Helping Employees Realize Their Dreams: The Search for Meaning

Key Concept

Do you want a more engaged and productive workforce? You’re not alone—all managers do! To achieve this, managers can help employees realize and reclaim their lost dreams through tailored career development programs. This Idea offers four practical strategies to help you do this.

Idea Summary

How can companies help their employees reclaim lost dreams—in both professional and non-professional contexts? Those companies able to do so will go a long way towards addressing some of the problems currently confronting not only their organizations, but society in general.

A ‘dream’ can be described as a possibility that a person imagines for his/her work or non-work life, which ideally should generate excitement; but for many, their dreams mean nothing more to them than a distant reality. Few people can be said to be ‘living the dream’ today.

Companies that help people pursue their dreams tend to be more successful at retaining their most talented employees; moreover, they also demonstrate a better track record on new product development and innovation.

In Monica Higgins book, Career Imprints: Creating Leaders Across an Industry, Higgins points to companies such as Merck, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Baxter and Google who have historically provided plenty of career and leadership development activities and opportunities to their employees. The success of these companies, says Higgins, is no coincidence.

Location also has a major impact on the general nature of people’s career dreams. A survey of what career success means for white and blue-collar workers in 11 different countries is considered in the original article, attached. The countries were: Austria, China, Costa Rica, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Serbia, South
China, Costa Rica, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Serbia, South Africa, Spain, the UK and the US. The survey showed that the importance of factors ranging from job satisfaction, financial rewards and work/life balance tends to vary from country-to-country.

**Business Application**

Four main strategies can be adopted by companies to help them formulate career development programs that take into account a whole-person perspective. Such programs can also use 'the dream' as a window into individualized meaning. In brief, these strategies are as follows:

1. **Get and keep management on board:** the degree of support and commitment expressed by top management is one of the most important factors contributing to the success of any career development system. Training guides and support should be provided to all managers and executives involved in any program.

2. **Foster personal, not just personnel, development:** employees must also take charge of their own development process, and companies should encourage personal choice and self-initiation. This means tailoring the career development process to the actual needs of the individual, rather than just focusing on organizational needs.

3. **Make your actions speak louder than words:** merely paying lip service to employee dreams is dangerous. This leads to low employee morale and productivity, and high staff turnover. To achieve long-lasting success, take concrete actions to make sure your employees' explored dreams and aspirations come true.

4. **Establish a process of constant evaluation:** the effectiveness of any career development program must be closely monitored and assessed as it is rolled out through feedback from employees and managers. Career development is a long-term process and requires a long-term commitment on the part of companies to monitor progress on a regular, ongoing basis.

In addition, managers need to take note of country characteristics to determine culturally contextualized dreams (where applicable). This is particularly important for companies that seek to lead a global workforce. They must understand the role of national culture—as well as other external socio-cultural factors including age and other demographics—in determining individual career behaviour.

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How Landmarks in Time Help Employees Set Aspirational Goals
References
[Helping Employees Realize Their Dreams. Douglas Hall & Elana Feldman. IESE Insight (Fourth Quarter 2011).]

Further Reading and Relevant Resources
Douglas T. Hall's profile at the Boston University School of Management
Elana R. Feldman's profile at Boston University School of Management
IESE Business School's Executive Education profile on IEDP