

#26: The Extra Step that Engages Talent By Patricia Wheeler

It's inspiring when leaders set high bars for themselves. During a leadership development project, I debriefed a dedicated Fortune 100 senior leader who wanted to improve one of the competencies on his 360 assessment. While pleased with high scores on driving for results and strategic perspective, he was less satisfied with scores measuring his people development skills.

When we create custom 360s for our clients, we include the item "Helps others develop their strengths." Telling employees what they do well increases overall commitment and performance. The leader, whom we'll call Frank, knows many top executives in his company will retire within five years. He's concerned about this, as keeping and developing talent is key to sustaining success in his division.

I was impressed; while his scores weren't abysmal, he truly wanted to improve this skill. He focused on two behaviors. One, becoming a better listener (his direct reports gave him an average score here). The other behavior was "helps others develop their strengths;" here, direct reports gave him average to low scores. He was puzzled, recounting a number of times he gave specific positive feedback about technical achievements.

"There must be something they want that you're not doing," I remarked. He thought for a moment, then said, "Sometimes my younger employees come to me about job postings they see from our company on Monster.com. They ask questions about these jobs and whether they'd be good opportunities, and I send them to HR. Maybe I'm missing something here."

"If you wanted to use these conversations as an opportunity to develop people, what would you do differently?" I asked.

"I'd have more information about these jobs and know if they'd be good advancement opportunities for my people. Since we want our senior leaders to have wide experience within our organization, I could pass along the knowledge even before people saw the Monster posting."

He agreed to contact HR monthly about job postings, so he could give employees notice of opportunities and help them evaluate the "rightness of fit" for their careers.

"How often do you ask your direct reports about their career development goals?" I asked.

"Every year at Performance Review time we talk about career goals," Frank replied.

I suggested to Frank that this was an opportunity for a slight change in his approach. I told him when conversations about goals and directions only occur within the regular Performance Review process, employees assume their boss is primarily having this conversation to "check the box." This does not register as active concern about their development, particularly if he or she is highly competitive and motivated to advance.

I challenged him that if he was serious about developing others' strengths and career, he must have this conversation with each direct reports more regularly. Even better, engage in ongoing dialogue, in which both leader and employee create action items for themselves. It's one extra step which yields great results.

The Corporate Research Council found that only 11% of workers they studied could be classified as "strongly engaged" in their jobs. Engaged employees are a company's highest performers, who go the extra mile for their teams and constantly seek to be even more effective. 76% of employees were neither engaged nor disengaged; that means their bodies show up, but not

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necessarily always their hearts or their minds. Managers who clearly value and develop their people are key to talent engagement, according to the Corporate Research Council and the Gallup Organization.

Frank decided that he would take this extra step, and has created a schedule to help him remember these quarterly check-ins. He will ask two simple questions:

What steps are you taking toward developing your career?

How can I help you with this?

This simple conversation drives the next quarter's action steps. I predict that as Frank follows this plan, his employees will be even more engaged and motivated to deliver results for their team and their company. And with six direct reports, this conversation will take less than three hours per quarter. A small price for better talent engagement.

Frank was fortunate that his employees told him about surfing Monster.com and other employment sites. Take a guess: how many of your employees do you think are looking around at other companies? Hint: just because they don't tell you, it doesn't mean they're not looking.

Action step: Is it worth a few hours of your time each quarter to have conversations which demonstrate your interest and support of your employees' careers? If so, have these conversations regularly. This sort of follow-up doesn't take much of your time....and it reaps great benefits for you and your people.

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