Solving "Engagement"

How to deal with one of the most ubiquitous words in HR and People Strategy.

There's a funny thing about *the* HR buzzword of the past decade. It doesn't have a single definition.

Try this exercise. Try to define "engagement" in fewer than ten words.

> *It's what keeps employees paying attention.*
> *It's how we define performance.*
> *It's connected to our culture.*

Engagement is that buzzword of the past decade – in fact, Deloitte found the combination of engagement and culture to be the dominant issue for HR professionals today. Respondents to the 2017 SITE Index list "improving engagement and morale" as one of the top reasons for using incentive travel. Yet organizations have different ideas on what engagement actually is, how to specifically address it, and what problems it gives rise to.

Understand and affecting engagement in your organization means addressing key strategies:

Define what "engagement" means for your organization.
In truth, it doesn't matter what the word "engagement" means as long as you clearly identify what it means to you and your organization. Treating the word as a catch-all term doesn't activate engagement in any meaningful way – meaning that it isn't helping your organization's people or culture strategy.

Create a specific, clear definition for what engagement is in your organization – similar to how you might for a corporate Mission, Vision or Values. Once you have a definition, communicate it to key players responsible for engagement. This creates a common foundation on which you can base strategies and tactics.

Best tool to define engagement.
Mind map out all the words that have meaning to your organizations when it comes to engagement, as a starting point to draft your definition. Common terms can include *people*, *productivity*, *performance*, *commitment* and *capability*.

Be certain that engagement is the problem, not the symptom.
You just got back your employee survey and engagement scores look weaker than a year ago. You have an engagement problem.

Or do you?

Organizations that see engagement as a foundational issue don't look for underlying or associated symptoms. Engagement can be a challenge, but it can also be a component of something else. Seeing a low engagement score might mean that the organization is not effective with day-to-day recognition, or that your Millennial workforce holds values that are different from your Boomer workforce.

Best tool to understand engagement opportunities.

Ask "why," then keep asking "why" until you've adequately understood the challenge you're facing. Low engagement scores happen for a reason (so do high engagement scores). Determine what the symptoms are, drilling down until you're able to best understand the challenge that you're trying to address or solve in the first place.

Use the right tools in the right way to influence engagement.

Incentive is an effective tool in driving employee engagement – but it's not the only tool. With a clear understanding of your company's definition of engagement, determine specific roles for the tools you have to address those opportunities. These include incentive, reward, compensation, recognition and employee communications, and each can be applied in different ways.

- Non-cash incentive can be a tool to drive employees and teams to achieve specific results, and incentive travel has been proven to "increase loyalty" and "a sense of belonging."
- Reward can integrate with incentive or recognition to create a tangible reminder of what someone has done right.
- Compensation continues to broaden to include not only pay and benefits, but also elements such as wellness and CSR, and can be an attractive retention strategy.
- Recognition is being increasingly used as a tool to identify, coach and reinforce the behaviors that lead to high levels of individual performance and productivity.
- Employee communications serve as a tool to introduce and continuously underscore the behaviors and goals of an organization.

Beware of pitfalls.

The pursuit of improved employee engagement can be a double-edged sword. Programs that feel contrived and out of character for a company's culture can lead to a backlash or disengagement. Creating an "entitlement culture" is also a potential problem. One recent anecdote saw a young workforce become vocal and negative when a company's incentive program was modified to be more inclusive – without increasing the overall budget. It meant that more employees were included in incentive opportunities, a fact that adversely affected perennial top performing recipients.

Best tool to address entitlement culture.

Expand beyond the use of one tool for an organization – drawing on large- incentive, small-scale recognition and increased marketing communications. Defining, building growing a complete people strategy creates more opportunities to fuel engagement.

Keep an eye on what's next.

Employee engagement has been a big part of organizational conversations for the better part of a decade – and it continues to evolve in ways that make it more sophisticated and integral. New, next generation measurement platforms are allowing companies to take the pulse of an organization more frequently. Companies are also becoming keenly aware of how emotional factors can be used to attract, retain and grow employees. Most importantly, engagement increasingly feeds into the also-often-difficult-to-define concept of corporate culture. In a way, culture is accepting the mantle of focus for HR departments from engagement. It's the emerging "big thing" with companies around the world.

When it comes to engagement, there's so much more than meets the eye. While recognizing that engagement is critical to a company's success leaders need to dig down to the next level, understanding the definitions, tools, obstacles and opportunities to transform this ten-letter word into a powerhouse for any organization.