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## **A Renewed Focus on Employee Engagement**

**By Lynne Eisaguirre**

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Now that we may be over the worst of the downturn, many organizations are looking at employee engagement: How do we make sure that we keep our best and brightest employees and that they stay engaged?

For Ann Rainhart, Director of Legal Personnel and Professional Development at the national law firm of Faegre and Benson, that means that she has to encourage attorneys firm wide to ask the question: What are we doing to create the dynamic of an engaged workplace? Based on her many years of human resource experience, what she finds is that you have to constantly ask the question: Why should people come to work every day?

You never know how managers might react to this issue. I worked recently, for example, with a group of self described "grumpy managers." When I encouraged this gang of cynics to craft a vision statement, they decided upon "We want to make it a fun place to come to work!"

Rainhart finds that, in order to keep employees engaged, you have to focus on the individual. The reason someone stays, she believes, is that they have someone who helps them develop and watches their back. She recommends asking good people why they like working at the organization. The answer always comes down to

individual development, "Having your own internal board of directors that helps develop you."

She finds that employee engagement efforts that focus on a broad group will fail.

"You have to drill down but that takes time. It's hard to get partners and directors to take the time away from their work to do that." A trend she sees is that people don't just want a general idea about employee engagement but they want to know "What do I actually do?" They need more concrete information.

### **Solutions that Work with Employee Engagement**

Rainhart suggests that you encourage managers and leaders to step outside themselves for just a moment and see how they're perceived, particularly as to how they relate. She suggests that they "stop and pause," even if it's just for a few minutes and that leaders need to ask themselves who they're going to connect with *today*. She finds that her leaders like the words "check in," and suggests that they make sure they have a concrete goal when they have that conversation. She coaches them, for example, that if they're going to take Bill to coffee, to make sure that they write down what they want to have happen. Rainhart reminds them that in their work they're accustomed to driving a certain result. They need to ask themselves "How do I apply that to relationships?"

In order to catch leaders attention about these topics, Rainhart has embedded these issues into Faegre's business development programs. She finds that people will

come to marketing classes, and Faegre teaches relationship skills in those session that can then be applied to employees. They also remind leaders that they will need an effective team in order to serve the clients they want to attract. After those sessions, people come out saying that they really want to learn about leadership. Both Rainhart and I are sometimes called upon to coach so-called "problem children." With these leaders or employees, she finds that you have to use a more direct approach. There has to be a point of crisis.

My own approach at that point is to use a combination of carrots and sticks – i.e., if you don't learn better relationship skills, here are the consequences, as well as here are the advantages of learning such skills.

You also have to work with "the other side of the table," Rainhart finds, by helping new employees and summer associates have goals about where they want to be in a year or five years. For example, she finds that the "Millennial" generation doesn't like the "You own your own career" message. You have help them reach that conclusion by giving them the tools: What does that actually mean? They want to know. How do I actually do that? What if I want to work for someone else? You have to help them brainstorm how to manage their own career.

I suggest that you consider these ideas to take a new approach to employee engagement. Think outside the box. You just might come up with a new idea.

Many more suggestions about these issues are found in my book *Tough*

*Conversations with Your Employee: From Performance Reviews to Terminations,  
Tackle Any Topic with Sensitivity and Smarts.*