Squeaky Wheels Get the Grease

Radio Flyer retooled its employee feedback program to identify disengaged employees, and get them back on the wagon.

Radio Flyer’s trademark little red wagon is an iconic image in American culture, ubiquitous in many Americans’ childhoods. The company’s story is also typically American. Born in a small town outside of Venice, Italy, Radio Flyer’s founder, Antonio Pasin, dreamed of coming to America and starting a new life. At age 16, he convinced his family to sell their mule to allow him the opportunity to voyage to America, where he settled in Chicago in 1917. Pasin started building toy wagons, initially out of wood, but eventually from metal, introducing the Radio Flyer in 1930. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, Radio Flyer wagons became increasingly popular toys that are still widely available today.

The company sees this personal connection with the public as one of its core values, and as such, it views maintaining customer service via measurement and management of workforce morale as important. So, in 2007, the company began looking closely at its employee feedback process to see how to best design this process and determine where there was room for improvement.

Radio Flyer initiated a 360 feedback program, beginning with its CEO, Robert Pasin, known as the chief wagon officer. As it moved 360 feedback down through its entire workforce, Radio Flyer was unsure whether its employees — known internally as Flyers — were sharing their true, honest opinions about the company since it hadn’t offered a way for employees to provide anonymous feedback. The leadership team, directed by Pasin, decided it needed to create a medium for Flyers to share their feedback in confidence.

Beyond the company’s desire for Flyers to share their honest feedback, Flyers themselves sought feedback and input from leadership to facilitate their own growth and continuous improvements. They expressed a desire to become more involved in their engagement and ultimately their own career development. The leadership team wanted to create a means for Flyers to become aware of their own engagement levels and take steps to improve.

A Vehicle for Feedback

This led Radio Flyer to conduct an employee survey in 2009. Management believed the anonymous survey would encourage a partnership between management and the staff to create better outcomes.

Radio Flyer believed it needed to get in front of the direction of engagement among its employees. "The alternative to engagement isn’t good for people or business; disengagement can only lead to more disengagement," said Amy Bastuga, Radio Flyer’s director of human resources. "Likewise, engagement is contagious. The dialogue between the company and employees is key to identify what really matters, address that, engage employees in the process, and have fun and let your engaged employees do what they do best. The survey allowed us to focus in on what really mattered — career development, more work-life flexibility, and more information and activities regarding social responsibility." The promotion of a survey shifted the mindset of the staff from reacting to the company’s initiatives to collaborating with management.

Radio Flyer and HR Solutions Inc. partnered to administer an employee survey that incorporated a tool called the Personal Employee Engagement Report (PEER), which allowed each Flyer the opportunity to receive a confidential report with his or her engagement level and receive best practices to make improvements. The employee survey helped management pinpoint the areas it would address, while PEER provided Flyers the self-awareness they needed to understand their opportunities for improvement and take action in accordance with management.

According to data gathered in the survey, Radio Flyer showed good engagement levels compared to the national normative data collected by HR Solutions Inc. in surveying employers globally, polling more than 2,400 organizations across all industries and gathering 3.3 million employee responses.

National normative data illustrates three levels of engagement in the workplace: actively engaged, ambivalent and actively disengaged. The average percentages for these three levels of engagement are as follows: 25 percent actively engaged; 59 percent ambivalent; and 16 percent actively disengaged. Fifty-five percent of Flyers received actively engaged scores, which is 30 percentage points above the norm of 25 percent. The
TABLE 1: ENGAGEMENT BREAKDOWN

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<tr>
<th>Radio Flyer Inc. PEER Respondent Engagement Summary</th>
<th>National Normative Data for Engagement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actively Engaged</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actively Disengaged</td>
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<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<td>70%</td>
<td>59%</td>
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Source: HR Solutions Inc.
remaining portion of the workforce scored 43 percent ambivalent and 2 percent actively disengaged. For individuals who opted to receive their confidential report, 70 percent were actively engaged and 30 percent were ambivalent. Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of these scores compared to national normative data.

