

CUES Podcast 129 Matthew Bidwell on Employee Engagement

April 2022

By Matthew Bidwell

Lisa Hochgraf 00:04

You're listening to the CUES Podcast episode 129.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:09

Thank you, listeners, for tuning in. As you know, on the CUES Podcast, you can hear from a wide range of cross-industry experts discussing trends and topics relevant to you.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:19

My name is Lisa Hochgraf, and I'm Senior Editor for CUES and its credit union management magazine. I will be your host today.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:26

On today's show, we will be talking about employee engagement. It's a Great Resignation world out there where the pandemic has caused a lot of people to rethink their relationship with their work. This current circumstance makes it more critical than ever for credit unions to find ways to engage their employees.

Lisa Hochgraf 00:43

Our guest today, Matthew Bidwell Ph.D., provides a wonderful assist in better understanding what engagement is and just how employers can foster it. Bidwell is an associate professor of management at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. His research examines new patterns in work and employment, and his latest projects explore how organizations balance internal promotions with external hiring, and how people develop careers within and across firms.

Lisa Hochgraf 01:11

If you like what you hear today on the show, I hope you'll register to hear Bidwell speak at TalentNEXT coming up in May in Austin, Texas. You can get all the details about the event at cues.org/talentnext.

Lisa Hochgraf 01:26

So let's get started.

Lisa Hochgraf 01:30

Welcome to the CUES Podcast Matthew.

Matthew Bidwell 01:32

Thank you. Thank you for having me on here.

Lisa Hochgraf 01:34

Before we get into talking about engagement, I'd like to help our listeners get to know you a little bit better. The way I often do this is by inviting our guests to share a professional quote or a mantra that they live by. Would you have such a quote or a mantra to share?

Matthew Bidwell 01:49

I think the closest that I have so a quote that sometimes springs to mind, it's probably from a much less erudite source than most of the ones that you get here. There's a series of books by a British comic fantasy writer called Eric Pratchett that I'm also surprisingly well-written, surprisingly thoughtful. There's one of the characters there has a um ... there's a phrase in one of the books, "You do the job that's in front of you," which sometimes I find quite useful. So I think we're going to talk a little bit about engagement. On the days when I'm not necessarily feeling super engaged, but there are things that I'm not sure exactly how to do, or things that are just tough, I just tell myself some days, you just do the job that's in front of you.

Lisa Hochgraf 02:31

I like that a lot. I think about the same thing. And sometimes I call it the next right step. I have 1000 I could pick from. If I can just figure out what the next right step is, then I'll be on the pathway again.

Matthew Bidwell 02:42

Yeah, sometimes what you have to do gets chosen for you, so you just do it.

Lisa Hochgraf 02:46

So I wondered if we might start off by talking a little bit more about the sources of employee engagement. Are there some top ones that you'd like to focus on?

Matthew Bidwell 02:55

Yeah, I mean, lots and maybe I might also start as well, just by talking a little bit about what we mean by employee engagement is kind of a technical answer to that and the way we tend to actually use it in practice.

Matthew Bidwell 03:06

So psychologists, I guess, you know, it's like how there are allegedly 300 words for snow or whatever there be you have. I believe that's completely inaccurate. But anyway, so let's pretend there actually were. Psychologists have about 300 different words for what we think about as employee engagement based around kind of, you know, how we feel about the job, how we feel about a company, how we feel about our work today, and so on. Technically, I think when psychologists talk about engagement, what they're often talking about is kind of specifically how we feel about the particular tasks that we're doing right now. It's very work-related, I think, when we talk about it.

Matthew Bidwell 03:42

Outside the halls of psychology, we're more likely to be talking about just how excited we are to be coming into work generally. So kind of when I'm thinking about employee engagement, I am thinking about how happy am I come into work on a given day, and what drives that. And yet, in many ways, there are actually quite a lot of different things that drive engagement. And I think one of the best things we can do is kind of bear in mind all of them and think about how each of them for us contributes.

