

Employee Engagement: Why Good Isn't Good Enough



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“Respectful treatment of all employees at all levels,” tops the list of factors contributing to overall job satisfaction, according to the 2016 SHRM Employment Job Satisfaction and Engagement Survey. Also positive, SHRM—the Society for Human Resource Management—reports that U.S. employees are “more satisfied with their current jobs than they have been at any time in the last 10 years.”

The risky downside in the survey results is the finding that today’s workers are only modestly engaged, and 45 percent report that they will look for new jobs (outside their current organizations) during the year ahead. The fact that less than half of your workplace feels engaged should be a loud wake-up call to nonprofit leaders.

Why? Connection to your compelling mission may have been the biggest draw for your most talented workers. Those who could have landed lucrative jobs in other industries instead chose to work for your nonprofit. You owe it to these workers to focus on engagement.

Risk Tips to Engage Your Valuable Employees

- **Refresh and Power-Up** - As an organization grows in size and scope, employees may feel lost in the chaos, or they may lose sight of the big picture when faced with increasing operational responsibilities. Even highly engaged staff members can be at risk of burnout; these are times when your staff members may need a chance to refresh and power-up. Reduce burnout by communicating how staff members help bring about your nonprofit’s big wins. During phases of change or organizational stress, be sure to celebrate shared achievements to keep your team motivated to move forward.
- **Connect the Dots** - In the Center’s experience, specialist employees often lose sight of how their efforts bring the overall mission to life. “I just process donations,” a development team member might say, or “I’m just an accountant.” No one is ‘just’ anything in a nonprofit; each and every team member contributes to the nonprofit’s ability to change the world. Remind every one of your direct reports ‘why’ and ‘how’ their labor matters, as often as you can. And be cognizant of cultural nuances, like the possibility of tension between programmatic staff members—who are overtly connected to your mission—versus operational staff who provide support needed to make programs possible. Ensure that staff members in both these groups appreciate each other’s connections to your mission.
- **Kindle a Learning Culture** - Alongside respectful treatment, nonprofit employees want to learn. From learning a new technical skill, to learning project management or leadership skills, few if any of your staff are truly content to repeat the same tasks, day after day, year after year. To kindle a learning culture in your nonprofit, show peers and direct reports that your desire to learn is unquenchable. Talk about the

workshops you hope to attend, the books on your nightstand, and what you learned during networking roundtables, at meetings outside the office, and during your morning commute. Most importantly, give staff members the time to learn during the workday by encouraging everyone to read well written published articles, and to attend remote and in-person professional development seminars like the 2016 Risk Summit. Finally, provide opportunities for your team members to share their own knowledge and inspiration with colleagues within your organization.

- **Engage Your Team in Hiring** - Too many nonprofit leaders continue the dated and dangerous practice of hiring in secret; prospective hires are interviewed outside the workplace, and the results are only made known to the team after the new hire has accepted the position. If you're doing anything remotely close to this practice, resolve to stop. Involve your entire team in defining what the organization needs now (and why) in your next hire. The position description for a departed employee should be one piece of information, not the whole story on what you need and are looking for. After defining the position, work with your team to identify the characteristics, educational background, qualities and skills needed. Next, brainstorm about possible recruitment strategies and sources. When you use a team approach, you increase the odds that your next new hire will be a standout who enjoys the full support of her coworkers. Every person involved in the search process will be invested in the new candidate's success.

Melanie Herman is executive director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about employment engagement and disengagement risks, and inquiries about the Center's consulting services, Web applications and Affiliate Member program. Melanie can be reached at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.