



# Revolving Doors and Redemption:

Reflections on Effective Employee Engagement

Revolving doors are incontrovertibly a nightmare. Most people give no thought to the mind-shattering terror and next-level athleticism required to negotiate the cyclonic fury, and maybe some have even become accustomed to it, but I have had enough!



## Who's on first?

While you may think that my dislike for the dizzying death arises from some unresolved childhood trauma, the psychological scarring actually arose from my oldest son's near death experience, not my own. He has always been brave in the face of new experiences: when he first encountered one of these abominable apertures, he froze in his tracks, but only for a moment. Imminently assured of his fledgling facility to overcome the orbiting obstacle, he launched headlong toward destruction. I desperately managed to arrest his progress only a moment before his precious noggin was squashed like a grape in a vice.

I sometimes have flashbacks to this near-tragedy when working with clients to develop their employees. When employees take on unfamiliar challenges or assignments, they often find themselves in a similar situation: no matter how talented or ambitious they may be, rapidly changing objectives can crush even the most devoted employee. Worse yet, working our guts out toward non-specific (or artificial) goals is terribly demoralizing.

Most of us are hardwired to enjoy doing well and achieving our goals. No one wakes up in the morning excited about a day full of failure and unmet expectations. Well-planned performance management with clear and accurate expectations helps us navigate expectation changes.

Job descriptions, for example, while often viewed as a way to “check the box”, provide multiple measurable advantages to employee productivity. Recruiting efforts, interviews, performance reviews, growth goals, and career planning are all enhanced by using precise and accurate requirements for each position. Create them with input from all stakeholders to ensure that all expectations are captured and documented. In this way we connect employee efforts to concrete company objectives. From there it is easy to highlight employee successes and nurture long-term employee engagement.



## One size does not fit all.

Of course, my antipathy for the pernicious portals is not limited to my son's brush with disaster. Once, while my coworker and I were traveling together for work, he followed too closely behind me into one such vortex. For some reason, he was carrying all of his travel gear (clothing, laptop, presentation booklets, etc.) in one enormous pack on his

back. When he unexpectedly tried to squeeze into the same compartment as me, we became inextricably wedged.

We were trapped, but we were not alone. It took no small effort to convince all of the other travelers, who were already mid-orbit, to reverse direction so that we could correct our quandary. There was one very observant occupant who caught on right away and immediately added her efforts to the cause, but several of our fellow captives didn't realize what was going on until we managed, through shouted instruction and frantic gesticulation, to get their attention and persuade them to participate in our efforts to reverse the conventional routine. There was even one guy who, I think, never caught on. He remained confused and oblivious as his world was unexpectedly and inexplicably turned upside down. Thanks for that experience, Mike; the memory always makes me chuckle.

I can't help but think of this comical conundrum as a microcosm of our modern workplace. Speaking generally, there are a few rock stars in every organization who require very little direction to recognize and energetically strive toward organizational goals. More common are the clock-punchers, who come to work each day, do what is necessary to avoid any negative consequences and then go home when the whistle blows. (These folks, by the way, are not the enemy. This is exactly what we hired them for.)

Of course, we also have the negative extreme: the saboteurs. These are the folks that keep us up at night. They do everything they can to buck the system, to exploit loopholes for their own advantage, despite the adverse impact on the company. They even, at times, will disparage the organization in front of clients or in public forums. These folks negate all of the efforts of your star performers. You have to find these guys asap and help them find purpose and meaning. Please remember: despite our natural impulses, termination is not always the best option here for either employee or employer.

Individualized engagement efforts are key. If we are reactive in our approach, implementing universal policies based on the behavior of the misanthropic minority, we risk alienating our entire workforce. Espouse policies that are positive and aspirational. Individualized performance management again becomes the vehicle by which supervisors align employee needs with organizational goals. Also, as we demonstrate a sincere desire to invest in and develop each unique individual, we remove our employees' attention from the multitudinous alternative employment options available to them.



