

5 steps leaders should take to engage workers

Leveraging passion, enthusiasm leads to an invested, loyal and motivated workforce

BY ANITA CAPUTO

A few months ago, I was inspired by an enthusiastic and passionate leader, John Furlong, CEO of the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC). Driven by his personal vision to improve the fabric of Canadian society, his dream was to bring the Olympic spirit through the front door of every home to build a better Canada.

Not only did Furlong have a vision, he also had the skill to build a cohesive team aligned with this vision — and he kept them engaged by maintaining trust and respect.

He understood the key to maintaining employees' trust and respect is the knowledge that work is an emotional experience — emotion is involved in all aspects of our decisions and actions.

Engaging people means a leader should leverage his personal passion and enthusiasm to tap into the positive emotions of the people he leads. Leaders who do this well have an invested workforce that is loyal, committed and motivated. Engaged employees are enthused and in gear. They use their talents and discretionary effort to make a difference and achieve an organization's goals — they want to work for you.

People in the workplace are in large part motivated by how leaders make them feel. Do the people you manage work with you because they have to or because they want to? What do you do to make people feel good about themselves and their role in the organization?

A leader or manager may feel he has limited control when it comes to engaging employees and that motivation is fundamentally an individual experience. And it's true, even the most powerful leader is unable to control factors such as economic uncertainty; organizational changes, policies and practices; the behaviours of other managers, colleagues

and workers; and personal challenges outside the workplace.

It's not what happens to a leader but how she reacts that is important. A leader has the power to create a positive work environment even in the most difficult times. She can cultivate a culture that either fuels engagement or destroys it.

Here are the key elements of building an engaged workforce committed to accomplishing the goals of the organization:

Have a vision: Furlong's personal vision was "to improve the fabric of Canadian society." His desire for the Olympic spirit to touch every life, family and child engaged the human spirit and provided inspiration and hope. When the route of the Olympic torch relay was designed, his vision drove the target of bringing the flame as close as possible to every Canadian. Do you have a dream that is engaging and exciting? Do you have a clear, concise and compelling personal and organizational vision? Do you have a work ethic that drives you and your organization? Employees and customers look to you for this direction and inspiration.

Build a cohesive team: Recruiting the right people to do the right work for the right reasons is an important element of engagement. Each employee is a unique individual who wants meaningful work that is important to her. It is up to the leader to align her work with her desires, passions and proficiencies. People want to do a good job, to feel good about their accomplishments and shine in their roles. They want to continually build and develop their marketable skills.

A leader should build a collaborative team comprised of competent people who are driven by clearly articulated priorities and projects balanced with the right amount of autonomy.

Align your team with your vision: Aligning people with your vision is critical for successful engagement. A leader should surround himself with people who want what

■ TIPS FOR LEADERS

Personalize each person's job

To be an effective leader, treat each worker as an individual who has unique interests and needs. Inspire excellence and clearly articulate priorities.

Assign roles, work or projects that align with each person's specialties, such as their:

- competencies — work they know how to do
- passions — work they love to do
- desires — work that is meaningful to them for their own personal reasons.

Delegate assignments that provide enrichment such as:

- a challenge — fun assignments that are not too easy and not too hard but encourage the use of a person's talents
- creativity — freedom to "make it theirs" without being micromanaged
- influence — inspiration so individuals feel their work makes a difference and they have a stake in the outcome.

he wants and will not only buy into his vision but own it. Every person on the team must feel like they can make a difference and they have a stake in the outcome. That way, each person instinctively takes responsibility for achieving the organization's goals.

Nurture a culture that fuels engagement:

Furlong took the time to build relationships with individual team members. He regularly toured work sites and dropped in on employees just to say thank you. A critical element of workplace satisfaction comes from healthy work relationships. Building relationships with employees builds trust — and trust builds loyalty and engagement. To fuel investment among employees, a leader

should take a personal interest in what they do. She should recognize and reward contributions, understand their challenges, be compassionate, clear obstacles and advocate for them. She should allow them to get to know her as a person and colleague who is also an employee with hopes, dreams and challenges.

Communicate often, openly and consistently:

Eliciting full and willing co-operation begins with listening. Great leaders are great listeners and communicators. Genuinely listening to others intuitively tells them what they have to say is important. Respect is earned from feeling understood and not judged. Listening first to employees' perspectives builds acceptance and then others are more open to a leader's influence and decisions.

Communication must always be honest and come from the heart. A leader should give out what information he can and explain to employees what information he cannot share. He should talk about the "what" and "why" of a decision. Actions must be consistent with the talk — talk without ac-

tion is a surefire way to damage rapport. When a leader shows respect, he builds rapport and gains the trust of others.

Each of these elements recognizes engaged employees are the catalyst to achieving a leader's dreams and his organization's strategy. Putting people first builds momentum and emotionally engages a workforce. When a leader puts people first, she genuinely cares about them and values them for who they are and what they contribute to the organization. A leader finds ways to build relationships and connect with people one-on-one. And she must first be true to herself by living her vision, passion and putting her heart and soul into everything she does.

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■ 7 QUESTIONS

Are you an effective leader?

How do you know if you are an effective leader? Ask yourself these questions:

- Do your team members share information freely?
- Are they willing to help you when you need it?
- Do they call on you for help?
- Do people want to be on your team?
- Do the people on your team look forward to coming to work?
- Do they go above and beyond without being asked?
- Do they go above and beyond without complaining?