Sustainable Employee Engagement

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Abstract

Employee Engagement has been an accepted tool used by HR managers in dealing with employee retention problem. Interestingly, several studies confirmed that only a small percentage of employees were actively engaged at work, leading to the problems that these employees do not deliver their full potential to help their organization succeed. This paper intends to review employee engagement practices, people involved to suggest methods to accelerate its positive outcomes.

This paper reveals employee engagement definitions which have been drawn from two emphases. Former emphasized on engagement with roles and jobs while the later emphasized on engagement with organization. In summary, employee engagement were defined in term of job engagement and organization engagement such as employees' positive feelings toward their jobs, co-workers, boss, workplace, and organization, which leads to positive employee behaviors and their intention to put forward extra effort at work. Instruments available to measure the level of employee engagement were reviewed including a tool developed in Thai context called Emo-meter which measures employee well-being, feeling of belongingness and the effort to do their best.

Sustainable engagement process is suggested, starting with the plan, the implementation and the evaluation. As a continuous process, employee engagement consists of three ongoing stages. In planning stage, program

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planners make decision on who is to be engaged. This paper suggests that individual engagement plan must be developed. The implementation process must involve the right group of people. Mangers/leaders are required to fully participate in every engagement stage.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Leader, Line Manager

Introduction

Job opportunity for the workforce is expanded due to the fact that business world is becoming smaller as the impact of updated technology, implementation of the free trade zone, and cheap transportations. Companies are not competing for skilled and competent employees solely with domestic companies any longer; they also compete with overseas companies. For organization, there is not only a need to compete in recruiting new employees, but also to work harder to retain talented employees. Human resource (HR) specialists, both academic and practitioners, have created several retention tools like attractive salary, welfare, rewards, allowances, share benefits, etc. These offers are perfectly or partly imitable. Big companies can even double the offer for talented employees. But again, the larger problem is finding a way to keep good employees from the talent war.

Employee engagement usually is brought to the light when talking about employee retention. This is because there are several studies that have reported the relationship between the two constructs (Karatepe, 2013; Kennedy & Daim, 2010 and Bhatnagar, 2007). The employee engagement concept has emerged as one the most accepted ideas used by HR practitioners in the 21st century. While academics emphasize more on engagement with roles and tasks, HR professional and consultants emphasize engagement with the organization. It is also famous among Thai HR professionals. It has been associated with high level of job satisfaction,

customer satisfaction, profitability, and productivity (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Many studies confirmed positive effects of employee engagement. It is related higher job performance, organizational citizenship, organizational commitment, and lower intention to leave (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008; Harter, Schmidt, & Hays, 2002; Jones & Harter, 2005; Rurkkhum & Bartlett, 2012; Truss, Soane, Edwards, Wisdom, Croll, & Burnett, 2006). Interestingly, several studies confirmed that only a small percentage of employees were actively engaged at work, leading to the problems that these employees do not deliver their full potential to help their organization succeed (Gebauer, Lowman, & Gordon, 2008; Welbourne, 2007). This paper intends to review employee engagement, its measurement, and concerned people and suggest method to accelerate its positive outcome.

What is employee engagement?

The concept of employee engagement has emerged as one the most useful ideas for HR practitioners in the 21st century. However, most of what has been written about employee engagement can be found in practitioner journals. Definition of employee engagement has been drawn from two emphases. Former emphasized on engagement with roles and jobs while the later emphasized on engagement with organization. Institute for Employment Studies, IES, talked about engagement as a two-way relationship between employer and employee where organization must put effort to build and encourage engagement. Engaged employees work to improve performance for the benefit of the organization (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004).

Rultledge (2005), who defined engaged employees as want, dedicate and love what they are doing. Consistent with Schaufeli and Bakker (2010), who defined employee engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption" (p. 295).

