

Growth Strategies

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The Power of Employee Engagement



Eileen P. Monesson

Business and psychological researchers have found a direct correlation between an employee's workplace engagement and a company's overall performance. Gallup's 2011 Employee Engagement Index reported that 71 percent of American workers are "not engaged" or "actively disengaged" in their work. That leaves a small fraction of employees truly enthusiastic and working at a highly productive and energized level.

Engaging employees in your firm's purpose can mean the difference between your firm being good or great. Great firms know that employee values must be in alignment with the firm's. Marketing and human resources departments can develop programs to educate employees on the firm's purpose, which might include training on how to live the firm's brand; internal newsletters reinforcing that message and coaching to ensure that everyone in the firm is working together for the common good of the firm.

Marketing and human resources can play an integral role in employee engagement by contributing to these programs. WithumSmith+Brown, P.C. (82 partners, 450 total staff, 14 offices) in New Jersey has a number of initiatives to engage its employees. The firm has a Leadership Training Program, Manager Training Program, and Women's Leadership Development Program, as well as continuing professional education (CPE). WithumSmith+Brown also has an employee website which is updated weekly by the marketing department to highlight employee accomplishments, office and charity events, articles and team member pictures.

In addition, the firm offers coaching in the areas of business development, leadership and management. WithumSmith+Brown sponsors a number of team building events like trips to New York City to see a Broadway play, baseball games and other sporting events. Employees plan their own outings as well to celebrate the end of tax season and other milestones. According to Kristen Celii, Marketing Manager with WithumSmith+Brown, "Our team genuinely enjoys spending time together. We are friends both in and outside of the Firm. It is *The Withum Way*."

Define Your Firm's Purpose

Great firms define their purpose. For example, a firm might decide that its purpose is to enrich the lives of its clients, employees and the public. Everything that they do, from internal communications to client communications, will center on this purpose. Client service standards, employee policies and communications, as well as interactions with the community, will all focus on enriching lives.

WithumSmith+Brown, attributes much of the firm's success to its commitment to its clients, employees and communities. The WithumSmith+Brown team fully embraces its culture and, as a result, has realized positive growth since its inception in 1974. The firm has been named one of the "Best Accounting Firms to Work For" in the nation in the "large" category by *Accounting Today*, as well as being named in "Best Places to Work in New Jersey" by *NJBIZ* for eight consecutive years.

One of the reasons why employees might not be engaged is because they cannot clearly identify their purpose or personal contribution to the success of the firm. This is an area where marketing can step in and guide employee engagement. Vision and mission statements may articulate the firm's purpose and values, but if employees do not believe the firm is living up to those values, there is a disconnect.

To successfully engage employees, management has to lead by example — starting with the managing partner. According to Elizabeth Au-Yeung, Vice President of Marketing of Sensiba San Filippo LLP in California (16 partners, 100 total staff, four offices), the firm's managing partner is passionate about its clients and its focus on service delivery. "Our firm is growing organically," Au-Yeung states. "We attribute our growth to having real people on our team who truly care about our clients. This approach has served our firm well."

A great leader demonstrates his or her ability to engage employees on an individual, social and organizational level. Mitchell Reno, Principal/Chief Marketing and Sales Officer at Rehmann (120 partners, 700 employees, 18 offices), says, "Everything we do is centered on the client. Our unique method of service is modeled after how Steve Kelly, our Chairman and CEO, services clients. We wanted to emulate him throughout the firm."

Understand Your Firm's Level of Energy

In his book *Energy Leadership: Transforming Your Workplace and Your Life from the Core*, Bruce D. Schneider [founder and CEO of the Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching (iPEC)] defines two types of energy: anabolic and catabolic. Anabolic energy is constructive, rejuvenating and sustainable, while catabolic energy is destructive and draining. Catabolic energy causes stress, burnout, anger and fear. People in a catabolic state complain and worry and are full of self-doubt. They are emotionally attached to misfortune and are stuck in a problem instead of a solution mindset. Anabolic people are passionate, creative and focused on working together to find opportunity in a challenge.


Having an anabolic culture is a competitive advantage for a firm. Anabolic energy creates an environment where employees are engaged and work in collaboration with one another. In an anabolic, challenges are viewed as opportunities. New ideas are constantly being generated to improve client service, attract new clients and retain employees.

The way that a leader interacts with his or her team has a tremendous impact on building anabolic energy and engagement. Partners who participate in meetings, respond to situations and socialize with employees with anabolic energy will establish a highly functional firm culture. It is important for firm leadership to acknowledge that these interactions must be authentic. If you say one thing and do another, you will lose the respect and trust of your team.

Align Firm Goals with Employee Values

WithumSmith+Brown's mission of providing quality services and innovative solutions to the businesses, individuals and communities it serves is supported by the actions of the leaders. The firm has even been able to engage their employees to do this in all aspects of their lives. When William R. Hagaman, Jr., CPA, Managing Partner, CEO was honored with the Humanitarian Award by the American Conference on Diversity—Central Jersey Chapter, he stated, "I accept this award not on behalf of myself, but on behalf of the 450 staff at WithumSmith+Brown, who — as individuals or in teams — are out almost every weekend, walking, bicycling, running, or parading with their pets, all for the sake of helping others in need. WithumSmith+Brown is committed to fulfilling our social responsibility to the community, and this ideal has been woven into the moral fabric of the firm for nearly 40 years."

"At WithumSmith+Brown we understand the importance of marketing and support our department with the resources necessary to carry out this vital function," continues Hagaman. "We have a great team working together to increase awareness of the WithumSmith+Brown brand. Our dedicated, passionate staff work hard throughout the year helping to put the firm and its clients in a position of strength, but they also like to have a little fun." To showcase its culture, WithumSmith+Brown developed a series of videos which served as a team and brand

building event. The videos represent the culture within the firm and the high level of employee engagement. 

About the Author

Eileen P. Monesson is a founding Principal with PRCOUNTS, LLC. Her firm is dedicated to helping its clients use the power of public relations and compelling marketing to drive their brand. She is an iPEC trained coach focused on energy leadership. She has more than 30 years of experience in marketing, business development, public relations, and communications in the professional services industry, 12 of which are in accounting. She can be contacted at 609-570-2150 or EMonesson@PRCounts.com.

Encouraging Employee Engagement by Sharing Knowledge

One of the most important steps you can take in engaging employees focuses on the simple act of sharing: Share all pertinent information of your business development efforts with your employees. Share your prospects, share your proposed fees, share your wins and losses, and even share the reasons behind them. Share everything!

Giving employees unlimited access to the marketing knowledge of your firm brings excitement, connection and ownership that engage them. They will be engaged not only in the process as it relates to them directly, but in the overall financial goals of your firm.

At Maxwell Locke & Ritter LLP, we have an open policy on attendance at industry-specific and firmwide marketing meetings and work to engage each person who attends through sharing. Sharing includes the following:

- ✓ Client feedback stories
- ✓ Recent prospect developments
- ✓ Competitive intelligence
- ✓ Other updates to our pipeline

In our personal lives, feeling connected to something encourages us to stay close to those connections, to nurture those relationships and to see our goals through to completion. I find it equally important for marketers to try and engage the employees in the hope that they will feel this type of connection to the overall growth and success of the firm. Let them draw themselves into your bigger picture and become a part of your long-term future. You will be amazed at the results!

*Staci Sprayberry
Marketing Director
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