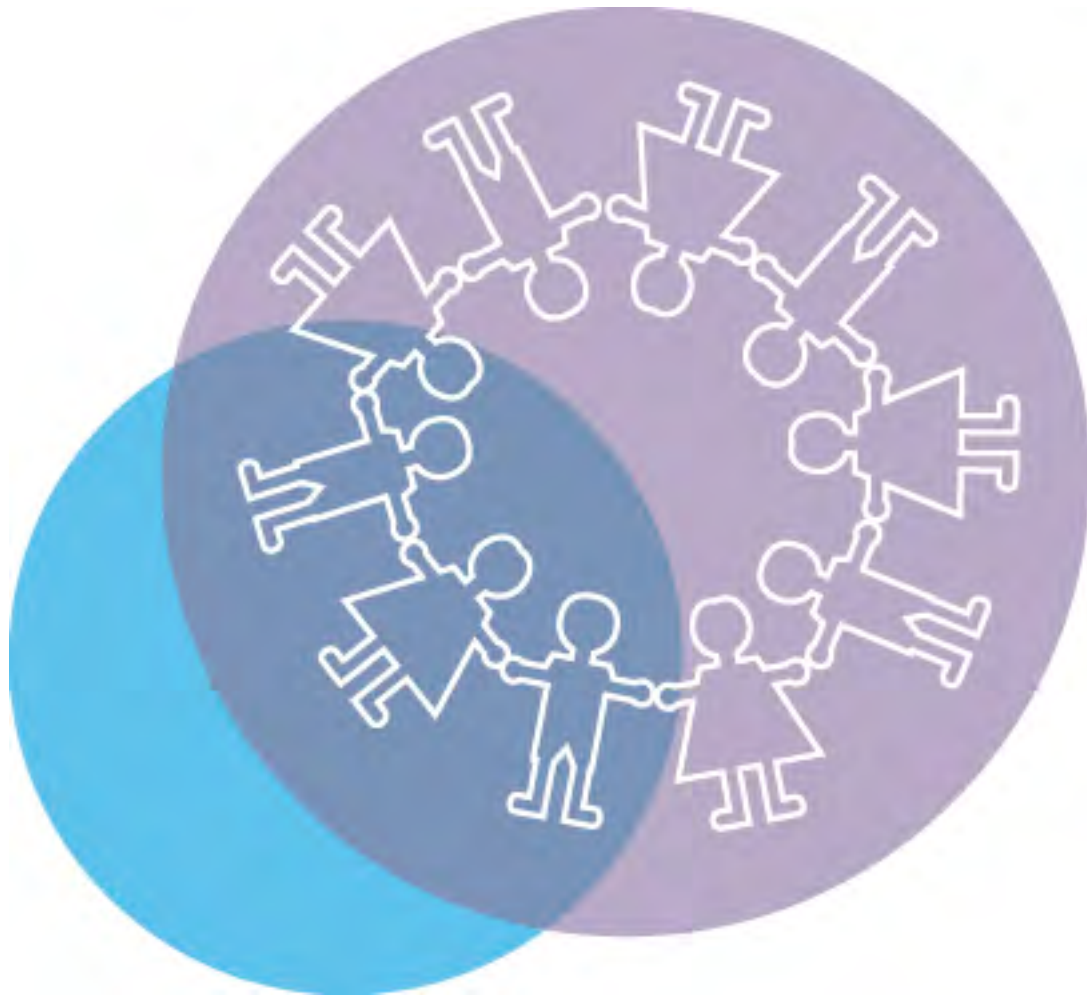


# Brand Engagement

*The role of visuals in stimulating employee  
commitment and engagement*



Shikatani Lacroix is a leading branding and design firm located in Toronto, Canada. The company commissions assignments from all around the world, across CPG, retail and service industries, helping clients achieve success within their operating markets. It does this by enabling its clients' brands to better connect with their consumers through a variety of core services including corporate identity and communication, brand experience design, packaging, naming and product design.

