Creating an engaged workforce

Mark Eydman, CQP MCQI, Founder and Lead Consultant of Six Pillars Consulting, UK, explains the importance of an engaged workforce and how organisations can create one to boost business performance

People are at the heart of a successful quality management system and their engagement is key if that success is to be achieved. ISO 9001 requires top management to achieve this state as a condition for certification, but what is an "engaged employee", how can this be achieved and what are the explicit benefits that accrue as a result?

Too often, employee engagement is seen as desirable, but the benefits are not considered explicitly; measurement is sporadic and flawed, and few impactful plans to drive improvement are formulated and executed.

Why is there this gap between knowledge and action? This is a difficult question to answer, however personal observation suggests there is organisational awareness of an engagement gap but a reluctance to bring this explicitly into the public domain.

Who wants to confirm that employees are not engaged to the required degree, especially when solutions are not immediately apparent? Unfortunately, the absence of measurement does not eliminate the problem.

What is employee engagement?

Employee engagement is the extent to which employees feel passionate about their jobs, are committed to the organisation and put discretionary effort into their work. By creating and retaining an engaged workforce, employees will help to boost productivity, support customer loyalty and enhance organisational quality. They are also more likely to stay with the business for longer.

Why should you develop an engaged workforce?

The benefits of employee engagement are widely acknowledged. "Engagement of people" is recognised in ISO 9001:2015 as one of the seven Quality Management Principles, with engagement defined in ISO 9001:2015 as "involvement in, and contribution to, activities to achieve shared objectives".

ISO 9004:2015 goes further and describes the requirement for any organisation to drive employee engagement through maintained processes that are supported by managers at all levels. Some of the described activities to be considered include:
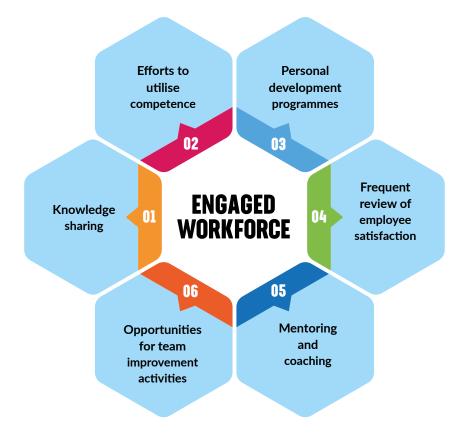
- Knowledge sharing;
- Efforts to utilise competence;
- Personal development programmes;
- Frequent review of employee satisfaction;
- Mentoring and coaching;
- Opportunities for team improvement activities.

Measurement and improvement

So, with the importance of employee engagement recognised, and studies (gallup.com) suggesting potential impacts of up to 20 per cent on profitability and 40 per cent in quality (defects reduction), how do we implement these measurement and improvement programmes?

Various methods have been deployed with mixed success to measure employee engagement. These include pulse surveys, focus groups, exit interviews and more structured survey programmes.

While a full critique of these methods is beyond the scope of this article, care should always be taken to ensure that the method is appropriate to the aim, and that feedback and willingness to act on the results are key components.

ENGAGED WORKFORCE

- **01** Knowledge sharing
- **02** Efforts to utilise competence
- **03** Personal development programmes
- **04** Frequent review of employee satisfaction
- **05** Mentoring and coaching
- **06** Opportunities for team improvement activities

A typical approach is the use of an annual survey. For the best result, a simple approach is suggested, with a numeric question to provide tracking data, as well as some open questions to explore barriers and drivers of engagement.

With surveys of this type, confidentiality can be key, and consideration may be given to the use of a third party to conduct the work. It is typical to confirm that identifiable feedback will only be released where individual safety may require it.

As quality professionals, our ongoing aim is to have not only engaged employees, but also for them to be engaged with our quality journey.

This aim is not without its difficulties, and the recently developed ISO 10018:2020 - Quality Management – Guidelines for people engagement, considers some of the common challenges. These include:

- Quality has a reputation of being linked to compliance rather than a collective pursuit of excellence.
- Quality is seen as a technical discipline and not "the best way to get things done" of relevance to all.
- Language and tools can be used to make quality seem inaccessible to those who are not formally trained.
- Quality professionals often lack the "softer skills" necessary to change the paradigm.

ISO 10018:2020 continues to explore those themes at a high level, showing how challenges can be overcome. Driving improvement around leadership, organisational strategy, knowledge, awareness and competence development is advocated and connected with ongoing organisational success.

Staff retention

Engaged employees stay longer, contribute more to a business and are likely to recommend your organisation to other potential talent. Addressing this opportunity systematically can bring significant benefits to any organisation, as mentioned previously in this article.

If your employees ask what they can do to inspire others, help their colleagues, and actively communicate their excitement working at the organisation, then you're probably on the right track to creating an engaged workforce.

TOP TIPS TO CREATING AN ENGAGED WORKFORCE

While any plan to develop employee engagement must be based on direct feedback from your organisations' employees, common actions to drive improvement include:

1 Providing clarity on workplace expectations.

2 Providing all the resources to allow people to do their best every day.

3 Encouraging managers at all levels to provide deserved praise regularly.

4 Ensuring that every employee has someone who cares about them and their development.

5 Finding ways to allow employees to share their opinions and then feel that these count.

6 Ensuring that everyone feels connected with the organisation's mission or purpose.

7 Developing an effective process for gathering employee engagement feedback data, develop a culture of open and honest participation and ensure action is taken where needed.

8 Recognising and celebrating the links between employee engagement and business success.