

# Top Ten Ways Employers Fail at Employee Engagement

You are doing things for your employees and you think they work, but you are not seeing the result for which you are striving. While the intent is good, employee engagement approaches and methods often fail when the necessary foundation of trust does not exist. This trust is based upon employee perception<sup>[11]</sup> and is a key component to understanding and driving engagement within the organization. Employee engagement can impact a company's performance, employee's behaviors, customer satisfaction, and employee attrition<sup>[5]</sup>. Awareness of the unintended result and how each can lower employee engagement, or even lead to employee dissatisfaction, guides us to a better understanding of what we should and should not do. This opens the door to creating a culture ripe for engagement and allows an organization to truly realize the benefits.

Gallup's 2013 State of the American Workplace report states that companies with engaged employees and engaged customers enjoy a 240% jump in performance-related business outcomes compared to those with neither engaged workers nor engaged customers.<sup>[10]</sup> Harvard Business Review Analytic Services report of more than 550 executives around employee engagement—found that while most leaders understand the importance of engagement, nearly 75% of those surveyed said that most employees in their organizations are not highly engaged. A significant gap showed up in the views of executive managers and middle managers in this area <sup>[18]</sup>. Top executives seemed much more optimistic about the levels of employee engagement in their company, making them seem out of touch with middle management's sense of their frontline workers' engagement. <sup>[13]</sup>

## Newsletters

Intent: Provide a regular means of communication where people can learn about what is going on in the company and feel connected. Designed to share information, make people feel part of a community.

## About Us

**Kenny & Company is a management consulting firm offering Strategy, Operations and Technology services to our clients.**

We exist because we love to do the work. After management consulting for 20+ years at some of the largest consulting companies globally, our partners realized that when it comes to consulting, bigger doesn't always mean better.

Instead, we've created a place where our ideas and opinions are grounded in experience, analysis and facts, leading to real problem solving and real solutions – a truly collaborative experience with our clients making their business our business.

We focus on getting the work done and prefer to let our work speak for itself. When we do speak, we don't talk about ourselves, but rather about what we do for our clients. We're proud of the strong character our entire team brings, the high intensity in which we thrive, and above all, doing great work.

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**Unintended Result:** Particularly in large companies, newsletters are created by a small group of people. They promote what leadership thinks is important. If the employee's experience is different than what is published, it results in people feeling more disconnected rather than less.

**How to fix it:** Talk to your people. Shift or rotate who creates or feeds the newsletter on a regular basis. Focus on what your employees want to see or know by soliciting their feedback; focus the newsletter more on a reflection of the organizations commitment to its customers, its employees and the community<sup>[3]</sup>. Utilize this tool to inspire, not simply to inform<sup>[8]</sup>.

"Newsletters with the greatest impact are not those that seek to inform but rather those that seek to motivate. It's a simple shift of purpose, but it changes the kind of information the newsletter presents and the way its presented—and it dramatically changes the effect the newsletter has on the culture of the organization. Instead of striving to keep workers in the know about random news events, the primary goal of these newsletters is to keep workers fired up about the key objectives—in other words, the mission— their organization is pursuing." – Paul Levesque<sup>[17]</sup>

### **Open Door Policy**

**Intent:** Making yourself available via an open door from your office ("my door is always open"). Let people know that they can talk to you about anything at any time.

**Unintended Result:** When people need to seek you out, they are careful and unsure. This is not a replacement for seeking them out or making time on the shop floor. People are less likely to come to you unless they feel certain and have the courage enough to make the time and walk to your office to seek you out.

**How to fix it:** You go to them. Make time to seek out your employees. Initiate contact and project genuine interest in your employees, their time, and their work.

"A desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world." — John Le Caré<sup>[14]</sup>

Cc Everyone

**Intent:** Be inclusive, share developments and make everyone feel part of the conversation.

**Unintended Result:** Creating junk email and more work for people who feel they need to read and comment every step of the way. Those that don't have something to add to the conversation feel overwhelmed and out of touch with the activity. This can send a message of "I don't trust you." When emails are sent in masse, people don't know

when to make a stand or a decision. When everyone "owns" it, no one does. This can lead to troublesome lack of clarity, direction, and blurred lines in context of roles and responsibilities.