#### About the Author

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Jean-Pierre (JP) Lacroix provides leadership and direction to his firm, which was founded in 1990. He has spent the last 30 years helping organizations better connect their brands with consumers in ways that impact the overall performance of their business. Mr. Lacroix was the first to coin and trademark the statement "The Blink Factor" in 1990; which today is a cornerstone principle to how brands succeed in the marketplace. JP has authored several papers, has been quoted in numerous branding and design articles and, in 2001, co-authored the book "The Business of Graphic Design" which has sold over 10,000 copies. JP can be reached at [jp@shikatani.com](mailto:jp@shikatani.com) and you can follow his blog at: [www.belongingexperiences.com](http://www.belongingexperiences.com) & [www.belongingexperiences.wordpress.com](http://www.belongingexperiences.wordpress.com).



#### Other Articles and Books

The Belonging Experience

Not all Moments of Truth are Equal

Business of Graphic Design

## How do you foster a clear “Brand Vision” that creates the catalyst for employee engagement?

The market downturn has only emphasized the need for focused and engaged employees who clearly understand and live the brand promise. A lot has been written about employment branding but little has been written on the role of visuals to help shape and define employee perspectives and their need for a sense of belonging and self-esteem in an organization. The following questions will be answered in this document:

1. What is the current attitude and mind state of employees?
2. What is the role of visuals to help motivate and engage employees to support the brand promise?
3. What tools and processes work best at ensuring alignment and support of an internal branding initiative?

Ensuring a strong brand position is based on how it **engages internal resources** and employees.

**An environment of fear and skepticism**

Today's economic climate has heightened employee concerns regarding job loss and a cutback on workplace benefits. This loss of security fear has undermined an organization's ability to engage the workforce as employee focus shifts from the need for advancement opportunities or company culture to financial security. Employers are also challenged as productivity increases and cost control dominate their short-term initiatives, taking valuable resources and a determined focus away from employment branding initiatives.

Organizations clearly understand the value of having engaged employees who support the brand promise and align their behaviors to better mirror the organizational values. Numerous research studies have shown that there are direct correlations between staff engagement and the level of customer brand loyalty. A Forrester study conducted in 2008 with 5,000 consumers on the correlation of customer experience and loyalty clearly identifies that consumers with good experiences consider purchasing more and typically do not switch brands.

A similar study by the Verde Group was done recently for the Retail Council of Canada to determine what a “WOW” shopping experience is. The study identified that 75% of shoppers who enjoyed a great experience with a specific retailer definitely intended to return to that retailer the next time they need a similar product or item. When shoppers encounter merely “standard” experiences at a store, their likelihood to return drops by over 65%.

Key factors that influence how consumers rate a great experience were directly related to the level of engagement by the staff, the ability to be sensitive to customers’ time and needs, and the ability of the staff to resolve and compensate for customer issues. Employers remain focused on retaining employees and controlling costs while also addressing employees’ diverse needs for security, control and work-life balance.

On the other side of the equation, employees are feeling more stressed and pressured to perform. A survey conducted by the Center for Work-Life Policy (CWLP) identified that between June 2007 and December 2008, employee loyalty plunged by 65% and the number trusting their employers plunged from 79% to 22%. Employees are also on average, older, leading to a heightened need for financial security and control.

A recent study by MetLife identified that the concern about having comprehensive financial plan for retirement increased from 53% in August to 58% in November 2008, while the younger baby boomers expressed the biggest increase from 56% to 67%.

## Employee disengagement continues to be a critical issue.

Having enough money to make ends meet, having appropriate health insurance for the family, and having job security ranked over 58% of the level of concerns of employees. A recent study from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health identified that more than 40% of workers felt their job was very or extremely stressful.

