

Engaged employees find work meaningful in seven ways

03 July 2018 7:15am

Happiness is vital for engagement but has limited application in a business context, according to an expert who says HR should turn their attention to meaning instead.

Ross Reekie, founder of workplace consultancy [Rise](#), uses the analogy of climbing a mountain to explain.

"There'll be moments during that mountain climb where you're happy – when you're standing on the top, the sun's shining, you're getting your photograph taken – but there's going to be moments on that climb when it's miserable – you've got frostbite, the wind's blowing, and you don't want to keep going," he says.

"We don't climb the mountain because it makes us happy; we climb the mountain because it's a meaningful experience and a challenge, so when I'm talking to HR and business leaders, I try to talk about meaning at work, because it's less concerned with the day-to-day happiness and more concerned with the longer-term fulfilment."

Reekie, who has done extensive inter-disciplinary research into workplace happiness, says he identified seven "mechanisms" through which work becomes meaningful: achievement, purpose, belonging, authenticity, self-esteem, connections, and making an impact.

Employers don't need to excel in all seven categories – balanced employees find meaning, happiness and fulfilment both within and outside of the workplace – but even if they neglect just one category, their employees will suffer.

"Think of them as hygiene factors," Reekie says. "You may not need to get all of your sense of achievement or all of your sense of purpose from work, but there's certainly a minimum that you need, and if you're below that minimum requirement for each of the seven categories, then you're going to feel a deficit of meaning."

If confusion reigns and employees lack clear direction, they'll lack purpose, he explains. If leaders don't foster a sense of team, and separate people from their friends, they'll lack belonging. If employees are asked to go against their values, authenticity will be compromised, and if they lack an inspiring vision that connects them to the end product they will feel disconnected from the impact of their work. Lack of recognition can compromise self-esteem, and failing to give people adequate tools and support can compromise achievement, while connection depends on "micro-level interactions" that should be characterised by courtesy and respect but often see leaders talking down to their subordinates and snapping at them.

"You might have an organisation that has a very strong purpose and a clear direction and [it's] making an impact on the world. Those two things certainly contribute to meaningful work, but they might be neglecting self-esteem – not recognising people – or they might not be fostering a sense of teamwork, compromising the belonging category," Reekie says.

A deficit in one or more areas can cause employees to have "a minor or a major work crisis", he warns. HR leaders can mitigate risk by building a capability framework that addresses all seven areas, and applying it across the organisation.

Inspire by being inspired

In most organisations, any deficit of meaning isn't caused by the company itself, it's caused by the "destruction" of meaning that comes from bad leadership, Reekie notes.

Taking managers through the seven categories, and the ways leaders can destroy meaning and create unhappiness in each, generally results in them admitting they've "done all seven" in the past week, he says.

One way managers can improve is to go beyond "talking the talk" on meaningful work and experience it for themselves. "The ones that are experiencing it are the most inspiring people."

HR can facilitate this through professional development that makes employees' work more rewarding, and by helping individuals connect what's meaningful to them with the organisation's vision, mission and purpose. "That's really the role of HR," Reekie says.

It helps if HR professionals feel it themselves, he adds. "It's like when you go up on an aeroplane, they say 'put your own mask on before you help others', and I think that's good advice for HR."

Many more articles like this one are available to HR Daily Premium members, including [HR case studies](#) and [workplace compliance news](#), plus our [on-demand webcasts](#) and [live webinar schedule](#). [Upgrade here](#) if you're not already a member.

Related premium content

- [Webcast: Engaging through the brain](#)
- [Ditch the "diet fads" of employee engagement](#)
- [Three keys to accelerating high performance](#)

Related content

- [Meaning and purpose key in AI-focused workplaces](#)
- [Engaged employees not always committed: Mercer](#)
- [Engagement focus "a classic disconnect"](#)

© Copyright 2018 HR Daily