The Two Biggest Barriers for Managers Faced with Employee Engagement

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The longer I am immersed in the work of employee engagement, the clearer it is to me that getting it right as a manager is simple and hard.
That may sound contradictory, but it's not.

Engaging employees isn't all that complicated. It starts with forming and maintaining a healthy, positive relationship with each person you manage. Then, ensuring that everything you do protects and builds that relationship and avoids harming it. That sounds pretty simple, right?

But if you've ever been in any kind of relationship with another human being, you know that this can be more challenging than it sounds. Good relationships require that you work at them.

When it comes to doing this work of building relationships with employees, there are two obstacles I hear from managers and leaders most frequently.

The First Obstacle to Employee Engagement Is TIME

Being a manager is one of the most time-crunched jobs in the company. Generally, as a manager, you still have a full plate of your own work to do in addition to managing a team of people. Being a manager also comes with the expectation of attending a slate of meetings that may or may not be of any value.

The problem with being time-constrained is that relationship building requires time. Try to think of one person in your life who you have a great relationship with where you haven't spent a lot of time together. You can't.

Time is the currency of relationships. There is no shortcut or hack. If you don't make the time to be with people, you will never build a relationship with them.

This is what makes regularly scheduled, one-on-one meetings and check-ins so critically important. By making this part of your schedule and considering the time as critical to doing the role of management, you ensure that each member of your team has at least some dedicated time with you.

Getting the one-on-one in the schedule is just the first step. That time is precious and important, so follow these steps to ensure you make the most of it.

Never cancel a one-on-one and only reschedule when absolutely necessary. Treat this time as sacred.

Ask questions and listen for most of the meeting. This is the employee's time with you. Let them tell you what's most important. In fact, consider starting with the question, "What the most important thing we need to talk about today?" and go from there.
Ask the employee for feedback on the meeting and how you could together make it the most valuable use of your time together.

I know you're busy. Everyone is. But you need to make time for your people, or they will never be fully engaged.

The Second Obstacle to Employee Engagement Is **FEAR**

This one isn't talked about as directly and openly as lack of time is, but it's even more of a challenge. Cultivating relationships with your people can feel awkward and scary, particularly if you are new to it.

It requires that you trust people, maybe more than you are comfortable with. If you've been burned in the past, this will be hard. What if you get burned again?

This also requires that you get to know people beyond what they can do for you at work. Who are they as a person? What really matters to them in life? Who are the most important people in their life?

I know, I know. You've probably been told in the past that work and life should be kept separate, but is that how you experience work? Do you become a completely different person, disconnected entirely from your life when you go to work? Of course not. And neither do your people.

Getting to know them will help you understand how to help them find more meaning and enjoyment at work. But, here's the catch. You'll have to share some about yourself as well. They need to know you as a human being in order to really connect. Somewhere in each of your stories are some commonalities that will bond you together.

When I suggest this to managers, I start to hear the "what if" objections.

- What if they tell me something I really shouldn't know?
- What if we become friends and I have to give them some hard feedback?
- What if I have to fire them someday?

"What if" questions come from fear. We are afraid because we are uncertain about what we would or should do in those circumstances. We are afraid because we don't want to change. We are afraid because we don't want to get hurt. But what's the alternative?

Remain distant, be less scared, and let your people feel like nobody really cares that much about them at work? Yes, it will make it easier in that rare situation when you've done such a poor job of managing them that you have to suddenly fire them, but in the meantime, they are probably going to perpetually struggle along until they quit to find a manager who cares more.

Lean into Relationships to Improve Employee Engagement

Treat people the way you'd treat anyone else in your life who you value and care for. That doesn't mean you abandon accountability or other good management practices. But, it does mean that you handle those things in a way is consistent with valuing the relationship.

If you want an engaged team, you have to make time and push past the fear. It will be worth it