



KEEPING YOU INFORMED

A quarterly ezine for our valued clients and colleagues. April, 2007

How Engaged is Your Workforce?

What is Workforce Engagement?

A subject that has been gaining attention and interest is workforce engagement. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award 2007 Criteria for Performance Excellence now reflect workforce engagement, which is evidence that it has become a validated best practice among high performing organizations. But exactly what is it?

The Baldrige criteria describe workforce engagement as the extent of workforce commitment, both emotional and intellectual, to accomplishing the work, mission, and vision of the organization. Organizations with high levels of workforce engagement create and sustain high performing work environments in which people are motivated to do their best to satisfy customers and help the organization succeed. People feel engaged when they find personal meaning and motivation in their work, and when they receive positive interpersonal and workplace support. Cultivating and sustaining workforce engagement in this sense is quite a challenging proposition!

How High Performing Organizations are Different

High performing organizations distinguish themselves by implementing a comprehensive set of processes that enable them to more effectively attract, retain and motivate a highly qualified and flexible workforce that consistently outperforms their competition. Their senior leadership teams approach workforce engagement as a complex challenge that demands as much focus and attention as financial, sales and marketing, and operational issues.

Senior leadership teams of average performing organizations don't seem to grasp the importance of workforce engagement. They tend to regard it as "soft stuff." Usually it's the last item on their agenda, and it is not taken as seriously as issues such as meeting this quarter's operating budget or resolving a customer delivery problem. Average performing organizations often exhibit a "checklist mentality" about workforce engagement. You hear reactions such as "we already do that," or "we already know that," or "our human resources people are on top of that." But in reality, their approach to workforce engagement is often a collection of disjointed programs that are poorly implemented and supported. An organizational assessment will reveal evidence of departments operating in silos, internal competition and turf battles, an atmosphere of blame and criticism, and work groups in which poor performance is tolerated, and people are doing the minimum to get by.

In contrast, effective workforce engagement goes well beyond human resources departments and programs. It's effective when leaders at every level of the organization live it and breathe it. They take personal ownership in creating and sustaining an organizational climate and culture that has a spirit of achievement, learning and continuous improvement. You can see, hear and experience the difference in how people on the front lines perform their jobs. There is a noticeable focus on internal and external customers, and a commitment to excellence.

High performing organizations intentionally create and sustain a culture that is conducive to motivation and high performance. There is cooperation and teamwork among work groups; effective communication flow up, down and across the organization; individual goal setting,

empowerment and initiative; and ideas and innovation leveraged through a diverse workforce. Compensation, recognition, rewards and incentives are aligned to reinforce a focus on the customer and business needs, and achievement of action plans.

Focused, purposeful workforce development processes are aligned with the organization's core competencies, and the achievement of strategies and action plans. There is a variety of opportunities provided for workforce development, including education, training, coaching, mentoring, work-related experiences, reinforcement of new knowledge and skills, and avenues for transferring knowledge and skills.

Leaders are expected to develop their leadership skills and knowledge of the organization, and demonstrate that their teams understand the organization's strategies and action plans, and are focused on achieving them. Leaders are also expected to be role models of ethical business practices, and actively encourage learning, continuous improvement and innovation.

Finally, senior leaders regularly measure and assess levels of workforce engagement through well-conceived organizational surveys supported by research. They know the strengths and weaknesses of their organization, and have effective, objective feedback-action planning processes in place to pinpoint and address issues that impact workforce engagement, organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction. They track these trends on their overall organizational scorecard, and compare themselves to role model organizations to learn best practices, and continuously improve their approaches to workforce engagement.

Getting Started with Workforce Engagement

Effective workforce engagement begins with the senior leadership team. There are three questions that a senior leadership team must answer before embarking on a journey to improve their approach to workforce engagement.

First, does senior leadership truly understand the importance of workforce engagement to organizational performance? A commitment to workforce engagement demands ongoing time and attention relative to other aspects of organizational performance such as sales and marketing, finance or operations.

Second, is the entire senior leadership team willing and able to be effective role models of the organizational climate and culture that is needed to be competitive? Tolerating one or two senior leaders who are either unwilling or unable to be effective role models will stop the initiative cold.

Third, is senior leadership willing to make workforce engagement an important expectation? If so, workforce engagement must be measured, evaluated and improved just like any other key aspect of organizational performance. Leaders must have the courage, commitment and patience to face the complex, challenging issues involved, take action, and make needed changes.

Workforce engagement is challenging, but organizations that make a strategic commitment to excel in this area can cultivate and sustain a workforce that outperforms the competition.

Our mission is facilitating organizational transformation and performance improvement. If you would like to explore practical ways to improve your approach to workforce engagement or other aspects of improving organizational effectiveness, please contact us. © 2007 by Jeffrey H. Bracken, Bracken and Associates. All rights reserved.