



AIA Best Practices: Increasing employee engagement in difficult times

Contributed by Donald C. Simpson, AIA

Summary

Major economic events can cause fear, uncertainty, and doubt in employees. These reactions may reduce employee engagement when the firm needs it most. But firm leaders can take actions to increase employee engagement in difficult times. These actions can be the differentiators that allow some firms to gain ground while others are losing ground.

Common and predictable reactions from employees to major economic events:

- Fear, insecurity, and uncertainty about the future
- Questioning and scrutinizing leaders
- Self-preservation focus that lessens risk-taking and team focus
- Communication breakdown
- Lower productivity and lagging momentum
- Provincialism and power struggles, reducing trust, teamwork, and productivity
- Commitment erosion

These reactions result in lower employee engagement during pivotal times for the company.

Employee Engagement has been described by the Conference Board study of employee engagement as a heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for their job, organization, manager, or co-workers that, in turn, influences them to apply additional discretionary effort to their work.

This lower engagement can be critically important because there is a causal relationship between employee satisfaction and financial performance, as author David Maister demonstrated in his book *Practice What You Preach*. Maister found that decreases in employee satisfaction and engagement lead to decreases in quality output and client relationships, which result in lower financial performance.

The four basic needs of people to feel engaged at work

Leigh Branham, author of *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave*, conducted over 19,000 exit interviews of employees who voluntarily left their jobs. His research identified four basic needs that, when not met, started people on the path to disengagement and ultimately quitting a job.

1. **The need for trust.** Trust that firm leadership is acting in the best interest of the firm and the employees. Trust is foundational for successful relationships.
2. **The need to have hope.** Hope enables people to persist through difficulty. It is the positive mentality that although things may be tough, we will be able to get through this by working together.
3. **The need to feel a sense of worth.** A belief that one's skills and contributions are appreciated and making a difference.
4. **The need to feel competent.** Pride in one's ability to perform work at a high level. It can grow in an environment where there is opportunity to enhance one's skills and learn new ones.

Leadership is key to combatting the losses associated with decreasing employee engagement.

"Leaders are the stewards of organizational energy—in companies, organizations and even in families. They inspire or demoralize others first by how effectively they manage their own energy and next by how well they mobilize, focus, invest and renew the collective energy of those they lead. The skillful management of energy, individually and organizationally, makes possible something that we call full engagement." — *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwarz.

Firm leaders can take action to increase employee engagement even in difficult times. These actions address the four basic needs and can differentiate a firm from its competitors.

The five differentiators:

1. Set a clear, compelling direction that inspires employee trust and confidence

Sample actions that can be taken:

- Develop a clear and credible plan for and path to success.
- Make sure the plan is clearly communicated to all employees.
- Seek and welcome every idea for making the plan a reality and delivering more value (e.g., big/small improvements, new ideas/innovation).

2. Create more open, honest, two-way communication (The #1 factor is trust)

Sample actions that can be taken:

- Face reality and meet challenges head-on. Don't sugar-coat.
- Encourage senior leaders to be open, visible, and vulnerable.

- Involve employees in idea generation and reward the ideas that work.
- Engage with employees in “50-50 meetings,” in which leaders meet with groups of employees and focus on listening, and not talking, at least 50% of the time.
- Keep employees informed through a steady stream of bite-sized status reports.
- Conduct pulse surveys of employees on particular topics and then respond appropriately.

3. Enhance career growth, learning, and development

Sample actions that can be taken:

- Focus employees on company growth as key to personal growth.
- Hold “career checkups” and paint a picture of possible options and scenarios.
- Challenge employees to create their own opportunities by meeting “unmet needs.”
- Encourage temporary job trials, job swapping, and skill-building rotations.
- Invest in training; create everyday learning opportunities.

4. Increase recognition of all contributions

Sample actions that can be taken:

- Challenge all supervisors to notice and appreciate employee contributions.
- Celebrate team accomplishments.
- Spread the word about customer success stories.
- Confront poor performers.
- Resist temptation to “crank up the negative consequences.”

5. Demonstrate a strong commitment to employee well-being

Sample actions that can be taken:

- Conduct surveys, listening sessions, and focus groups.
- Communicate availability of all benefits.
- Hold meetings to address team’s life-work issues.
- Create “red zone” awareness and encourage “interventions.” (The red zone for an employee means that they may start exhibiting signs that they are feeling depressed, angry, anxious, or ashamed.)
- Educate about stress/time management, healthy diet, exercise, and lifestyle.
- Encourage socializing, fun, and stress relief.

Questions that firm leaders should ask themselves about each of the differentiators to help assess their status and progress:

- What are we already doing well?
- What more can we do?
- What obstacles will we face?

Difficult times can produce employee engagement problems. The five differentiators are proven ways for firm leaders to proactively address their employees' four basic needs so that they can achieve higher employee engagement and, as a result, higher client satisfaction even in difficult times.

Resources

1. American Institute of Architects. (n.d.). The seven hidden reasons employees leave. <https://www.aia.org/best-practices/6401822-the-seven-hidden-reasons-employees-leave>
2. Branham, Leigh. (2005). *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave*. AMACOM.
3. Maister, David H. (2001). Practice What You Preach: What Managers Must Do to Create a High Achievement Culture. Free Press.
4. Loehr, Jim, & Schwartz, Tony. (2003). The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal. Free Press.
5. Gibbons, John M. (2006, November 09). Employee Engagement: A Review of Current Research and Its Implications. The Conference Board. <https://www.conference-board.org/publications/publicationdetail.cfm?publicationid=1238>

About the contributor

Donald C. Simpson, AIA, is the president of KPS Group, Inc., in Birmingham, Alabama. He has been an active volunteer of the AIA, serving as chair of both the AIA Practice Management Knowledge Community Advisory Group and the AIA Best Practices Committee.

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Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition Unit 1 - The Profession

Chapter 05 – Organizational Development

Section 04 – Firm Growth and Development: How to Build a Creative Culture