

The Challenge of Engagement:

Reengaging your team after a pandemic

With 2021 in the rearview mirror, the economy is reopening. Many teams are excited to return to the office, but others hope to follow a hybrid model. The last 18 months have challenged banks to innovate and embrace different staffing models and arrangements to continue serving their communities.

As leaders, managers, and team members, we have an opportunity to not *just go back to the way things were* but to *build something even stronger*.

Creating an environment of engagement is an on-going strategy that drives employee retention, satisfaction, productivity, and ultimately higher revenues and profitability.

State of Employee Engagement

At a high-level, engagement means having such a positive impression about a job or role that great effort is gladly given, essentially, the individual has a “Calling.” Most recent Gallup Poll results show that 35% of employees are engaged, 52% disengaged or psychologically unattached to work, and 13% not engaged. On a positive note, employees who are engaged have increased by 7% since 2019. While we do not know how these numbers might shift with some employees wanting the autonomy of working remotely, Pew Research reports that more than half of employees whose jobs have allowed them to work remotely during COVID-19 want to keep doing so all or most of the time; another third said they’d like to work from home some of the time. Whether or not your bank will offer these options, it is important to create an environment of employee engagement. This must be driven by the leadership team, helping your team find the “Calling,” the “Why,” and meaningful connections.

Leadership is the Key to a Calling

Building trust with your team enables you to take people from where they are to where you know they can be. We need to help our team members find a higher calling than just business-as-usual. Simon Sinek, in his valuable TED talk and book “Start with Why ...,” describes how most companies and individuals understand the What and How of their products and work, but few understand or identify the WHY. When we focus on the What and How, it doesn’t contribute much meaning to our work. However, if we help our team members understand the WHY of our organization—the higher calling we have as community bankers—it provides a greater sense of meaning and value. Rather than focusing on products and processes, let’s reorient around our purpose.

Community banks exist to make our communities’ and people’s lives better. We spent this last year helping small businesses survive a terrible threat. We helped families manage their money during times of great uncertainty. In the future, we’ll help folks buy their first home, save for college or retirement, and much more. We help people realize their goals and dreams. We just happen to do so by providing caring service, trusted advice, and fair and valued banking products and services. When we “start with WHY,” we help our team members find a higher calling and greater meaning in work.

Meaningful Connections

When so many of us were taken out of our normal work environment, separated from our colleagues, and asked to be productive in new contexts, it became difficult to remember how our work connected to the broader organization. We each knew our own role and continued to perform at the best of our ability. However, many individuals may have lost sight of how their work contributed to the greater organization. We need to unite our teams around a common cause. What is the vision that drives our organizations forward? What goals are we trying to achieve together? What can be the common cause that unites us in our work? We need to provide a common cause involving the entire organization—each team contributing in its own way within its own role—to rebuild a sense of unity of purpose.

As an example, a strategy oriented toward growing the number of core customers can involve every part of the organization. The operations group helps evaluate and shape products, policies, and processes to enable growth in customers. Marketing brings innovative tactics and approaches to drawing in new customers and creating opportunities for the branches. Lending teams leverage their customer relationships to ensure that those customers get a chance to hear about other bank products and services. Branch teams learn service and sales techniques to capitalize on the prospects responding to the marketing. Senior management lends vocal support to the frontline teams, recognizing their key role in achieving the goal of growth. And every employee encourages those in their circle of influence to become a customer, because they understand the importance of growth for the organization’s future health and success.



Leaders have an opportunity to build even more meaningful connections with those on our teams as we come back together. We’re all busy so the hard work of building relationships and connections is best accomplished as part of a strategy through regular practices like:

- **Team meetings**—gathering the team together weekly will be especially important after the separations of the last year. Rather than focusing on policy or process discussions, use it to reestablish connections. Let team members share their successes and their challenges. Encourage them to celebrate the good they’ve seen in their coworkers—“Cheers for Peers.” The foundation of personal trust you build here will be the basis of your team’s future growth.
- **Check-ins**—15-minute weekly, individual conversations with each team member. Allow these to be both personal and professional updates. We all found that during the pandemic those lines between our work and our personal lives blurred. Showing you care about them as people, not just as employees, will enable you to serve them far better.
- **Coaching sessions**—spend time observing your team members at work with customers, then debrief with them. Perhaps skills have grown rusty. We’ve reinvented the way we serve customers because of the circumstances in which we found ourselves. Coming alongside as their coach will again build trust that you are going to help them thrive whatever the future holds.

The pandemic caused many to question the way things have been. The old ways aren’t good enough anymore. We have an opportunity to do more than just return to business as usual by reengaging our teams and building something better and more rewarding. By reminding our folks of the WHY—the Higher Calling, uniting them around a Common Cause, and creating more Meaningful Connections, we’ll not just survive but thrive. **B**

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