

Keeping Retail Employees Engaged With Emotionally Intelligent Leaders

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Although the federal COVID-19 Public Health Declaration officially proclaimed the pandemic over nearly a year ago (on May 11, 2023), many employers, especially those in the retail industry, continue to feel the pandemic's impact. A rising number of former employees have chosen not to return to the retail workplace at all. Indeed, trends show a falling number of workers in retail. Positive employee engagement can be part of reversing the trends.

According to author Daniel Dorfman in a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics article published April 2022,

the retail trade sector is projected to lose almost 4.0 percent of its 2020 employment total over the course of the 2020–30 decade, which is roughly 587,000 jobs. The largest projected declines are expected to occur in food and beverage stores and general merchandise stores, which are expected to account for a projected decline of 257,500 and 233,500 jobs, respectively, or roughly 83.7 percent of all retail jobs lost.

Thus, whether retailers have been fortunate enough to have had employees return to their workplaces or workers new retail join their ranks, they still navigate a new reality of employees no longer feeling tied to any specific job or employer. Indeed, employers have tried many measures to entice workers back to retail, including higher pay and flexible scheduling, still to no avail.

Higher pay offered by the retail establishments has not stemmed the mental and emotional toll associated with difficult and demanding customers, acerbic managers and co-employees, and so on. According to Amala Luncheon in a study published in the 2021 Walden University Dissertations and Doctoral Studies on emotional intelligence:

In our businesses today, what we need from people is engagement.... Engagement comes from employees understanding what they do, enjoying it, getting recognition, being rewarded for it, and tracking their performance.... That is what creates real job fulfillment, *the money moves people to get to the office, but it doesn't motivate people to do better and be more productive.* The only thing that truly motivates people is engagement.

(Emphasis added.)

Positive employee engagement can be directly linked to managers and supervisors being fully aware of their own emotional intelligence (or emotional IQ). The 2023 Oxford Languages defines this as “the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one’s emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically.”

Emotional IQ typically is measured by four elements:

1. Self-management – the ability to control impulsive feelings and behaviors and adapt to

changing circumstances;

2. Self-awareness – the ability to recognize your own emotions and how they affect your thoughts and behavior;
3. Social awareness – the ability to show empathy for others; and
4. Relationship management – the ability to maintain good relationships, communicate clearly, inspire and influence others, work well in a team, and manage conflict.

Managers with high emotional IQ recognize, identify, understand, control their own emotions and are able to better connect with and manage the employees they supervise. As result, they are less inclined to have claims of unlawful behaviors. They take the mental breath to implement the skills that they have been trained on and are taking to heart. That is, they think before they speak, take in the full account of events before they act, and seek guidance where the circumstances dictate. Thus, they generally are less prone to making snap decisions that are open to claims of unlawful harassment or discrimination. The benefits of the mental pause between self-awareness and action goes a long way toward building trusting relationships between management and employees.

Finally, the retail industry sees all types of consumers, from gracious and grateful to demanding and demeaning. Leaders who lead with strong emotional IQs consistently demonstrate and reinforce to their employees they are valued, supported, and respected. Ultimately, such managers are imparting the tools for engagement that money cannot buy.

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