

# Employee engagement - a non-negotiable



By Catherine Milward-Bridges

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Bear with me as I state the obvious. Business is about maintaining and growing a healthy bottom line. Satisfied customers are what make that bottom line possible.

The missing piece in this puzzle is the motivated employees. It's only motivated and engaged employees who are able to attract, and more importantly *retain* those critical customers.

So, why the fuss about employee engagement?

The need for effective employee engagement is *here to stay*; and it can only be attained through unwavering commitment from leaders and employees alike. Here's why employees need to remain engaged:

1. Companies with an effective communication structure in place have a 70% chance of outperforming their peers.
2. Contemporary employees and leaders are expected to do more with less; therefore it makes sense for both parties to join hands and weather the storm together.
3. Levels of employee engagement have been dwindling since 2007 across the globe, although the tide is turning.
4. Though engagement is becoming more of a priority in business, employees have been losing confidence in their managers and leaders.

## Leadership communication

The experts are clear about the fact that good communication skills are critical to good leadership. This is especially true when considering that effective leadership is largely dependent on relationships, and that communication is the conduit. Leaders' engagement with employees is likely to improve if they start:

- Listening carefully at engagement sessions and heeding employees' feedback.
- Being open to learning from their people - secure leaders realise that they *don't* know it all.
- Being humane in their approach, mindful that they're dealing with human beings.
- Ditching the executive persona and facing employees as mere men/women; sharing victories and challenges (within reason).

## A leader of note

Mark Cutifani, CEO and director of South African gold mining company, AngloGold Ashanti, has demonstrated a much-needed understanding of the link between attained business goals, and an engaged workforce.

"People are not our most important assets," said Cutifani during his first meeting with staff. The deathly silence that followed was quickly interrupted: "People are *more than assets*. People are the business." Putting his money where his mouth is, Cutifani doesn't have a designated chief executive parking space. "I am like everybody else. If I arrive last in the morning and it means I have to walk 200m, that's okay."

## Recognition, where it's due

A good old sincere 'thank you' - or any positive feedback - often goes a long way in encouraging employees to continue displaying discretionary effort.



Recently, a seven-decade injustice against 125,000 World War II airmen was finally corrected when 25 of the 5000 still living, received recognition in the form of a golden clasp from David Cameron, Prime Minister of The United Kingdom. These men made up the U.K.'s Royal Air Force Bomber Command.

Rather than the random pomp and ceremony, most employees prefer a sustained culture of recognition where:

- employees feel valued
- merit takes precedence
- leaders recognise and reward talent and dedication
- an honest review of leaders by employees is also encouraged

### Poor performance

Though a thorny subject, poor performance has to be dealt with just like any other potential 'threat' to a sustainable business. Address it fairly and in time to prevent a grave outcome, by:

- carefully considering managerial appointments - the people who will assume the critical role of guiding and motivating the workforce
- fighting complacency through consistently growing a motivated workforce
- encouraging peer review, and rewarding innovation
- knowing when to let ill-fitting employees go (sometimes poor performance is caused by being in the wrong role/company).

### In this together

Employees have a significant role to play in the quest for dynamic employee engagement. Because they've often been in a business for longer than the incumbent leader, their active participation in feedback sessions is invaluable to the business as a whole. Employees can therefore be a part of the solution by:

- getting a firm grasp of their role in the context of the business
- transforming corridor groaning into real feedback that reaches the leaders; and encouraging peers to do likewise
- mapping their own growth by working hard, communicating their aspirations and choosing a mentor
- viewing the business as their own.

It's only when leaders and employees realise the importance of their collaborative role in the equation of effective employee engagement, that they will advance from the visitor's room to 'walking the corridors' with the type of swagger that becomes a formidable team.

### Sources:

- [www.melcrum.com](http://www.melcrum.com)
- [www.iol.co.za](http://www.iol.co.za)
- The International Express

### ABOUT CATHERINE MILWARD-BRIDGES

Catherine Milward-Bridges is a passionate communication specialist and founder of simplyput.co.za. Catherine guides her clients in taking their engagement efforts from good to great; and helps them optimise social media with strategic know-how.

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