Steering the Wagon
Despite encouraging engagement results, Radio Flyer wanted to continue to adjust its approach to employee engagement based on the survey. In it, Flyers had expressed to the company that they wanted more flexibility with work-life programs. Management decided to initiate a work-life committee to develop action plans in order to address this feedback. The work-life committee’s final recommendations include paid paternity and maternity leave, flexible scheduling, additional access to vacation time earlier in employment and additional time for all Flyers through a vacation purchase program.

Flyers also expressed a desire for more career advancement opportunities. Management knew that in order to retain top talent, such opportunities were critical. PEER provided Flyers a basis to move their careers forward. Flyers who opted for their confidential report and scored low on career advancement received specific recommendations to increase their likelihood for future promotion. The recommendations provided to Flyers included:

• Regularly discuss your career development and career path with your supervisor.
• Ask your supervisor if you can accompany him or her to different committee meetings and project meetings to gain exposure and experience.
• Seek personalized career guidance. Ask your supervisor about his or her own success stories and what has worked for his or her career growth.
• Ask your supervisor about promotion and internal advancement opportunities that may exist.
• If you have strong experience and an interest in developing others, ask your supervisor if you could be a mentor to newer co-workers.
• Ask your supervisor about any skills training needs that he or she would recommend for you.

Radio Flyer began conducting career discussions three times per year between Flyers and managers to discuss career development. Without the feedback from the survey, these discussions may have been a 2012 initiative, which would have coincided with 50 percent of Radio Flyer’s workforce reaching five years of service and perhaps feeling ready to look for a new job. The company got out in front of this potential problem, focusing career discussions on where Flyers wanted to be in the next two to five years. Managers emphasized that each individual’s career is driven by both their interests and the organization’s needs. Topics discussed here included:

• What are your career goals?
• What would you like your next role to be?
• What training are you interested in?
• What skills would you like to build?
• What education or certification would you like to pursue?

Following the Trail
Beyond the aforementioned career development discussions and planning, Radio Flyer also carefully evaluated its engagement levels, focusing specifically on the ambivalent category of their staff. Going beyond Flyers coming to them directly, supervisors encouraged Flyers to meet with them to discuss their PEER reports since these reports outlined each Flyer’s opportunities as they related to his or her individual engagement.

The positive response from managers toward ambivalent Flyers who approached them was critical to cultivate a more engaged workforce. Ambivalent employees may have felt discouraged because the majority of their co-workers were actively engaged. Managers decided not to focus on the ambivalent versus engaged designations but rather on highlighted areas for improvement, digging deeper to formulate action plans specific to each Flyer. After managers took the time to address any concerns causing disengagement, Flyers had a better understanding of management’s actions to correct their concerns as well as what they could do on their own.

Keep It Rolling
The engagement survey demonstrated that even when an organization has a workforce that is highly engaged, there is still room for improvement. The comments that surfaced in the survey and the focus groups illuminated the importance of organizational reflection. “Feedback is a gift,” Bastuga said. “We want employees to give us feedback because we don’t know what they don’t know.”

Since the survey, Radio Flyer continues to emphasize the importance of an open culture where Flyers can give confidential input on the company’s culture and strategic direction. Radio Flyer has rolled out a virtual HR feedback and suggestion box on its intranet where Flyers can provide anonymous suggestions 24 hours a day. Management reports all received feedback and suggestions at company meetings and the actions they have taken as a result.

Engagement is a work in progress and it is fragile. It is critical to get honest, confidential input from employees so that the employer can remove any barriers to engagement or fix any problems. “Feedback is our fuel for continuous improvement,” Bastuga said. “Our role is to listen and take action after we receive the information.” Going forward, Radio Flyer will continue to gauge Flyer opinions in order to attract and retain the best talent around the globe. "

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