Based on a recent BusinessWeek article, employee disengagement continues to be a critical issue across a wide variety of organizations as they work through the economic downturn. One out of four employees was disengaged at the end of the first half in 2009 according to a survey of over 61,000 employees by the Corporate Leadership Council, a program of the Corporate Executive Board. One of the main causes of this disengagement is directly linked to the massive change employees have experienced when it comes to their Employment Value Proposition (EVP) - or the value that employees gain by working for a particular organization. 82% of employees indicated that their EVP has trended downwards quite dramatically in the past six months due to reasons such as layoffs, organizational restructurings, and shifts in managers.

These findings lead to the question, "How can organizations ask employees to become engaged and heroes for the brand when they have a high concern for survival and poor EVP perception?" This has become the biggest challenge among organizations - the ability to engage employees to share a common vision, when the vision being created is not clear or attainable.

### The shift from Employee Value Proposition to Engagement Vision Perceptions

Organizations have clearly defined brand value propositions that have been translated into employee value propositions (EVP), a term used to denote the balance of the rewards and benefits that are received by an employee in return for their performance at the workplace. However, there has been a missing link between the EVP and actual employee engagement, and much of this gap is attributed to the inability for employees to easily visualize their future.

Linking an organization's brand position to employee value proposition has been the cornerstone in developing employment branding initiatives that attracted the best recruits, motivated the best hires and ensured the organization was focused on living the brand promise. Although these achievements are critical to an organization's success, what is unclear is how employees assimilate the EVP proposition in a way that impacts their daily work-life behavior.

Visualization is a powerful tool that is used to motivate and focus the energy of high performance people such as athletes and business successes

Over the years, our organization has been involved in numerous employment branding initiatives in support of either a new customer experience model, the rebranding of an organization that included a new position and unique selling proposition, to leveraging the existing organization position to better focus the employees to a given direction. Through countless employee interviews and management discussions, we have come to realize that the most powerful tool to engage employees is their ability to visualize the desired outcome for both their careers and the organization.

In their book “The Carrot Principle”, Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton review the results of a 2006 Recognition ROI study that examined 31 organizations and 26,000 employees on the ability of the organization to recognize excellence. The results confirmed our belief that companies providing strong recognition of excellence earned significantly higher return on equity, return on assets, and operating margin. The study also reaffirms our own research that indicated great organizations motivate their employees by tapping into a person’s aspirational needs around their work. In an organization that drives improved performance, the ability of its employees to self-actualize their success is critical.

Many organizations confuse self-actualization with being the rising star, but often this is not the case. While wealthy or highly celebrated people might reach self-actualization, many psychologists believe that most employees who have reached the highest level of happiness are unknown beyond their circle of family and friends. Organizations develop when people are allowed to reach their particular level in Maslow’s hierarchy. Once people meet their physiological needs and they feel safe, they begin to support the organization’s culture and work towards common needs.

## The “4P” Model of the Toyota Way



History has shown us that the ability of leaders to create real or perceptual images in the mind of their employees or followers has a significant impact on the success of the given initiative. I wonder what would have happened to the equality for African Americans if Martin Luther King would not have given his “I have a Dream” speech, or John F. Kennedy’s visualization of putting a man on the moon. These leaders were able to create a visual picture of what the desired outcome would be if everyone worked together, creating a strong platform for engagement.

Organizations such as Toyota, the world’s leader in automobile manufacturing have been able to leverage visuals as both a means to articulate complex employee engagement models to how they ensure effective compliance as part of one of their key principles of using visual control so that no problem is hidden. The “4P” model of the Toyota Way visually identify the hierarchy of behavioral importance for each of the four goals of the organization, leveraging learning from Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs.

At the bottom of the pyramid Toyota identifies the need for a solid philosophy of long-term thinking. This need supports the right process that produces the right results engagement approach. This is followed up the pyramid with the behavioral need to add value to the organization by developing people and partners which leads to the pinnacle need for the organization, the need to drive organizational learning by continuously solve root problems.

Another key factor that reinforces the importance of creating a strong visual of the desired outcome is how employees mirror their self-esteem with that of the organization’s perception in the market place.

### Employee self-esteem is influenced by PEP

A key to organizational engagement is the degree of alignment of the employee's self-esteem to the perceived external prestige (PEP) of the organization.

