

Engaging Employees in Employee Engagement Interventions – A Challenge in Hospitality Industry

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Abstract

Employee engagement interventions have been high on the agenda of HR managers particularly in hospitality industry. These activities are predominantly designed and executed to enhance employees' involvement physically, mentally, and emotionally with the organisation and their respective jobs. Albeit, the poor involvement of employees in these activities has been a constant threat to the effectiveness of these activities and the underlying objective itself. This case is a compilation of the experiences of three management interns associated with a leading hotel brand in HR domain. The case highlights the challenge to enhance the engagement of employees towards these employee engagement activities and subsequent attempts to establish effective means to do so.

Keywords: *Employee Engagement, Employee Participation, Hotel Industry, Organisational Goals.*

Ishita, Rajan and Anjali – three ambitious management graduates; were waiting in a row for their internship placement in HR domain. Enthusiastic to work in any sector, all that was important to them was to learn, grow and have hands-on experience of HR function. They appeared for an interview in one of India's most reputed organisation in hotel industry, The Grand Tulip. Thanks to their HR faculty whose reference brought them this golden chance as they perceived it to be. All three of them were selected as interns/trainees in the HR vertical very much to their interest as profoundly expressed by them in the interview.

Bubbling with a lot of zeal to make out of every bit of this opportunity they reported at the company well before the scheduled time on the first day. The study project allocated to

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them as a part of their internship programme was on employee engagement activities. In the first week of their internship programme, as a part of their project, all the three graduates were given a group task by the HR supervisor, to organise an employee engagement activity in the organisation and to report the employee participation statistics for the activity. Taking it as a target to ensure high participation from the employees, they communicated the information to all the departments in the organisation putting in their best efforts through different ways. To create enough buzz about the exciting activity they made attempts to generate lot of curiosity and looking forward to through means like: personally communicating with the HODs of different departments requesting for their support to ensure high participation from the respective departments, they also communicated through formal mail invitations and utilised the daily activities display board (which was quite prominently visible to every employee while they walked into their workstations every morning), they prepared eye-catching posters related to the activity to grab maximum attention. The activity they planned was the screening of a latest cinema flick that apparently had received rave public response from all genres owing to its interesting content and strong socio-cultural message. They made proper seating arrangements with all the resources ready for the screening of the movie. Now, as the clock struck 3 in the afternoon and the three trainees anxiously stood waiting with their fingers crossed, since this was their first group task. To their surprise, it was a very meager number that turned up. Unfortunately, there were only a few employees who registered their presence to participate in the engagement activity. The trainees were worried if they failed to communicate appropriately. They immediately called back to reach out to all the HODs through telephone requesting them to send at least a few of their assistants from their department. Albeit, it proved to be a futile attempt as the ultimate response in terms of employee participation closed down to a less than 40%.

Next time, the trainees were given a fresh task of conducting the engagement activity for all the supervisors working in various departments to enhance cross-departmental integration. Now, the big challenge that stood before these three interns was organising a theme lunch event coupled with team building activities. Here, all the supervisors of different departments were supposed to come together for participating in this event depicting the various food cultures across India and the subsequent integration at the macro level. For the theme lunch, every supervisor was informed around 20 days in advance. To their nightmares coming true, during this event also the history seemed to repeat itself, out of the 20 supervisors contacted, only 5 were active in this event. On the day of event, everybody amongst the supervisors was there to enjoy the theme lunch, but the three interns carried deep melancholy as they witnessed least participation from these supervisors in terms of contributing themselves or through their team members in the

preparation phase and involvement in activities despite of several requests for their contribution. These three interns observed that people were there to enjoy the lunch coupled with their judgemental comments on the arrangements, rather than taking part in the engagement activity as wished by these young organisers. They stood still, brooding over, with an apprehension and dilemma, were they lagging somewhere in making their efforts yield according to the expectations?

At The Grand Tulip, the HR had to plan and organise different tea time activities for employees across different levels and various verticals at least thrice a week. Activities that were less time consuming and could refresh and energise the employees to be more productive when they get back to their respective work such as: sack race, melon and card game, tambola, table tennis, ball and basket etc. HR team used to put in lots of efforts in planning and organising these activities but when it used to come to participation, it invariably was extremely discouraging and dispiriting.

On one of the regular days, Ishita, Rajan and Anjali on their way back thought of seeking a direct feedback from the HR Supervisor about where does she believe that they were lagging and unable to maximise employee participation in the employee engagement activities. Surprisingly HR Supervisor, Ms. Ananya warmly responded that the HR team is quite used to face such response in terms of low turn up for these activities and it is not something to be much worried about as it is quite common in this industry. She added that all three of them are performing quite well and are being much appreciated for their sincerity and professionalism.

