3 Daily Actions That Set the Tone for Workplace Culture

by Craig Kamins

Story Highlights

- Be respectful toward employees
- Communicate what's happening -- and why
- Promote accountability and fairness

Managers are central to a culture of engagement. They [determine at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement](#).

But the importance of managers specifically doesn't negate leaders' pivotal role in cultivating a culture of engagement.

The role of leadership is foundational to engagement -- a precursor to the role that local managers play.

When leaders act as champions of the engagement program, it's far easier for managers to support and sustain engagement.

Leadership's involvement signals to managers that engagement is a priority for the organization and leaders will hold managers accountable for the program's success.

However, a leader's role goes far beyond messaging and accountability. Leaders must establish an organizational culture in which engagement can thrive.

In fact, an engaging work culture that aligns with the [new will of the world](#) *won't happen* without C-level leadership.

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Some leaders mistakenly assume that organizational culture is simply a social phenomenon. But culture is more about employees' shared values, thoughts, rituals and behaviors. These factors wield enormous influence over employees' actions and decisions.

Some workplace cultures motivate employees and fuel performance. Others drain employees' motivation and make employees feel as though they have no control over their environment nor any incentive to perform.

Employees' perceptions about their work culture hinge on leaders' actions and words. In turn, employees' perceptions sway their own engagement -- for good or ill.

Architecting an engaging work culture can be daunting for leaders whose attention is on tactical and strategic matters. However, leaders can employ three straightforward daily behaviors that set the tone for the right workplace culture and lay the groundwork for exceptional engagement.

1. Be respectful toward employees.

The notion of being kind to employees should go without saying. Yet many employees feel disconnected from and disrespected by their leaders.

Leaders don't need to become best friends with employees. But even with subtle outreach and interaction, leaders can dramatically shape their culture.

Simply being out on the floor and saying hello is a good starting point.

Employees like to see and be seen by leaders. They want their leaders to understand the stresses they face. They need opportunities to voice questions or concerns.

Leadership rounding programs (where leaders go out to interact with employees in their work environment) can help meet these needs -- but only if all leaders are dedicated and consistent.

Acknowledging employees' efforts and accomplishments is equally important.

In many less engaged organizations, recognition is absent or limited to formal programs or events.

A timely, genuine "thank you" from a leader goes a long way toward engagement.

2. Communicate what is happening in the organization.

Many leaders are guarded with their communication. This is problematic because employees tend to fill in the gaps -- often with unfavorable assumptions.

Leaders should be open and transparent -- particularly regarding changes and developments. This requires frequent communication across as many channels as possible.

Sharing *what* is happening is not enough; leaders need to explain *why* to foster an engaging work culture.

Employees are more likely to embrace change if they understand the motive -- and can see how it furthers the organization's mission and affects individual performance, too.

Communication is even more powerful when it occurs *before* a change, so employees can provide input. Employees want to have their voices heard. Tenured employees, in particular, want leaders to value their knowledge and experience.

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After soliciting feedback, leaders must acknowledge and act on it -- even if that action is explaining why they *can't* do something.

If you don't follow up, employees are likely to stop providing input -- to the detriment of their engagement.

3. Promote accountability and fairness.

A common refrain in less engaged organizations is that accountability is relative. That is, most employees believe they are working hard and following the rules; it's *others* who aren't diligent or compliant.

A culture of accountability starts with clear performance standards that apply equally to everyone -- including leaders.

This is especially true when there are few rewards for excellence or repercussions for slackers are similarly scarce.

A [culture of accountability](#) starts with clear performance standards that apply equally to everyone -- including leaders.

If leaders don't model desired behaviors, employees get the idea that those rules are arbitrary.

Leaders also need to ensure that accountability doesn't become synonymous with punishment. Employees need consistent feedback from leaders that emphasizes their strengths and recognizes successes.

Another challenge with accountability involves tension between work units, with employees perceiving another group as getting a "pass" or favoritism from leaders. This often stems from misunderstanding -- that is, when people don't know one another's protocols or timelines.

In such instances, leaders should [encourage cross-functional meetings and communication](#). This not only reduces distrust, but also helps streamline processes and boosts efficiency.

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There's no one recipe for engaging employees. But leaders who focus on their workplace culture can deepen buy-in at the local level and participation in an engagement initiative. In doing so, they set the stage for world-class engagement.

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