Based on work completed by Olivier Herrbach, LIRHE, Université des Sciences Sociales, organizational image has mostly been studied using an external perspective focused on strategy and marketing issues. Given its salience in employees' symbolic environment, however, image may also have internal as well as external consequences. A recent study that explored the impact of perceived external prestige (PEP) on three individual outcomes: job satisfaction, effective organizational commitment and affective wellbeing in the work environment; show that all individual outcomes are related to PEP.

Mr. Herrbach notes in his study that corporate image should be of growing interest not only to marketing and strategy professionals but also for HR purposes. Three major reasons account for this relevance of corporate image to HR, namely that companies are more likely to attract quality applicants if they convey to them a positive image, organizational image could be helpful in retaining employees and finally, organizational image is likely to influence employee attitudes and behavior in the workplace through its salience in an individual's symbolic environment.

Employee  
perceived  
external  
prestige clearly  
links to job  
satisfaction,  
commitment  
and wellbeing  
in the  
workforce.

The study's findings validate the critical link between organizational image and employee outcomes. PEP was clearly linked to job satisfaction, effective organizational commitment and affective wellbeing at work. The findings are further validated by two previous articles that have studied this topic, while extending the findings to both a larger and more diverse population, namely the Riordan study (1997) based on 174 employees from one small US electric utility company, and Carmeli and Freund (2002) research on a sample of 527 management-level employees working in different private-sector organizations. The Herrbach study also tested a differentiated impact of PEP for sales/marketing people versus other managers and found that it was partially supported.

This supports the contention that, although relevant for all management-level employees, image issues seem to be stronger for sales and marketing. The study brings into importance how employee self-image is a reflection of the image of the organization in the marketplace. The greater the level of positive perception of the organization is, the stronger the level of engagement of its employees.

In her book "Foster Success for People: Two Musts for Employee Motivation and Positive Morale Motivation Success", Susan M. Heathfield notes that people who have high self-esteem are more likely to continuously improve the work environment. They are willing to take intelligent risks because they have confidence in their ideas and competence. They work willingly with teams because they are confident about their ability to contribute.

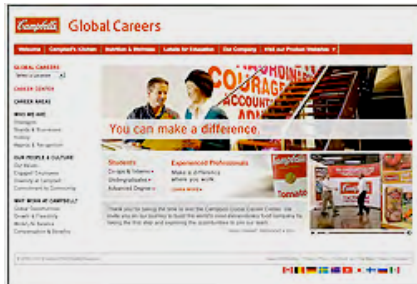
Employee  
**self-esteem** is  
a clear  
indicator of an  
engaged  
workforce.

Nathaniel Branden, author of *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* and *Self-Esteem@Work*, also notes that self-esteem is a self-reinforcing characteristic. When we have confidence in our ability to think and act effectively, we can persevere when faced with difficult challenges. The result: We succeed more often than we fail. We form more nourishing relationships. We expect more of life and of ourselves. Image plays a critical role in fostering this self-esteem and how peers perceive the organization becomes critical.

Finally, a key factor in ensuring engagement amongst employees is the need for understanding. In his book, *"The Fifth Discipline, the Art & Practice of the Learning Organization"*, Peter M. Senge identifies that the only long-term sustainable advantage is an organization's ability to learn faster than its competitors. A key to learning is the ability to translate a lot of information in easy terms for its employees, at all levels of the organization.

In most instances, the failure to communicate effectively is the lack of sensitivity to the level of employee branding knowledge and terms by facets of the organization. Coupled with the inability for most people to remember a wide range of information, most employee branding initiatives that created to stimulate engagement create disengagement due to the complexity of learning.

Stories and pictures are the most effective approach in ensuring a high retention of complex information. History has shown, from the pyramids to how children learn to read, that pictures and stories play a critical role in the retention of learning. However, seldom are these tools used to align employees on the employee values and vision of the organization other than cliché posters and graphics.