Matthew Bidwell 04:08

So there's a lovely little framework that a professor at Penn, guy called Martin Seligman, came up with, he calls it the perma framework, P E R M A. He actually uses a slightly different context, just thinking about why some people are happy. But I find it works perfectly for engagement of thinking about why people are happy in their job.

Matthew Bidwell 04:27

So the P in his framework stands for positive emotions, and particularly just the fact that some people just experience positive emotions more than other people. So there're always going to be some people are more engaged. I've made it very clear that when I come back in my next life, I want to come back as a spaniel. I don't know if you've seen the kind of running around they just get desperately excited about absolutely everything. I think that I think they're very lucky. I'm somewhat towards the other end of the scale. But yeah, some of us are very good at tuning into those positive emotions kind of feeling that excitement about anything new. Others of us may on those get jaded look for other things that that can get us excited.

Matthew Bidwell 05:04

Um, second part of his framework, this E, is just being engaged by the work itself. And this is kind of a lot of interest about our ability to lose ourselves in tasks, that idea of kind of losing track of the time. And I think for most of us, there are some things that we do, maybe outside our work, where that happens. I mean, computer games are like, perfectly designed for this, the entire idea of them is they are so absorbing that we tune out everything else. And work can sometimes be like that. And I think we think one of the reasons why that test happens, we get very absorbed in things when the challenges that they represent are a very good fit for our skills. So it's something that if we really try hard, we can do it. We're not going to get bored, you know, if it's too easy, we're going to get bored. If it's too hard, we get turned off and burnout, but it's just hard enough. So we have that continual kind of feedback. Yeah, you're just doing this, but you got to keep trying, that often, we find quite engaging. So kind of the challenge of what we're doing, and how it meshes with our skills is important.

Matthew Bidwell 06:08

Now, the piece that goes into this engagement relationships, the R is relationships, now how excited we are to show up to work every day, a big part of that is who we're going to meet there. Our relationship with our immediate supervisor, our manager, and so on is very important, but also kind of those relationships with our teammates, I think the last two really matter.

Matthew Bidwell 06:28

So M in the perma framework is for meaning. And this is something I mean, we spend so much time at work, we look for meaning, try and understand meaning in what we do. And so we find it a lot easier to feel happy about what we're doing if we feel it's accomplishing something that that's really worthwhile. We want to think most of us in some way or another want to change the world. We want to make it a slightly better place. And that's an awful lot easier if we feel that we get to help people in what we do rather than if we feel you know, just shuffling papers around and things like that.

Matthew Bidwell 07:00

And then the final thing, maybe the most important is accomplishment. And there's actually there's been, I think some some very interesting debates that have gone on about kind of what it means to be happy. You know, some people saying is it just doing things that we enjoy, so is the secret to happiness, just, you know, watching as much Netflix as possible and eating as much chocolate as possible. You could make a strong case. But I think that a lot of people say no, there is something about this kind of we seek accomplishment, we seek a sense of achievement, even if we don't always love every step towards doing so. It can be quite hard to feel this fulfilled unless we have a sense of achievement.

Matthew Bidwell 07:37

And that I think at work, couple of things are really important for feeding into that. So one is seeing the results of our work, getting feedback work, where we can quickly see what we achieved, who we helped, how we change things. We're going to have a sense of accomplishment in a way that we're not with kind of work that's much less tangible. But the other big thing that we find is a lot of it is about a sense of ownership. If we're left free to decide how to do the work, to make some important decisions ourselves, we start to feel ownership of it. And so those results that we achieve, it's not just that something good happened. But that wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for me. And that gives us a tremendous sense of accomplishment. So that kind of feedback, but also having the autonomy to figure out how to do the work ourselves that contributes to accomplishment.

Matthew Bidwell 08:24

So it was kind of when I think about what might make me excited to come into work, there are a lot of things that go into it, potentially a lot of things that can go wrong, right, but kind of a lot of things also that that are going to shape how I feel about my work, how pleased I am with it. That's a great way to frame engagement with PERMA, right? That was PERMA all the different facets in that acronym.