In academic literature, engagement has been compared with some constructs in organization behavior. There were discussions about the similarities and differences among employee engagement, organizational commitment and job involvement (Robinson et. al., 2004). May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) distinguished engagement and job involvement by explaining that engagement is how individuals employ themselves to perform their jobs, while job involvement is about the need to satisfy abilities of the job. Sometimes, when employees feel deeply engaged with their jobs, engagement may demonstrate indirect impact to job involvement (May et al., 2004). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) define employee engagement in three aspects that cover both academic research and practice. It stated that engaged employees focus on what they are doing (thinking), feeling good about their roles and organization (feeling), and performing with commitment to the organization (acting). Employee engagement is when employees commit to something or someone in the organization which results in hard work and intention to stay with the organization.

Even though there have been many studies done in the area of employee engagement, most were conducted by consultant companies using their own model and measurement. Many researchers have identified factors leading to employee engagement like physical and psychological supports, appropriate job characteristics, work team and supervisors. Some studies noticed consequences of employee engagement and others discovered its antecedents.

From the theoretical perspective, job design is important for engagement. Well-designed jobs with appropriate characteristics like task variety and task identity, autonomy, and provide feedback, can make employees feel motived and inspired to put forth their effort to their work (Williams, 2010). This is confirmed by Kahn's (1990) study which showed

three conditions associate with work engagement such as meaningful work, work without fear and negative consequences, and the physical, emotional, and psychological supports and resources availability. Consistent with the report by Maslach, Schaufelli, and Leiter (2001) that there are significant relationships between job engagement and proper workload, autonomy, appropriate compensation, a supportive team, equality, and meaningful work.

Work environment was also referred to as factors driving engagement. According to Crabtree (2005), workplace environment is also important to sustain employee performance because employees are more likely to support the organization when they feel that they have a healthy job and organizational environment. Lockwood (2006) stated that in order for employees to be able to increase their productivity, their physical health is one of the important employee engagement factors. Gallup consulting firm also reported the effect of employees' physical and psychological well-being on their work both in quality and quantity (Gallup, 2005).

Other than reported about association of work environment and employee engagement, Crabtree (2005) also revealed relationship between employee engagement and available organizational resources was reported to have a positive consequence on employee performance and customer loyalty. Additionally, open communication, respect, trust, teamwork, and positive work relationships are reported as conditions that support health and psychological well-being (Lockwood, 2006).

Last but not the least, manager and supervisor also have influence on level of employee engagement. Arakawa and Greenberg (2007) stated that work value, constructive feedback, good mentoring program, professional development, fair compensation program, effective leadership, clear job expectation, and high level of motivation are organizational factors that influence employee engagement and retention.

According to the above-mentioned, employee engagement, both organization engagement and job engagement, is affected by the availability of physical resources i.e. workplace environment, appropriate compensation and organizational resources as well as psychological resources such as open communication, supportive team, proper workload and meaningful work. Later in 2012, Global Workforce Study proposed sustainable engagement which suggested that employees will be connected with organization based upon these three core elements; (1) being engaged, which is the level of effort employees put forth in achieving work goals, (2) being enabled by an organizational environment that supports productivity; and (3) the feeling energized by the work experience that promotes employees' well-being. In summary, employee engagement were defined in term of job engagement and organization engagement such as employees' positive feelings toward their jobs, co-workers, boss, workplace, and organization, which leads to positive employee behaviors and their intention to put forward extra effort at work.

Employee engagement measurement

Measurement is the first step to achieve a better outcome. For this reason, several researchers have suggested that the first step of employee engagement is to determine the current level of employee engagement. This can be accomplished by conducting employee surveys (Arakawa & Greenberg, 2007; Glen, 2006; and Saks, 2006). Crawley, principal at Towers Perrin (2005), said that when measuring employee engagement, it is not to measure their happiness or satisfaction, but it is the extent to which an employee puts discretionary effort into work above what is required.

There are many survey instruments available to measure the level of employee engagement. Towers Perrin uses an online diagnostic survey tool that consists of a nine-item scale. The survey measures both emotional

engagement (the extent to which employees believe that managers, teams or organization are in their interest) and rational engagement (the extent to which employees value, enjoy and believe in their jobs, managers, teams and organization) (Towers Perrin, 2005). Towers Perrin also offers a Towers Perrin-ISR engagement approach consisting of three components: a cognitive or "think" component refers to value employees place on organizational goals and values, emotional or "feel" component refers to employees' sense of belonging and pride of the organization, and a behavioral or "act" dimension which refers to outcomes that are desired by employers, such as employees' willingness to work with higher effort and to stay with the organization (Tower Perrin, 2007).

