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BUILDING A CULTURE FOR EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Employee engagement, frequently defined as the willingness of an employee to give one's best work, can be a key indicator in organizational effectiveness. Many organizations routinely measure the level of employee engagement because of its relationship to organizational performance. Reflecting on current trends indicating low levels of employee engagement, there is a need to identify best practices used by organizations that have achieved high levels of employee engagement over an extended period. This qualitative case study of organizations in Northwest Ohio, which were voted as a top workplace by employees, aimed at identifying the key cultural and leadership elements necessary to achieve optimum employee engagement. Results of the study showed leaders were deeply committed to the employees of the organizations and employees had a high degree of confidence in their leaders. The commitment and confidence by both leaders and employees resulted in a workplace culture of trust, openness, respect and ongoing collaboration between leaders and employees, and employees with each other.

KEYWORDS: employee engagement, best workplaces, organizational effectiveness

1. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement as a term or concept started gaining in popularity as a management practice in the 2000s (Shuck, 2011). The term is often used to represent different constructs and the definition can be problematic if organizations do not have a clear understanding of how it is perceived internally and what they hope to accomplish by measuring it or developing programs to increase it. Resources can be wasted if employee engagement initiatives are not aligned with the organization's strategic plan and if it is unclearly defined.



Macey and Schneider (2008) explained the ambiguity of the definition and considered three facets of employee engagement as (1) psychological engagement, (2) behavioral engagement and (3) trait engagement. Other definitions explored the relationship of learning in an organization from a training perspective with the individual (Czarnowsky, 2008). Shuck and Wollard (2009) synthesized many definitions and argued that employee engagement is “an emergent and working condition as a positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward organizational outcomes” (p. 138). Despite various definitions on the term, each definition is clear that the development of employee engagement potentially can significantly impact organizational outcomes (Shuck, 2011).

For purposes of this study, we defined employee engagement as “giving one’s best work,” and we considered the organizational elements of culture and leadership in the framework for developing the right climate for high employee engagement.

While the importance of employee engagement has been established for creating a high-performing culture, companies are facing challenges in terms of employee engagement (Shenoy & Uchil, 2017; Deloitte, 2017), especially because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. In a recent survey by Microsoft, 41% of workers globally, reported they are thinking of leaving their current position and more than half of 18 to 25 year-olds in the workforce are considering quitting (Fleming, 2021).

The problem addressed in this study is that organizations are increasingly faced with low levels of employee engagement, while at the same time facing increasing competitiveness from the external environment that differ from historical conditions such as globalization, sociocultural changes, disruptive technologies and digital technology (Koch & Windsperger, 2017). Low levels of employee engagement can result in lower organizational outcomes however; some organizations are showing higher levels of engagement despite these trends.

The purpose of this study is to identify best practices used by organizations that have achieved high levels of employee engagement over an extended period. The study sought to answer the following research questions, R1: What practices do small and medium-sized companies in Northwest Ohio have that are distinguishing them as a workplace? and R2: What practices are related to the leadership and culture of the organization?

Before developing our questionnaire, we explored three large multinational companies known for their high levels of employee engagement with operations in Canada, Mexico and the United States - Bombardier, Dana Corporation and Kellogg Company. Large companies were selected because their business practices; often human resource related (Murphy & Southey, 2003) can be influential to other companies throughout the world (Kahle-Piasecki, 2011). All three countries are part of the U.S.-



Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and cross-border investment is high (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). This was important to provide a context for the area of the country and similar environments our participants operate within. The three companies were researched to examine best practices in place for employee engagement to determine a foundation for development of our study.

Bombardier

Bombardier is a Canadian transportation company, headquartered in Montreal with operations around the globe in 25 countries and almost 60,000 employees (Bombardier, 2020a). The main products and services are commercial aircraft, business aircraft, aerostructure and engineering services, and rail solutions (Bombardier, 2020b). As part of their strategy, they consider their “great talent globally” a competitive foundation. Their efforts on engagement are part of their company priorities and conducted to help strengthen the culture. In 2017, the company launched a new employee engagement survey to gather employee feedback. The company states the results are used to drive their actions over the next several years in order to drive success (Bombardier, 2020c). The company reports their employee turnover rate annually on their website and for 2019, total turnover was 21% (Bombardier, 2020d). They also report their employee engagement rates based on the percentage of employees answering favorably to questions on a survey measuring both employee commitment and effort.

Dana Corporation

Dana Corporation is headquartered in Maumee, Ohio, U.S. They are considered a leader in “drivetrain and e-Propulsion systems” (Dana, 2020a). The company employs around 36,000 people in 34 countries (Dana, 2020b). The company has been recognized with many awards throughout the years including as a top employer and best workplace.

Kellogg Company

Kellogg was founded over 100 years ago as a company credited with creating the first-ever breakfast cereal (Kellogg Company, 2019). The company is headquartered in Battle Creek, Michigan, U.S. Today the company has about 31,000 employees worldwide and manufactures products in 18 countries (Kellogg Company, 2018a). The company is consistently recognized for their employment practices and company culture from organizations such as Black Enterprise, Working Mother, Forbes, Fortune, Military Times, Diversity Inc., LGBTQ Business Equality, and LinkedIn (Kellogg Company, 2020).

