

Turn Your Disengaged Workers into ‘Bright-Eyed’ Contributors

By Eric Allenbaugh

Three company cultures generally emerge in corporate America—and you can often identify the presence of a particular culture by looking into the eyes of employees. While all three employee groups often exist within a given company, a dominant group defines the overall culture. Here is what you will likely see—and experience:

The ‘Glazed Eye’ Group. About 54 percent of employees fall into this category, a group characterized by its lack of spirit and vitality. They’re quick to explain why something cannot be done and frequently offer excuses. They look to others to fix problems and seldom share creative ideas. They feel discounted, unappreciated and insignificant. They’re likely to make statements such as “Nobody listens to me,” “It’s not my job” and “They don’t care.”

Members of this group avoid risk taking at almost all cost, do the absolute minimum they can to get by and tend to watch the clock very closely. They range between neutral and mildly negative about the company, yet don’t feel motivated to do anything to improve the situation. When this group dominates, it will slowly drain the vitality out of an organization.

The ‘Beady Eye’ Group. Members of this actively disengaged group represent about 17 percent of the corporate workforce, but dealing with their negative energy often consumes a disproportionate amount of time, talent and treasure. These people work against the organization and go out of their way to seek out and find the flaws—and they do find them. They focus on problems and resist attempts to deal with solutions. They feel angry, frustrated and highly disconnected. Blaming, moaning and whining, you will

likely hear them say things like “My boss is a jerk,” “This place is the pits,” “The pay and benefits are lousy” and “This is hopeless.”

Although these employees do not like working in this environment, they tend to resist efforts to improve working relationships. Many get their power through open resistance and cynicism. Even though they may be relatively small in number, their relentless negative energy drags others down. Their high stress levels contribute to the stress of others. In some respects, they take some degree of pleasure when a leader fails or even when the organization fails.

The ‘Bright Eye’ Group. This “dream team” represents about 29 percent of the employee population in corporate America. Bright eye employees are highly engaged and committed to the mission, vision and values of the organization. A “can-do” attitude characterizes their behavior, they go the extra mile in giving and doing their best and they function in a spirit of partnership with other employees and with their customers. These people have a clear understanding of personal accountability and tend to look to themselves first for resources and solutions. Instead of fixing blame, they fix the problems.

Bright eye employees embrace change and look for ways to reinvent themselves while continuing to provide high value. They work hard, yet seem to be energized by the quality and significance of their work. They take great pride in their accomplishments and speak well of their company. You will likely hear such statements from them as “I love my job,” “This is a great place to work,” “This feels like home to me” and “I am proud to work here.”

So, how do you go about creating and sustaining a bright eye culture? It's not rocket science; you just need to stick to the basics—but do them exceptionally well. Here are six strategies for taking talent to the top:

Hire winners. Take the time to hire well. Southwest Airlines “hires for attitude and trains for skill,” and its long-term results reflect this commitment. When evaluating potential employees, consider the three A's to ensure long-term success:

Attitude: Do they have the right spirit for this job?

Aptitude: Do they have the right talent for this job?

Alignment: Are they the right fit with our mission and values?

Engage their spirit. To motivate others:

Find out what turns people on about their job and do more of that.

Find out what turns people off about their job and do less of that.

It's amazing what happens when you actually talk with and listen to your employees about what's important to them, as well as following through with assignments that engage their spirit.

3. Coach for success. Coaching is an ongoing, collaborative process intended to clarify performance targets, reinforce strengths and encourage individuals to stretch to even higher levels of performance. Building ongoing coaching into the culture produces a high return on the investment while engaging people in their own success and effectiveness.

4. Focus on deliverables. A meaningful mission and challenging goals tend to bring out the creative best in others. People want to do a good job, they want to contribute, they want to make a difference, and they want to have pride in their work.

Your job is to make sure people are aligned with and enthusiastic about a meaningful purpose—and to engage their spirit in exceeding expected results. Celebrate successes and look for the learning when mistakes are made.

5. Clear their path. Like the conductor of an orchestra, your job is to “bring out their music” by encouraging employees’ individual and synergistic best. You don’t play their instruments. You engage their spirit to release the music within. As a leader, a coach and a facilitator, your primary job is to provide them with the resources they need, remove the barriers, make the connections and encourage their individual and collective best. In short, create the environment for them to excel and get out of their way.

6. Commit to renewal. Maintaining the status quo in a competitive environment is not a viable option. If your team merely stayed at its current state of development for the next several years, it might become an “endangered species.” Ask yourself: “Are we lagging behind in our field, are we just keeping up, or are we one of the progressive leaders?” Even if your team is moving ahead, the speed it is moving must be faster than the speed global business advances. Otherwise, your team will still trail behind.

As most employees want to learn and grow on the job, consider the three R’s of renewal: Release, reaffirm and reinvent. To stay at the cutting edge, ask yourself:

What must the team release or let go of to provide room and resources to support growth?

What existing strengths and resources does the team need to reaffirm and intensify to support its next growth steps?

How might the team reinvent itself to ensure that it remains at the cutting edge in its field?

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