

Why Focusing on Employee Satisfaction Is Dangerous

There is extensive evidence that happy and satisfied employees are more productive, create better customer experiences, and help support higher levels of employee engagement throughout the organization. As a result, there has been a rush to create initiatives that increase and measure *employee satisfaction*. So what's wrong with that? Plenty.

Stated most directly, employee satisfaction should be framed by leadership as an *outcome*, not the *object* of what the organization is doing across the culture. Do we want satisfied employees in the workplace because they improve business performance across a broad range of indicators? Yes; the evidence is overwhelming. But CEOs need to focus on what drives *engagement*, not simply satisfaction.

In short, business leaders need to focus on behaviors rather than simply attitudes. Employee *satisfaction* is an attitude; employee *engagement* depicts a sustained behavior that results in improved business outcomes. Employees who are fully engaged at work, as one might expect, are also satisfied. But the satisfaction CEOs should reach for should come as a result of engagement (e.g., volunteered discretionary effort), not because management has taken actions to make staff happy.

For example, you could conduct an employee satisfaction survey and find that you have very high levels of same. That result can be deceptive because the *satisfaction* could come from the fact the workers are overpaid and not held accountable. In that case, the high levels of employee satisfaction would not correlate to a high performance culture, but rather the collective euphoria of employees who landed on a good thing.

Additionally, when employees are approached with questions related to their *satisfaction*, organizations (and their culture) can create a sense of entitlement, namely that the role of management and the organization is to keep them happy as opposed to remaining profitable, being innovative, and providing meaning, purpose, and recognition for a job well done.

The ultimate responsibility of every CEO and senior leadership team is to achieve and sustain profitability. In order to do that we focus on things like cash flow, capital accumulation, supply chain, lean manufacturing, accounting practices, etc. In almost all these initiatives we use current best practices, and we use the latest technology. But when it comes to how we engage with employees, many companies are using old, no longer effective, models developed around the industrial revolution.

Today's best employees are looking for a lot more than a pay check and job security. Organizations that know how to create a high performance culture where staff looks forward to coming to work will have an edge over their competition and much more passionate and loyal customers. Get your employees engaged, trigger their intrinsic drivers, and as a result – they will be more than satisfied.