

The Uncounted Costs of Apathy – Re-Engaging Municipality Employees

Engaged employees tend to be more content in their work, and therefore provide better performance on the job. Unfortunately, one factor that contributes the most to budget drain is overlooked: Employees who are simply indifferent to their jobs, employers and quality of work. Yet, when Municipalities look at preventing losses to their budget, management often turns first to preventing theft and preserving physical assets. They may also look at time lost to injury and illness or examine the advantages of more comprehensive training. Apathy may be the unseen root cause of potential workplace safety issues when “cutting corners” and indifference toward coworkers is allowed to prevail.

Identifying employee apathy can be challenging because it will affect individual employees differently. One employee may appear to have an attitude problem and is unreceptive to change. Another may be indifferent and unfriendly, while others show a lack of concern for what happens. Employee apathy can be seen in other costly ways:

- Tardiness (arriving to work late, returning from lunch late, etc.)
- Absenteeism
- Increase in workers’ compensation claims
- Increase in fraudulent claims
- Diminished performance
- Poor organization, missed deadlines
- Poor morale, lack of focus

What are signs that a workforce is becoming apathetic?

Silence is often one of the best indicators of apathy, but one of the hardest to notice. Have your employees stopped asking questions, ignored feedback or advancement opportunities? They may be shutting down. Sometimes Administration attitudes breed apathy. If someone has an emotional investment in the people they hire, it may promote mediocrity. If the person you’ve hired is performing below average, but isn’t really bad enough to fire, do you keep the employee? This can often lead to a tolerance for mediocrity. Another indicator of apathy is ‘clustered’ disengagement of employees at one particular site. No matter how positive the employment relationship is, if one verbal, disgruntled employee believes they are not being compensated fairly for the amount of work they feel they do, this quickly becomes a spreading poison. Soon, all employees within the site or department become disengaged and the ‘entitlement’ attitude sets in.

Other indicators of an apathetic workforce include:

- Conflicts or hostility among staff members
- Confusion about assignments, missed signals, and unclear relationships
- Decisions misunderstood or not carried through properly
- Lack of involvement (attendance is not engagement)
- Lack of initiation, imagination, innovation

- Routine actions taken for solving complex problems
- Complaints of discrimination or favoritism
- Ineffective staff meetings, low participation, minimally effective decisions
- Negative reactions to the site Administrators, etc.

How to Re-engage Your Workforce

Of course, the best solution to apathy is to keep it from growing in the first place. What if you are new to the City/County and you've just *inherited* an apathetic workforce? Worse yet, what if a multitude of other concerns have distracted you from noticing your workforce has become complacent and mediocre?

Trust

The effort to re-engage your workforce must come by developing employee trust. Trust is a core value that is necessary in order to become a cohesive, interdependent group. Employees must buy-in to what you are selling; whether it is a mission statement, goals or safety. Given the tools to improve and the belief that the tools will get them to where they need to be, trust is developed. Feelings of comradeship or community need to be developed and nurtured so the "we-they" mentality can be eliminated.

Developing Trust through Value, Visibility and Viability

An **engaged** partnership between the Administration and all employees begins with a genuine effort on your part, which includes the difficult task of looking introspectively at your "**Value**". Do your employees view you as contributing value? Do you have their best interests at heart? What reputation do you bring to the City?

A second aspect of developing trust lies in your "**Visibility**". Are you an administrator that is seen by your employees? Do you remember their names and faces? Do you feel your visibility is important to them trusting you? Are you just a name in an office?

The third aspect in establishing trust is "**Viability**". Are you making a difference? Do you take the time to stop and measure what you've implemented? Do you, both formally and informally, recognize those who've gone 'above and beyond'?

Employees need to believe that you have *their* best interest at heart. This would be reflected in taking care of their work environment (culture, climate, work areas), as well as making an effort to know them (writing names down and reviewing them before visiting their department, using nametags at meetings to personalize it, etc.). This also means "actively, genuinely caring" through sharing your vision with the group, giving feedback, monitoring progress and keeping in touch with them.

Steps for Rekindling Employee Engagement

If there is a problem with apathy or the ‘climate’ within your Municipality, here are some steps for getting engagement from your workforce:

1. Apathy should never be tolerated. It needs to be confronted when it occurs. There needs to be a “no excuses” policy on apathy.
2. A culture of success and “Ancora Imparo – I am still learning (Michelangelo)” needs to replace “Status Quo,” “Quality Drift,” or anything that doesn’t push for continuous improvements.
3. Develop a mentoring program and/or induction process for new hires. New hires need support, frequent feedback, positive reinforcement, and recognition. It’s important they feel valued by their employer.
4. Continue to monitor the “climate” of your employees. This can be done by gathering information from staff, at all levels. Be sure to obtain information from those leaving the job as well as those who remain. If issues of involvement, respect, distrust and value arise, improvements should be made as soon as possible. Complacency is never an option with climate issues as it leads to apathy.
5. Disengaged employees often cite salaries as the cure to their indifference but many times the “feeling of being valued” may be more important. There are many innovative ways of valuing the work of staff through recognition of effort, involvement in improvement efforts, and longevity.
6. Keep a close eye on the physical appearance and maintenance of the city/county buildings. Good looking, well functioning buildings, inside and out, create pride in employees.

Employee engagement is a process and doesn’t happen overnight. Continuous efforts to work on developing a team spirit throughout your Municipality, each site, or department must be a daily goal. City/County employees and administration should be working closely together both vertically and horizontally to bring success and enthusiasm for the job. Remember, there is more power working together than alone. All staff must be made part of the process of not simply reforming practices but transforming the organization. Gone are the days of complacency, blame, apathy or inaction. Developing trust and pride in your organization will create employees who are engaged and vested.

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