And here surfaced the dilemma, the big question, "What were the reasons behind poor employee engagement in the industry? And why it happened that way? Was it every time the same? Can't this problem be addressed? If it can be positively addressed, what could be the approach to put a solution in place? These questions and the genuine intentions to contribute to enhance the effectiveness of employee engagement interventions at the organisation, generated an enthusiasm in these young and energetic trainees to step into the shoes of the concerned stakeholders and go beyond their existing knowledge and understanding of employee engagement and explore further to figure out some possibilities to enhance the appreciation and participation towards the employee engagement interventions from all concerned. For this, they started mining about employee engagement right from the definition, purpose and the road ahead as propounded by researchers and HR experts.

"Employee engagement is the responsive pledge that an employee has towards the organisation and its goals. This means engaged employees actually care about their work and their company. They don't just work for monetary reward, or just for promotion ahead,

but work on behalf of the organisation's goals with self-inclination to achieve them within the timelines." Ishita, Rajan and Anjali now landed in predicament, are the employees of the organisation carrying this kind of realisation and the desired attitude?

So, they decided to review the appraisals of the employees to check their past performance. The results established that more than three fourth of the employees performed as per the targets set within the specified time period, few of them were extra ordinary&the figures for below average performers were quite negligible. This demonstrated that despite poor employee engagement, the employees were bound to the organisational goals. It was the time for them to take the investigation to the next level to figure out the precise factors and possible reasons that drove the employee towards their objectives. They were permitted to interact randomly with the employees to elicit responses from them to identify the reasons for poor participation. The three trainees as a part of their diagnostic study distributed the work mutually to cover most of the employees within the limited time.

After analysing the survey results, the major findings that surfaced were that predominantly the reasons behind low employee involvement were such like unhealthy interpersonal relations that result in biasness, work pressure from supervisors which made them overstressed, guests as a priority, inappropriate breaks that also led to diminish the employees' morale to involve themselves in these activities, stringent time lines, longer shifts besides the fact that high occupancy rate at the hotel automatically results in less participation.

There are certain constraints that play major factors to bring down the efficiency of the workers in this industry. Firstly, hotel industry is a 24*7 industry where immense pressure exists. There is an overall lack of awareness and favourable reception towards the significance of employee engagement interventions in the supervisors and the top level management. Moreover, workers work in shifts, generally there is no such particular period during which all employees can gather at a common time and they also have flexibility to take breaks from their work schedule (12 hours) which varies from individual to individual. So, finding a common slot for activities becomes difficult for the HR. It was also inferred that there a common feeling that unlike other industries, this industry by and large finds itself lacking as far as an exciting work to offer is concerned. The monotony of the work results in failure to hold the interest of the worker positively and repetition of work leads to tiresome experiences, overall feeling of fatigue and subsequently a low engagement. The deficiency of cordial workplace relationships, especially between the supervisors and the employees also creates biasness in the minds of the supervisors resulting in nominating their selected favourites to be the part of the engagement activities

over others. Industry believes and works on the principle "AthidiDevoBhava", which made employees fundamentally inclined to concentrate more on the guest and service aspects than to participate in employee engagement activities. The broad understanding was that employees at all levels fail to identify the relevance of employee engagement in enhancing the employee motivation, overall morale in the organisation and ultimately the productivity and performance level of the employees.

The Road Ahead

As a conclusion to their investigation and corresponding discussions, Ishita, Rajan and Anjali construed that the HR team has to put in aggressive efforts to create awareness about the importance of employee engagement activities, the negative consequences of persistent work pressure without the room for rejuvenation for the employees and in the long run this would serve detrimental to the overall organisational effectiveness. As observed through many research studies, in certain industries, the employees are found comparatively less productive and more lethargic. And hotel industry features high on this list. Hence, the managers in this industry need redesign their work practices to minimise the fatigue and monotony in the overall work experience. Also, there has to be some mechanism in place to aptly align the schedules of employee engagement activities with the occupancy rates at the hotel.

HR needs to design a permanent break schedule for every department which varies from sub group to sub group ensuring 100% participation & it also requires continuous update of schedule every week. Organisation should design certain criteria to measure the employee engagement effectiveness as done to evaluate the effectiveness of training and development interventions.

The HR team needs to raise a comprehensive system that involves all the workers of the organisation (duly addressing the disparity in time schedules), groups need to be made according to shifts. The activities should be designed such that the individuals can relate it to their respective work area. Selected exercises like Yoga and Meditation that help evolving the creative and constructive dimension of an individual's ability must be incorporated and given special emphasis in the employee engagement agenda to beat the work stress. Individual interests should be kept in mind while designing activities. Systematic and continuous efforts would positively enhance the effectiveness and value-orientation of the employee engagement activities.

The interns discussed it all with the HR supervisor. Ms. Ananya had all praises for Ishita, Rajan and Anjali. "I warmly solicit your contribution in planning the strategy ahead", said Ms. Ananya smiling at them.