

The Ultimate Summit: Employee Engagement

Kevin Sheridan, an avid mountain climber and resident of Wilmette, Illinois, is Chief Executive Officer and Chief Consultant of HR Solutions, Inc., an international management consulting firm specializing in opinion research. Two of Sheridan's life goals are to guide organizations on improving business outcomes through employee engagement and to summit each of the Seven Summits, which are the highest peaks on each continent (29,029-foot Mt. Everest - Asia, 22,840-foot Mt. Aconcagua – South America, 20,320-foot Denali (Mt. McKinley) – North America, 19,339-foot Mt. Kilimanjaro – Africa, 18,481-foot Mt. Elbrus – Europe, 16,067-foot Mt. Vinson Massif – Antarctica, and 7,310-foot Mt. Kosciuszko – Australia).

Over his 18-year career, Sheridan has done management consulting with some of the world's largest corporations while finding time to climb four of the seven summits: Mt. Kilimanjaro, Mt. Aconcagua, Mt. Elbrus, and Denali (Mt. McKinley) – where he'll be on another expedition this coming May 24th. While reflecting upon his many climbing excursions, Sheridan was intrigued by how these experiences could be compared to employee engagement.

Employee engagement can be defined as an employee putting forth extra discretionary effort, as well as the likelihood of the employee being loyal and remaining with the organization over the long haul. Research shows that engaged employees: perform better, put in extra efforts to help get the job done, show a strong level of commitment to the organization, and are more motivated and optimistic about their work goals. Employers with engaged employees tend to experience low employee turnover and more impressive business outcomes..

There are strong parallels between what it takes to summit at high altitude and achieving employee engagement within an organization. Sheridan identified the following seven strong commonalities:

- *Preparation* is as crucial to the climb as training and development are to employee engagement. Both employees and climbers must have the right training to achieve their goals. "Success is dependent upon proper preparation and training. Without it, the hill is that much harder to climb," said Sheridan.
- *Resources* are needed to aid employees and climbers to ultimately achieve success. Investing in equipment and supplies that will help employees become more efficient, or simply assigning a more seasoned employee to serve as a mentor for coaching new hires, are resources that allow employees to concentrate on moving forward, rather than having to constantly battle obstacles. High altitude climbers need to continually monitor their equipment and physical condition both in training and on the mountain. A faulty piece of equipment can be a life-threatening detriment to the individual as well as to the team as a whole.
- *Pride* is defined as a sense of one's own proper dignity or value. Engaged employees have a clear sense of their individual contribution and value to the organization. Similarly, climbers realize that their individual contribution to the team is crucial to reaching the final goals of the summit and a safe return off the mountain.
- *Coworker or Teammate Satisfaction* is crucial to troupe success. Engaged employees tend to be very supportive of their co-workers and are often seen as an inspiration to others. In high altitude mountain climbing, it is said that you are only as strong as your weakest climber. In the event that a climber should fall through a crevasse, the fact that you are roped in with your co-climbers is a vivid example of how dependent you are on them, not only for success on the summit, but for your life.
- *Teamwork* is also a critical factor. Teams are the effective use of multiple skills, abilities, and experience. The result is expanded knowledge, shared accountability, and improved communication and efficiency. Mountain climbers rely on their team members to keep themselves motivated toward a common goal, and draw energy from each other throughout the journey. "Being able to share the summit with the rest of team makes all the hard work along the way worth the effort," includes Sheridan. "Laughs and tears are not uncommon at the summit, both symbols of this strong camaraderie."

- *Leadership* is another essential component in both climbing and employee engagement. Leaders are needed to keep everyone working together toward common objectives. An effective leader of engaged employees considers the best interest of the entire group when making decisions. Sheridan sees strong similarities between what it takes to cultivate an organization of engaged employees and lead an expedition up one of the seven summits. Said Sheridan, “Without the strong leadership of effective Managers or Sherpa Sirdar (the name of a head guide on a Nepalese Everest expedition), the team will lack the proper direction and can be thrown off course.”
- *Rewards and Recognition* are strong motivators in organizations and in mountain climbing. Although compensation definitely plays a part in overall job satisfaction, the true key driver of employee engagement is a sense of feeling valued, appreciated, and a “right fit” for the job and its duties. For Sheridan, “the real reward is the full journey, and not just the summit. Equally as rewarding is the fact that you are able to escape from your everyday life. Looking back introspectively while climbing makes you appreciate your family, health, and the simple things that we take for granted such as a warm bed, different varieties of foods, and a hot shower or bath.” course.”

In conclusion, there are myriad parallels between mountain climbing and employee engagement. Simply put, organizations that have an engaged workforce enjoy better business outcomes. As compared to high altitude mountain climbing, if your team is engaged on achieving the summit, chances are you will enjoy the beauty at the top.