

## Leadership of sentinels

*Front-line managers help drive engagement*

BY REBECCA HEASLIP

Front-line managers are often overlooked in organizations that focus on developing the leadership skills of middle to senior-level managers. This runs counter to logic and common sense. The front-line manager, after all, is the first line of defence in a war for scarce talent — a sentinel in the management hierarchy. Helping front-line managers build the skills and confidence needed to lead and engage staff should be a top priority. They are the first points of contact with employees and can have a significant impact on engagement and retention.

A mere 21 per cent of 90,000 employees worldwide are engaged in their work, meaning they're willing to go the extra mile to help their companies succeed, according to a 2007-2008 *Global Workforce Study* from Towers Watson. A further 38 per cent are partly to fully disengaged, leaving 41 per cent stuck in the middle. And the companies with the highest levels of employee engagement achieve better financial results and are more successful in retaining the most valued employees.

So why aren't companies doing more to train and coach managers on how to engage and retain staff? What keeps people engaged and loyal is the commitment of management to help staff build skills and advance in their career. Universally, employees seek

the same things: Work that provides opportunities to learn and grow, variety and challenge.

Front-line managers need support in helping employees make the link between individual performance and organizational success. They need to understand their employees' motivations and interests to help leverage their talent and inspire them. When employees believe their managers have their best interests at heart, they will go the extra mile, producing at levels above and beyond what is expected.

Younger generations are keen to be noticed and thrive on recognition. They are especially motivated by the experience of work and will leave if an organization's values (evidenced through its leadership) don't fit with their values. They care about a company's brand and other intangibles, including the interpersonal or relationship side of the business. Their needs should be on the radar of all managers but especially front-line managers who often have the most contact with younger employees.

It behooves organizations to create a sustainable supply of quality leaders, starting with front-line managers, to meet current and future leadership requirements. This necessitates extensive workforce and succession planning but, sadly, many organizations have not invested the time and resources.

High-potential employees with the attributes, values and passion to lead

need to be identified early. In-depth assessment of their leadership talent, readiness and desire to take on more responsibilities is the first step. Key competencies that are tied to business goals need to be identified for each level of leadership.

People leave bad managers, not bad companies. When employees see a meaningful return on their investment of time, talent and energy, they show a greater commitment to their manager and organization. Enhanced employee engagement and retention become moot.

When front-line managers answer the following questions positively, it's clear their organization has invested in their development:

- Do my people know what is expected of them?
- Does my team know where the company is headed?
- Do I help them make the link between what they do and corporate strategy?
- Do I make an effort to know and develop each team member?
- Do I hold my staff accountable for agreed-to goals?
- Does my staff trust and respect me?
- Do I have good self-management skills?

Turning front-line managers into leaders takes commitment and time that will pay dividends in enhanced employee engagement and retention, significant financial return for an organization and personal rewards for a manager — worthy goals for 2010.

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