamed them at the management meeting for things that went wrong even when they felt it was because they had not been provided with the support and resources they needed, and which they felt Shane never really pushed for in case it would make him look incapable to his managers. They heard people in other departments comment on the poor quality of their work and that they were not achieving anything.

Rebekah felt that to abide by the code of conduct she needed to raise this with Shane, who dismissed her as a disgruntled employee. Rebekah felt dissatisfied with her job and unhappy at work so she decided to leave. When several others left soon after senior management decided to investigate. It turned out staff felt they could never do a good enough job, they only heard about the negative issues and felt unsupported by the organisation and management. They feared for their own jobs and felt safer to fly under the radar saying little, and doing only what was required of them. They were reluctant to put ideas forward or to put in extra effort; they knew they wouldn't be acknowledged and that they were not really working towards any shared goals – in fact the goalposts seemed to change depending on where Shane's interests lay. He pumped every possible resource into his own tasks and staff felt he was presenting their work as his own! It was also revealed that staff felt Shane manipulated people and results to make himself look good, there were some fantastic staff whose talents were underutilized and there was favoritism towards inexperienced staff who Shane could manipulate.

Shane couldn't believe what happened, he thought he was the best manager leading a high performing team – but he never told staff or others how great they were! And he never went into bat for them when things went wrong or they needed more resources. They lost some good staff who felt ripped off that their organisation didn't care about them, though they were expected to advocate for the organisation and its customers. The department had missed out on several important opportunities that would have sustained improvement into the future and helped to meet the organisation's long-term goals.

If the scenario hits a nerve with you or you wonder about workplaces where advocacy is lacking, an interesting read is "The Boss" by Andrew O'Keeffe, a Sydney-based Consultant. When I read this book I think I renamed every character in the story based on people I've met during my professional career. And I know who brings out the best in me, my work and those around me!

Seven tips to help you advocate for your employees:

1 Listen to people

Don't just hear people talking, genuinely listen to hear their perspectives, ideas and concerns. If listening is not something that comes naturally and you're the more talkative type you may have to practice your active listening skills. Active listening involves picking up on nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language, and this is especially important if staff are not used to speaking openly. When people feel listened to they are motivated and inspired, and you might pick up a gem of an idea or realise that a small adjustment will overcome a major concern or deflect a future setback.

2 Acknowledge their contribution

Acknowledging staff for their contribution is a morale booster... provided it's done in a genuine way. A superficial ploy can turn staff off! When staff realise their input is valued they are more likely to strive to reach their potential and to continue contributing. Acknowledge everyone's input and be careful not to forget the secondary achievers who are integral part of every success.

3 Watch out for your people

Know what challenges employees face and what they need to do their job, then seek to provide it. Otherwise employees can feel they are carrying the load themselves and are responsible for every problem. Even when things go wrong, it's probably more important than ever for employees to feel supported and still appreciated. How good your staff are at their job is a reflection on your leadership!

4 Make every individual count

Talk about your staff as if they are the best in the world and you wouldn't trade them for quids! A great team is made up of a number of individuals, each of whom brings strengths and weaknesses to the team and their work. You wouldn't want a team of people who are the exact same as each other, and cloning the most innovative or smartest member to create a whole team would most likely lead to problems. Recognise each employee's strengths and engage him or her in work that matches these.

5 Reward efforts, not just success.

Let's face it, not every task or project goes to plan and sometimes the best-laid plans go awry. Staff usually feel bad enough about these failures without their manager or leader rubbing salt in the wound. It's important to work through the issue with staff to identify what worked and what went wrong. And in the process reward the effort people put in. Research shows that effort-reward imbalance impacts on psychological and physical wellbeing, as well as workplace innovation and performance.

6 Be genuine and honest

Trust me, I'm the boss! These words can hurt and have lasting implications when the opposite happens; the boss is disingenuous and damages staff relations by not living up to their promise. This builds distrust and resentment leading staff to feel the boss is not on their side. Being open and honest about *everything* and giving heartfelt feedback builds trust; don't take the responsibility lightly.

7 Treat them with the respect they deserve.

Everyone deserves respect as an individual and no one has entitlement to more respect than others just because of their position or job title. Decisions and behaviours that lack respect for people can result in people losing respect for their employers and the organisation. Once lost, respect is difficult to regain. Be aware of how actions impact on employees and the organisation as a whole and earn even more respect by ensuring you don't take your title and authority for granted. When staff feel respected and worthy they are better able to advocate for their organisation and for themselves too.

(Online resources used in this article – Clickz 2013, Adonis 2015, Management.issues 2009, TLNT 2013, HBR Jan 2015, Idoinspire Dec 2014, Inspireblog Aug 2013, Janssen 2000, JAN April 2001, Huffington Post May 2015, Forbes July 2013)

For more information and support with facilitation, whole person learning, workplace engagement strategies and mentorship, or to arrange a free strategy meeting contact Pauline@7sensesconsulting.com.au