What's Your Engagement Strategy?

HRO Today Forum speaker Beverly Kaye offers three key strategies that build loyal, productive employees.

How engaged are my employees? It’s a question that many HR executives face on a daily basis and one that has made its way to the C-suite. In fact, according to Deloitte’s 2014 Global Human Capital Trends research, 78 percent of business leaders rate engagement as urgent or important.

“Engagement may be a new buzzword, but the importance of having engaged employees is not new at all,” says Beverly Kaye, Ph.D., founder of Career Systems International and co-author of business best sellers “Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em” and “Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go.”

But more than likely, the recent spotlight on employee engagement shines brighter since Gallup reported a 70 percent disengaged workforce two years ago, which costs U.S. companies between $450 and $550 billion each year in lost productivity. Plus, there are plenty of statistics that support the benefits employee engagement brings to an organization. Gallup finds that companies with highly engaged employees have 21 percent higher productivity and 37 percent reduced absenteeism. It also has a direct effect on the bottom line: Hay Group reports that companies with engaged employees have 2.5 times more revenue than their counterparts with low engagement levels.

Probably what’s most surprising is that business leaders understand the power of engagement, but don’t have initiatives around it. In fact, according to research from ACCOR, 90 percent of leaders agree that an engagement strategy has an impact on business, but only 25 percent of them have one in place.

FAST FACT:

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“There is certainly a knowing versus doing gap when it comes to engagement,” says Kaye. Through her years of research and delivering talent solutions to organizations that increase engagement and retention, the international best-selling author offers three proven strategies that can help close the engagement gap.

1. Career opportunities. “If an employee can’t see a future in the organization’s future, then engagement is going to drop,” says Kaye. In fact, Towers Watson’s 2014 Global Workforce Study finds career advancement opportunities as the second top driver of employee retention behind salary.

In terms of career development, Kaye says there are five things that every employee wants, no matter the generation:

- Employees want managers to take the time to get to know them and understand their skill sets—and use them.
- The workforce wants to be challenged in their roles and have opportunities for growth. Without options for expanding skills or upward movement, there is little motivation for employees to be engaged in their work.
- Employees seek the ability to learn—from their jobs, their peers, and their managers. High potentials are inclined to leave their positions if they are facing stale work on a daily basis.
- Employees need performance feedback on a continual basis—not just once a year during the performance appraisal process. They need to hear that they are getting better or find out ways they can improve.
- No one wants to hear about company happenings via social media. The workforce wants to be informed by department leaders and managers. Plus, when it doesn’t come from management, misinformation can occur and spread like wildfire.

“Career development is a major piece of an engagement strategy,” says Kaye. Employees need their managers to demonstrate that they care about their career path. From her book “Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em,” Kaye outlines five options for career development that can help increase engagement:

- Exploring options within the company
- Enriching the current position with learning and growth opportunities
- Realigning priorities

Leveraging Job Equity

Managers: Don’t despair. For employees that have become disengaged and are on the brink of leaving, Kaye advises rebuilding that relationship through what she coins job equity. Change is hard. Remind these employees of the four types of equity that they have built during their tenure.

1. Financial equity: This is an employee’s total compensation package including salary, bonus, and benefits.

2. Influence equity: Over time, employees develop connections and learn the right channels within an organization that can get initiatives achieved.

3. Social equity: Employees build friends and develop relationships during their tenure.

4. Skills equity: These are tools and skills obtained at an organization and knowing how to deploy them in their specific position.
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- Moving laterally
- Relocating

2. Feeling valued. Employees want to be recognized for the work they are doing and feel like they are making a contribution to the organization, says Kaye. Research from Harvard Business Review finds that 72 percent of business leaders rank recognition as having a significant impact on employee engagement.

Kaye says a simple thank you goes a long way. What is key for management to consider is the act of being specific when sharing appreciation. “You’re doing a great job” no longer cuts it, says Kaye. Managers should link recognition with specific actions, like:

- “You’re right on the mark with…”
- “You should be proud of yourself because…”
- “You made a difference by…”
- “What an effective way to…”
- “I’m impressed with…”

3. A strong connection to management. Engagement is often driven by leadership, and having a good boss is key: As the saying goes, employees don’t leave companies, they leave managers. Employees seek managers that respect their contributions and that will go to bat for them, says Kaye.

