

## Associate Engagement - It All Starts At the Top - By Lizz Chambers, CHE, CHA

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Woody Allen once said that 80 percent of success is showing up. Unfortunately, this accurately describes the mindset of the majority of workers today.

Multiple studies conducted in different countries and across just about every industry show that very few workers, on average seventeen percent, are passionate about their jobs and their company. The rest just show up and go through the motions, or worse, they are 'actively disengaged'-with some actually working to harm their company. The cost associated with this disengagement within our workforce is mind boggling, with estimated losses in the billions of dollars in the United States alone.

### **What Is Engagement?**

Words like passion and commitment come to mind. Associate engagement is the illusive force that motivates your associates to be more productive and to provide higher levels of service to your guests. What does engagement look like? In my experience it manifests itself in the following excellent attributes:

Passion and enthusiasm

Loyalty

Taking ownership with an overwhelming sense of pride for the job they do

Commitment to team members, to our guests and ultimately to the company's bottom line

Engaged associates are those who work longer hours, try harder, accomplish more and speak positively about their hotel and the brand for which they work. When you have engaged associates the competition, as well as the guests, are sure to sit up and take notice.

### **The Leader's Role**

While many factors influence associate engagement, the most critical factor is the quality of leadership. An associate's immediate supervisor influences how they view the hotel, the management company and even the brand and associated franchise.

Remember, people do not leave jobs...they leave people. The quality of an associate's relationship with their immediate supervisor is the most critical factor in the engagement process as well as whether to stay or leave a job.. Even compensation and benefits are less crucial than this relationship.

What about those who want out because of a poor relationship with their supervisor but are not in a position to just quit. Well, they become disengaged. Simply continuing to show up for work and doing just enough to get by and get paid. What effect do these types of associate have on the rest of your staff? Have you ever heard the phrase 'one rotten apple can spoil the whole bunch'? Disengagement is highly contagious and can cause the entire team to suffer as will your hotel.

While disengaged leaders may cause some associate's to quit and de-motivate others, engaged leaders have the opposite effect. They create and maintain an environment marked by trust, respect, open communication, and inspire their associates to give 100 percent and then some. Why are some hotels and hotel companies successful at driving engagement? It is simple...they ask the right questions.

### **Do Our Leaders (Managers, Department Heads and Supervisors) Have a Passion to Lead?**

How can disengaged leaders inspire passion and commitment in others? Simply put...they can not!

While there are many reasons why leaders are disengaged, including the leadership style or behavior of their own supervisors, a major cause is that too many people promoted into leadership positions never wanted to be leaders in the first place and lack the skills needed to lead others. The lack of leadership skills is easier to address than the lack of motivation to lead in the first place. With this in mind shouldn't we be interviewing for the desire to lead when making hiring or promotion decisions? And shouldn't we be encouraging disengaged leaders to explore other career options which do not include our hotel.

### **Do We Have The Right People in the Right Jobs?**

Common sense should tell us that associates are likely to be more engaged in jobs they like and for which they have a talent. Most associates fail to be engaged because they were a poor fit for the industry, the position, or the company's culture. If that is the case, we must question our selection process. Are we truly dedicated to interview not only for knowledge, skills and ability but for motivational and cultural fit?

Leaders must be careful when interviewing candidates, to structure questions to determine job fit, cultural and motivational fit. For motivational fit you need to know...Do candidates want jobs in the service of others? Do they want to be in direct guest contact or work behind the scenes serving those who serve our guests? Do they want to travel or sit behind a desk? Do

they want job security or high risk and reward? These are just a few examples of motivational fit characteristics that should be explored with candidates.

### **Do Our Associates Know Our Vision?**

There is a strong relationship between engagement and the degree to which associates feel that they have an important role in the organization. Associates must feel that their leader has a vision for success. In recent surveys on engagement, fewer than half of associates felt that their supervisor was communicating a clear vision for success.

To bring that vision into sharper focus, leaders should constantly connect associate goals and accomplishments to the broader goals and values of the organization through communication and recognition. It's easy to overlook the degree to which this connection needs to be reinforced. Associates, involved in their day-to-day tasks and deadlines, can easily lose sight of how they impact the organization as a whole. When this situation is not monitored, engagement suffers.

### **Do We Promote Accountability?**

Clear goals and expectations are essential to high engagement. However, in my experience many of our associates do not know exactly what is expected of them at work. When our associates feel this out-of-the-loop, the consequences are significant:

Lack of commitment to achieving organizational goals

Lack of focus or feeling of accomplishment

Absence of reliable information on which to base meaningful career development plans

To help our associates see the big picture, leaders must do more than merely set and review performance expectations. They also must take action. Star performers need to be recognized and rewarded. Many leaders virtually ignore their best performers, assuming that they want to be left alone. While these stars don't need to be micromanaged, they do need to be encouraged and have their contributions recognized. And, consistently poor performers need to be managed-fairly but firmly. Remember that nothing de-motivates our associates more than leaders who tolerate substandard performance from some because they know the best players will pick up the slack.

### **Do We Develop Their Talent?**

Most of our associates want to feel like they're going some where. For the sake of variety and also for the challenges involved, they want and expect opportunities to grow, expand their skills and experience new challenges. Many associates will name limited opportunities to grow as the reason they left their last job. Precious few associates have ever even seen a development plan. Along with your company's Succession Program your leaders must be held responsible for developing the individual. We must ensure that:

Leaders are held accountable for managing the development process, including setting, measuring and attainment of goals.

Development goals are set and defined by performance results rather than by simply acquiring the knowledge or skill to do the job.

Development goals have measurable payoffs: to the individual, to the department and to the hotel or company as a whole.

### **Do We Recognize the Obvious?**

Some supervisors do not invest time, effort or money into recognizing associate's efforts and accomplishments, even though the return on this investment can be extraordinary. This can be traced to a combination of factors. First, many understand the value of recognition but feel they don't have the time to provide more than the occasional 'good job.' Other managers may be out of touch with their associate's day-to-day work or are simply unobservant. They rarely take note of effort or accomplishment unless it is far beyond expectations. However, those managers who are attuned to their associates' performance, monitor progress, provide day-to-day coaching, praise effort and reward successes in both large and small ways create an environment for engagement.

In my company, Newport Hospitality Group, we are constantly striving to understand the connection between leadership ability, behavior, and performance. And as we search for the best ways to grow our company through people, we continue to work to ensure that our associates are engaged, beginning with those we choose as leaders.

### **About the Author**



Lizz Chambers conducts in-house training and training assistance for all properties managed by Newport Hospitality Group. She coordinates and conducts supervisory skills workshops to prepare supervisors to earn their certification through AH&LA's Educational Institute.

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