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For Workplace News

Employee brand: If you build it, they will come...

Lets take a test. How good is your company at luring and keeping the best?

Answer: If I don't know who you are, what you stand for and how work gets done in your culture — not very.

On the other hand, when you mention your company name, if people who work in your industry or think about your products or otherwise know your values get an instant picture of what you stand for and what kind of people fit your organizational culture — it's because you have a real, living 'employee brand.'

'Brand' in its own right is an interesting concept. Keith Fox, vice-president of branding at Cisco Systems, defines it as "the promise of experience." Or as George Zachary said in the January 2000 issue of Red Herring, "there's a lot of emotional energy going on with a brand."

The promise of experience, emotional energy. Aren't you interested already? Those are the kinds of things that human beings respond to.

By comparison, salary, location, title or perks are lesser motivators, hitting an altogether different part of the brain. Statistics prove it. The

most important thing people look for in a company is one that is, "a Fun place to work." What they mean is an organization that fits who they are, what they stand for, and how they like to succeed — all of which results in values alignment.

Employee brand provides that sense of purpose. It is made up of values — what the organization stands for, vision — where the organization is going; and job behaviours — how work gets done. Together, this is essential information for both current and prospective employees.

Understanding employee brand is your best road to retention. After all, consider your own superior performers. I guarantee they are the ones who fit your culture to a "T," and do their jobs using the right behaviours.

Why are those two concepts so important for employee brand? Job behaviours are the way in which work gets done. That's more crucial than results, because every time someone does something in an organization it sends a strong message to other employees and customers about what the organization stands for, holds important, how it operates and what it will and will not tolerate.

Culture, on the other hand, is the way values get expressed through the organization's environment, style, language, rituals, self-image, etc. When an employee combines cultural fit with the job behaviours

of superior performance, you've got a keeper.

Employee brand captures the essence of culture and work in ways people instantly grasp. It's the flash of recognition that communicates what a company stands for and what kind of employees it desires. It allows people to do a gut-check on whether they fit in and can thrive.

How do you build employee brand? Well, here's how not to. Don't try running an ad that lists your company values and show up at the job fair expecting people to flock to your booth saying, "Sign me up." After all, if it were easy it wouldn't mean much.

Employee brand has to begin from within your company. It requires serious reflection as to who you are and what attributes, actions and behaviours bring about success.

Along the way, as you begin to recognize the real nature of your organization's culture, you might need to modify or refine those aspects of it that aren't right. If it is not attractive to you or doesn't reflect the right values, how much more unappealing will it be to a current or prospective employee with options?

The heart and soul of your company is its culture — not as you want it to be but as it is lived.

Human beings don't respond to values as words. They respond to emotionally charged incidents and stories they can identify with.

Values are lived out in the way employees treat customers, suppliers and each other and are demonstrated through on-the-job actions and behaviours.

Those real life events create stories, experiences, word-of mouth, testimonials — an ongoing confirmation that reflects the degree of pride and passion people have in the values that get expressed. Such stories capture the experience of your company, communicating more than you could even imagine. They are retold as “corporate legends.”

A place that is “fun to work at,” comes down to value-fit. It’s one that really lives the values the employee bought into. It’s the place where people articulate the meaning of the values and live them consistently.

An executive who cherishes organizational culture and knows the importance of employee brand will never tolerate anything but passionate commitment to that company values. Nor will they reward, promote or acknowledge performance as “outstanding” when desired results are achieved while violating values

Maintaining this standard is especially challenging during economic downturns — but it’s never more important. Anyone can keep true to values when a company is on a roll — sticking to values during the tough times is the real test, and one your best employees are watching closely. ●

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