

Ambush at the Commitment Gap

Today's jobholders, it seems, like their jobs but don't like their companies as places to work. So says Opinion Research Corporation after surveying the attitudes of managers, supervisors, professionals, clerical and hourly workers.

According to ORC, job satisfaction is stable and has been for about the past ten years. Employees even express substantial commitment to their companies' growth and success, but satisfaction with companies as places to work has been slipping dramatically. It's not that commitment isn't possible, the researchers conclude, it just isn't being mobilized by today's supervisors and managers.

Another group, the Public Agenda Foundation, in another study of jobholders, uncovered a "commitment gap" in the American workforce—a distance between what employees can do and what they are willing to do. The Public Agenda Foundation also concluded that commitment could be mobilized by better supervision and management.

This sounds like good news. Not only do these two groups of researchers characterize commitment as a manageable problem, but they suggest that it can be solved partially with the help of training and skillful human resource management.

To understand how, it helps to look at what jobholders value. All the groups surveyed by ORC, from managers to hourly workers, put a high value on pay and benefits, on the opportunity to advance, and on being treated with respect. All these highly valued qualities come from the work environment rather than the work itself and thus can be improved and changed. If pay has high value, for example, management ought to be able to motivate employees by matching job performance to financial rewards. But ORC found that many employees do not see a connection between effective job performance and rewards where they work. They are not very satisfied with the quality of management and supervision in today's organizations.

Employees don't believe that supervisors are providing enough information for doing a good job, and supervisors don't think they are getting enough support from management or enough examples of effective supervision. Both supervisors and managers agreed that there is not enough training in management skills and not enough quality in the training that already is provided. In the opinion of supervisors, managers are not doing a good job communicating goals and directions. Supervisors feel that their organizations value them less and less as individuals. Given these views and the shortfall between what jobholders value and what they believe they are getting, it is no wonder that commitment is not forthcoming.

The Public Agenda Foundation came to similar conclusions along a different avenue of investigation. They wanted to measure something they call "discretionary effort" which they describe as the difference between the

maximum amount of effort an individual could bring to the job and the minimum amount required to avoid being fired. The important thing about discretionary effort is that it is controlled by the jobholder.

For many workers, this new leeway comes from the intervention of technology into their work. Many jobs created by new technologies are knowledge-intensive. Instead of simplifying and dividing tasks, a strategy that makes the worker less important, many new technologies make possible a complexity of tasks in which the worker is more important. The level of individual involvement is important here because new technologies can extend rather than replace individual effort, but often only if the individual is motivated and trained to take advantage of the opportunity. Three quarters of the jobholders surveyed by the Public Agenda Foundation said that technology had made their work more interesting and more than half said technology had given them greater independence.

In Public Agenda's survey, many people admitted they were holding back on the job. Fewer than one out of four said they were working at capacity.

Back when the economy was dominated by low-discretion jobs, it was possible to tighten management systems while ignoring intangibles such as commitment. And now that jobs and jobholders have changed, managers and supervisors still seem to be ignoring the intangibles.

Both these surveys support the supposition that management is out of sync with what motivates jobholders today. And both groups agree that more effective management and supervision might bridge the commitment gap. Their recommendations include: providing rewards that are visible, tangible and valued, and tied to performance; giving more support to supervisors and middle managers both by increasing their authority (flattening the organization) and by involving them in the establishment of goals and standards of performance; and finally by providing more training to managers and supervisors to be better motivators of commitment.

These two surveys and their recommendations are small islands in a sea of opinions about what makes the worker tick more productively, but I believe they are reliable indicators that managerial and supervisory training are going to be extremely important in closing the commitment gap.



Editor