We believe that Toyota got it right by creating an easy to understand diagram with four key messages that can be easily retained by its employees. This is further validated by memory recall research where most humans can best remember three messages and the rate of retention drops significantly as more messages are added. HR and marketing professionals assigned to helping organizations live the brand promise need to understand how information is retained by employees, and the ideal approach that will ensure a high level of engagement in the actual learning process. Humor and stories that support empathy, the appreciation of the challenges facing the workers everyday life tend to resonate better and, by its very nature ensure a higher level of message relevance and retention.

It is also important to understand that the ability to create visuals that synthesize the values and vision of the organization supports how we absorb information. Forty percent of all information we retain is driven by our sight and eighty-percent of what our sight retains is color and shapes. Can you translate your EVP program into simple colors and shapes, and will they be simplified in a way that the message is limited to no more than four elements? The challenge we have faced with most of our employee branding initiatives and assignments where brand experience has been changed and employee processes needed to be modified, is the ability to translate the required changes in the simplest, most visual approach.

A lot can be leveraged from the education industry since it has been proven that written exercises or highly image related communication tend to generate the highest level of message recall and information absorption, key factors in ensuring a strong understanding of employee branding initiatives.

What are the tools that leverage better employee engagement?

#### The visual tools for engagement

If image-driven perceptions help bridge the self-esteem of the organization to the needs of the organization, visuals are the quickest route between the two. Images help articulate the final destination while creating emotional connections between the image and the employee's need for self-actualization.

It has been proven in every industry, sector, and category that consumers by nature do not like to read instructions. Have you ever assembled a BBQ or your child's bicycle and ignored the instruction booklet, or if used, focused on the pictorial images versus the words. Humans by nature learn through visual stimuli and these processes can be applied to how to engage employees in support of the desired brand promise.

Over the years we have assisted organizations in developing employee branding and working with other supporting industries that help organizations manage knowledge and behavioral changes. We have identified a range of tools that could be leveraged to gain a higher degree of support and understanding. These tools mirror how employees want to learn and typically represent how the best organizations manage knowledge that lead to consistent execution of the brand promise.

In his book, “The Fifth Discipline”, Peter Senge notes that key to the engagement process is employee enrollment in the organization’s EVP program based on becoming part of something of their choice. He notes that employees are committed when they are not only enrolled in the branding process but feel fully responsible for making the vision happen. It is the feeling by employees that the vision is as much a part of their self-esteem and their needs as they are part of the organization’s competitive requirement. Mr. Senge notes that in most contemporary organizations, relatively few people are enrolled, and even fewer are committed. The majority are in a mindset of being compliant, following the rest of their peers in supporting the vision without being fully engaged.

The challenge for managers is how to ensure employees are not merely compliant with the organization’s vision and mission but fully engaged to embrace both the meaning and the execution. The ultimate desired outcome for organizations is the type of social networking found on such sites as FaceBook, YouTube and LinkedIn, where the participants take an active role and are advocates for the experience, recruiting friends and colleagues in the social network. We have identified a range of visual-oriented tools that organizations can base on best industry practices and our own firm’s experience in determining what works and what does not in gaining a stronger employee commitment.

We have grouped these tools as part of three categories: gaining meaning, aligning actions, and measuring performance. These three categories best define the various phases of engagement that deliver meaningful and measurable change for the organization.

## Gaining Meaning

### Employee Brand Identity

In ensuring a strong understanding of the fundamentals of the EVP program, the leading organizations leverage the use of key thematic visuals that capture the essence of the brand story in a key visual. We have found this practice very helpful in rallying the employees around a common vision and helps link all of the key messaging that supports the EVP program, bringing a consistent message.

We have seen a range of image tools used by organizations and each has a key common trait. Each of the programs that leveraged a strong image linked that given image to the core brand message and desired behavioral outcome. It is also critical that the EVP identity not become a fad based on the movie of the moment, but more importantly, can last the test of time, bringing a consistent frame of reference for the EVP program.

