



big ideas
Catherine Ducharme

Keeping it real

Authenticity is the key to employee loyalty

I recently got an email from a friend working for a company newly ranked on *Maclean's* magazine's "Canada's Top 100 Employers" list: "Who were they comparing us to – federal penitentiaries?"

While funny, this sentiment reflects the all-too-frequent cynicism of employees who don't buy the company story because they live the reality. We've all been sucked into jobs through the fantasy interview, where promises of fame, fortune, a great culture and growth opportunities dissolve into a reality more akin to a *Dilbert* cartoon.

Anyone who has used the London Underground will know the recording that echoes in stations alerting passengers to "mind the gap" as they step onto the train. Companies that don't deliver on their stated or implied promises should consider such a recording as new recruits step through the front door, if only to become transparent.

Employees aren't looking for perfection; they just want authenticity. They want to work for companies they can trust to be who they say they are and do what they say they'll do, companies whose stated values are actually evident in the way they operate. Sound gooley? Numerous studies deliver hard data to support it.

In today's workplace, employees rate meaningful work over compensation. That is not to say they will tolerate unfair wages, but what motivates them and connects them deeply with their employer is to be able to buy into and believe in the company's vision, avail themselves of the opportunity to do what they are good at, contribute meaningfully to the success of the company and grow. And in the current market, if they don't find this, they will leave.

Most companies refer to staff as their most valuable assets. They promise growth opportunities and job satisfaction, but the sad truth is that they either seriously delay delivering it, or simply cannot. Rankings on "top employers" lists are worth nothing if companies manipulate their message just to be ranked, without really delivering.

It's better not to make empty promises. Even if the job ad sounds less attractive, it reflects authenticity and employees are looking for just that.

A brand is a personality and an experience. Most companies

focus their brands on attracting and retaining loyal customers. These days more companies, particularly those in B.C.'s tech sector, where competition for knowledge workers is particularly fierce, are realizing the need to have brands that will also attract and retain talented employees. This means brands must have an external experience and an internal experience, and while there may be differences, they need to be aligned. What most companies fail to realize is that the internal brand powers the external one. After all, it is the employees who deliver the brand experience to the customers. Why would they deliver "on brand" if they are not experiencing that brand themselves?

Take the company that says it values its "human capital," but treats customers like kings and staff like slaves. The contradiction might not be immediately apparent to clients, but employees will notice and will resent the discrepancy. They will not only talk about it to others, but the sentiment is likely to be reflected in the way they treat customers or in their loyalty to their employer.

It is a worthwhile investment for any organization to develop and deliver an internal brand experience to its employees. Ultimately, it is this authenticity that will truly engage them, inspire them, keep them and motivate them to deliver the brand experience to customers.

A truly engaged employee is prepared to put his or her personal reputation on the line by recommending their employer to their friends and networks, whether or not they are paid a referral fee. If they so much as sniff a lack of authenticity, you can count them out for referrals. If you look after your employees, they are far more likely to look after your customers.

So here's the big idea: if you want to retain and attract employees and customers, get real. Employees who can trust the authenticity of their employers, who are informed, engaged and committed, are productive because they are intrinsically motivated to see their company succeed. And fulfilled employees will give of their best and remain loyal to your organization. ■



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