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Rules of Engagement: Cynthia Roney



Front Line Staff: What's on Your Mind?

When was the last time you asked your front line staff, "What's on your mind?" If you believe that your people are your greatest asset, prove it by asking a few simple questions and then actively listening.

The challenge

Fewer than 30% of employees are actively engaged in their jobs, and the remaining 70% fall into either not being engaged (54%) or being actively disengaged (17%), according to the **Gallup Organization's** surveys of millions of North American employees over the last decade.

Disengaged employees, according to Gallup, cost the American economy \$350 billion per year in lost productivity, and that doesn't include the cost associated with 54% of the workforce not engaged in its jobs. When Gallup asked what employees wanted from their managers, the feedback was surprisingly simple: focus on me, know me, care about me, hear me, help me feel proud, see my value, help me grow.

An issue for HR or all management?

"One characteristic common to all organizations with high engagement is open, transparent, complete and timely two-way communication," according to **Hewitt Associates**, a global human resources consulting company.

Employees want to understand what's expected of them and how they can contribute. They want to feel connected to the company purpose and vision and want to be kept aware of how things are progressing, even when the news may not be good. Employees want the opportunity to learn and grow and be recognized for their contributions. Sadly, many companies reserve this type of communication for once-a-year performance reviews or ask HR to conduct annual employee satisfaction surveys.

As former CEO, I firmly believe that active, open communication with employees at all levels is not only an essential pillar of leadership but also a moral responsibility for all managers, especially those at the top of the organization. One of the highlights of my CEO career was leading a remarkable team of fully engaged employees who never gave up and overcame tremendous business obstacles.

In my work as an executive and business coach, I encourage companies to embrace a hands-on communication approach and genuinely ask employees, especially front line staff, three questions: 1) What are we doing well? 2) Where can we improve? 3) What's on your mind?

All employees deserve to be seen and heard.

Companies leading the way

In its paper, **What Makes a Company a Best Employer?** Hewitt Associates describes how senior leaders in a leading high-tech company created "an open forum in the company cafeteria every two weeks to share information and listen to employees' concerns." The high-tech executive said, "You need a leadership team that is able to articulate a vision that makes employees willing to go forward...Communication is not just about executives standing on podiums and giving presentations...it's...about being face to face and heart to heart with employees in order to listen...and explain their value to the business."

To understand what leading Canadian employers are doing to engage their employees in active communication, I referenced information gathered by **Medicorp** for the **2010 Canada's Top 100 Employers** and **BC's Top 55 Employers**:

- **Telus Corporation** "Telus regularly hosts interactive forums where employees get to meet the CEO and executive leadership team and ask questions".
- **PLC Construction**: "Twice yearly, senior executives hold "fireside chats" to update employees on financial results and projections".
- **MTS Allstream**: "Hosted four times a year, MTS CEO Pierre Blouin discusses company news and achievements and takes questions from employees during a live question-and-answer period".
- **Great Little Box Company**: "GLBC hosts monthly meetings (with catered lunches) that include frank discussions about all financial matters relating to its business. Uniquely, the private company opens its books for all employees every month and splits 15% of its profits, distributed equally every month".

Knowing that most companies operate with less than 30% of their workforce engaged, why not ask your front line staff, "What's on your mind?"- and be prepared to listen. •

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