# Truth, Justice, and the American Way

I miss the merry-go-round. How have we banned merry-gorounds, but not revolving doors? My dear children look at me with confused looks when I talk to them about wheeling through space and time on the merry-go-round. They don't quite understand how that simple playground mechanism provided limitless hours of space exploration, military fortification, flight, and a plethora of other activities. That simple, circular spinner imbued us with power, exuberance, joy, and freedom. As you can see, I am an avid advocate for the return of the merry-go-round.

Similarly, as I meet with employers and employees alike, one thing has become clear to me: human beings are more engaged when they feel connected, part of a higher purpose. Even less-than-amazing occupations become more engaging when an employee can see that their efforts do make a measurable impact on the world.

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I recently had the privilege to work with an amazing organization whose employees' duties are above and beyond what most mere mortals experience. For example, two of their employees work alternating shifts, one all day, one all night, caring for premature triplets. Minimal recognition, incessant demands on their attention, and long hours in isolation were standard for these amazing caregivers. However, when I had the opportunity to sit and chat with these earthly angels, they had nothing negative to say about their clients or their work. They understood the connection between their very difficult work and a greater purpose in the well-being of the tiny people they protect.

If an organization can articulate a higher purpose and clearly illustrate how the organization connects to that higher purpose, employees will much more readily supply critical discretionary effort to that higher purpose. Specifying what the corporate vision is, how operations and individual employees connect to that vision, and infusing that vision throughout all aspects of your company increase engagement and productivity.

We would be remiss to not emphasize culture here. Culture statements are the tool companies use to codify purpose, engage employees, and build longevity in the workforce. We must not only know, embrace, and communicate company values, we must be very careful to apply culture as a criteria for every phase of the employee experience. Culture fit, or better yet culture add, is an incredible indicator of employee success and, by extension, employee longevity.



## Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

While in college, I worked as a recruiter for a security firm that was the stereotypical revolving-door workplace. Hiring managers were very much concerned with profit, but did not see any connections between profitability and turnover, retention, engagement, or employee development. Their personnel philosophy was to get a warm body in the door, and then to immediately begin recruiting for their replacement. It was expected that an employee would burn out within six months or sooner. You can probably guess that this turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It was not a very inspiring environment to be in.

As is typical with most high-turnover organizations, management blamed the astronomical turnover on the nature of the work. They accepted the pain as standard and built it in to their assumptions. If they had taken the time to consider other viewpoints, however, they would have gained quite a different perspective.

Decisions in a vacuum are never productive. False assumptions and group-think are the demise of well-intentioned efforts. Gaining stakeholder input is critical to the success of any initiative, and we must never forget that our employees are important stakeholders in all of our endeavors.

Archaic, episodic, isolated annual performance reviews are not enough anymore. (Truly they never have been.) How are we operating in good faith if we only give one-way feedback once every 52 weeks? An employee, once hired, must have the ongoing support and commitment of the organization. This is an implicit component of any employment relationship. If an employee is hired and they fail due to lack of feedback or expectation setting, the fault lies solely with the management team.

Not only must we provide clear expectations and actionable feedback, but we must continually solicit feedback from employees as well. Meaningful interactions with your employees on a regular and frequent basis are both illuminating and empowering. Those on the front lines often have unique perspectives and actionable insights that elude management teams and decision makers.

Many such insights are often better measured anonymously and/or by a third party. Data collection and evaluation is a big part of any engagement effort. Measurement enables evaluation, planning, progress and success. Know your numbers.

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Continually romance employees throughout their employment. (Please settle down, all of you good HR people: we are only speaking figuratively here.) Show them that we continue to value their contributions and care about their development. Purposeful performance management, effective one-on-one conversations, true recognition and reward programs, and all of the other little things that need to happen every day help our employees feel the love and increase the likelihood of long-lasting relationships.

Workplace relationships.

Appropriate workplace relationships.

## QED

So, as we see, in addition to my own nightmarish experiences, revolving doors everywhere continue to threaten us all with wreck and ruin. Employers increasingly feel the pain of employee relations practices that model themselves after the wrathful revolver. It is time to challenge our assumptions. I hereby submit these thoughts in an effort to endorse eradication of revolving doors of all kinds everywhere, including those that plague us and our employees in the workplace. Reach out today to add your support to the effort, or at least to share your pain with any type of revolving door.



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