



Employee Retention: The Power Behind Emotional Connection

Article | September 9, 2021

Are you building emotionally resilient relationships with your team members? Do you have a firm grasp on how your team is feeling these days or are you too focused on moving to the next task ? **Dave Stevens** dives deep into why leaders must learn to communicate with emotional awareness when interacting with their people—ensuring job satisfaction, higher morale, and increased productivity.

Leaders can no longer avoid the time and energy needed to motivate and retain employees. [Research](#) indicates that 54% of workers are psychologically unattached to their work and company. As a result, these employees tend to do the minimum required and will quickly exit their company for a slightly better offer—leaving colleagues to deal with the increased workloads, stress, frustration and job dissatisfaction.

AUTHOR



Dave Stevens

Signs of employee disengagement range from noticeable behaviours such as absenteeism, lower productivity, and poor attitude to subtle indicators such as lack of initiative, wellness issues, and low motivation. When this happens, the remaining team members are required to pick up the slack, further depleting resources and morale. The business



case for proactively managing employee morale and retention is strong, and the psychological techniques for managing are proven and worthwhile.

As a leader, ask yourself this question—are people your most important asset? If yes, then how are you living by that principle? One way to assess this is to look at the quality of the relationships you develop with your team. Without meaningful relationships, you will be unable to emotionally connect with team members. Moreover, without that emotional connection, your employees won't feel like an important part of the organization—meaning there is less tying them to their role. Taking time to acknowledge where someone is at and what they need builds emotional resilience in your relationship and makes it emotionally less risky when things get tough.

Building emotionally resilient employee relationships

Relationships consist of two key components: *connection* and *task*. Task refers to the work that needs to get done. Connection refers to the person-to-person interaction. Since emotional connection is hotwired into our DNA, there is an assumption that fostering relationships comes naturally and doesn't require much effort. The problem is we're frequently overwhelmed by the task—we don't have time to initiate conversations that lead to meaningful connections. In fact, many interactions are purely automatic focusing only on deliverables, discipline, or brief accolades for a job well done. As a result, relationships remain transactional and further inhibits an employee's emotional connection to their leader and company.

People get emotional connection wrong

When we talk about connection, people often misunderstand what it means to connect.

Connection is *not* shooting the breeze or general ice-breaking banter. In many instances, it's not even about asking how someone is or inquiring after their family.

Emotional connection is a high-quality interaction, defined by trust, active listening, and a willingness to engage conflict. This is achieved by directing your attention to what the other person is saying. This way you will pick up subtle clues as to their current mood, their concerns, and their level of engagement.

The key to becoming a good connector is to start by making yourself available. Let people know you are willing and eager to connect so others don't feel they are disturbing you. Then you listen. Connection is a reciprocal process of understanding each other's world. If you're only listening for what you want to hear, you may miss important signs. These include the level of an employee's distress and their willingness to want to reach out. Leaders who only listen from a place of problem-solving or judgement may inadvertently shut down the person, further reinforcing the emotional disconnection. It may sound simple, but by listening deeply and allowing the other person to speak, we are creating a safe space for emotional availability.



Action-centered leadership

John Adair's well-known [Action-Centered Leadership](#) model states that leadership is defined by three watchwords—*task*, *team*, and *individual*. These watchwords describe the actions leaders must take to be effective in their roles including positively impacting employee engagement and retention. Managing the three watchwords is hard. Often leaders default to the task and don't invest time to manage each individual and the effectiveness of the team. When top talent leaves an organization, one needs to look at how a leader is engaging all three.

Managing an employee's disengagement requires attention and empathy. People want to feel emotionally connected to their work and team and know there is a future for them within the organization. Leaders should feel reassured that the investment will be worth the effort both at an organizational and individual level.

Where does empathy start?

Empathy is about recognizing and responding to another's emotional state. For this to occur a person must feel comfortable and want to connect emotionally. Leaders should focus on creating a space—free from interruption, solutioning, and judgement—where employees feel valued and are engaged. The objective is to listen to understand while moving the conversation along with open-ended questions. These questions, where appropriate, allow the leader to drill down for more details to further reflection and insight.

The impact of an empathic listening process is twofold: it creates an emotional connection to the leader and the organization by strengthening the relationship, and it allows the individual to express any internal heightened emotions. The benefit of this is the positive impact on an employee's productivity, motivation, and level of engagement. By finding words to express our emotional dimensions, it helps us restore our inner resources that have been compromised by events in our lives—we feel better and when we feel better, we work better.

Why does empathy matter for employee retention?

The effects of not managing employees' emotional connection are particularly harmful through times of disruption as our emotions influence our thoughts, behaviors, and ultimately our decisions. Often this emotional component is overlooked because it is not considered part of the job. However, in an increasingly demanding employment market, many leaders are looking for a competitive advantage when it comes to [retaining top talent](#).

As companies find it increasingly [difficult to retain employees](#) it is important for leaders and organizations to focus on those factors they can influence. With the scramble for top talent on the rise, the need to retain high-potential employees is paramount. When employees feel emotionally connected to their organizations it results in stronger ties and increased loyalty, placing meaning at the heart of the employee-employer relationship.



Beyond the Webcam: How Can Leaders Build Meaningful Relationships?

These are the right questions leaders should be asking. [Learn more.](#)

Our Contributors

Dave Stevens

Barry Pokroy is an Advisor with B. Riley Farber. Trained in clinical psychology, he has in-depth knowledge and experience in adapting the insights of psychological theory to the demands of the corporate environment. Barry can be reached at bpokroy@brileyfin.com or at [416.496.3079](tel:416.496.3079)