**How to fix it:** Be clear, concise, and direct in your messaging. If you want a specific person to do a specific task, contact them directly. Expectations matter and people cannot serve your expectations without being clear on what they are and for whom they are meant.

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." – George Bernard Shaw, playwright.<sup>[23]</sup>

### **Let's hold a Meeting**

**Intent:** Collaboration, share information, let's talk about it.

**Unintended Result:** Wasting their time. People don't hate meetings; they hate meetings that are unnecessary and unfocused. When you involve the whole world, it makes those responsible or unaffected feel untrusted. It is likely that the larger a meeting is, the more inefficient it will be.

**How to fix it:** Be efficient, be clear. No tourists. Everyone has a role. Define these roles and expectations of each role prior to the meeting. If it is unclear why a participant needs to attend, revise the attendee list. Set a clear agenda and follow it. Align attendee list with agenda<sup>[1]</sup>. The meeting should have an objective and outcome.

"The distribution of collaborative work is often extremely lopsided. In most cases, 20% to 35% of value-added collaborations come from only 3% to 5% of employees." – Harvard Business Review<sup>[4]</sup>

### **Asking for Opinions/Suggestion Box**

**Intent:** Inclusiveness, empowerment, collaboration.

**Unintended Result:** Without context, the suggestion process can be frustrating both for those offering and for those receiving. If you don't clarify roles, employees can become unsatisfied with the process and the environment. People need to understand and have clarity as to their role and expectations of the suggestion-making process. Does the person providing feedback have decision-making authority? When we ask for an opinion and then do nothing with it, people feel as though their ideas aren't heard, listened to, or acted upon. This can leave employees frustrated and less likely to offer up their opinions in the future.

How to fix it: Be clear from the get-go of the give and take. We are asking you to do X, you will provide Y, and from there we will do Z. And then, follow-through.

Consistently and constantly be talking with your employees, ask their opinions, solicit their suggestions, and empower employees to promote and act on their ideas. Make this part of “the everyday”. Idea generation and idea systems must have a governing process. When this becomes part of the culture, it is ingrained, trusted and welcomed.

“Front-line employees see a lot of problems and opportunities that their managers don’t. Their ideas represent some 80% of an organizations improvement potential. When managers gain the ability to tap their ideas, everything changes.” – Alan Robinson <sup>[20]</sup>

### Annual Performance Reviews

Intent: Feedback and structure as part of a formal evaluation process.

Unintended Result: Not having the feedback or performance conversation often or frequent enough. The annual review may seem empty if there is no support or follow through. Employees can end up lost, misguided, or unaware.

How to fix it: Constantly and consistently talk with your employees about their performance. Share with them where they are doing well and where they have opportunities to improve <sup>[19]</sup>. Ask them how they think they are performing, where they believe they are doing well, and where they’d like to improve. Provide correction, coaching, and both the opportunity and the time to make improvements! The content of a performance review should never be a surprise to either party. <sup>[12]</sup>

“If there is no consequence for underachievement, there will be no behavior change.” – Bob Kelleher <sup>[15]</sup>

### Bending Rules / Making Favors

Intent: Be compassionate and Accommodating specific needs of specific individuals.

Unintended Result: Employees may feel angry, frustrated, and discontented. Making exceptions can be perceived as playing favorites. Your tender heart is creating uncertainty and thus frustration and it sets unclear and inconsistent expectations. Outcomes become unpredictable and therefore employees cannot tie their behaviors and performance to what they expect might happen as a result.

How to fix it: People feel safe and comfortable when they know the rules and know that they are enforced fairly. Be consistent. Be fair, have rules, and follow them. You want your employees to know that your care is sincere, but changing or breaking rules does not project caring. Make clear decisions and ensure employees are clear about their standing, their performance, and expectations. Exceptions are occasionally required in the manager-employee relationship; it your responsibility to think through these clearly and ask yourself if this is a reasonable accommodation, as well as to fully understand the associated implications and resulting perceptions.

“In a recent survey of 17,000 federal employees, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) found that 28% believed their own supervisor had engaged in favoritism within the past two years, and 53% felt that favoritism had influenced the decisions of other supervisors in their organization. The associated report concluded that even the perception of favoritism decreases employee engagement, hurts recruiting and hiring efforts, and damages overall productivity.” – The Washington Post. <sup>[7]</sup>

### Employee Functions

Intent: Treat employees through award and appreciation. Develop group dynamics, practice team-building.