One of the most used measurements is introduced by Gallup consulting firm, which conducted hundreds of focus groups consisting of thousands of workers. The report shows 12 key employee expectations that, if satisfied, allow employees to develop strong feelings of engagement. The survey consists of 12 engagement questions, rated on a scale of one to five, determining employees' weak or strong agreement. The results show employee engagement in terms of what they give, what they get, if they belong, and if they can grow with the organization. The survey results also demonstrate the relationship between worker performance and high engagement score. Gallup Q 12 is different from others in that it links values that affect employee morale and engagement, such as the level of effort employees are willing to put forth in exchange with proper outcomes (Thackray, 2001).

A measurement developed in the Thai context is the tool called Emo-meter. Akaraborworn, Rurkkhum, and Yodrakang (2014) proposed Emo-meter as a tool for organizational diagnosis to reflect an individual's well-being, his/her feeling of belongingness, and the effort to do his/her best. During Emo-meter development process, the index of item-objective

congruence (IOC), exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were used to validate the measurement instrument. This tool takes into account variables that impact an organization's ability to engage employees like personal factors, workplace culture, and organization support factors that influence employee engagement. The results will not only reveal a level of individual engagement, they will also provide a clear picture by plotting each variable's factors into the emo-meter.

Sustainable Employee Engagement

Once engagement measurement results are shared, an employee engagement plan usually is conducted for the benefit of the whole organization at the management level. Middle managers and first-line managers will join at the implementation process, utilizing top management's engagement strategies. However, the heart of employee engagement arises from a relationship between managers and employees who work together on the daily basis. Ideas must be generated at the individual team level to enhance the program's impact. A plan starts with an objective like who is to be engaged ?

Who should be engaged ?

In the planning process, one of the questions that must be addressed is: *who should be engaged ?* Towers Watson proposed that the level of employee connections with their organization can be based on three aspects.

1. Traditional engagement refers to employees' beliefs in organizational goals, their emotional connection, and their willingness to give extra effort.

2. Enablement refers to employees' feelings of freedom from impediments to success at work with available organizational resources to support their ability to meet challenges at work effectively.

3. Energy refers to employees' abilities to have energy at their work with supportive work environment to complete their work.

According to a Towers Watson's report, there are four global workforce segments.

First, the *highly engaged* workforces are employees who score high on all three aspects. Second, the *unsupported* are those who are traditionally engaged with the absent of enablement and/or energy. Third, the detached are those who have enablement and energy, but have no feeling of traditionally engaged. And fourth, the *disengaged* are those who mark low on the three aspects of engagement.

One of the big questions organization should throw to the meeting table before launching the program is "do we want to engage everyone ?" Many companies focus on benefiting those who scored high on organization engagement because this group of employees gives extra effort in their work. During the planning process, companies must decide on who will be engaged, the highly engaged, the disengaged or everyone.

How to engage

Organization needs to identify a measurement tool that appropriate and match it with the organizational goal. As each engagement model available possesses different variables and foci, it is the responsibility of managers and HR managers to identify the best model to be used in their organization. Measurement tools identification varies from one organization to another, depending upon the diversity of each organization.

Once the model is selected, gap analysis is the second step that organizations must take to accomplish employee engagement. To derive with actions or plans which are necessary to increase employee engagement level, the current level of employee engagement can be identified, utilizing each organization's selected engagement measurement tool. Once the level

of engagement is revealed, organization will have a clear view of the factors which are strongly supported, those that need to be improved, and/or those that need urgent attention for each employee. Employee engagement program must be designed accordingly. Gap analysis will enable organization to establish action plans and implement them to increase level of employee engagement by focusing on each engagement factors. Hence, employees' needs are vary, factors leading to employee engagement for each employee are also diverged. Managers must be able to recognize employee's individual needs. In 2007, Penna research report proposed new model called hierarchy of engagement stated that meaningful of work has potential to bring employees and employers closer for employees to feel sense of belonging and opportunity to contribute to organization. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of need model which stated that lower level of needs must be fulfilled for people to want higher level of needs, hierarchy of engagement model also stated that employee will look for development opportunity when they are satisfied with lower order of needs like pay and benefits. As such, the engagement plan should be prepared on an individual basis. Each employee current engagement level should be analyzed and individual engagement program is planned with the purpose to increase low score factors and maintain high score factors.