Lisa Hochgraf 08:46

I find it interesting that you say there are a lot of things that can go wrong. And my next question kind of points at that, because I'm curious about, based on the sources of engagement that you just talked about, how can HR leaders or people leaders or cultural leaders or whatever they call themselves these days, ensure that people find their jobs engaging? And the flip side of that coin is, how can they help them? Or help the culture avoid the pitfalls of engagement?

Matthew Bidwell 09:11

Yeah, no, it is. I mean, we we could probably do a great podcast, couldn't we on how to disengage people? You know, and I am sure there are a lot of great managers who we could bring on give some

really good insight into this. Yeah. Firstly, I always really like to micromanage my people. I find if I micromanage, I can really drive that engagement really far down. It takes a certain time. So yes, there's a lot that we can do, you know, speaking at the moment, right. So as we record this, everyone's talking about the Great Resignation. So it is clear that there are a lot of people out there who are very happy to leave their jobs, given the first chance to do so. And so yes, I think there are do's and don'ts here.

Matthew Bidwell 09:47

Something that I love to do when I'm teaching is to give people some time to think about what's the job that they've had where they were the most excited and engaged and what's the job that they've had where they were the least excited and engaged. People have a lot of stories about the jobs where they were disengaged, I sometimes feel like I'm doing group therapy, getting them to talk through those experiences. But yes, we kind of see both with our managers.

Matthew Bidwell 10:11

So what are some of the key things, engagement challenging people in the work. People want to be, they want the right degree of stretch, right? They don't want to be bored. They don't want to do impossible work. But they want to get to use a variety of skills. And so finding ways to give people new experiences to challenge them is an important way to engage them.

Matthew Bidwell 10:31

This relationship piece, I mean, when I talk to people about you know, when we disengaged, when they had a leader, they didn't trust, when they had somebody who they felt didn't have their back, who belittled them, that didn't support them, maybe took credit for their work, they felt really disengaged. When they felt that they were being supported by someone, when they had a manager who they felt had their interests at heart, it was a lot easier for them to kind of come to the work feeling, you know, somebody is looking out for me, now I want to do the best job and kind of contribute back. And so I think building those kinds of relationships and contributing support are important.

Matthew Bidwell 11:07

The meaning piece. Leaders have a central role in that. I mean, all of our jobs, we can see either as really important or really menial, right? I mean, jobs can be either meaningful or meaningless. And a lot of it is how they're framed. You know, if I feel like just another bureaucrat, it can be hard to get engaged. If on the other hand, I feel inspired by the company's mission, if I feel that the bureaucracy that I'm working within is doing important work and really achieving things, if I feel as an organization as a whole, we're moving in the right direction, I'm more likely to find it meaningful.

Matthew Bidwell 11:44

Um one of my colleagues, guy called Drew Carton here at Wharton, has a lovely study where he talks about kind of the creation of meaning in NASA's putting a man on the moon, you know, talking about how you know, even the janitors. You ask them what they're doing as they're kind of sweeping the floor, they say, "I'm putting a man on the moon." They were, right? They were putting a man on the moon just as much as anybody else was. But the fact that the organization was able to craft a compelling vision so that everybody knew what it was that they were trying to do and felt that they were contributing to it

meant that people could find their work meaningful, even if there are other ways we can construe that work where it would feel kind of much less important.

Matthew Bidwell 12:21

And so I think crafting that vision and communicating and helping people to understand how they're really helping others, I think is valuable. And then like I say, "Don't micromanage," right? I mean, the one thing that always comes out, people hate being micromanaged. It's hard as a manager, right? Because that means giving up a certain amount of control, means you have to really trust your people a little bit to do it. But providing people that autonomy, really critically important.

Lisa Hochgraf 12:47

Oh, for sure. I think about that in my parenting too, that as my son becomes an 18-year-old, he's technically an adult, and I'm in that bridge place where I still need to help with some things and talk about safety. But on the flip side, he needs to do a lot himself, and that letting go things, setting that vision of safety or health or good study or whatever it is, and then letting go and letting him do is important.