Unintended Result: If these are frequent and on the employee time rather than business time, you are taking something rather than giving it. Without appropriate awareness and context, family and work obligations may suffer. This may cause employee resentment and obligation. Employee functions, lunches, celebratory affairs can be come burdensome when they conflict with deadlines and work-related tasks happening concurrently.

How to fix it: Have a keen awareness of team deadlines and whether scheduling an event will be impacted. Ask your team members what they would like or enjoy. Encourage them to chair/schedule events themselves.

“The source of engagement has nothing to do with breaking bread (or bread sticks) and everything to do with the extent to which trust, values and mission actually inspire and drive daily activities and interactions.” – Dov Seidman, Forbes <sup>[21]</sup>

## Generalized Recognition

**Intent:** Tell the entire team what a good job they did. Promote teamwork and collaboration.

**Unintended Result:** When recognition is blanketed across the team, the individuals don't feel recognized for over (or under) performing. The lack of differentiation promotes the idea that management doesn't really understand what the team did and does not have awareness as to who worked on what. The "vanilla" gratitude is less meaningful to each individual. There is lesser motivation for going above and beyond.

**How to fix it:** Get specific. Pinpoint the specific actions that the person did, why it is worthy of recognition, how it made you feel, and how it impacted the results. Do: "Steve, I really thought you did a great job of keeping the meeting on track. When the group got off on a tangent talking about next year's budget, you very skillfully brought them back to talking about the current initiative that we were there to discuss. The way the team responded shows me that you are truly evolving into the leader of the group. Well done. Thank you." Don't: "Nice job in the meeting, everyone."

"Appreciate everything your associates do for the business. Nothing else can quite substitute for a few well-chosen, well-timed, sincere words of praise. They're absolutely free and worth a fortune." – Sam Walton <sup>[22]</sup>

## Clearly Defined Tasks and Actions

**Intent:** Tell your employees explicitly what to do, when to do it, and what to expect. Provide clear instruction, and dictate easily executable actions. Through explicit direction, set-up employees for success.

**Unintended Result:** With only task-oriented employees and actions, there is little connection to the overall strategy or organization's purpose. This may work well, in

some cases for junior employees who need the direction.

Experienced employees feel disconnected from the organization as they are unable to use their creativity and problem solving skills. Purpose becomes limited to daily, tactical, execution. This method detracts from focused efforts towards the greater organization's mission.

**How to fix it:** Provide transparency, clarity, and connection around how what each and every employee does connects to the greater mission of the organization.<sup>[6]</sup> Paint the vision and define success rather than define each task. Clearly defined tasks are important, but of key importance is the employee's awareness of the connection to the overall mission of the organization.<sup>[2]</sup>

"Connect the dots between individual roles and the goals of the organization. When people see that connection, they get a lot of energy out of work. They feel the importance, dignity, and meaning in their job." – Ken Blanchard <sup>[16]</sup>

## Conclusion

While each of the above listed activities can serve employees and an organization well, they do not fulfill the mission of developing truly engaged employees. It is the communication and trust building skills of a manager, and the transparency and accountability of leadership that truly builds organizational trust. This is where people want to get engaged. Connection to Vision, Mission, and Values allows employees to feel truly connected. This builds trust. Trust can be attributed as the single biggest contributor to employee engagement. Learning, knowing, spreading, and cultivating these values can be the key first step to building engagement with our employees.

"No company, large or small, can succeed over the long run without energized employees who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it." – Jack Welch<sup>[9]</sup>

### About the Author



Heidi K. Scott is a Manager at Kenny & Company. Heidi has 14 years' experience with MIT Lincoln Laboratory, Timberland, Timken, Honeywell, Intel, LEGO, The TJX Companies, and Nike. Heidi's experience includes projects in manufacturing, technology, distribution, retail, R&D, & corporate affairs. Her functional experience is in the areas of Supply Chain, Materials & Inventory Management, Project Management, Planning, Data Management, Procurement & Sourcing, Production Control, Business Analysis, Process Development, Lean, Continuous Improvement, & Finance & Audit.

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Our Partners are personally committed to our clients and lead every engagement.

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We average over 20 years in professional services and bring tailored approaches to every client engagement.

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We work side-by-side with our clients in highly focused teams to solve complex business problems.

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