Perspectives

Anna Tavis, Editor

As has been our quarterly practice, the Perspectives section of *People & Strategy* joins in the central HR/business/strategy debates to revisit core human capital management assumptions.

We invited Scott Brooks and Jeffrey Saltzman, two veterans in the employee survey/HR analytics field, to present an alternative view of employee engagement. Employee engagement has been considered for at least the past two decades to be the proverbial strategic imperative of most employee survey initiatives.

To Brooks and Saltzman, engagement does not stand on its own as a goal for organization's human capital effort. To create a meaningful result, they argue, the survey needs to be grounded in business strategy. As strategies vary from business to business, so does employee engagement. It needs to be looked at in an informed, uniquely aligned way. Brooks and Saltzman conclude by saying:

> "While important to survey design or HR strategy, the question of how engagement can help is absolutely subordinate to understanding the strategic priorities of the organization. This is where surveys really become potent and connect with the passions of executives."

Based on this set of business-based assumptions, Brooks and Saltzman partnered in creating OrgVitality, a boutique assessment consultancy that challenges market leaders in the business of employee surveys.

Our four panelists hold senior HR roles in various types of business organizations.

Tony Fogel, chief human resources officer of Ciber, steps into the debate with some illustrative cases from his own rich business experience. He concludes, "We still needed an engaged workforce; we just needed them engaged on the right things in the right way."

Dave Binder, vice president of talent and organizational capability at Pfizer, defines a manager's role in the employee engagement rollout. "Improving engagement presents a unique challenge for managers. Managers are rewarded for taking on a problem, developing and implementing a solution and moving on to the next problem. With engagement, they are expected to personally alter and sustain their behavior over time in the hope that engagement will improve their team's impact at an undetermined point in the future."

Eivind Slaaen, senior vice president of human resources at Hilti Corporation in Switzerland, cautions HR as a function not to get too carried away with engagement as a standalone initiative. So many times, Slaaen argues, we fail as a function to deliver on the appropriate strategic alignment and, deservedly, we do not get the much discussed "seat at the table."

Matt Valenti of Starwood Hotels & Resorts illustrates how his company has "changed the engagement conversation." Valenti writes that at Starwood Hotels "engagement scores are no longer relegated to the annual event of when reports are distributed, and action plans have moved away from 'improve engagement scores.' Action plans have become more holistic with the data informing the how, not defining the what."

In summary, the conversation about employee engagement is changing. In this series, our senior human resources contributors call on their audience to use engagement data as part of an overall holistic approach of measuring organizational vitality, aligning with business strategy, and continuing to focus on execution and management excellence.

Why Employee Engagement Is Not Strategic

By Scott M. Brooks and Jeffrey M. Saltzman

Employee engagement has a well-acknowledged meaning and impact. It has become core to many surveys and can be found as a critical metric within HR strategies across the globe. But is the measurement, tracking or the setting of an engagement improvement target strategic?

While specific definitions of engagement vary widely, engagement tends to be thought of as passion and commitment in service of an organization's goals that can result in a stronger collective motivation to get things done. In turn, this motivation can lead to higher performance. But let us be clear: a *connection* to business outcomes does not automatically make something *strategic*. The pursuit of higher engagement is like the pursuit of more customers, market share or profit — all good things to have, yet these more properly refer to ambitions rather than strategic choices. Moreover, we assert that engagement by itself is like motivation without ability.

Characteristics of Strategy

Here are a few characteristics of effective strategies that are generally accepted:

1. **Strategy is not the same as goals or ambition.** Revenue targets, market share or