

How to optimise employee emotions

David Lee

Emotions play an important role in an organisation's ability – or inability – to compete successfully. By following some simple ground rules, managers can develop a positive relationship with employees and harness their emotions for maximum impact on the job.

Employee emotions affect primary sources of competitive advantage, such as intellectual capital, customer service, organisational responsiveness, productivity and attraction and retention. Thus, the more skilled an organisation's management team is at creating a work environment where employees experience positive emotions, the more successful that organisation will be.

Knowledge about how to do this has been around for years. The principles and practices involved in bringing out the best in employees are neither arcane nor rocket science. They do take work and patience, though, which is probably why only a small percentage of organisations seem to employ them. Organisations that do the hard work, however, have a workforce that enables them to compete successfully in the marketplace.

We first need to recognise the first step that makes any of this possible. That essential first step is for management to have a clear understanding of the connection between emotions and competitive advantage. Without a clear and compelling 'why', no manager will allocate time for learning and implementing the 'how'.

Two final comments before getting to the list. First, the list is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather a sample of what world-class organisations do to optimise employee emotional states. Second, as mentioned previously, these practices are not rocket science. With that in mind, as you read each item on the list, the key question to ask is not "Do I know this?" but "Are we doing this?"

Pay for management development

Make no mistake about it, your organisation pays for one or the other. They either pay the price of cultivating managers' supervisory and leadership skills, or they pay the price of having managers who don't know how to deal with people. The impact of an ineffective or abusive supervisor is huge, because in many ways, a supervisor is the organisation to those they supervise. The way supervisors treat employees sets the tone for how employees feel about their work and their employer.

Organisations that cultivate their management team use an array of tools and strategies, including management style assessments, management training, executive coaching, and 360-degree surveys. To make any of this work also requires a clear message from the top that a manager's value to the organisation is dependent upon their ability to bring out the best in the people they supervise.

Ask employees for feedback

When management doesn't ask employees for feedback, they are in essence saying, "We don't care what you think about how we treat you, and besides, we know what's best for you anyway." In contrast, when management asks employees for feedback about their management style and practices, they communicate respect and concern. In such an atmosphere, employees are more likely to feel committed to their work and the company.

Asking for feedback isn't just about communicating respect and concern, though. It's also about finding out what's working, and what isn't. Too often, we assume we know, when we don't. In one study, conducted by Kepner Tregoe, less than one-third of employees surveyed felt their manager knew what motivated them. Over one-half of the managers surveyed agreed.

Just as smart companies actively and continuously solicit feedback from their customers to find out how well they are meeting their needs, smart companies actively and continuously solicit this kind of feedback from their internal customers – their employees.

Don't check brains at the door

Few things kill the spirit more quickly than mind-numbing work. Give employees the opportunity to think on the job. Encourage them to improve the work processes they're involved in. Not only does it make sense – people who do the work usually have the best ideas about how to do it better – it makes work more enjoyable and interesting.

In the customer service field, an excellent – and unfortunately underutilised – way to engage employees' minds, is to turn them into 'customer service detectives'. Create processes and rewards that encourage them to find out what customers want and then deliver this critical information to key decision-makers.

Give employees control over their work

This strategy is related to the previous one. The more control and autonomy employees have over their work, the more they're able to use their minds. The issue of control goes far beyond the intellectual realm, though. Decades of research shows that when people feel they don't have control, their intellectual functioning, interpersonal functioning, and behaviour deteriorate.

Feeling out of control creates tremendous stress and, if chronic, leads to the condition called 'learned helplessness', which in turn leads to depression. When employees have a say in their work, and therefore feel in control, they become more energised, enthusiastic, and productive. (Important note: the drive for control is so powerful that if employees aren't given opportunities for positive control, they will find ways of exerting negative control, such as calling in sick, engaging in work slow downs, illegitimately using short-term disability, and so on).

The power to please the customer

When organisations create policies and practices that hamstring the frontline service professional's ability to please the customer, they are virtually guaranteeing a demoralised, cynical workforce.

Conversely, if frontline customer service professionals have the power to please the customer, the predominant tone of their interactions is one of appreciation and delighted surprise. This can't help but create a sense of pride and wellbeing – the emotional foundation of world-class customer service.

Notice when employees do things right

Many managers unwittingly increase their own frustration, while creating a demoralised workforce, by always focusing on employee mistakes. Unfortunately, it's human nature to notice what's wrong more easily than what's right. Since we are all affected by how we are perceived, and since 'what gets noticed, gets repeated', giving in to this natural tendency creates a downward spiral of increasing undesirable behaviours and decreasing morale. To prevent this from happening, provide managers with training and coaching about how to become a more consistent 'good finder'.

By engaging in these management practices, your organisation can create an organisational climate that optimises employee emotions. By helping your management team optimise employee emotions, you will be helping your organisation make a significant impact on the primary sources of competitive advantage in today's marketplace.

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