

# Employee Engagement Leadership

## Helping Employees Think Better

By Gregory L. Ferris

*If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the people to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it and nail planks together. Instead teach them the desire for the sea.*

We have all had our share of good reads in leadership and a taste of the best, as well as many "could have been better" approaches to leadership development. However, I am not convinced that in those mentioned resources and developmental actions was there much to say about the thinking habits of employees. That is, learning how to help employees think better at work and leaders observing the results of those actions.

Some recent discoveries about the brain indicate that technology is largely ineffective at helping others think, give advice or solve work-related problems. To be sure, it is time to give up guessing what peoples' brains need and, instead, to help them think for themselves. Even defining solutions rather than problems helps people find new habits and behaviors.

The leaders of today and tomorrow need to have a far greater awareness and understanding of how to maximize employee thinking in the workplace. More importantly, leaders should care about employee thinking, not only for competitive implications but also for higher levels of employee engagement and performance.

The art of employee leadership engagement is in understanding that people need to have their own insights. Or, as I heard recently from a leader, allow wisdom discovery to surface. Stimulating the thinking power and patterns of employees increasingly generates higher levels of motivation and performance.

What I often hear from leaders is, I am not sure I understand how to fill an empty vessel. My response, the vessel is already full, find out what's in it. Then I engage in an open dialogue with the leader centered on probing questions, such as:

How do you let employees think through their own workplace decisions rather than just tell them what to do?

How do you keep employees focused on generating and implementing solutions?

How do you stretch and challenge employees to think?

How do you keep employees focused on proactive insights?

How do you make it easier for employees to think by using clear and concise processes?

Initially, the responses vary and are even somewhat negative in tone, but then a gradual openness by the leader to identify gaps. The bottom line is that many leaders would rather tell. However, I have had numerous leaders ask how they might begin thinking through ways to further engage the minds of their employees. The following are examples of key open-ended questions the leader may use to stimulate the process of thinking and build a defined solution relationship:

You say you are not sure about project expectations. What part of it would you like to talk about?

Has this been on your mind frequently?

Do you know how to take the next step and just need me as a sounding board, or are you really slammed?

How might I best help you think this through?

Open-ended questions generate continuous probing questions, eventual self-discovery and ownership by the employee. The questions are the small steps needed to guide the employee to bigger thinking.

Employee engagement leadership is more than just motions. It's thinking about how you can engage the heads, hearts and hands of the employees in order to strengthen their commitment to deliver positive behavior and improved results.

During the decade following WWI, Americans were internally exposed to waves of social revolution. Long-lived values and beliefs were being challenged by a generation that returned from the war. One prime example of the wave of change surfaced during the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925. The teaching of evolution in public schools was at issue. The star witness for the prosecution, a proclaimed expert and lifelong reader of the Bible, was defending a literal interpretation. When asked about certain events that clearly went against scientific knowledge, the witness responded with blind acceptance of the Word. When asked if he if ever considered the scientific implications that result from a literal interpretation of the Bible, he answered, "I do not think about the things I do not think about." In response, the defendant's lawyer said, "But, do you ever think about the things you DO think about?"

The leader of today and those of tomorrow can ill afford NOT to think about the things they think about. Thinking about ways to engage employees' minds is essential in this age of dynamic global markets, constant change and external business threats.