



Ways to Work: Episode 2 — EX that matters

LEE BRIONES: A lot of pitfalls of organizations is that they often rely heavily on HR to manage engagement for the entire organization. But now, it's becoming more important really to put managers front and center.

NARRATOR: Welcome to Ways to Work, a WTW podcast series exploring the modern workplace through the lenses of people and risk with a focus on the Philippines and the broader Asian market. We provide access to current thinking on topics that matter most to employers and employees.

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MARGRET SEMANA: Hi, everyone. Welcome to this week's episode. I am Margret Semana, and I'm part of Willis Towers Watson's Employee Experience team. And I will be your host for today. We're almost two years in, in this pandemic and we do hear from our clients how the employee engagement landscape has been very challenging. As HR consultants, we do want to help not only our clients but also our listeners have a better understanding of what employee engagement is and how to make it sustainable.

This episode is actually the first part of our Employee Experience Series. So in the coming weeks, you will be hearing not only from us, but we have also invited our key clients that we believe can share their relatable experiences and the initiatives that they have done to continue providing the best employee experience possible. To talk about sustainable employee engagement, we have with us WTW's employee Insights Practice Leader Lee Briones. Hi, Lee, it's so good to have you.

LEE BRIONES: Hi, Marge. It's great to be here, and it's great to have a casual conversation on this very interesting and very important topic, especially today.

MARGRET SEMANA: Right. So let's start off with something relatable to our listeners. During this pandemic, almost the entire nation, not only in the Philippines, but globally, there was a shift towards a more remote work setup. How has this affected employee engagement since for most companies they literally lost touch with their employees?

LEE BRIONES: That is especially true. If we remember in the first six months of the pandemic, connecting to people was surely an issue since a lot of organizations then didn't have this network facility that we enjoy today. Having that basic connection was tough, or making connections between an employee and their manager was very tough since the efficiencies were not yet still in place that would enable them to have those normal conversations.



We also had the difficulty at that time selecting the right online portal like what we have now in MS Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, that would meet organization's most basic needs, not only in connecting with employees, but also in connecting with external parties. It could be a vendor, a client, a customer, or someone that's part of a regulating body that you need to be able to speak to.

The next question that came out after having realized what would be those most basic requirements that organizations need to be able to operate in the pandemic would be-- how do we make those connections meaningful? Since one key issue that came about was meetings being set up one after another. I'm sure our calendars are more full now than before. Since traveling is no longer an issue, we got to save about, especially for us consultants, we get to save about two hours per meeting since we don't have to travel back and forth to a client site.

It did make us a bit more efficient, I would say, but it did cause a lot of concern, especially in us being able to handle or have those basic conversations which we enjoyed when we were still having that face-to-face interaction prior to the pandemic. A lot are really focused on BAUs as mentioned, and it was a bit tough in that period for an employee and their supervisor to have that authentic one on one conversations.

We need to also ensure that managers get not only daily conversations with employees, but have conversations that would really matter, conversations that would allow managers to tell their employees how they are doing, what changes are going to be implemented, and how it's going to impact them, and most importantly, what support they need to wade through the crisis or difficulties as they are going to experience as changes occur.

To a certain extent, companies understand they need to constantly connect with employees. Those companies that we got to work with cited the importance of having true and constant connection with their employees. It's about also investing in your managers to be able to carry out conversations without the physical cues, body movement that we got to enjoy while we were still working in the office.

MARGRET SEMANA: Yeah, now, I can imagine how challenging it is, like when you talk to someone online, not seeing them, how they react, if they understood what you've said, if your message is coming across. It's quite difficult to see it virtually. So I do like how you pointed out the importance of having that authentic connection with your employees, which for sure is one of the things that drives engagement.

I just want to briefly touch on the great resignation which shaped work in the last year. Others would prefer calling it the great reimagination, the great realization, and I actually read an article that in another country, they use the term the great resentment. Has this been the case for your clients? Can you share some details about a recent talent attraction and retention survey?



LEE BRIONES: We actually just completed a survey late 2021 where we did a follow up study on attrition, since that was a main concern being raised not only by our clients in the Philippines, but also in other locations where we have a consulting practice. The survey was conducted, as mentioned, last year, where we managed to gather information from about 380 companies globally, which represents around 7.4 million employees.

And we found in this research that organizations are significantly more likely to be having difficulties with attraction and retention coming out of the pandemic. And they expect these difficulties to further persist in 2022. There is an increasing demand for labor while also having a limited supply of labor since some-- even at the employees, and they choose to stay at home to take care of their children, or their elderly parents, or even stay home because they don't want to expose themselves and protect them and themselves and their families in terms of their health and overall well-being.

Of course, there's also a distinct source of difficulty based on the type of roles that they perform. We've been hearing that companies are having difficulty getting in finance related associates, IT, especially with the increased demand in technology solutions, marketing and sales that are able to operate in a digital work environment, or those that would have capabilities or competencies that would allow them to do that.

With all of this going on, organizations are taking many actions across an entire range of employee experience, including increasing salary increase budgets, providing more options to employees with regard to workplace flexibility, and making changes to certain programs, particularly health and well-being, to be able to adjust to the new requirements as it arises or as the situation develops, and even going into retirement or investment plans just to complete that reward make up.

Organizations are also looking into further streamlining and integrating their talent management with their total reward solutions. And also, we've seen several clients look into improving market perception, particularly on candidates that they are targeting by either in overhauling or tweaking segments of their employee branding, or what we often refer to as employee value proposition.

