



Editorial

Should We Really Care if Our Employees are Happy or Satisfied?

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It is almost counterintuitive to think that a company should not care about whether its employees are happy. But does all the time and energy that companies spend measuring employee satisfaction and engagement really lead to higher levels of productivity, customer service and employee retention. Companies in the hospitality industry have long stated that people are their most precious resource. Is this done so that employers can be good corporate citizens who improve working conditions for their employees and thus the quality of life for their employees? Or is it done to make a profit. One approach is a very positive and proactive attitude towards HR while the other attitude could be called skeptical or reactive. However if we are honest, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

Most major hotel, restaurant and tourism related companies take frequent employee attitude surveys to measure employee satisfaction. Others delve more deeply by trying to measure the topic of employee engagement. Why do they do this? Controversy has always existed as to whether we can truly measure employee satisfaction or whether our employees are happy. Is it ever possible to have all employees satisfied. Research indicates that people are satisfied because they feel good about themselves and they receive respect and recognition from their co-workers and top management. Research on the topic of employee recruiting discusses the idea that we must recruit and hire the proper people for specific jobs. This result in having employees with the correct personality traits in jobs that fit them best. Yet we often apply a one size fits all policy in regards to hiring employees who work in very different types of jobs.

A recent study indicated that when employees were asked about their happiness at work, their answers did not correlate to the amount of money they were making [1]. The respect and admiration that a worker had in face to face work groups had a stronger effect on their happiness [2]. When workers decide to work in the hospitality and tourism industry they are normally aware of pre-entry expectations [3]. It can be said that there is a psychological contract which equates to the employee's beliefs about the promissory obligations between themselves and the organization [4]. What this means is that the individual has certain expectation about tangible and intangible things being exchanged in the work relationship. This often involves intentions of the employer or attitudes towards employees. The violation of this contract often leads to the employee quitting.

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Misunderstandings about the true contract often occur as early as the recruiting process. But there are other reasons why people don't stay in our industry are often beyond the control of hotel management. For example, one third of all hospitality and tourism graduates leave the industry in the first 5 years because they are able to use their skills in other people related industries. It is true that some of these industries require less hours and pay more but sometimes the initial fit between these people and our industry was not there.

So what can companies do to truly meet the needs of their employees? Expectations have changed over time and both parties now demand more from each other. We can't change the long hours of our industry. We can't change the fact that we have to deal with sometimes unreasonable customers with out of line expectations. Paying all employees more money will not address the issues. It is impossible to keep all employees satisfied but you can take care of certain factors causing dissatisfaction. This goes back to the theories of Herzberg relating to hygiene and maintenance factors [5]. Even trying to do this is costly and often ineffective from a management recruiting standpoint, the issue is to truly identify those individuals who want to make a long term commitment to the industry and have realistic expectations. From the standpoint of hourly workers, the hospitality industry has had tremendous success offering employment to immigrant groups who appreciate the opportunity to work for well known companies and with opportunities to move up. Employees who see their work as meaningful can still be found in all industries [6]. A recent study by Sturman and Way [7] noted that workplace climate was the most important factor in having employees stay in your organization. Workplace climate is composed of an employee's understanding of the practices, procedures and behaviors that are rewarded, supported and expected by the organization. When the workplace climate is toxic no one is happy. So the answer for the hospitality and tourism industry is to provide the best possible work environment. Listen to employee ideas and concerns and follow up on legitimate concerns to make the organization a better place to work. Don't spend countless hours trying to measure things which constantly change every day and in many cases you can't control. Do those things which you know from experience are the right things to do. To quote the founder of Marriott Corporation, "Take care of your employees and they will take care of your customers" [8].

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