

Stuck in the Middle:

Four Steps Managers Can Take to Enhance Workforce Performance



RIGHT VIEWPOINT™

A recent survey by Right Management suggests that fully half of all employees take a less than favorable view of the competence of their immediate managers. Is it fair simply to assume that employee assessments are accurate and that many managers are, in fact, less than fully competent? The lack of confidence in leadership is too widespread to believe it's just about the individual. A more objective view of our survey results is to see managers shouldering the blame for issues related to the dizzying pace of workplace change.

Our research should be interpreted alongside a body of recent work by Right Management and organizations such as The Conference Board showing that employees are increasingly dissatisfied and disengaged. Recent economic volatility has forced many organizations to reduce workforces, introduce far-reaching operational changes and/or rethink fundamental business strategies. This volatility has surfaced longer-term trends in the world of work related to shifting demographics, technological innovation and increasing competitive marketplace pressures. So the recent past, current state and foreseeable future have all combined to create an intense focus on organization performance. That, in turn, has intensified the pressure on leaders and managers to effectively address what sometimes seems like an overwhelming array of issues and challenges. And this pressure is unlikely to abate even when the economy stabilizes and robust growth returns.

Employees are being asked—and will continue to be asked—to increase their productivity to improve efficiency, compensate for workforce reductions and to fill skill gaps created by a declining working-age population. They also are being asked to develop new skills and ways of working demanded by the introduction of new technology, and to cope with an increasingly diverse workplace staffed by people drawn from different generations, each with its own needs and

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expectations. And all this while the direction and prospects of the organizations that employ them often seem clouded and uncertain. Confused, insecure and stressed out, employees are unhappy and inclined to blame the leaders in their direct line of sight—their immediate managers.

Facing significant challenges and pressures of their own, immediate managers may not always recognize that the role of managers is changing. A world of work in flux means that managers must bring new skills and behaviors to the table. To be effective, they must redefine their mindsets and skill sets to accommodate changes in the way people work. The question arises: how can managers manage change better? What can they do to engage or re-engage their teams while leading them through change?

IS ENGAGEMENT MANAGEABLE?

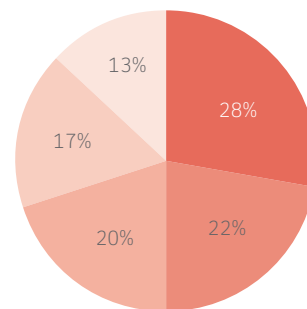
To some extent, engagement is a matter for the individual employee. Whatever changes we may face in the workplace, we have to find motives for remaining engaged within ourselves. Some would argue, in fact, that responsible adults and professional employees are motivated by their own internal resources, or not at all—that engagement simply isn't manageable by immediate managers or anyone else.

However, the idea that no external factors influence engagement defies Right Management's own exhaustive global research, as well as validated research by other notable firms. In a study involving nearly 29,000 employees worldwide, we found that engagement is driven by a range of organizational factors. These include business strategy, culture, work processes, recognition and reward, and structure, roles and capability.

They also include leadership—at the immediate, as well as at the senior, level. Our study revealed a significant correlation between employees who assessed their immediate managers favorably and those who reported high levels of engagement. Strong management, in other words, appears to promote engagement. Since engaging employees is a complex task requiring a whole-systems approach, immediate managers cannot reasonably be expected to take full or sole responsibility for engaging employees better. But they do have an important and essential contribution to make. Effective management and high engagement go hand in hand.

Significantly, not everyone knows what to do with this fact. A recent Right Management poll of 357 senior HR professionals showed that as many as one-third of all managers are not held accountable for engagement levels in their organization. It is important to appreciate what is at stake. A direct line runs from employee engagement through retention, productivity and performance, organizational effectiveness and business success. Organizations that fail to hold managers accountable for engagement risk being less effective and successful than they could be.

HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR MANAGER'S PERFORMANCE?



- Very competent28%
- Competent.....22%
- Incompetent.....20%
- Somewhat competent17%
- Somewhat incompetent.....13%

Source: Right Management online poll of 764 individuals conducted in July 2010.

IMMEDIATE MANAGERS INFLUENCE TOP GLOBAL EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT DRIVERS

IMMEDIATE MANAGERS ARE IN THE BEST POSITION TO INFLUENCE WHETHER YOUR EMPLOYEES AGREE WITH THESE STATEMENTS:

1. My opinions count
2. I have a clear understanding of what is expected of me at work
3. I understand how I can contribute to meeting the needs of our customers
4. Everyone is treated with respect at work
5. I clearly understand my organization's mission
6. I am encouraged to take ownership of my work
7. There are career opportunities for me at my organization
8. Work and personal interests can be balanced at my organization
9. My organization allows me to maintain a reasonable balance between my family and work life
10. The amount of pressure I experience in my role is reasonable

