

Building a Highly Engaged and Productive Workforce

Post Recessions, we need to build Robust and Fail Proof Organizations.

- M.R.Arulraja

One of the things that architects keep discussing after massive earthquakes, like the one we saw in Haiti, is how to build better structures, so we could withstand future shocks. Business world, too, is just getting out of the disastrous collapse of many of its institutions, worldwide. It's good to give a thought on how best to rebuild, by engaging the workforce, in a very productive way. Hope these thoughts will promote action!

Searching for clues on "high engagement and productivity"

Have you not heard the story of some people engaged in cutting stones, and an MBA student with a project on productivity interviewing them? When she inquired about what they were doing, one replied, rather contemptuously, "Don't you see what I am doing? Cutting stones...I'm working hard, just to earn my bread..."

The interviewer promptly moved away, and posed the same question to another, who said, "Well, I shape stones so they fit snugly where they should. It's all part of construction work... I wonder if you'll understand our life!"

A little further away, in the same work site, someone gave a reply much different and said, "Madam, we are constructing a magnificent cathedral! It'll have the tallest spire in the whole country. And, imagine, tourists pouring in to see this cathedral, when it is completed! I feel so proud God gave me a chance to be part of this venture - an opportunity of a lifetime!"

Other things, like, the required skills, health etc being the same between the three interviewees, we could expect the last guy to be high on engagement and productivity.

What makes one engaged?

Probably the following two quotes from a website on Appreciative Inquiry, a modern science of Organizational Development from Case Western Reserve University might help us close in on the clue to "high engagement and productivity".

1. If you want to build a ship, then don't drum up men to gather wood, give orders, and divide the work. Rather, teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea.

- Antoine de Saint-Exupery

2. Martin Luther King did not say, "I have a strategic plan." Instead, he shouted, "I have a DREAM!" and, he created a crusade.

- Unknown source, provided by Kathy Wells

Obviously, it is their vision that moves people to feel engaged, and to act.

But, before they could move, people have to fall in love with far off goals or dreams; and only then, they will yearn to reach them.

Thus, the challenge to get people engaged lies squarely in the court of business Leaders, Managers. Their ability to create and to communicate their business vision is put to test, now. They have to do it so well that their people just can't but fall in love with their vision, and go running after them.

We could say that dreams, visions and goals are the starting point, to get the workforce engaged and become more productive.

The art of producing dreams and visions

Dreams are not what we build in the air. They are built in concrete contexts, as answers to pressing problems.

Like the context of slavery of black people providing the context for Dr. Martin Luther King's dream, our dreams, too, should have a context if they should prove powerful enough to motivate people.

"The gap between vision and current reality is a source of creative energy. If there is no gap, there would be no need for any action to move toward the vision. But when there is a gap between the goals and the current reality, negative emotion may also arise. We may lower our goals when we are unwilling to live with emotional tension. On the other hand, when we understand creative tension and allow it to operate by not lowering our vision, vision becomes an active force. Truly creative people use the gap between vision and current reality to generate energy for change."ⁱⁱ

Happily, we have many such gaps between vision and reality, providing the much needed energy source to move people to greater engagement. It's up to the caliber of our leadership to face the challenges squarely, so they could generate much energy:

The Reality that Goads us to Move on:

1. We are in the post WTO era of World Wide Competition. Competition gets boosted with up by the constant revolutions in communication and computing technologies. Hence, increase in productivity is not much of a choice any longer. It's the only way to survive, and to thrive.

Higher quality and cheaper priced goods and services threaten the very existence of one's own Company. Conversely, with improved productivity, your Company can conquer the world!

2. The world is just getting out of recession. We need to appreciate that this recession was manmade; Management made, or Mismanagement made, to be precise! A totally avoidable misery, caused by the irresponsible behaviour of business leaders!

Employees have seen, in India and abroad, how leadership let down highly reputed Organizations for very selfish and/or illegal gains. There is a need to instill confidence of employees in the system in general, or even in their masters! And, this is also a great opportunity to engage employees to bring in their ideas on protecting the corporate they have strived to build.

3. The workforce is in a demoralized situation. During the recession, they have faced the grim reality of how they or their companions could be dismissed off their jobs. Many lost their years of investments, with markets collapsing.

Thus, we do have enough material on which to build engagement of the staff in a meaningful way; to help them build organizations that their grandchildrenⁱⁱⁱ will be proud of entering.

We should ensure we build them recession proof and tamper proof by people in power. These new generation organizations will proactively promote the dreams of each employee in the Company.

For a leader with a creative capacity to dream, perhaps, there could not have been a better time than this to reshape the structure of his/her organization so that it will reflect the common interest of all its members to stretch and to expand to their full capacities.

What Steps Can Companies Take

1. As a first step, conduct seminars/trainings to help your staff appreciate the opportunities and threats of modern business; of the need to be constant learners, and to behave with a sense of Personal Mastery.

2. Brain storm: Go the extra mile to engage your staff in exploring ways on how best a disaster can be avoided. Though we are out of recession, we are yet to place any credible steps to avoid a repeat of tragedy. Can we engage the employees in this area, at least, now?

3. Offer the space/time/opportunity (a training?) for employees to dream their own future. Often, they are like sheep, following the heard, investing in a home, a car, and everything their neighbours do... drowning themselves in a whirlpool of EMI obligations.

Can the new generation employees work together to build their private avenues of highly productive investments? (If they can't invest their own money in productive ways, how do we expect them to be productive inside the Company?)

- o I could imagine employees taking the terraces of their corporate building on lease; they arrive a little early or leave a little late, so they can engage in organic production of vegetables on roof tops; or in breeding ornamental fish, growing bonsai gardens... as serious investments...

4. In today's world, everyone is aware that he or she could grow. All the caps placed on individual's growth in the past ages by society have been blown off. With aspirations growing, if there is no space in the organization to grow, employees will not feel engaged. HR can help people plan their development, and get engaged in promoting the personal development goals.

Going through the above four steps in a very serious and genuine way will most certainly increase employee engagement.

Is Employee Engagement an Enabler to High Productivity?

The engagement of employees in the four steps mentioned above will also make them committed to building a robust organization.

The process itself will ensure that they will, with imagination and creativity, work towards increasing their productivity. How else will they respond to the threats and opportunities of 21st century business world, meaningfully?

The sense of belonging and ownership which is missing now will be built up by the process of involving them in the serious affairs of protecting and developing their Company.

The co-relation between employee engagement and productivity will be directly proportional to the seriousness of the 'engagement' that the employees are brought into.

If the engagement of the group is on things that don't address their core issues or the core issue of the Company, then, any increase in their productivity, too, will be minimal.

On the other hand, if the leadership will operate by not lowering their vision then sky is the limit for building enduring organizations, filled with people of a high degree of engagement and commitment to constant improvement of their productivity.

ⁱ Refer: <http://www.appreciative-inquiry.org/AI-Quotes.htm>

ⁱⁱ Ref: http://www.vedpuriswar.org/book_review/the_fifth_discipline.PDF

ⁱⁱⁱ This is an idea borrowed from Peter Senge's Fifth Discipline. It's, indeed, a wonderful way of expressing one's happiness with an organization to be able to dream of one's grandchildren entering the same organization with pride? Ref: http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1994/10/17/79843/index.htm