So definitely a lot of changes are happening. It's not just about looking at rewards, but looking at other programs that would help improve the chances of organizations keeping employees and for the right reason, and employee seeing value and staying as it could assist with their personal and professional growth.

MARGRET SEMANA: Wow. Those are interesting results. I'd like to know more about that. But I know attraction and retention is such a broad topic and maybe we can have a special episode for that. So let's go back to our main topic. Employee engagement should ideally be one of the top priorities for companies



since our research shows that it has a direct linkage to business metrics. Since it directly impacts business, how can we not only drive engagement, but sustain it as well?

LEE BRIONES: We have had a lot of projects over the past several years. And one reality that we've seen even prior to the pandemic was the importance of supervisors and managers being able to drive engagement for their own teams. Sometimes it takes something as simple as having that one on one day-to-day conversations, which we've highlighted previously, since that serves as a rich source of information for managers to quickly enact changes that would address their teams' immediate concerns.

Of course, surveys still would comprise an important segment of an organization's listening strategy and it helps organizations have a more integrated view of solutions rather than looking at it at an individual basis. But there's always something that supervisors can do on the ground without having to rely on all of these particular areas.

Sometimes some concepts that we introduce in our employee measurement may be a bit too far advanced at the moment for them to grasp, and even for some companies to fully comprehend. But we really need to look at experience with a far more simple lens that would enable us to get more participation, not only in addressing concerns in specific pockets of the organization, but really looking at the organization's requirements holistically as well. And that would allow people to be able to share and work together to be able to arrive at those great interventions.

A lot of pitfalls of organizations is that they often rely heavily on HR to manage engagement for the entire organization. But now, it's becoming more important really to put managers front and center to help drive - not only drive it themselves, but able to work together to achieve higher levels of engagement for the organization, be it centered around sustainable engagement, or whether it's work experience, or whatever concept they choose to adopt to ensure that employees get to work in an environment that not only supports them in delivering their day to day work, but would also make them realize their personal and professional aspirations.

When you have that on hand, a manager that is capable in driving experience of their teams, it could yield wonders not only in motivating employees to constantly do their best, but also be able to relate and do the same for their clients or peers, or even their stakeholders in being able to perform in a way that is aligned to the company's larger mission and vision, or whatever short term or strategic imperative the company would either live by or choose to pursue.

MARGRET SEMANA: Engagement is indeed a shared responsibility. It's not only an HR responsibility, but it also extends to the managers. However, I also hope that employees realize they are also responsible for their own levels of engagement. Because if they do not speak out, then no action will be done. That's why we encourage employees to participate and respond if their companies have initiatives



on this, like for example, an employee engagement survey because that is one of the venues to voice out concerns. And through that, hopefully, honest survey results, the leaders will then be able to take action. So having said all of that, are there quick wins to drive employee engagement?

LEE BRIONES: Yeah. So companies can actually implement quick wins by managers being able to connect daily with their teams, identifying what are those that they actually require, the pain points that they experience. Those are very rich source of information which you could base action plans on. That's why managers really need to take an active part in creating action plans that would both make sense from a business or operations standpoint, but an activity-- or an action that, or an intervention that the employees would truly value, that would assist them not only in them being able to deliver their work, but also being able to fulfill their familial or personal commitments.

I also teach my clients to remind their managers about their role in shaping the work environment that would not only lead to improved team performance and productivity, but also sustain or improve engagement, or provide a positive experience while delivering work. We really believe that when managers participate in that process, that they would be able to create action plans that could lead to quick wins that could address immediate team concerns that are within their power to influence and change.

I have seen clients do something as simple as setting regular team huddles, creating their own team recognition programs, implementing buddy systems, mentoring arrangements, some would even call that brown bag or lunch and learn sessions, or even toolbox sessions, and even doing something as providing them with the basic tools that they need. Sharing best practices with each other-- what I mean by is managers being able to share their experience with one another, identify what worked well for their team, and what they could possibly impart on other managers that they could also implement.

There is no one size fits all when we say quick wins. It always would have to be relevant to the current state that organizations or even teams find themselves in. Now, even within across teams certain functions, it would be different. So it really takes-- it really-- there really is value in getting more people involved in the process to gather more perspectives, and really recognize the diversity of experience that employees feel in all areas of the organization.

I'm actually excited for the next few episodes since we have set up a topic that would be specific to certain goals or aspirations that companies are looking into now. And it would be a treat to our listeners to be able to hear from leading Philippine companies, like Energy Development Corporation and Globe Telecom to name a few. And hopefully, we get to bring more.

But what-- and I hope that we would be able to gather insights, and experience, lessons, and even live samples that our listeners can actually bring home or bring to their teams, whether they are an HR



professional or not. Just to learn from these examples and be able to do the same, which is I think the most important part today, especially with the pandemic. Everyone is learning as things occur, or as things happen, and definitely we have to treat this experience in the pandemic as our catalyst to be able to aspire and be able to create an organization that is future proof, future ready, and future aligned.

MARGRET SEMANA: Exactly. That is definitely something worth looking forward to. Thank you so much, Lee. This was such an insightful conversation. Thank you for your time. And thank you to our listeners. Watch out for the next episode of our Employee Experience Series.

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NARRATOR: Thank you for joining us for this WTW podcast featuring the latest perspectives on the intersection of people, capital, and risk. For more information, visit the Insights section of wtwco.com.