



Engaging with the new normal.

As businesses navigate the new normal, employee engagement is more important than ever. Jeff Cates of Achievers explains why recognition has such a crucial role in this process.



BY Tom Goodwin WITH Jeff Cates 30 Jun 2020



Employee engagement is an ongoing challenge for leaders around the world. Ideally, the goal should be to create an environment in the workplace where people can do their best work. It's a lofty mission, granted, but one that Jeff Cates, CEO and President of Achievers, believes is achievable.

"There are three main challenges under the umbrella," explains Cates. "Recognition, employee voice and coaching. They're all interconnected, and they're all key to ensuring employees remain engaged in their roles."

Recognition is multifaceted; how it plays out in a given workplace will vary greatly from industry to industry, and even office to office. In general, recognition should be used as a means to anchor back to and reward the practice of the company's core values.

"There's been a tendency to assume the need for recognition and ongoing feedback is just a generational thing, required by younger workers who have grown up with a barrage of feedback through social media," says Cates. "Research, like that conducted by Gary Chapman and Paul White (co-authors of *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*), however, indicate that's not the case. Cross-generationally, recognition is arguably the most important workplace motivator."

If a company wants to have a true culture of employee recognition, the sharing of appreciation and rewards must be frequent and extend across the entire enterprise. Nobody can be left out: Every location, team, business unit, and individual must be equally likely to have their great work noticed and praised.

According to a recent research report by the Brandon Hall Group, organisations that rate their culture of recognition highly are 2.5x more likely to see increased employee engagement and those that give frequent recognition are 34 percent more likely to see an uptick in engagement.






Cates is also quick to distinguish recognition from performance management. Though they're often – and understandably – conflated, Cates believes that they serve vastly different roles.

“Leaders sometimes stock up their feedback, whether it’s positive or negative, to wait for a more formal review,” says Cates. “But the challenge there is that humans need more immediate recognition if you want them to model those positive behaviours in the workplace; wait for a review and you’ll have lost your momentum around it.”

Such momentum has rarely been more important. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically disrupted workplaces around the world, and accordingly led businesses to rethink the way they engage and recognise their employees. The days of informally swinging by someone’s desk to wish them “congratulations” simply isn’t realistic at the moment. Here, Cates notes, is where employee voice becomes crucial.



“The more tools that companies have to hear the voice of employees, the better,” Cates says. “We’ve already seen a shift from annual employee surveys to quarterly pulse surveys. Frequent, and consistent employee engagement questions enable a company to benchmark and set a tone of valuing employee feedback.”

Organisations need to complement the pulse survey though, with always on, real-time channels to collect feedback, identify blind spots and address them quickly. Cates points to the situation around the COVID-19 pandemic, and the current Black Lives Matter protests as an example.

“These are situations that are evolving in real time – you can’t wait until the next quarterly review to find out how they’re affecting your employees,” says Cates. “Companies need to be nimbler when it comes to the voice of the employee.”

Responding to urgent needs is where coaching comes into play. Once leaders have insights into the workplace directly from employees, they can take the necessary steps to reinforce positive behaviours. After all, Cates notes, people also need insight into what’s not working well and how it impacts organisational culture and overall performance.

“I subscribe to the idea of praising in public and coaching in private,” says Cates. “A solid recognition system lets you do that – good behaviours are modelled to the wider work community. Coaching is more geared at getting people to realise their potential; employees often understand what “great” looks like in their role instinctively, but they need direction on

how they can better evaluate both their own performance and of those around them.”

Now is the time to rethink how you gather employee feedback, and how you drive positive engagement through recognition systems. As the world adjusts to new ideas of “normal”, businesses need to consider new ways of working to build crisis resistant organisations that are ready for the future.



Achievers

Achievers Employee Success Platform delivers proven employee recognition, continuous listening tools and timely coaching tips for organisations to give their people ownership of the employee experience and to drive organisational success.

www.achievers.com/au

+61 3 9107 4418