



Ask the Expert

Q: Each time an executive travels to a different country I try to organize a roundtable or breakfast with employees. However, some of the executive team are very resistant to the idea of getting involved.

Do you, firstly, have any tips on how to get executives more involved in employee engagement activities? Secondly, do you have any tips on how to run successful roundtables?

A: Regarding how to get executives more involved in employee engagement activities, the answer is simple: link the rationale for doing so to the company's stock price, financial performance, operational results or anything else that the executive cares about.

Gather as much data as you can – from internal and external sources – to show the benefits of an engaged workforce and present your findings to the executive along with your engagement idea. Possible data sources include Melcrum, The Corporate Leadership Council in the US and any of the big HR consulting firms (Towers Perrin, Watson Wyatt, Hewitt, and so on).

There is an added benefit to doing this: much of the research supports the notion that communication has a huge impact on engagement. For instance, according to a major study done by the Corporate Leadership Council in 2004, the strength of employee communication had the biggest impact on changes in discretionary effort. With a little digging, you should be able to find other, more recent studies that support this claim as well.

Executive breakfasts

Regarding executive breakfasts, I'll share my first-hand experience running these when I worked at pharmaceutical/consumer products company Warner-Lambert (which is now part of Pfizer).

We held monthly breakfast meetings with the head of my division and high-potential employees at a site in which the executive was visiting or at the headquarters site where he was based. I generally attended when the breakfasts were held at headquarters and occasionally at other sites too. Here's the process I followed to run the breakfasts:

- *Coordinate with a local HR leader* to let her know that the executive would be on-site and that he would like to have breakfast with about 10 midlevel high-potential employees. There was an official list of "high-potentials", but it wasn't necessary to be on that list to get an invitation.
- *Work with a local administrative assistant* to reserve a suitable conference room and arrange to have food delivered.
- *Send email invitations* to the potential attendees, once they were identified and the breakfast logistics coordinated.
- *Run the session.* Usually, the executive would begin things with comments about the state of the business and whatever else was on his mind. Then he would ask the attendees what they have been experiencing: what's going well, what's not going well, what should he be aware of, and so forth.

- *Take notes.* I would act as scribe for the session, noting what the executive covered in his remarks and what attendees asked and mentioned. These notes helped me plan and produce subsequent communications.
- *Send thank you emails* to attendees and follow up on any loose ends, such as when the executive couldn't answer a question and said he'd get back to people with a reply.

These breakfast meetings were widely viewed as a success. The executive got to hear firsthand about meaningful issues occurring throughout the business. And employees had the opportunity to discuss with the executive whatever was on their minds, in an informal setting that wouldn't naturally occur otherwise. Employees also knew that getting an invitation meant they were well regarded.