

Engaging Workers to Achieve Excellence

by Juan Riboldi



Key Point

El Pollo Loco was needing a stronger commitment to engagement at all levels. Considering the unique needs of El Pollo Loco's diverse workforce, the engagement process started by listening to employees to define engagement on their terms.

The Engagement process revealed that high engagement restaurants produced 10% higher sales, 3% higher customer scores, and 15% less turnover than similarly located units.

Organizations large and small are lining behind initiatives aimed at improving employee engagement to increase not only morale and commitment of their workforce, but to boost revenue and customer loyalty.

The raise of engagement in recent years attest of the vigor behind this concept. Yet, managers often wonder: *"What can you do to increase Engagement?"*

While the concept of "employee engagement" is relatively new in the business world, the idea behind it is not. For decades, attempts to define the employee's discretionary effort at work have been described with words such as productivity, job satisfaction, employee morale, initiative and empowerment. Engagement is a contemporary, comprehensive measure for doing one's best at work.

High engagement happens when the needs and wants of both the employees and the enterprise are fully met. In order to be engaged, an employee must be satisfied, motivated, and effective. While each of these factors is important on its own, it is only when all three are present simultaneously that true engagement occurs. Then, people and business thrive

Such is the case at some of the top performing restaurants operated by El Pollo Loco—the nation's leading quick-service restaurant chain specializing in flame-grilled chicken. The chain is rapidly growing nationwide, currently operating more than 400 restaurants in the states of California, Arizona, Nevada, Texas, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Utah, Illinois, Georgia, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

When Jeanne Scott, VP of Human Resources at El Pollo Loco, saw the need to reinforce the culture that had made El Pollo Loco successful, she was thinking people and business. Our research shows that the high engagement restaurants produced 10% higher sales, 3% higher customer scores, and 15% less turnover than similarly located units.

More interesting was the finding that high engagement restaurant managers can bring their sizzle to other units and reproduce similar results. We noticed that engagement was primarily a function of the manager.

Armed with this insight, El Pollo Loco, set out to establish employee Engagement as part of their formula for success. As the company grew, this required a stronger commitment to employee engagement at all levels. Not an easy task, considering the unique needs of El Pollo Loco's diverse and mainly ethnic workforce.

The engagement process started by listening to employees at all levels of the organization to define engagement on their terms. Managers found that what drives engagement for restaurant crew members is vastly different from what staff employees value.

Based on restaurant crew feedback and ratings, we developed an engagement tool tailored to crews and the corporate staff.

El Pollo Loco trained Area leaders on engagement principles and practices using the managers who had mastered the concept. Their examples for how to run crews affectively proved contagious as the outcomes were undisputable.

El Pollo Loco reinforced the training with simple tools and practices to facilitate engagement meetings at each restaurant. In three years, El Pollo Loco significantly increased employee engagement, which contributed to becoming one of the fastest growing and most successful restaurant chains.

Engagement is the voluntary dedication to doing one's best work. When people apply their hearts and minds to what they do, they become fully engaged. Engagement springs from a genuine desire to treat others the way we want to be treated.

A growing body of research links employee engagement to talent retention, customer loyalty, and revenue growth. Beyond the concrete financial returns of a highly engaged work force, there are also intangible values. The case for engaging people at work simply makes sense.

Leaders create the conditions for engagement by aligning decisions, training, and recognition to values. But demonstrating one's values by example is by far the most influential form of engagement.

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