All for one and one for all
Uniting a global workforce with company culture
In today’s business climate characterized by constant change, employees’ ability to successfully adapt and respond is, more than ever, dependent on their level of engagement. Highly engaged employees are more likely to successfully adjust, and bring others along with them. At the same time, disengaged employees are likely to leave – and if they don’t, their disconnection and disenchantment with their work and the company will negatively influence their peers.

Yet, organizations still deploy old-school engagement strategies that fail to address today’s environment of change. Employers all want the same thing: employees who are committed and engaged, not just at the local level, but across the global organization.

Constant change and new uncertainties challenge employees and put employee engagement levels at risk. Where connecting across geographies, across cultures, and across lines of business are day-to-day realities, employees are often responding to what is missing – and very often, what’s missing is a culture that powerfully unites the entire organization.

“In this paper we’ll explore the impact of change on employee engagement, discuss some of the barriers to company-wide engagement as well as foundational elements of engagement around the world, share keys to approaching a unified culture strategy, and show how to bring that strategy to life with employee recognition.”

The challenge of change

As organizations expand and redefine themselves, employees’ connection to a single unifying culture can buffer the potential negative impacts of change. Culture provides the foundation for a company achieving alignment on strategy, objectives, and results.

A clearly defined and demonstrated cross-company culture can provide the underpinnings for strong connections that enable engagement to thrive. In the new reality of constant corporate change – as businesses rapidly respond to emerging trends, markets, and opportunities – communicating and facilitating a strong, united culture is incredibly important for company performance. ²

Aon Hewitt research on managing engagement during times of change highlights how employees respond differently to different kinds of organizational change, particularly when changes highly impact an employee’s job function.³

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When employees are highly impacted by organizational change, disengagement increases. That said, disengagement can arise even when there is little impact to employees. According to the report: “Regardless of the type of change, the degree to which employees can identify with their organization, see a clear future, or strive toward organizational objectives seems to be most significantly at risk during change events.”

Strengthening culture sets the stage for employees to better identify with the company and understand and align with company objectives. But communicating company values is not enough. Goal-setting is not enough. What brings global company alignment to life? And is it worth the effort?

Disengagement is costly

Rising to the challenge and aligning a global workforce to drive employee engagement offers a significant payoff. Consider just a few of the findings that show:

- Organizations with engagement levels at or above 65% posted total shareholder returns that were 22% higher than the market average, even during times of change.
- A disengaged employee costs an organization approximately $3,400 for every $10,000 in annual salary.
- Organizations with engagement in the bottom quartile averaged 62% more accidents than those in the top quartile.
- Organizations in the top quartile of engagement scores demonstrated revenue growth 2.5 times greater than those organisations in the bottom quartile.

Falling behind in aligning and engaging employees isn’t an option in today’s marketplace. Future-focused organizations have the opportunity to redefine their approach and respond to the reality of change by focusing on consistent culture that supports alignment and engagement strategies.

4. Ibid
Barriers to company-wide engagement

**Consistent experience combats perceived inequality**

Employees can be acutely aware of differences across locations and regions – perceiving inequality where perhaps none truly exists. Inconsistent employee experiences exacerbate employees’ focus on differences, creating a ‘have not’ mentality.

Balancing local atmosphere and global consistency presents an additional challenge to employee alignment and engagement. However, consistency is king – equal employee experience is central to success.

**Communication channels**

Who are employees listening to? Where do they turn for information? Underutilized information-sharing and communication systems reflect tools that don’t resonate with employees. Poor adoption of applications and systems – especially those that deliver cultural content such as announcements, key strategy updates, and recognition – leaves the organization without a fundamental tool to facilitate a united culture.

**Lack of alignment**

When employees don’t align with company values, strategy, or objectives, productivity and value can’t thrive. Across the globe employees remain disconnected from the strategy and goals of the organization. According to Steven Covey in his book The 8th Habit, of global employees, “only 37% said they have a clear understanding of what their organization is trying to achieve and why. Only 20% was enthusiastic about their department’s and their organization’s goal. Only 20% said they had a clear ‘line of sight’ between their tasks and their team’s and organization’s goals.” Put another way: “If, say, a soccer team had these same scores, only four of the 11 players on the field would know which goal is theirs. Only two of the 11 would care. Only two of the 11 would know what position they play and know exactly what they are supposed to do.”

But what about cultural differences? Is employee engagement the same across the globe? While it is true that employee motivations and cultural dynamics are unique to a particular place, business context, and market climate, research suggests that while talent markets differ, the fundamental language of engagement – how employees describe the engaged state everyone is seeking – is the same.

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Common ground for global engagement

One study on the connection between performance management and employee engagement examined multinational corporations headquartered in Britain or the Netherlands with operations across India and China. While each organization was unique in its history and structure, their HR departments all spoke about engagement in similar ways. And this was also the case within their locations in India and China, “interviewees all used words such as passion, commitment, motivation, happiness and alignment with the organization’s objectives and values.” 11

To consider the differences in employee attitudes and needs across employment contexts is important, but it is equally important to recognize the similarities. Research surveying employees at all organizational levels across the globe (China, North America, India, Europe, Australia/New Zealand, South America, and the GCC), has shown that drivers of engagement are largely consistent: clarity on the organization’s priorities, getting feedback, having opportunities to use skills, and career development all appear at the top of the list for most employees.12

It is clear that communication is essential – understanding what is going on in the organization, who is doing what, and how they are doing it (and how well) represents more than information exchange. Being connected with the flow of events and seeing their relative importance within the business - both in day-to-day terms, as well as overarching strategy - invites employees to value their own contributions, and enables them to align their actions with this flow.

