



Weekend Australian  
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# Engaged to the job

Creating a happy workplace will reap commercial dividends

PERSEPHONE NICHOLAS

"ONE in five Australians is going to work and is extraordinarily unhappy there," says Melissa Dunn Lampe of global research-based consulting company Gallup.

Unhappiness is a condition Australia can ill afford. Dunn Lampe estimates this malaise, caused by employee disengagement, costs the country up to \$42 billion a year.

The flip side, according to Gallup, is that organisations with an engaged workforce are 27 per cent more profitable, achieving 50 per cent higher sales and 38 per cent above average productivity. Building an engaged workforce can also reduce accidents at work by up to 62 per cent, staff turnover by up to 50 per cent and absenteeism by up to 27 per cent.

The idea of a link between people's feelings and their behaviour isn't new. Yet Gallup's survey of 6.1 million respondents worldwide, representing 700,000 work groups in more than 100 countries, sheds new light on the importance of recognising and rewarding employee contributions in the workplace.

Dunn Lampe says employers need to give employers a clear sense of purpose by "creating environments where people feel they are making a contribution, not just coming in and doing a job, where they can link themselves to a higher purpose the organisation fulfils for society or for their industry in some way."

Purposeful employees deserve appropriate feedback. Those who received feedback on their strengths were likeliest (43 per cent) to be engaged, followed by those receiving

feedback on their weaknesses (33 per cent engagement). Worst off were those who were ignored, who were not assessed on strengths or weaknesses. They had an engagement score of just 2 per cent. "They are getting nothing and are extraordinarily unlikely to be engaged or give any discretionary effort to their work," Dunn Lampe says.

Employers ignore employees at their peril.

"You'd be mad not to have an institutionalised system to give people high-quality feedback on a very regular basis," Dunn Lampe says. "You'd be crazy to let your people stay in that ignored bucket because there is no way you're going to get the most out of them."

Employee disengagement results in ailing business and is linked to ill health and stress.

"People who are disengaged are much more likely to have health problems like high blood pressure and diabetes and are much more likely to self-report that in the last month there were three or more days when they behaved badly towards their friends and/or family because of stress at work," Dunn Lampe says.

She says we must take responsibility for our circumstances: "A lot of times at work we create a situation, intentionally or not, that we don't enjoy, then whinge about it rather than taking some positive action to make a change in the right direction."

Ironically, disengagement is no indication an employee will leave. Dunn Lampe counsels taking control. "For the benefit of your own health,

seriously consider a move... If you're really unhappy at work, figure out a way to get out of there and get somewhere else.

"Take responsibility for your own engagement. Talk with your manager and tell them the sorts of things in your role you most enjoy, solicit their assistance in tailoring your role so you do as much of that as possible.

"We all have things about our jobs we enjoy more than others but you can come up with strategies to do what you need to and get it over with so you can focus on things you're naturally talented at."

She has no time for self-pity. "If you're one of those people who whinges: 'I don't get enough recognition for what I do around here', then my first question to you is, 'When was the last time you went out of your way to give someone else some?'"

Naomi Simson, founder and chief executive of RedBalloon, goes the extra mile. RedBalloon, an online gift retailer, has an engagement score of 97 per cent (Australian businesses average 54 per cent). Simpson attributes this to employees' sense of purpose and focusing on their strengths. "I make sure every person knows what they are here to do. In the middle of our office we have a scoreboard telling us how we're going towards our overall purpose: to change [gift-giving] in Australia forever." She says the recipe for engagement has many ingredients. "Some people think: 'If we just get the job descriptions right, if we just do the performance reviews or if we just get our salary benchmarking



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right', but it's not one single thing, it's everything and it's about consistently staying on top of that."

Playing to people's strengths is a basic and Simson's employees list their likes and dislikes for her. "It's better to know what people love and loathe. If I take away what they

loathe, they'll be highly engaged and love what they do. Knowing what people love and loathe usually falls back to their strengths and then you can define a new role."

Dunn Lampe is all for a fresh approach. "When times are tough people have less choice about where

they're going. Managers should focus on the basics and give people as much clarity and stability as possible, some hope for the future and show their humanity at work. Creating engaging workplaces is not complicated but it does require deliberate effort."

### Checklist

Remember your staff are people first, then employees. Treat them as individuals and get to know them.

- Show your humanity.

Ask for help when you need it and show compassion when appropriate.

- Try, even in uncertain times, to create as much stability as possible. Be clear about expectations and priorities and define expected behaviours plus business outcomes.

- Give recognition and praise generously.

Encourage your people to be generous with one another and their subordinates.

- Give regular, specific, positive feedback and correct inappropriate behaviour immediately.

- Create a purpose-driven environment. People need to connect to something greater than themselves or simply achieving sales targets.



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