

Developing Engaged Employees: The Difference Engaged Employees Make In Providing Great Guest Service

By Chris Longstreet, CHA, President & CEO, Society for Hospitality Management

September 2006 - Recently, I read a Gallup Management Journal article and research report discussing the value of developing relationships with your employees and the value it provides you as a manager and the bottom-line results that are achieved in the process. The bottom line of this report entitled “Getting Personal in the Workplace: Are Negative Relationships Squelching Productivity in Your Company?” finds that “negative workplace relationships may be a big part of why so many American employees are not engaged with their jobs.”¹

The report outlined three categories of employees based on their engagement in the workplace:

- **ENGAGED EMPLOYEES** work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the company forward.
- **NOT ENGAGED** employees are essentially “checked out.” They are sleepwalking through their workday, putting time – but not energy or passion – into their work.
- **ACTIVELY DISENGAGED** employees aren’t just unhappy at work; they are busy acting out their unhappiness. Everyday, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish

At a recent seminar series I conducted, I asked participants (all managers and professionals working in the hospitality industry), “How many of you have employees who work with you that you could classify as ‘engaged’ as defined by this study?” Only a few hands went up. I followed the question with another, “Of those who answered, how many employees can you identify that are engaged? 1? 2? 3?” Most of them said one or two. I proceeded to ask, “How many of your properties have employees who fit into the not engaged category?” Many more hands rose with a chuckle when I defined these employees with the phrases “checked out” and “sleepwalking through their workday.” Most people could classify quite a few employees in this way.

Take a moment and look at your staff. How many employees fit into each category?”

A Tale of Three Employees

Arriving late one night on a recent trip to Norfolk, Virginia, I entered my hotel and was

greeted by Andre the front desk agent and evening supervisor. It was 11:50 pm and I was tired from a plane delay and long airplane trip. I informed Andre who I was and gave him my credit card for payment. Andre took my card. Andre never greeted me. I got no “Welcome to Norfolk and welcome to our hotel!” He typed my name in the computer and never made eye contact at me. After 30 seconds or so, Andre stated that there were no rooms available and that they were going to walk me to another hotel. He went to a phone, made a call, then wrote some information on a piece of paper. He handed the paper to me and told me that the cab outside would take me to another hotel and they would be paying for my stay at the other hotel and for the cab ride. No apology. No sincere explanation of being overbooked. No eye contact. Andre was “actively disengaged” and set a very negative tone for my experience with this hotel. Andre was an employee who wasn’t just unhappy at work, he was busy acting out his unhappiness on me. There was no question that Andre was undermining what his engaged coworkers were trying to accomplish when serving their guests.

I proceeded out to the cab which I was instructed to go to. There I met Clay. Clay is a rather short and very energetic cab driver in Norfolk. It was now 12:15 am and Clay greeted me with a smile and asked my name. I shook his hand and introduced myself. I explained my situation. Unfortunately, Andre made no connection with Clay so Clay had no idea what was happening. So, after my explanation, Clay took it upon himself to go to the front desk and ask Andre for some money to cover the cab fare. I watched their interaction while standing next to the cab. Minutes later, Clay came out smiling and said everything was all set and he would be taking me and another couple to another hotel. He apologized for the inconvenience and opened the car door for me. It wasn’t his fault, yet he apologized for the hotel’s problem. He did the same for the other couple and sincerely welcomed us to Norfolk. It was 12:15 am and I had just met the most engaged cab driver I had ever met in all my travels.

Although the downtown area was quiet and no one was on the street, Clay welcomed us to his town and pointed out various places and attractions along the short distance to our hotel. He engaged us in conversation and truly desired to make our visit to this city better than it had started. At 12:15 am, it was very evident that Clay loved his city and loved what he was doing. When we arrived, he opened our doors and again apologized for the inconvenience the other hotel had put us through. Not only did he get our bags from the trunk of his vehicle, he brought them into the hotel for us. He genuinely thanked us for riding with him. I was so impressed with him I asked him for a card so I could call him and have him take me back to the airport at the conclusion of my meeting. Clay was truly engaged in his work and had passion for his job. He had a profound connection to his role in the hospitality experience of Norfolk. I was impressed!

Well, my last experience of this day gave me a taste of a “not engaged” employee. This woman didn’t have a proper uniform, no name tag, had no idea I was coming to the hotel and basically didn’t care that I had arrived at 12:35 am. I was disturbing her and she paid little attention to me when I arrived at the desk. She slid the key to me and pointed me in the direction of my room. What a difference between her and Clay. After finding two soda machines that didn’t work, at 1:00 am I approached her to get directions to a

working machine. She glanced at me as if I were disturbing her and said they were on the even number of floors. I was in a totally different building. What a great way to end my night, or start my day, depending on your perspective. She was essentially “checked out.” She was sleepwalking through her workday, putting time – but not energy or passion – into her work. She did her “job” – nothing more.

The Benefits of Relationships at Work and Developing Engaged Employees

The fact is clear. We all want engaged employees working for us and serving our guests. True? I know I would if I were in your position.

The Gallup Management Journal discovered that there is a direct relationship between positive relationships in the workplace and the development of engaged employees. The substantial differences between the engaged employees, not engaged employees, and actively disengaged employees illustrate that developing and encouraging positive relationships in the workplace is essential to creating productive employees. Productive employees provide better service and better results. Engaged employees enjoy their work, are more effective, and provide a higher level of service to the guests they serve.

In terms of relationships, it is important to understand that engaged employees consider their relationship with their manager to be crucial to their success. In fact, according to the study, 49% of engaged employees strongly agree with this statement. A positive manager-employee relationship has a strong impact on the engagement level of employees. This strongly suggests that managers who want to improve engagement levels in their employees – converting non-engaged employees to an engaged level – can do so by developing positive relationships with their employees.

The report concluded saying, “Despite efforts to keep the personal and professional realms separate, it’s becoming increasingly apparent that workplace relationships are personal and that negative relationship dynamics have far reaching and long-term consequences for organizations. People don’t become soulless zombies when they arrive at the workplace. And, attempts to force them to act that way are likely to lead to a less engaged workforce.”

How do we develop engaged employees? How do we foster relationships with our employees so their engagement levels are higher? It requires us to take time to get to know the employees who we supervise and lead. As a general manager, that means we need to take the time and get to know each department leader. As a supervisor, it means getting to know our staff members and using these relationships to build an engaged team of employees. We cannot be fake about our intentions though – we must be genuine. Consider some of the following actions which can foster “getting to know our employees”:

- Sit with employees at a break or at a meal
- In performance reviews, discuss more than just job performance – ask about their job and what you can do to develop a more productive work environment and

- develop a plan for the employee to help them grow and succeed
- Seek employee input on important decisions and ask their opinions
- Ask employees for ways to improve operations – and reward the ideas that are implemented
- Make an attempt to greet each employee at the start of their shift
- Consider “walking in their shoes” and spend time with each employee in their position: whether it be greeting guests as they enter a restaurant or assisting with cleaning a room

Do you have ideas on how we can develop engaged employees in the hospitality industry? Send them to me and I will share them.

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