The need is for employees to not only engage with their roles and job tasks, or with the individual location or sub-brand context, but also to engage with the global overarching brand. This enables employees to be flexible and collaborate with other teams and lines of business. Employees then see themselves as part of a greater whole and want to align their actions with the best strategy for global success of the company.

Connect across all divides by uniting company culture.

Keywords of engagement
The language employees use to describe being engaged with their work and company are strikingly similar around the world.

Passion
Commitment
Motivation
Happiness
Alignment

Keys to approaching a unified culture strategy

Make it about us

Transform the organization to an attitude of “us.” “Us-vs.-them” can seem inevitable, whether between teams, employee to company, or one department against another. Rather than helping each other, employees disengage and seek to keep the other side searching for solutions. While companies often turn to their leadership to resolve an “us-vs.-them” atmosphere, leadership proclaiming new attitudes cannot alone change behavior. Typically, behavior modeling is the missing link. How can employees see what happens when actions are aligned with the company’s values, strategy, and goals? The solution requires establishing the clear message that the organization operates as “us” and cascading the core criteria of this ‘us’ attitude throughout day-to-day operations, everywhere.

Represent us at every level

What goes into an “us” message? Symbolism is important. Not just at the initiative level but all the way through to the organizational structure. Make roles reflect the unified approach to the company whenever possible. For example, one organization did away with divisional vice presidents all reporting to the executive team. Instead, an executive vice president for global operations was assigned – in role and in title a representative of the unified global organization.

Measuring together

Simple metrics that orient all activity of the company are imperative. Make the effort to boil strategic goals down to straightforward principles that everyone can relate to. For example, complex/varied specific business improvements may align to “create profitability” or “create value.” Sales targets, market expansion efforts, even R&D, can roll up to “new business.”

Create cultural hubs

Culture cannot stand alone as a broadcast from corporate headquarters. Creating cultural hubs has been found to be a critical step to global culture. “A cultural hub...has the capability to shape and articulate the company’s core cultural values and assist in the process of localizing them. By establishing cultural hubs, companies can harness cultural capabilities that reside in different geographic locations and across functions and groups.” Capitalize on existing pockets of cultural strength within the organization that “walk the talk” and leverage their positive influence and local knowledge.

13. See for example: Learning Center article “Them and Us” at http://www.learningcenter.net/library/them-us.shtml
It’s OK to repeat yourself

Ultimately these efforts rely on clear, authentic, consistent messaging. Don’t let frequency detract from the value of the message. Delivering a consistent, clear message, every time, demonstrates the importance of and commitment to the concept, over and over. Maintaining a single message – not rephrased or apologized for – is powerful. A unified vision does not get old.

How can this approach be communicated and lived by the organization? What is the enabling strategy?

Now more than ever, organizations have the opportunity to implement a platform of engagement that supports and grows these ideas – helping bring them to life, nurture them, and continuously learn and improve strategies based on data that reveals the pulse of the workforce.
Enabling strategy: Employee recognition

An effective employee recognition program enables employees to connect with the organization’s purpose. It provides the ability to “steer the ship” in setting the tone and framework for everyone to understand and participate in the organization’s culture that reflects the overarching “us” of the company. Utilizing an enterprise recognition platform enables all levels of the organization to interact and make business goals visible alongside core company behavioral values. All of these aspects are known to contribute to increasing engagement.16

Examining Gallup’s standard set of engagement questions provides insight into the facets of engagement that tie-in with employee recognition. Looking beyond specific questions about recognition it’s not hard to identify additional questions that are strongly supported by effective employee recognition. For example, the very first question of the Gallup Q12, “I know what is expected of me at work,” is supported when employees are provided ongoing positive feedback about their work, helping to reveal to the employee what specific behaviors and contributions are valued. Another Gallup question, “My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person,” is supported when the manager-employee relationship is built on concrete positive communication. A recognition program provides a direct avenue for managers to interact with employees as coaches.

An enterprise recognition platform support ‘grassroots’ cultural participation by reflecting the needs of the employee population with software employees love to use – not a performance management system or process automation – a tool with multiple connection points to engage with recognition and achievements as they happen.

Consistent communication requires that employees’ have localized experiences. A fully localized user experience means much more than translating text. Adjustments for tone, content, style, and usability across all local contexts must be factored into the design of the software in order to offer a consistent employee experience. The power of a universal experience is underscored by cross-regional interaction within the application. That is, everyone, everywhere, enabled with the ability to recognize each other regardless of where they are within the organizational structure – whether in terms of job level or geography.

Culture of success

When employees are aligned with company goals and values and feel connected to each other and their jobs, they can adapt to change. Strong company culture buffers the impact of change by connecting employees to a global vision, enabling broader perspective and awareness of purpose beyond specific functions or locations. Enabling culture with an employee recognition platform provides constant support for engagement by delivering clear, consistent, communication and alignment with company goals and strategy.

A strong united culture is incredibly important for company performance. In the new reality of constant corporate change, being able to rapidly respond to emerging trends, markets, and opportunities with a connected and engaged workforce represents a distinct competitive advantage. Connect across all divides by uniting company culture, and realize remarkable business success.

“Organizations that have made substantive progress in fueling business success through employee engagement have approached this transformation as a culture change exercise.”17

– BlessingWhite

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18 Achievers customer base retention for FY2015
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