Matthew Bidwell 13:09

Yeah, I mean, it's not easy. I mean, this is the, you know, I spend all my time teaching, "You don't micromanage." And then sometimes when you're working with us, we kind of just want to take it all over because we know we can do it better. Finding that balance is hard, but it is really important for engaging people.

Lisa Hochgraf 13:23

Right on. I'm really pleased that you'll be speaking at our new talent next event in May in Austin, in Texas, where teams of top people in charge of talent accordions will come together to learn and to share ideas. The idea is actually to have teams of the people people at credit unions come together from oh, maybe there'll be two or three people from the HR team at a credit union in attendance together. So what are some ways that you think that the people that work on culture and people and engagement at credit unions--that might be the CEO and might be the VP of HR, the chief talent officer--how can those people work together best so that they're more effective when it comes to engagement?

Matthew Bidwell 14:03

Um, you know, I think that does need to be a strategy. And so at that level, you know, I mean, so much of how we craft our people's engagement is at the level of the individual line manager, right? I mean, they are the key player in terms of shaping the work that people do every day. They're the kind of central bearer of the relationship with the organization. And so it is, ultimately it comes down to them, but they work within a certain architecture. And so I think for the people at the top probably describable sort of training we want to provide to our managers. It's about what kind of overall strategy we take to our workforce. So, you know, I think one thing that's really important is thinking through that balance, kind of how much you rely on your workforce, devote things to them, how much you kind of try and regulate everything put in place kind of rules and clearly in an environment like credit unions, there are some regulations that are non-negotiable, but kind of setting that tone of trust and partnership rather

than kind of engineering and cost minimization, I think is important as well. So there are some basic kind of, you know, strategic decisions around how we manage people that come from a top, that kind of vision, and then how we align people throughout the organization to actually put that into practice.

Lisa Hochgraf 15:16

And so are there some things to that the people team, if you will, can do to almost model the behaviors that they want, or the culture that they want in the organization within their own work together? I'm kind of wondering like, as an example, I've been visiting a medical office fairly regularly lately. And every single person on that staff that I've come into contact with seems calm, capable and ready to interact with me. And it's just, it's impressive to me that it's so permeating that organization, and I wonder what it is about the leadership of that group that makes that possible to demonstrate to the customer? Is there something about the way the CEO, the VP of HR and the chief talent officer work together like between them, the three of them, that might help drive the culture home throughout the organization?

Matthew Bidwell 16:05

That's a great point. I mean, maybe between the three of them, but I think also in their interactions, like you say, with other people. So partly, this is modeling behavior. How do we treat people in this organization? How do we behave? What do we emphasize? A lot of it is also in how they reward other people, and even what they what they pay attention to. So how much attention is really paid to how people are developed throughout the organization? When the CEO is reviewing people at the next level, are they just looking at results? Are they looking at how they manage their people, how they treat their people, the extent to which they're doing a good job in developing them, and so on. So yes, I think the behaviors people model matters, I think also the behaviors that get rewarded. And so really demonstrating that we take talent very seriously in this organization and you're going to get rewarded partly on the results, but partly also on how you manage talent, that sends a very strong message.

Lisa Hochgraf 17:00

That's so interesting. Now, you've already mentioned a couple times that micromanaging is something to stay away from if you're trying to promote engagement. Are there some other things, actions or ways of thinking that you think the people in charge of talent in an organization should to try to avoid if they're trying to boost employee engagement?

Matthew Bidwell 17:19

That is the really big one. I think, also, when I think about how we manage people, generally, I think there's a big kind of tension between what I think of as kind of an engineering mindset, like, if I can craft these processes perfectly, then people won't need to know what they're doing, or why they're doing it, they will just follow the process. And we will get perfect outcomes, right. And so there's a lot to be said for getting your processes right. When you think about kind of high quality and all those sorts of things, a lot of them come from having very clear processes. But sometimes it's easy at the top to kind of see this as a big engineering problem and forget there are people involved. And so part of it is, you know, if we're going to be very process-centric, how do we engage people in actually creating these processes rather than having them as something alien that comes from outside that's imposed on people. They can feel very controlling.

