



Why building community matters

By Summer Turner | July 19, 2016

Creating a sense of community is one of the toughest challenges facing leaders today. Most organizations are complex. Attention is scattered. Roles and responsibilities are matrixed. It can be hard to figure out how one person fits into the larger team.

But community is critical to the engagement that drives performance and retention. Research shows that a talented but less engaged employee considers leaving their job six times more often than a talented employee who is more engaged.

In healthcare, this problem is acute: athenahealth's 2016 Physician Leadership and Engagement Index found that 69 percent of physicians who are dissatisfied with their leadership plan to leave their jobs within the next two years.

The process of building community is so central to leadership that it even has a name: "contextual leadership." Coined by Duke University professors Sim Sitkin and Allan Lind, they say it requires leaders to focus on three areas:

1. Simplifying and focusing attention

I recently coached a leader who didn't want to micromanage, so he erred on the side of keeping expectations open. He thought this was empowering. But team members perceived him as too vague. They weren't clear on what was most important and where to focus their attention. They wanted more granularity: to know precisely what their objectives were, and why these particular objectives were important to the broader organization.

They didn't see this as micromanagement. They saw it as the clarity they needed to do their jobs well, meet their objectives, and support the company's mission.

This leader now formally discusses and documents objectives with his team. In team meetings, he ties these objectives back to the company's vision, so team members see how their work drives business results. This ongoing dialogue helps his team keep their goals in sight and their focus sharp.

2. Creating coherence

Contextual leadership goes beyond one-on-one relationships to help team members understand how and where they fit in the whole. Visuals can be helpful here: Leaders can use org. charts and process maps to show how work flows and roles connect.

Discussing organizational structure gives team members an opportunity to raise questions and concerns – and it gives leaders a chance to have frank conversations about the upsides and downsides of current workflows. There is always a need to answer the eternal question: “Why do we do it this way?”

The goal here is not to solve problems, although that can be a side benefit. The goal is to increase coherence and understanding.

3. Identifying shared values

Leaders need to make a personal connection, linking what matters to themselves and their teams to what matters to the organization. One way to do this is to talk about values. These conversations can happen one-on-one or in team meetings, and can be led by leaders or by team members.

At one global technology firm, a leader asked her direct reports to name their top three values. Trust, transparency, humility, and collaboration were a few of the values cited. The leader then led a discussion, in which the team identified shared values and found ways to practice these values in their work together.

As a result, team members understood each other better. They got excited about new ways of doing work that not only were personally meaningful, but also better served the needs of their clients. This experience gave them a sense of shared purpose and identity.

And it helped the leader create a high-engagement environment – where team members felt like they belonged, had something meaningful to contribute, and wanted to stay.

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