

## COVID-19, Remote worker engagement

VT Public Library HR minute – August 2020

By Gary Deziel, UVM Extension

### Dear Library trustee,

Balancing personal and professional lives, constant adaptation to changing rules and health guidance, and social upheaval around racism and justice has resulted in employees being exhausted in so many ways.

As a result, indications from the larger employment world are that employee engagement is slipping. In the span of a month, from mid-May to mid-June, employees have reported a steep decline in their preparedness to do their job. According to Gallup, there's been a **20% decline** in employees saying that they "strongly agree" that their

Imagine it is July 2021. What do you want your employees to say about how you led them through this season of remote work? Align your hopes with your actions to enhance employee engagement.

supervisor is **keeping them well informed** about what is going on in their organization, and **that their organization cares about their overall wellbeing**. This is a problem. Gallup reports that highly-engaged workplaces result in lower turnover, lower absenteeism, and greater productivity.

We're headed in the wrong direction.

Crises reveal organizational culture and priorities- and this crisis is demonstrating that some organizations are failing to keep their employees, their number one asset, in the forefront. There are practical ways to help employees feel better and to be highly engaged with your library's mission, vision, and values.

In a Society for Human Resource Management webinar<sup>i</sup> that I attended recently, LeAnne Lagasse and Joy O'Steen, principals in ROI Talent Acquisition (ROI), offered useful advice to leaders to improve employee engagement.

According to ROI, prior to COVID-19 some 42% of U.S. workers were conducting part or all of their work remotely. Now, of course, that number is much higher, keeping in mind that the *first* recommendation in State of Vermont "stay home,

stay safe" guidance is, well, to stay home and work remotely *if* possible. Remote work has become standard for library employees in all corners of the state. The majority of trustees and directors are now supervising remotely, at least in part.

ROI reported that three mistakes that lead to higher employee disengagement are being repeated by organizations across the U.S. These are:

1. **Neglecting** key leaders,
2. **Failing to communicate** to reduce uncertainty, and
3. **Forgetting** about professional development.

### Neglect

Key employees and team leaders- particularly those with vital roles within their organizations- are being left out of the loop in COVID-19 decisions. With their unique roles to operate either a de facto municipal department or non-profit corporation, library directors are critically essential employees. Directors very often supervise staff, and all manage volunteers. Directors report to a board of trustees. Thus the position of library director is the nexus of a healthy and successful public library, operationalizing the trustees' vision to the work and product of employees and volunteers. According to Gallup, the manager (in our case, director) accounts for 70% of the variance in team engagement. The director IS the crux of the entire operation! Director disengagement? The library simply won't serve the community as well it *could* be with an engaged employee.

**Strategy:** Focus on directors. Do they know what is expected of them right now? Do they know what the priorities are right now? Do they have the materials and resources to do their jobs? Ask them how you may add clarity, and then *add it*, by approving needed expenses, making decisions, and supporting *their* decisions when agreement is reached. Ensure that the director is an integral part of the Board's deliberations regarding how to move the library forward. THIS

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will tell the directors that they are cared for – something that every employee needs right now!

**Failing to communicate:** People feel decreased “psychological safety” when uncertainty increases – and uncertainty increases when communication is not carefully and intentionally implemented.

**Strategy:** Key employees feel especially isolated right now, says ROI. Decrease uncertainty by communicating more than you do during “normal” times. Schedule regular times to meet with the director with the entire emphasis on how they are feeling and coping with the crisis. Remember that an anagram for listen is *silent*. Practice active listening; listen for themes. Give specific, positive feedback. Who remembers being told the hackneyed “Good job” line by a supervisor? No one. But “good job on [fill in the blank]!” is something employees remember. Show gratitude. Mix this in with appropriate constructive guidance.

**Strategy:** The best managers are really coaches. Encourage your director to use coaching strategies to engage their employees (and don’t forget to use these with your director as well). Multiply the effect. Here are some sample coaching questions from ROI:

1. What are our goals and priorities? How will we measure success?
2. Who is responsible for specific tasks? What are our deadlines?
3. How will we spend our time if we are unable to perform our typical tasks?
4. How often will we meet?
5. Which tools will we use to facilitate communication and collaboration?

### Forgetting about professional development.

Librarians are undoubtedly naturally inclined towards continuous learning. Employees who have opportunities to improve and upgrade skills are happier and less motivated to leave their employer.

<sup>i</sup> Joy O’Steen and LeAnne Legasse, ROI Talent Development. [How to Keep Employees Engaged Through](#)

## Decreasing uncertainty

**“I know what’s expected of me right now.”**

Only about 50% of employees know what’s expected of them at work.

**“I have the tools and materials I need right now”**

Only 30% of employees say they strongly agree.

**“My manager keeps me informed about what’s going on.”**

Only 22% of employees strongly agree that the leaders in their organization have a clear direction for the organization.

Source ROI/GALLUP

However, amid the crisis of COVID-19, the recognition of learning and growing may have been lost in some organizations.

**Strategy:** Now is an important time to renew your support of professional development. Encourage your director look for learning opportunities. Do your best to fund learning activities that cost money, keeping in mind that many free offerings (at VTLIB, for instance) also exist. Also, support the director as they support *their* employees. Professional development throughout the organization will increase employer engagement, which will result in delivering higher value to your patrons and community.

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**Gary is not an attorney and this does not constitute legal advice.**

[a Pandemic: The Antidote to Remote Burnout](#). July 24, 2020.