“Talent-focused leaders develop people with a real growth orientation,” she says. “They build a relationship with their people and breed loyalty. They create a work environment that makes people want to come in the morning.”

In “Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em,” Kaye provides a foundation for developing good leaders. A main building block of a strong manager is respect. Kaye recommends showing respect for employees in consistent ways. Something as simple as greeting employees by shaking their hands will make them feel visible to the team and upper management. Show trust to employees by offering them increased responsibility and ownership of tasks. Coach them along the way to help ensure success and earn their trust in return.

This manager-employee connectivity counts. Research from Towers Watson finds 43 percent of highly engaged employees receive feedback from managers once a week compared to 18 percent of employees with low engagement.

Making It Work

“Organizations take their eye off the engagement ball because there is so much to turn out everyday,” says Kaye. But if organizations make it a priority, they will see exceptional results. Employees with targeted career development that feel valued and are connected to their managers will be willing to go above and beyond for their organizations. They are often better team players and problem solvers, says Kaye. And when it comes down to it, engaged employees are loyal.

“Retention and engagement are two sides of the same coin,” says Kaye. “If I am not engaged, I will not stay.”

Editor’s Note: Be sure Kaye will be the keynote speaker of the HRO Today Forum in Philadelphia, May 4-6. For more information, please visit www.hrotoday.com.
Sneak Peek!

A special look inside Dr. Beverly Kaye's new book, "Hello Stay Interviews, Goodbye Talent Loss: A Manager’s Playbook."

Invitation

To: Anyone who manages anyone
From: Bev and Sharon
Re: Stay interviews

We invite you to conduct stay interviews with anyone you hope will stay engaged and on your team.

When do most managers ask, “What can I do to keep you?” You guessed it: during exit interviews. It’s a great question, but the timing is off. We suggest you ask it sooner.

You want them to stay – at least for a while longer. They are your stars and your high flyers. And they are your solid citizens too; the people who show up every day to do the work you need them to do. Your competition wants them and you can’t afford to lose them.

You don’t have to cling desperately to your talent. You can have them pumped up and excited about coming to work for you every day. Find out what will keep them engaged and on your team.

If you’re not yet holding stay interviews, you are guessing at what your talented people really want from you, from the team, from their work. You could be guessing wrong. Stay interviews are just one of many strategies in a successful manager’s playbook. But they are absolutely foundational to engaging, motivating, recognizing, and retaining talent.

Help Them Say Why They Stay

It seems so simple—just ASK! Yet most managers will admit they are not conducting stay interviews (and their bosses are not conducting them either). Why? Often it’s because they’re afraid of the answers.

They ask, “What if I ask my talented people what will keep them and they all say money or a promotion?” Good point. So the fear of being unable to deliver on someone’s request gets in the way of having the most crucial dialogue of all. Is that true for you? This book offers you an easy four-step process you can use when an employee tosses you a tough-to-deliver-on request. It works like magic.

If you manage even one person, we’re betting you’ve conducted at least one stay interview. You probably didn’t call it that or think of it exactly in those terms. But your intention was no doubt two-fold:

1. Let your talented employee know how much you value him.

2. Find out what will keep her engaged and on your team.

That’s a stay interview! It’s not complex. It’s simply talking to your employees about what matters most and then working together to make that happen.

You might wonder, “If it’s that simple, why would you write a whole book about it?” Good question. The short answer is because managers asked us for it. Many leaders first learned about the concept in our book, “Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em: Getting Good People to Stay.” For several years they’ve asked us to dive into this topic to help them:

• better understand how stay interviews really work.
• quickly and easily prepare for these important conversations.
• effectively deal with tough requests coming their way.
• have these conversations in different cultures.
• really enjoy these ongoing dialogues with the talented people on their teams.

We invite you to take the time to conduct stay interviews. Conduct them early and often, with everyone you hope will bring their best and stick around for a while. Your return on investment will be an increased understanding of those on your team. And what might that lead to? Increased commitment, productivity, innovation, and success for you, your team, and the organization.

Editor’s note: "Hello Stay Interviews, Goodbye Talent Loss: A Manager’s Playbook" will be available in May 2015.