



# Talking

*The Best-Kept Engagement Secret*

Beverly Crowell, Lynn Cowart and Beverly Kaye

Stress is taking its toll on employees. Managers have to be willing to talk over what's right, what's wrong, what could improve and how to do it to sustain engagement.

**S**urvivors of downsizing — the workers who remain in their jobs after cutback announcements and departures — begin to walk out the door six to 12 months after initial layoffs, according to 2008 research by C.O. Trevor and A.J. Nyberg. They are often overworked, underappreciated and looking for greener pastures. Those who stay may disengage, threatening productivity and team morale.

In a 2013 Harris Interactive workplace study, 83 percent of Americans polled said they are stressed at work — up more than 10 percent from last year. The study cites poor compensation, unreasonable workload, frustration with co-workers, not working in the career area of choice, poor work-life balance, lack of career opportunities and fear of being laid off or fired as top work stressors. All of this stress is having an impact on more than just engagement levels. According to a 2012 University College study, occupational stress can increase the risk of heart attacks, early aging and a host of other medical issues.

Thanks to years of economic pressure and rapidly changing business and work environments, talent leaders don't have to wait for the dust to settle. Leaders at all levels have to effectively engage change-weary workforces by understanding the psychology of employee engagement and making time for conversations to help them better understand talent needs.

#### Critical Conversations

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is attributed with saying, "Change is the only constant." It has never been truer. Change today is old news, and some might say, "Get over it." That, however, is easier said than done. Battled-tested employees are doing more with less and increasingly asking their employers, "Do I see my future in your future?"

Employee engagement research from November 2012 by The Conference Board shows that poor management or leadership, lack of career development, disconnection from mission, perception of the company's future and unmanageable workload are the top five factors limiting employees' willingness to stay in their organizations. Further, if they stay, are they engaged during various organizational changes?

As employees move through each of the psychological stages of transition, including "endings," "nowhere-in-between zone" and "fresh start," there are opportunities for leaders to engage them. Conversations can help talent managers take advantage of these opportunities. However, many companies would rather invest millions in employee engagement surveys to find out how their people feel about work. Results are



#### ON THE WEB

Blogger Dan Bowling said soon we might be able to measure in real-time the mood and emotions of any given set of people through their digital communication: [blog.talentmgt.com/?p=2193](http://blog.talentmgt.com/?p=2193).

analyzed and action plans are formulated. Managers check the box on the action plan and then wonder why not much changes. In the aforementioned scenario, employee engagement is served by the survey and the action plan that follows. But during times of change, engagement and retention must go beyond the survey to sustainable, one-on-one efforts to get at the heart of what really matters to employees.

Conversations about engagement can create a sustained and measurable difference. They can empower leaders to tap into their employees' discretionary effort, bring that energy into the workplace and help leaders find simple yet meaningful ways to engage talent beyond everyday distractions.

In times of change, candid conversations are essential to build on the employee investment. Consider these for topical starters.

## Engagement Leads to Growth at Morrison

Morrison Management Specialists, a member of Compass Group, provides food, nutrition and dining services to health care and senior living markets, and employs more than 20,000 people in nearly 1,000 hospitals, integrated health care systems and senior living communities. As part of strategic planning, it recognized the following:

- There was significant growth potential due to a booming medical and wellness services market.
- The baby boomer population would require more services while simultaneously looking to assist in delivery of these same services.
- High-quality delivery would prompt increased business presence in health care and senior living spaces.
- People were the key asset and resource that would ultimately differentiate Morrison from its competition.

Annual employee engagement surveys highlighted areas for improvement in engagement and retention. Improvement in these areas would result in increased productivity and opportunities to achieve Morrison's growth objectives using learning, engagement tools and processes. Implementation of tools and workshops would not be enough. Company leaders recognized that the real success of this strategy would be in how solutions were applied consistently throughout the workplace.

Talent leaders developed a systemic strategy to integrate talent-focused behaviors into the organization's culture and subsequently increased employee engagement, decreased employee turnover and improved overall operational effectiveness.

A retention and engagement strategy was delivered to more than 6,000 leaders throughout the company introducing the concept of stay interviews — one-on-one conversations that surface what is important to engage employees and uncover key areas that leaders can address quickly. A series of sustainers — tools to keep the strategy alive and relevant to the

organization — were developed and integrated into day-to-day work. These tools included daily to-do's, tips and techniques as well as thought provokers and an online portal.

