

# Kerry: Learning to Improve Engagement

By Susan Shinn and Lois Weber

A recent Gallup Poll survey measuring employee engagement revealed that 17 percent of employees are disengaged, 54 percent are not engaged and only 29 percent are truly engaged.

Non-engaged and actively disengaged employees cost companies millions of dollars in low productivity, increased numbers of accidents and high attrition. These employees often ignore company goals, create tension and frequently do not have productive relationships with their co-workers or managers.

Employee engagement is the result of many factors, including effective recruiting, compensation, leadership support and the availability of development opportunities. Essentially, when employees can contribute to company success and are enthusiastic about their jobs, they are engaged. But it's more than feeling committed: Engaged employees are passionate about helping the company succeed, and they seek out direction and opportunities to further their career goals and the goals of the organization. The quality of the employee-manager relationship, perceptions of job importance, clarity of job expectations and the quality of feedback also have been identified as engagement drivers.

"Some managers tell, demand, bribe, give bonuses, cajole, plead and beg," said Craig Ross, president of Pathways to Leadership Inc. and co-author of *Stomp the Elephant in the Office*. "These create external motivations for engagement, and the managers' workloads double. Now, not only do managers have to do their own work, they have to keep the carrot in front of employees to keep them engaged. This only works short term and requires a maintenance culture where management consistently has to generate lists of external motivators."

Technology also can be used to foster an engaged culture, as can on-boarding. Technology can provide an efficient platform from which employees and managers can consistently and efficiently align individual and organizational objectives, create development plans and create feedback portals to facilitate a continuous stream of communication.

Effective on-boarding can promote engagement and increase speed to competency for new employees. New hires may be

familiar with an industry or even with a company, but they often are unfamiliar with the cultural or procedural nuances. This can lead to information gaps that go along with transitioning into a new work environment.

To get new employees critical company or position-specific information faster, and to promote their feeling more engaged, many companies use a learning management system to distribute contact lists and assign relevant training programs. Such systems allow employees to receive standard company messages, and managers can use them to communicate development plans that explain how their goals align to company objectives.

Kerry Ingredients and Flavours implemented such a system in 2005, when Kerry's Americas' regional management team began strengthening the organization's development and succession planning processes.

Kerry Ingredients and Flavours is a global division of Kerry Group and a global leader in food ingredients and flavors serving the food and beverage industry. Headquartered in Tralee, Ireland, Kerry Group has more than 23,000 employees working at approximately 200 sites worldwide. The company aligned across three regions: Americas, Asia-Pacific and EMEA. The Americas Region of Kerry Ingredients and Flavours employs approximately 7,000 people in Latin America, Canada and the United States.

Kerry implemented a learning management system to launch online content and administer instructor-led training. The system also allowed talent managers to post development planning guides and other tools to help managers and employees. The company began using both internally generated and vendor-created online courses to facilitate the employee-orientation process and deliver consistent messages about the company's mission, vision, culture, values, policies and standard procedures.

This online tool enabled talent managers to redirect their efforts from more tactical activities, such as conducting orientation sessions, to more strategic efforts to help new employees settle into their roles. For instance, the performance management training segment of online content offerings emphasized the company's overall strategic objectives, as well as business and functional

objectives. This promoted the importance of employees aligning their career goals to these broader targets.

Feedback on the off-boarding process revealed that, early in their careers, employees want development opportunities related to networking and how to integrate quickly into the organization. Further, the company wanted to strengthen employees' knowledge of its technology-based ingredient and flavor solutions.

One solution was to enhance succession planning efforts with a greater concentration on competency development to ensure employees had ample resources to build future capabilities. Another more immediate solution was to create two programs: a Technology Education Program and an Early Career Program.

The Technology Education program started with customized online modules in the learning management system to assist employees in understanding and leveraging the breadth and depth of Kerry's overall capabilities. To date, there have been more than 6,000 completions from the 25 technology program modules, and Kerry expects to see that number double during the next year as the organization transitions to global module content.

To accommodate different learning styles, Kerry added a blended, facilitated course using sections of modules with facilitation and food samples if the technologies involve food.

Kerry also discovered that basic training was helpful to increase speed to competency for employees early in their careers. Hence, it developed an early career program that covers topics including professionalism, networking, e-mail etiquette time management and communication skills.

Because employees eligible for this program were spread across multiple locations and worked on various shifts, Kerry needed a virtual means to conduct the program. The solution was to have employees attend an hour-long virtual training session every other month using system applications that allow for chats, polling, whiteboards and other interactive functions to help keep employees engagement levels high.

The virtual classes can be hosted through the learning management system so participation can be tracked. Managers are sent communications on the outcomes of sessions so they can supply supplemental materials and ensure the necessary learning is occurring.

Results for the early career training program were favorable. In fact, managers are even attending sessions themselves to learn more about a particular topic and to engage in a better dialogue with their direct reports.

"Over the span of the past few years, our employees have become more engaged in the strategic direction of the organization, and they feel informed and empowered to execute on that strategy" said Jim Egan director of communications programs at Kerry Americas.

All of these solutions—thoughtfully planned programs supported by technology—are helping Kerry Ingredients and Flavours produce an engaged work environment in which employees have a clear vision, regular communication with management and numerous opportunities for growth and development.

## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

Organizations such as Kerry that have solved the employee engagement puzzle also incorporate many of the following strategies into their talent management activities:

- On-boarding programs in which new hires are trained and coached immediately in order to achieve personal and organizational success.
- Regular conversations between employees and management on career plans, career improvement and advancement opportunities.
- Opportunities for employee involvement in strategic business decisions and plans, and increased communication about these decisions and changes.
- Adoption of a common set of values, visions and understanding of how the organization functions, along with behavior standards and clear job expectations.
- Providing the basic tools and materials to complete work and deliver on that common vision.
- Increasing the quality of the employee-supervisor relationship.

## BUILDING AN ENGAGED CULTURE

Employee engagement is not about a single change. It's about making sure individual employees can see how their work and contributions create value in an organization. But employee engagement is less an organic workforce expectation than it is a result of management activities such as engaging in effective communications and providing opportunities for growth. Talent managers can encourage such commitment and productivity with an infrastructure of software to support clarity of goals and roles feedback, competency development and career plans

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