### Employee Branding Attributes

One of the most effective approaches in gaining meaning and understanding as part of the employee brand proposition is its ability to be distilled in three key words that support the brand promise and desired employee engagement. These key attributes tend to be action words that predicate a desired change in behavior or the ability to better leverage a current behavior that is part of the equities of the organization. Typically these words form part of the visual language used to support the EVP program, linking the meaning of each attribute to a desired end state that supports the organization's internal needs.

The development of key EVP attributes need to be carefully chosen and more importantly, their meaning needs to be carefully crafted in a way that everyone in the organization can share in its meaning.

### **Behavioral Model Maps**

Mapping through the use of diagrams are effective visual tools in gaining internal alignment. Some organizations define these as employee value proposition models while other define them as scorecards that align with key metrics. Irrespective of the term used, the purpose of this given tool is to visually represent the desired organizational need state as part of supporting behaviors, all of each are defined by how they align with the overall vision.

Models also tend to provide context to what the organization wants to achieve by linking the activities of each functional area to the common vision of the program, thus ensuring that the silo structures of most corporations are effectively aligned.

Behavioral model maps tend to also support the on-boarding and re-boarding processes and allow the organization to leverage the key elements found on the map to given strategies and tactics required to support the common vision. A map's true value is to provide the organization with the ability to chart their progress and identify their destination well before they take their EVP journey.

### **Video Stories**

We have been trained over the years to learn from stories and visuals, most of which are communicated via our home entertainment systems. We can easily recall a given movie sequence or key message since the information being provided is entertaining and highly emotive through the use of actors, stories and challenges.

We have found that one of the most emotive approaches to gaining understanding of an EVP program is through movies, either testimonials of fellow employees or a well scripted story delivered by actors and other images that crystallize the challenge the organization must overcome, the importance of the individuals in meeting this challenge and the end desired state when the challenges have been overcome. Story telling is such an impactful way to ensuring information retention, we are always amazed at how this process is used to gel the organization. The title of the video story also allows the organization to link the message to other elements of the EVP communication strategy.

### **Social Media**

Only recently have organizations gone beyond their company intranet to deliver key EVP messaging and have evolved to leverage FaceBook, YouTube and Twitter to harness the social behaviors of their employees. A recent conference held by Fortune Magazine identified that organizations were just starting to leverage the full power of Twitter as a vehicle to deliver pertinent company information. FaceBook, often banned by companies to minimize the time employees are browsing the web versus working are realizing that these social media tools can be effective tools in the distribution of information.

The key challenge of leveraging this emerging technology is the ability of the organization to control the information being distributed and many organizations are reviewing both their legal requirements as a public organization and the privacy issues to determine how best to capitalize on these new social tools.

Gartner released a report in May of 2009 that identified the approaches companies and were adopting Twitter for business use. Based on Gartner's research, they have narrowed down the four different ways that companies are using Twitter today, namely:

- Direct: as a marketing or public relations channel, much like an extension to their corporate blogs, posting corporate accomplishments and distributed links
- Indirect: employees tweet instead, enhancing their own personal reputations, and in exchange supporting the company's reputation
- Internal: used internally to share ideas or communicate about what projects they're working on

Other social tools being leveraged are micro-blogging sites designed for businesses that let you do just that. "Yammer" and "Presently" are two of the top options for a Twitter-like platform for the workplace. In our company, we use "Blogsphere" from IBM to create customized blogs for our TeamClient project management system.

### **Online Digital Learning Tools**

We have had the opportunity of working with organizations like Fifth P who specializes in providing organizations with online learning tools that include tests and quizzes to sharpen the level of knowledge and ensure a consistent delivery of the message. For large-scale organizations where the manager's primary tasks are not as an educator but one that manages the resources and equities of the company, teaching may not be their core strength. However, how does an organization with thousands of employees effectively communicate the brand message and meaning while remaining consistent in its delivery?

Online learning tools such as those provided by Fifth P and other leading learning organizations form part of the core competency of their corporate communication department. Online tools provide a great platform to move the burden of consistency from the manager to the technology while allowing managers to effectively monitor and manage the learning process.