Morrison also integrated a focused coaching operation for its top 100 managers and leaders. The operation consisted of a two-year journey. Each leader was assigned a virtual coach to apply key strategies to specific engagement dilemmas. The coaching process drilled down on the individual needs of the business unit along with how the manager or leader could deliver on those needs.

An additional company sub-goal of the coaching process was to eliminate high-risk behaviors in managers, recognized as leading causes of employee disengagement and turnover. By working toward solutions to engagement challenges and eliminating high-risk behaviors, leaders were able to navigate the culture shift Morrison needed to promote culture change, growth and employer-of-choice status.

Major metrics in the organization were tracked from 2006-2010. These metrics included but were not limited to employee engagement, turnover rates and patient or client satisfaction. Employee engagement rose approximately 30 percent, turnover rates dropped approximately 15 percent and client satisfaction rates rose approximately 16 percent for the enterprise.

"We have no other significant change to tie this metric change to except that we are doing this engagement initiative," said Andrea Seidl, senior vice president at Morrison.

Engagement builds or diminishes in every interaction between the manager and the employee, particularly when working or leading through change. Conversations can provide valuable insight to managers and be the motivation to do what should be done. They remind managers to make the time to put practical strategies into practice.

— Beverly Crowell, Lynn Cowart and Beverly Kaye

## Reader Reaction

We asked our Twitter and LinkedIn followers how they make employees comfortable in times of transition.

### Twitter Via Twitter:



**@twofacedhlady:** I'm not sure change is about comfort; it's about moving forward and leaving the old behind. Should this be comfortable?



**@DimplesBryant:** Honesty and being transparent.



**@SrExecAdvisor:** Goal clarity and alignment are critical.



**@etmoble:** Clarity around expectations, support structures and a trusted guide through the process are key.



**@LeslieInLville:** Communication, communication and communication.



**@coachdanmcnair:** Open and regular communication about the role they play and their futures.



**@ADPMichelle:** Communication is key. Offering two-way internal communications and sharing information.



**@nikksmit:** Focus on raising their confidence by constantly focusing on improvements ahead.



**@SavvyInfluencer:** During a transition, keep employees informed, ask questions and actively listen to and address their concerns and fears.

### LinkedIn Via LinkedIn:



**Yue Guo:** Instead of trying to win everyone, focus engagement initiatives on two groups of employees:

**Executives:** Don't assume your leadership team buys into the changes. Engage them, mobilize them and let them be the role models.

**High potentials:** These people normally like challenges and changes, so they are easy to engage and can influence the grassroots from a closer distance.

What do you think? Join the discussion at [tinyurl.com/cj8bbjf](http://tinyurl.com/cj8bbjf), follow us @TalentMgtMag or join our Talent Management LinkedIn group.

**Co-create a game plan.** Revitalize employees' interest by involving them fully in goal-setting and plans for restructuring and reorganizing. Co-create plans so they are not designed in isolation, but don't do tasks for them.

**Never stop investing.** It would be a mistake to stop investing in employee development. Maximize all employees' contributions by providing them with skills, knowledge and resources they need now and in the future.

**Strategize for mutual gain.** Employees need investment strategies. They need to be candid with themselves about staying with their organizations. They should understand and think creatively about the range of skills and abilities they use now and have used in the past. Any competency can be applied to more than one area. Someone may be a regional sales manager by title, but his or her core competency may be marketing, communications or supervision.

**Talk and listen.** Employees want two-way conversations with their managers about their abilities, choices, frustrations and ideas. They want someone to listen. They may not expect someone to have all the answers, but they want to have the dialogue. It is essential that managers hold a stay interview with every contributing member of their team.

**Be well and be fit.** Show interest in employees' well-being. Set the example for employees to follow. Hold a balance discussion and support employees in achieving balance when it's out of whack. Watch for signs of excess stress and point employees to the appropriate resources for help.

Employees feel engaged by their work and cared for by their organizations when they can have open, honest, two-way conversations about their ideas, careers, motivations and challenges. They need leaders who listen to their perspectives more than once a year in an annual review. If individuals feel heard, understood and valued by their leader, they commit more of their energy and enthusiasm.

Today's change-weary workforce is not inspired by more work and less time to do it. But they can be inspired by leaders who take an interest in their needs, expectations and challenges. Engaging conversations that result in action plans can move the needle on engagement and provide a sustainable focus on employee action. **TM**

Beverly Crowell is the vice president of product development and marketing, Lynn Cowart is a senior associate consultant, and Beverly Kaye is the founder of Career Systems International and author of *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go*. They can be reached at [editor@talentmgt.com](mailto:editor@talentmgt.com).