Kellogg contributes their creation and development of their Network of Business/Employee Resource Groups as a critical component for increasing employee belonging within the company. Specifically in Mexico, one of their employee resource groups, “Our Women of Kellogg” participates in supporting gender equality by sharing best practices to build a workplace more inclusive of women and this leads



to an improvement in talent attraction and retention among female employees (Kellogg Company, 2018b).

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify best practices used by organizations in Northwest Ohio that have achieved high levels of employee engagement over an extended period. The study utilized the case study design approach that focuses on a few cases in an attempt to understand a situation in a smaller number (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The research questions the study sought to answer were; R1: What practices do small and medium-sized companies in Northwest Ohio have that are distinguishing them as workplace? R2: What practices are related to the leadership of the organization?

Approval was received from the university institutional review board and participants signed an informed consent.

The study

After researching best practices of employee engagement of large multinational companies, a survey instrument was developed with five questions. The instrument questions were created based on literature reviews of employee engagement, best practices of large multinational companies and a previous survey conducted by human resource practitioner organization HR.com (HR.com, 2018). Interviews were held over the phone or in person during January 2019. Individuals interviewed were top managers, and human resource directors.

Participants

Individuals were contacted who worked for organizations located in Northwest Ohio (United States) and voted a Top Workplace in an annual survey conducted by the local newspaper, The Toledo Blade and related research firm, the Pennsylvania-based Energage. The annual Top WorkPlaces Award, is an employer recognition program survey for employee engagement conducted by Energage. The survey maps 15 culture drivers that are considered common across all workplaces (Energage, 2019). The list of organizations from 2019, 2018, or 2017 was reviewed and seven companies selected for interviews based on either researcher personally knowing the individual. An informed consent form was given to each participant and signed by the interviewees.

Data Collection

The responses from the semi-structured interviews were noted on the survey form and then transcribed as overall comments to each of the five questions. Semi-structured interviews follow standard questions but tend to be informal and friendly and allow for further probing as opposed to structured

interviews that allow for the standard questions and nothing more (Leedy & Ormond, 2005).

Results

The results of the interviews are displayed in Table 1. The first column (Survey Item), lists the survey question, the second column, (Responses) lists the collapsed responses, and the third column displays the alignment with the research question.

Table 1 Summary of Responses

Survey Item	Responses	Research Question
Describe the overall goals and/or expectations your organization has developed to achieve high levels of employee engagement. These goals could be those established at all levels in the organization, or those that are expected for all leaders to achieve.	Empowerment with support from administration Part of the core business strategy Create a culture to build and sustain success Employee commitment to organizational goals	R1
Identify the role and leadership actions senior leaders in your organization should demonstrate to create a culture of high engagement.	Have culture of support Establish trust and transparency Be a role model Communicate expectations Advocate Create a culture of commitment	R2
Describe the high priority strategies and practices you have implemented to build and sustain engagement.	Implemented a version of Google Fridays, non-work interaction Created a coaching/development culture Established goals and metrics for achieving engagement Implemented employee-related conversations Developed onboarding practices	R2



	<p>Provided engagement/growth opportunities</p> <p>Implemented leadership development programs</p>	
<p>Explain the process your organization has used to implement and evaluate the success and the impact of the engagement actions.</p>	<p>3 points of engagement impact were used for qualitative meetings and anonymous Likert-type surveys</p> <p>Conducted periodic assessments of job satisfaction</p> <p>Reviewed “critical” incidents of positive engagement practices</p> <p>Measured organizational performance through external evaluation (i.e. Great Place to Work survey)</p> <p>Evaluated internal metrics (e.g., turnover, performance success, unit performance)</p>	R1
<p>Identify obstacles, if any, your organization has faced in achieving high employee engagement.</p>	<p>Created a donor-funded bonus program and housing assistance program reflecting issues of low salaries (a non-profit organization)</p> <p>Difficulty in hiring qualified individuals</p> <p>Issue of achieving importance of engagement in relation to organizational performance/profitability</p> <p>Stability of key leaders (advocates) in sustaining engagement culture</p>	R2

DISCUSSION

Summary of Results

Results of the interviews showed that leaders demonstrated a significant concern for employees. The leaders frequently solicited input from employees and provided support and appreciation for their work. They developed trust by being open and sharing changes to any organizational goals. Recognition and praise for doing good work were part of the culture of many of the organizations, and



employees were encouraged and rewarded in developing their skills and achieving personal and professional goals. Additionally, an ongoing assessment of employee satisfaction was practiced throughout the organizations. Opportunities for employees to offer suggestions, resulted in employees having a high degree of confidence in their leaders because leaders demonstrated a commitment to listening to employees.

The leaders also strived to build future leaders by empowering employees to build a strong workplace culture and in some cases had formal or informal programs for leadership development.

Employees in the organizations had a strong commitment to work their best and were deeply committed to the goals of the organization. The organizations expressed confidence in their employees and felt employees understood expectations of their jobs and had the opportunity to do what they do best every day. Employee opinions were heard and seemed to count.

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes in employee engagement are expected in the work place, as employees faced disruption in their work routine, family and personal life. Future studies on employee engagement should explore the engagement of remote workers versus workers in the traditional office space and explore the mindset and practices of leaders.

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