Continue with the implementation

Sustainable engagement programs require the incorporation of several people, namely top management, line managers, HR manager and staff (CDPI, 2012; Herd, 2012; Rose, Chuck, Twyford, & Bergman, 2015; Shuck, Reio, and Rocco, 2011; and Venkatesh, 2015). The responsibilities of each section must be clearly communicated (Welch, 2011). There must be consistent support at the strategic level (Jones, 2011 and Shaw, 2005). Lockwood (2006)

suggested organization take a look at the whole picture of employee engagement when determining what will work and what will not work in the employee engagement program implementation of each organization.

To accomplish the engagement purpose, organization must have leaders who regularly drive engagement at the tactical level. Engagement is a two-way relationship between employee and employer (Robinson et al., 2004, and Welch, 2011). Ayers (2007) suggested that to engage employee is not enough, to retain enthusiastic engaged employees is what counts, and that requires great leadership. Coffman and Buckingham (2002) said that part of the engagement problem comes from the way the organization gets its leaders by promoting people who are good at their jobs but lack necessary people skills to be managers. As a matter of fact, we have learned from literature review that engaged employees are more likely to have a relationship with their manager who led them with positive attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Using the combination of engagement predictors such as organizational process, values, management, role challenge, work/life balance, information, reward/recognition, work environment and products/ services, managers can better understand and manage employee engagement. According to the above-mentioned variables, leaders have essential roles on increasing employee engagement as they are in positions to provide such support and they have direct impact on organizational performance. There are several empirical pieces of evidence which show that leaders have impact on level of engagement (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Catwright & Holmes (2006); Herd, 2012; Rose, Chuck, Twyford, & Bergman, 2015; and Venkatesh, 2015). According to Bakker and Schaufeli's (2008) report, high interaction between leaders and employees increases level of employee engagement. Cartwright and Holmes (2006) also reported that if leaders focus on building trust and relationship with employees, such leaders

will have ability to directly impact level of employee engagement. Leaders can have impact on both work and organization engagement. When employees participate in the decision process, supervisor recognition can create positive impact on employee satisfaction because employees feel that they are mature enough and their opinion counts. This helps to boost employee pride and adds meaning to their work, since meaningful work is one of the factors that associate with level engagement (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006 and Kahn & Fellow, 2013).

Third, organization must develop clear communication with employees who will make the decision to engage or not engage (Shaw, 2005 and Welch, 2011). There were discussions about the organization and leader's role in employee engagement. Employees who embrace engagement at the personal level are also responsible for their own engagement. Employees need to understand and see that employee engagement program is the beneficial to both organization and employees. Managers are required to share engagement survey results with their subordinates and be held accountable to provide support in improving them.

Ending the loop with the evaluation

Even though an employee engagement program is a continuous process, it needs to be evaluated. The evaluation period can be varied according to nature of each organization. The same tools used at the planning period should be used again to compare the results after the engagement program has been implementation. Feedback should be communicated to line and HR managers as information for engagement program adjustment during the planning process of the upcoming engagement program, since engagement is a continuous process. It is suggested organization to use PDCA model to continuously seeking for better methods for engagement

program improvement. The PDCA model is good in both doing a job and managing the program (Sokovic, Pavletic, & Kern Pipan, 2010).

Conclusion

Employee engagement sounds excellent in theory, but it will be useless if organization, managers and employees, do not recognize its importance and the benefits. To be able to fully engage the employees, organization must thoroughly understand engagement and work to engage the right employees with the use of the right tools Line managers and HR managers must work together to identify the engagement factors that necessary to engage their employees. The design of engagement program must be based upon prior engagement results. Therefore individual engagement plan must be developed with coordination of line manager during the implementation process. Evaluation must be conducted to realize the consequence of the program. Program feedback must be analyzed, communicated and used during the future engagement program. Then, employees will make decisions about the level of engagement they will present to the organization.

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