

Feeling Demotivated? Consider How Your Job Helps Others.



No topic is as critical right now as employee engagement and motivation. Employees desperately want to feel engaged. Nine out of 10 people would take lower compensation to do more meaningful work. And engaged employees perform better, experience less burnout, and stay in jobs longer.

This translates to business success for companies that motivate and engage their people. Gallup has found top-quartile employee engagement firms experienced a multitude of advantages over bottom-quartile firms, including increased profitability (23%), increased productivity (18%), decreased absenteeism (81%), and increased client engagement (10%).

Yet most people are disengaged at work. A 2021 Gallup study found that only 36% of Americans feel engaged at work, and only 15% of employees globally feel the same. And the latest surveys show engagement statistics slumping as we continue through 2022.

There are, of course, many ways to encourage employee motivation and engagement, central among them, the creation of purpose-driven work cultures. But one often overlooked opportunity is service. Very few things are as positive for mental, spiritual, and physical health as service to others. Various studies have indicated that service to others is at the very heart of creating meaning and purpose in one's life. Research has also found that volunteering counters stress, combats depression, creates happiness, increases self-confidence, and even positively correlates with physical health. And we

all know that when we serve others we feel more fulfilled, happy, motivated, and engaged.

The good news is that each of us, in our day jobs, have almost innumerable opportunities to serve. But it's often challenging for us to see those opportunities and for companies to emphasize them. Our opportunity is to reconceive of our work as service and to help our colleagues and employees do the same. This change in mindset can be transformational, and there are six key groups any of us can consider serving each day.

1. Clients or customers

At the core of every business is a customer. If it doesn't serve that customer well, it will fail. And yet many of us feel distant from that customer in our day-to-day jobs. The accountant in a medical device company may not ever meet the people those devices are saving. And the procurement specialist at a theme park may not get to see the joy their rides create.

Finding ways to make this service to customers real to employees is a core challenge for each person and for every company's leadership team. One executive I know did this by having customers speak at the company's annual all-hands meeting, highlighting the difference the product had made in their lives. Professor Francesca Gino has written about a variety of ways to achieve similar outcomes, including varying employee tasks and making videos about the impact their work has on end clients. Regardless of approach, finding ways to see through an activity to the impact it has on the customer is critical to a mindset of service.

2. Colleagues

Nothing is more important to happiness and fulfillment in life than the depth and breadth of our positive relationships. And positive relationships at work are both sorely lacking in many environments and absolutely essential to engagement where they exist.

What could it look like if every person in a company decided to serve the people they work with the same way they serve clients? This may include managers learning how to better express gratitude to and to recognize great employees. But the core of this mindset shift must be in every individual in a firm choosing to act in service to others each day. The results could be a relational revolution. And all it requires is a change of heart from one of self-centeredness or competition to one of encouragement and support.

3. Community

Every organization exists in a community — a city, town, neighborhood, country, or state. Companies that implement community service programs experience a number of benefits, including better recruitment, development, engagement, and retention. And when structured to reflect the interests and passions of employees, these programs can

lead to greater motivation among a workforce and better reputation in the community. Professor Jessica Rodell, among others, has written extensively about how to make these programs effective, including steps like prioritizing meaning, balancing bottom-up interests with top-down corporate structure, and involving other stakeholders — like those people the community service work is intended to benefit. What opportunities does your organization have to serve its community right now?

4. Capital

This one is the hardest. For most people in a business, that business's shareholders are some distant, often malicious force. But in reality, most of the capital that owns public companies comes from 401ks, defined benefit contribution plans, 529 plans, and similar programs funding the retirements or financial needs of regular people. And many private companies are structured similarly. While it's likely never going to be as big a motivator as customers or colleagues, remembering that our work may serve the financial dreams and aspirations of people like us can make us feel better about the value we create.

5. Partners and vendors

Anyone who's been a vendor or provider to another company knows that role can be hard. Often, those we serve as clients take advantage of us, neglect us, and take out their frustrations on us. We have an opportunity, therefore, when we are the clients dealing with the vendors and partners who serve us, to act differently — and even to embrace an attitude of service to them. People or companies who become known for serving even their providers will benefit from more pleasant relationships with those partners and truly differentiated reputations in the marketplace. When we act to serve our providers, we can also feel better about our relationships with them.

6. People we love

We all work for a reason. Many of us work to support a family and to provide opportunities for them. Those without spouses or kids often work to support parents, siblings, or friends. And many people use the proceeds of their work to support causes and organizations about which they care deeply. Even on the hard days, we can take comfort in the fact that our work is an act of service to those we love.

For service to be central to work, it has to permeate everything that we do. It can't be confined to off-hours volunteering — though that is important — but instead must become a mindset with which we approach all our professional activities. Individuals who remember these daily opportunities for service will be happier and more fulfilled. And companies that promote them and keep them central to their culture will benefit from a more engaged and motivated workforce.

Written by: John Coleman

Published by: HBR.org / Harvard Business Review