MANAGING CHANGE

Addressing engagement is the key to managing change. It is precisely when change disrupts established routines that employee satisfaction, commitment, loyalty and advocacy fall away. Although repairing the damage requires action on a number of fronts, we shouldn't discount the practical measures managers can take to advance the cause. In research that identified and ranked 10 group drivers and 91 individual drivers of employee engagement, Right Management found that the managerial function touches on a large number of the most important. On the basis of this finding, we recommend that immediate managers concentrate on four areas of action:

1. Communicate! Help your people understand change

Change is bewildering. People no longer know where they stand or where the organization's ship is heading. Initiating conversations that lead to greater understanding is essential to effective change management. Our research shows that engagement is positively affected when employees are clear about:

- What is expected of them at work
- How they can contribute to meeting customers needs
- What the organization's mission is
- What the organization's business strategy is

Don't assume that employees simply understand. Be proactive in discussing change and what it means for them.

"Managing change often means learning to manage differently."

2. Provide learning and development opportunities

Employees feeling less secure in the wake of workforce reduction or simply disconcerted by major changes in the workplace want to know there is a meaningful future ahead. The same is also true of employees asked to take on new responsibilities. Providing such employees with learning and career development opportunities is among the most important ways an organization can demonstrate its commitment to them.

Immediate managers have a key role to play. Our research shows that initiating career discussion has a greater influence on how employees rate their managers than just about any other action a manager can take. Talk to your employees about their careers, present them with development opportunities and position them to succeed by providing the necessary tools, resources and support. You will be rewarded with higher levels of engagement.

3. Empower your people

Managing change often means learning to manage differently. As organizational structures become flatter, as increasingly diverse workforces demand increasingly diverse needs, and as people with specialized skill sets become harder to find and retain, traditional command and control modes of management are yielding poorer results.

According to our research, engagement is positively impacted when employees are empowered to succeed. Ensure that everyone is treated with respect. Ensure that their opinions count. Encourage them to take ownership of their work. And provide them with the authority they need to do their job well.

4. Organize work processes to minimize stress

One constant of organizational change is the almost unrelenting pressure organizations feel to improve productivity. As the leaders who interact most regularly with employees, immediate managers normally bear the brunt of inspiring and otherwise enabling employees to do more with less. In this role, a manager treads a fine line.

Productivity is tied to engagement and engagement, our research shows, is strongly impacted by the appropriateness of an employee's workload, by the pressure he or she experiences at work, and by his or her ability to balance work with family life and personal interests. Push team members too hard, put them under too much pressure, ask them to sacrifice too much and their engagement and productivity will actually decline.

While external pressures may severely limit managers' room for action, they should at least be aware that emphasizing balance could actually lead to higher productivity. The answer may lie in optimizing work processes. Of the 10 group drivers identified by our study, work processes were revealed to have the greatest impact on engagement.

“Helping managers better manage change and drive the engagement and performance of their immediate reports should be a strategic imperative.”

THE ORGANIZATION'S ROLE: SUPPORTING IMMEDIATE MANAGERS

Expecting immediate managers to be accountable for engagement has been described as “kicking managers when they're down.” While we would argue that a more engaged and productive team could only lighten the load for a manager, we recognize that managers may need support in realizing gains in engagement and productivity to begin with.

Some managers are hired more for their technical skills than for their general ability to lead. Most managers shoulder large burdens and are under the same pressures to get more done with fewer resources. In such circumstances, organizations should consider providing managers with formal support to help them develop the skills and behaviors needed in the changing world of work. Identifying the new managerial competencies required, assessing managers for gaps in necessary skills and providing managers with coaching and mentoring to help them fill those gaps are all measures an organization can take. Helping managers better manage change and drive the engagement and performance of their immediate reports should be a strategic imperative.

CONCLUSION: SIT UP AND TAKE NOTICE

Some managers may feel that winning the respect and good opinion of their employees has little to do with sound management. But when an employees' assessment of leadership is directly tied to his or her level of engagement, a manager should sit up and take notice. As engagement fares, so fares productivity, retention and organizational performance. Managers can and should play a significant role in engaging their employees. They must ensure that employees understand the organization's direction and their role in helping it achieve its goals; they must contribute to providing employees with career opportunities; they must lean towards a management style that empowers employees; and they must support productivity by helping employees achieve balance.

About the Author

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About Right Management

Right Management (www.right.com) is the talent and career management expert within Manpower, the global leader in employment services. Right Management helps clients win in the changing world of work by designing and executing workforce solutions that align talent strategy with business strategy. Our expertise spans Talent Assessment, Leader Development, Organizational Effectiveness, Employee Engagement, and Workforce Transition and Outplacement. With offices in over 50 countries, Right Management partners with companies of all sizes. More than 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies are currently working with us to help them grow talent, reduce costs and accelerate performance.

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