

VALUING YOUR PEOPLE:

How to effectively engage your employees

By valuing your employees and enhancing their engagement with your organisation, you can bring about a raft of benefits that will help grow your business – even if there are only two of you. These benefits range from increased productivity, decreased sick days and better team building activities to attracting top talent and fostering trust and loyalty.



Sustainable companies operate beyond profit and are working towards having a positive social impact through their business operations. Getting everyone on the same journey may be the best thing you can do to strengthen your business, but how do you go above and beyond these benefits to really make a difference for your employees? There are hundreds of different methods of engaging your employees in your business, your mission, and your sustainability strategy and the most important thing is finding out what works best for your business.

The Sustainable Business Network hosted three fantastic workshops in Wellington, Tauranga and Auckland to hear how some successful companies have become the employer of choice in their industries and what others can do to chart their own path in effectively engaging employees.

Start with the WHY

Almost all of our speakers talked about the WHY – and not just the reasons for having a purpose as a company, but making sure that the purpose matches what your employees care about.

If you don't already have a clear understanding as an organisation about your why, take the time to figure this out with your team. It will help to refocus your work, not just in the frame of making your employees the most enthusiastic champions for your brand, but for many of your business operations. Make sure, however, that the purpose you create internally is the same thing that you communicate to your customers. [Z Energy](#) is driven by *solving what matters for a moving world*. This is reinforced in its values and employees are assessed against how they're performing to the company's values and purpose.

Remember that follow-up to identifying your purpose is critical. If you are asking your staff what they want/expect from their employer, then be prepared to deliver on at least some of the ideas, or explain why you can't.

This can be challenging sometimes and without proper management processes, you might find that some employees don't have the same 'why' as your company, and they may even choose to leave. Even if they seem the best person for the job initially, if their 'why' clashes with your company, it won't be good for your business in the long run.

Focus on ACTIONS

Values are subjective and can be interpreted differently. Instead, focus on meaningful actions that you can do to demonstrate your purpose, your standards and how you're living them day to day. This doesn't always have to be complex: think about putting objects around the office that remind us all of why we're here, like [Karrakins Group](#) which has its standards printed on posters in the office.

The little things are anything but. For most of our speakers, the measures that make the real difference don't seem that significant on their own, but collectively make a significant impact on employees' lives and work wellbeing: things like inviting families to Christmas parties, making sure that management set an example and don't work overtime all the time, keeping staff on email lists whilst on parental leave, and having flexi-hours are all signs that you value your employees.

It's not always about doing a lot, however, and it pays to take some time to think about the right frequency and depth of top-down engagement (such as team building exercises, challenges, and presentations) that is right for your company. Remember everyone's different and not every challenge will resonate with every employee. Also, make sure all staff, including management, engage in company-wide activities. And remember, just because you have a team building event it doesn't mean that you have an engaged workforce.

Look at how you structure your organisation. Do you have cross-functional teams who can thrive off each other's differences? Think how your policies and procedures align with your purpose, and what you're trying to achieve with your staff. Keep things positive and action-focused rather than shutting down possibilities.

Which leads into the next key to successful company culture: it can often be influenced by a strong leader. [Chorus](#)' CEO, for example, has regular lunchtime gatherings where any employee can come and ask him any question, from what he had for breakfast that morning, to why didn't they get that promotion.

Communication

What you say and do is as important as how you do it. Understand the culture of your organisation (are you a young, dynamic workforce that is online a lot or a dispersed workforce where people are out and about and don't come together often?) and tailor how you talk to people and put together programmes accordingly. Nik Gregg, from [Sustainability Options](#), talked about the importance of positive framing and using language that demonstrates the care and respect you have for your employees, in all elements of the business.

Think about your company's guidelines for how you operate. Are they enabling and positive or do they shut people down and focus on negatives? Positive psychology, and

positivity, by definition is fun, engaging and motivating¹, so use this to be effective in everything your organisation does.

Think about variety and use a range of communication styles, methods and frequencies, and get to know different people, as particularly if you're working in a larger organisation or with a diverse workforce it's hard to find a solution that suits everyone.

Five actions you can take now to enhance employee engagement

1. Make your overarching sustainability targets publicly available in the office.
2. Devolve responsibility for those targets, and provide rewards or recognition for those employees that are meeting those targets.
3. Create opportunities for open discussion in the workplace like weekly meetings, to generate new ideas for the business, to air grievances or issues, or to congratulate employees who have achieved success.
4. Look at your policies and think how you can make them more positive and action-oriented to get people supporting and working with them, not because of them.
5. Celebrate! Even little things, celebrate reaching your targets and your employees' individual achievements.

Background

The Sustainable Business Network hosted three workshops in Tauranga, Wellington and Auckland in 2015 which looked at companies that are successfully engaging their employees in the purpose of their company. We wish to send a huge thanks to all of our speakers: Paula Earl-Peacock (Chorus Ltd), Michelle Kazor (Changelabs), Aaron Andrew (Andrew.Stewart), Nik Gregg (Sustainability Options), Marty Grenfell (Whakatane District Council), Gerri Ward and Sharne Fairbrother (Z Energy) and Rob Quigley (Quigley and Watts) and everyone who attended and participated in these workshops.

For more guidance and to see what SBN do in their own workplace, see our [Healthy Workplaces](#) resource sheet.

¹ Niki Harre, *Psychology for a Better World*, 2011