

Can't Buy Me Joy (at Work) - Build Trust for Engagement



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Across the nonprofit sector, work teams are gathering for holiday-themed celebrations and modest gift-exchanges, wrapping year-end fundraising appeals and saying a fond farewell to departing board members. And in many workplaces, nonprofit executives, managers and supervisors are taking extra time and care to say 'thank you' to their most valuable assets: the people who bring nonprofit missions to life. Some leaders regard seasonal touch points as key to employee engagement. Yet if recent research is to be believed, true employee engagement can't be bought with a gift card, catered 'town hall' meeting, or an extra day off. Why? One answer might be that expressing gratitude at the end of a challenging year simply doesn't convert to the most valuable indicator of employee engagement: *trust*.

In his research connecting neuroscience to employee engagement and trust, Paul J. Zak, founding director of the Center for Neuroscience Studies and professor of economics, psychology, and management at Claremont Graduate University, concludes that "most leaders... provide random perks," in the hopes of fixing the engagement gap. In his article titled "[The Neuroscience of Trust](#)," featured in the January-February 2017 edition of the *Harvard Business Review*, Zak points to the innumerable benefits of a high-trust culture, from stronger performance to less chronic stress and longer tenures. Workplace trust is more than a 'nice to have' aspect of culture; trusting teams are key to realizing an ambitious mission and seizing opportunities to grow and thrive.

Tidings of Trust and Joy

In his research on the connection between oxytocin production in the brain and trust, Professor Zak found that "trust and purpose... mutually reinforce each other." He explains that "joy on the job comes from doing purpose-driven work with a trusted team." This finding is cause for celebration in the nonprofit sector, where purpose-driven work is fundamental! But the troubling truth is that despite the clear advantage our missions offer, many leaders fall short of inspiring the trust necessary to inspire joyful teams. Consider the following three tips for building greater trust-and real joy-at your nonprofit.

- **Assign attainable goals with defined end points.** Did you know that moderate-stress tasks cause the release of neurochemicals that "intensify... focus" and "strengthen social connections"? Encourage

professional and personal development by assigning projects of varying lengths and complexity. At NRMCMC our team members regularly juggle super short-term tasks along with projects that take many months, or as long as a year. Quick 'wins' keep energy levels high, something we all need to reach the finish line and stay focused on the winding paths of more complex initiatives.

- **Illuminate your mission's path through daily communication.** Leaders who fail to communicate sincerely, openly and frequently with their direct reports reduce opportunities for workplace joy. Despite perceptions to the contrary, many successful nonprofit executives are introverts who crave time alone for quiet reflection. Yet chief among the complaints of many staff interviewees in NRMCMC-led [risk assessments](#) is 'inadequate communication' or 'lack of transparency' from a supervisor or the leadership team as a whole. To cultivate trust, seize every opportunity to help your staff understand the vital connection between their daily work and the realization of the nonprofit's mission. Dispense with insincere 'pats on the back'; show your team how their efforts led to tangible, meaningful results for your clients and your community.
- **Ask for help to inspire collaboration and teamwork.** Many nonprofit leaders believe that showing vulnerability weakens trust. Professor Zak's research reveals the opposite: that asking for help *stimulates* oxytocin production in those asked to help. In "[Help is Not a Four-Letter Word](#)," poet David Whyte writes that "We are born with an absolute necessity for help, grow well only with a continuous succession of extended hands, and as adults depend upon others for our further successes and possibilities in life even as competent individuals." The need for help grows as we take on increasingly responsible leadership roles. Confident nonprofit leaders don't wear impenetrable armor: they inspire trust by letting others 'see them sweat' and by asking for—and graciously accepting—help.

Costly turnover understandably leads many managers to consider ways to inspire loyalty and longevity. Gimmicky rewards and team building exercises sometimes increase cynicism rather than build trust. Science points to the powerful connection between trust and true workplace joy. Instead of relying on rewards that make you feel generous, focus instead on building trust. Start, or restart the process of building trust in your team by assigning achievable goals, communicating your vision, illuminating the path ahead, and asking for help.

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