Matthew Bidwell 18:09

Alongside that another thing that you see in a lot of sectors is, on the one hand, people are our most important asset, on the other hand, they're our most important cost. And so there's a trade-off between how much are we emphasizing creating value? How much are we emphasizing building the motivation and engagement of our people? How much are we emphasizing building their skills, kind of creating more value versus how much are we emphasizing cost minimization? So kind of reducing how much cost we spend on that.

Matthew Bidwell 18:37

You see in other sectors, this big gaps between some organizations that say, we'll make the most profit by driving our payroll costs down the furthest, in terms of how we schedule people, in terms of how much we pay them, and so on. And other organizations that say, we're going to pay more, and we're going to expect more of our people in return. I tend to think that latter strategy tends to drive much higher engagement. So some of those kinds of I think big decisions about just how do we think about where the value of our workforce comes from? Is it through kind of doing the most that we can as cheaply as possible? Or is it about engaging them as genuine partners? I think that also really shapes the environment.

Lisa Hochgraf 19:16

This has been wonderful. I want to turn the tables around a little bit and ask you, what would you say that CEOs and chief talent officers and VPs of HR, what can they do to promote their own engagement?

Matthew Bidwell 19:28

Oh, that's another interesting question. I mean, we talk sometimes about this idea of job crafting, which is this idea that in all of our jobs, we have some opportunity to shape it ourselves to figure out how I'm going to carry out my responsibilities, which tasks I'm going to emphasize maybe where I'm going to spend a little less stuff. I was worried a bit with the job crafting, it can be a kind of way to get the managers off the hook, right? So if your people are miserable, they're just not crafting their jobs properly. It's really on them to figure out how to make the work so engaging, clearly isn't because we have huge responsibility for the engagement of the people below us.

Matthew Bidwell 20:03

But yes, for our own engagement, that's where kind of how we think about job crafting comes in. And so, you know, I think, for all of us, particularly those of us have kind of a little more control over our work and kind of more varied work. There are some things every week that we look forward to. And there are some things every week that we really don't look forward to, there are some bits of our work that we just enjoy in the moment. So it's just this is fun, I almost find this kind of work relaxing, because it's really engaging. There are other pieces that may be we find really hard, but we get to the end of the day, and we've completed it, we feel a sense of achievement, I do think it's valuable just to look at your week and kind of understand which is which: which are the pieces which are really energizing me, let's find ways to focus on them, which are the pieces that are bringing me down.

Matthew Bidwell 20:59

Some of them were just going to have to do, but other ways to maybe push some of that off onto other people other ways to lessen the burden there. So I think kind of being a little bit in touch with our own emotions in terms of the work that we're doing, and seeing can we, can we organize our work a little bit so that we can really spend a little more time really focused on the pieces that energize us where we we get a sense of either engagement or achievement, I think that's something it's worth all of us spending time doing.

Lisa Hochgraf 21:25

I love that idea of looking forward at the week and saying, which pieces really get me going and which pieces slow me down and then managing that, in whatever way makes sense and is possible.

Lisa Hochgraf 21:37

This has been a great conversation. And before we sign off, I just want to ask you if there is anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like our listeners to know about engagement?

Matthew Bidwell 21:46

I don't think so. I think we've kind of covered quite you know, he's been a rapid traverse of the terrain, but I think we've kind of covered a reasonable amount.

Matthew Bidwell 21:54

Thank you. It's been really great. I really appreciate you being on the CUES Podcast today.

Matthew Bidwell 21:59

Thank you very much. Thanks for having me on.

Lisa Hochgraf 22:02

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to listen to today's episode of the CUES Podcast. And many thanks to Matthew Bidwell for sharing such great perspective on employee engagement.

Lisa Hochgraf 22:13

As I've already mentioned, Bidwell will be speaking at TalentNEXT, coming up in May in Austin, Texas. You can get all the details about the event at cues.org/talentnext.

Lisa Hochgraf 22:24

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Lisa Hochgraf 22:40

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Lisa Hochgraf 22:50

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Lisa Hochgraf 23:03

Thanks again for listening today.

Lisa Hochgraf 23:05

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Lisa Hochgraf 23:15

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