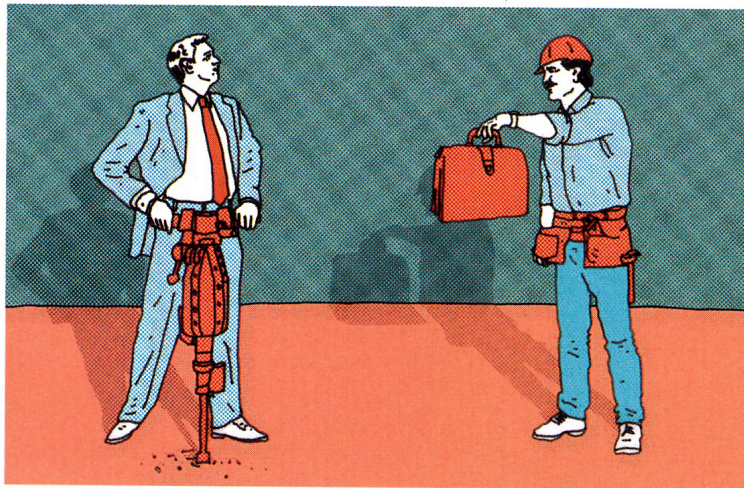HOW TO…

How to keep your staff engaged

Engaged workers perform better and give extra discretionary effort. But keeping high levels of engagement in uncertain times is tricky. Positive psychology research has suggested that part of the answer lies in psychological and social processes. Sarah Lewis outlines how employers can put these to work.

1 Create a positive culture

Actively introduce processes that increase positivity: for example, by starting meetings with praise for last week's achievements; celebrating successes; and creating a work climate of hope and good humour. Introduce ways of measuring people's experience of positivity at work, such as asking about positive work experiences in staff surveys.

2 Affirm the best

Recognise and develop best practice. Encourage virtuous organisational behaviour such as helpfulness. Regularly recognise team and individual strengths, initiative and innovation, both formally through appraisal processes, and informally by leadership interest and focus.

3 Turn strengths into talents

When people use their strengths they are more engaged. Introduce processes that help people identify and own their strengths. Use psychometrics or "best self feedback", where colleagues write accounts of when they have experienced the person at their best. The individual then analyses these stories and identifies the themes of the strengths they bring to their work.

4 Help teams play to individual strengths

The most productive teams are able to share the team tasks according to strengths, so encourage team members to swap tasks that fall in their weakest areas for those that play to their strengths where possible.

5 Adjust roles

Make the job fit the person, rather than trying to make the person fit the job; most outcomes can be achieved in more than one way. Minimise the time staff spend struggling with tasks for which they have no aptitude.

6 Increase flow

Flow is a psychologically satisfying state when people become very absorbed in their task. It tends to occur when the challenge of the work and the person's skill level are well matched. Different people experience flow in different activities, for instance, becoming absorbed in writing a report, or losing all sense of time when running a training session. Find out where people experience flow in their work. Help them recognise it and work out how to increase their opportunities to experience it.

7 Build rewards

People are motivated and engaged by the opportunity to obtain rewards. Many things can be rewarding for people in their work environment: praise, appreciation and thanks, smiles, and opportunities. Create work environments full of small, easily won rewards.

8 Understand goal seeking

Before you set goals for someone, you need to understand what they find rewarding. For example, some people find public recognition rewarding, while others just like to know that what they have done has been helpful.

9 Support meaningful work

People are very good at finding meaning in what they do. We all want to believe we are spending our time valuably. Help employees by making it clear why their work is important, what it means for them, you, the department, the organisation, and society at large.

▶ LINKS & NOTES

Sarah Lewis is the managing director of Appreciating Change. Her book, *Positive Psychology at Work*, will be published by Wiley in March.

The International Positive Psychology Association **bit.ly/intpos**

Further reading:
P A Linley, S Harrington and N Garcea, *Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work*, OUP, Oxford, 2010

K Cameron, *Positive Leadership: strategies for extraordinary performance*, Berrett-Koehler, 2008

A Linley, *Average to A+: Realising strengths in yourself and others*, CAPP Press, 2008

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◀ KEY POINTS

✳ Create a positive and affirmative culture

✳ Ensure people experience three times as many positive emotions at work as negative

✳ Help people know their strengths and use them

✳ Give work meaning

✳ Understand how to use goals and rewards to create moments of achievement