

# Creating a Culture of Ownership, Engagement, and Teamwork

*Effective leaders understand the importance of staff engagement and commitment.*

By Stan H. Wisler



**A**s district leaders, our role includes engaging and empowering staff, building an effective team, and creating a sense of ownership. Why do we spend time and effort on those things?

We do so because clear, undisputable evidence indicates that creating a culture of ownership, engagement, and teamwork makes a more effective, efficient, and results-oriented staff. The bottom line: the organization will be better off.

## Engaging Employees

According to Gallup's 2013 report *State of the American Workplace*,

- 31% of employees are engaged in

their work.

- 51% of employees are not engaged in their work.
- 18% of employees are actively disengaged in their work.

Consequently, in any given organization, 7 out of every 10 employees are not engaged or are actively disengaged. I don't know about you, but I find those statistics alarming.

What does employee engagement mean? It means employees are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and workplace. Engaged employees contribute to a high-performance workplace—and who doesn't want that? Table 1 compares the characteristics of engaged and disengaged employees.

As leaders, we must make sure our districts have more engaged employees than disengaged employees if we want the organization to thrive. The following strategies will go a long way toward engaging your staff.

## Building an Effective Team

The best plans, strategies, and initiatives will not get you the results you want without teamwork. Here are some points to consider:

- Let your staff know what you expect of them with regard to teamwork.
- When you have the opportunity to hire people, hire team players. During the interview process, listen for “we” instead of “I.”
- Involve your staff in the hiring process. Sometimes, you acquire great value by getting a perspective on applicants from multiple vantage points and from staff at various levels of the organization. They will appreciate having input on whom they will be working with, but make sure they understand their role in the process.
- Stay in touch with your employees—really listen to them, get to know them, and realize that most of them come to work every day wanting to do the right thing.
- Emphasize and model customer service—not just externally but internally as well. Treat people with respect inside and outside the organization.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Engaged and Disengaged Employees

Engaged Employees	Disengaged Employees
Collaborate, cooperate	Create tension, conflict, negativity
Go the extra mile	Have low morale
Are pleasant	Derail relationships
Are connected to the mission	Monopolize manager's time
Help move the organization forward	Drive business away

- Lead the effort to have your staff participate in a service project, a special charity event, or fund-raising opportunity—it will unite them in working toward a common purpose.
- Solicit feedback from the staff informally through conversation. You don't always have to use a formal written survey.
- Hold meaningful meetings. Have an agenda, a goal for each item on the agenda, and a defined time (estimated) for each item and for the entire meeting—it helps set expectations.

You are the key to developing engaged employees and effective teams. As a leader, you must communicate daily with staff members, exhibit strong people skills, develop interpersonal relationships, and demonstrate emotional intelligence.

### Generating Staff Ownership

Creating a culture of employee buy-in and staff ownership is another way of engaging employees. During a recent tour of the Deschutes Brewery in Bend, Oregon, it became quite evident to me that Deschutes has created a culture of staff ownership. I don't know all of the specific things they do to create the culture, but they include company stock incentives, an onsite chef at lunchtime, and regular distribution of a case of beer to each employee.

So how can we do that in education organizations that are funded with taxpayer dollars? We don't have stock options, and we certainly couldn't use taxpayer money to purchase cases of beer for our employees (or any "gift" for that matter). But we can do other things to help them feel that they have a stake in the success of the organization. Here are a few simple suggestions:

- Help employees visualize, understand, and be a part of the bigger vision.
- Provide recognition for staff members who make significant contributions and for those whose efforts go above and beyond.
- Find ways to reward team members; sometimes it takes just a simple heartfelt word of appreciation.

- Organize team social events.
- Allow employees to have a voice in how they do their work. Give them some autonomy; you don't have to control everything. Let them develop the processes and procedures. Let them take a risk even if it may mean they make a mistake—they will learn from their mistakes. One word of caution: make sure the mistakes are not career-ending for you.
- Adjust people's responsibilities to fit their skills and their passion. Many times, I tried to make staff members become effective in positions they were unsuited for. Where possible, I have shifted staff responsibilities or moved individuals to other positions, and the results have been positive—the employees are happier and more engaged.
- Use difficult times and challenging situations as periods of growth—learn from them and pull the team together to get through the challenges. Employees will appreciate your needing their help and will rise to the occasion. I saw that happen recently when we received only two weeks' notice that we were going to be audited by the Internal Revenue Service. The list of items required for review was overwhelming. We called the entire business office staff together, outlined our challenge, and asked for everyone's assistance in getting through the audit. It took a lot of effort and extra work, but it was so rewarding to see everyone working together toward a common goal.

One point to remember: Don't spend the majority of your time on the 20% of the staff who give you 80% of the headaches. You can't ignore the 20%, but you need to put the majority of your effort into appreciating and further developing the 80%. It will strengthen the culture you want, and the 20% will get "up to speed" or move on to a place where they might be more comfortable.

### Taking Chances

These concepts make good common sense and have been proved to work time and time again. So why don't we use them? There are many reasons: we think they are too time-consuming; we don't feel comfortable using them; our mentors have not reinforced these concepts. And quite frankly, some of the concepts fly in the face of what we have come to believe it means to be the "boss."

Don't wait until you have time; don't wait until things settle down. Make an effort now. Take a risk and work outside your box. You might be surprised at the results.

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