Online systems are a great resource for employees to learn more about the employee brand while fostering a learning culture where information can be absorbed at a comfortable rate over a period of time.

### **Aligning Action**

A key to ensure the success of any program is ensuring the organization's actions support the EVP program values and beliefs while also ensuring on-going awareness and commitment.

### **Office Environment**

The office environment is one of the critical behavior enablers for organizations wanting to align an organization's EVP with employees' daily routines. It has become common practice to change to either find new office environments as a result of a merger or a restructuring. However, very seldom does an organization leverage their physical assets to create a canvas to communicate on a daily basis their EVP program. We have had the benefit of working with some of the best organizations to work for, from TD Bank, PepsiCo to Petro-Canada and smaller firms. The common trait for all is the importance they place on leveraging their work environment as a physical manifestation of their EVP program, from staff lunch and meeting rooms to halls and main building entrance.

Some have gone as far as to build office TV networks that keep everyone informed on the progress of the company and a reminder of the role everyone plays in living the brand promise. Others have on-boarding videos in their main lobbies for new suppliers and visitors to the company, outlining the organization's beliefs and values.

### **Performance Visioning Tools**

Another effective tool is the use of employee visioning tools that help each contributor to the team effort to identify their desired personal outcome, both from a career and personal development. Smart organizations have realized that employees who can visualize their future are those who can fully commit to the success of a company's vision.

These tools tend to link the EVP program beliefs and principles to those of the employee's self-image and result in a personalized vision card that they carry in their purses or wallets. Some have even gone as far as to offer this tool as part of the employees computer screen saver, replacing the generic computer supplied home screen with one that reinforces the employees vision.

### **Re-Boarding Programs**

In support of online learning tools, organizations initiate quarterly re-boarding programs that include learning tools and knowledge sessions with either their immediate managers, or in some cases with the leaders of the organization. In many instances, due to geographical distances, these are conducted via videoconference and supported by workbooks that ensure the quarterly activities and performances align with the EVP Program.

## Measuring Performance

As the saying goes, “what gets measured gets done” could not be truer for EVP programs. The ultimate yardstick to how an organization embraces their EVP program is the metrics for how the leadership defines success. The following outlines some of the visual tools that organizations have embraced to ensure a high level of staff engagement.

### Public Performance Charts

Many organizations post their quarterly performance and company objectives on large charts that found throughout the organization. The management has come to realize that such visual tools are great in harnessing the energy of the organization for a common performance goal. However, very few companies we have worked with have identified the EVP performance metrics, other than featuring industry awards and other outside lead performance signals. If employees are to commit to an EVP program, it’s important that the performance metrics are visually communicated in easy to access vehicles.

### Company Pledge

We recently assisted one of North America’s leading office supply companies to initiate a re-engineering of their customer experience as part of a new business approach that increased the value proposition to small home and office business customers. A key to the new experience was a commitment to sustainability for the entire organization. In order to make this commitment a visual manifestation, the leadership of the organization created a large mural where each employee and supplier signed their name in support of the new initiative. The pledge wall became a key element in the company’s offices and a reminder to all of the focused commitment.

### **People Recognition Symbols**

Many organizations feature in their lobby plaques and achievement awards of their employees. These symbols of performance harness a sense of commitment to the organization, but tend to be sales focused, not the ultimate indication that these individuals have lived the brand promise. I would argue that some of the recipients have done nothing to enrich the organization in leadership that would motivate others to follow.

However, I was impressed by one of our clients who publish yearly performance books that are distributed to the entire company. The performance book contains not only hundred of photos and stories of people who lived the brand promise but also provided stories of their commitment. The true value of the book is in the message it provides, that any individual can contribute to the success of the brand promise, irrespective of the tenure and level within the company. This approach supports many employee engagement studies that identify that recognition for a job well done is more important than a raise. You wonder, if this is the case, why so few companies celebrate the success of people who deliver on the brand promise at all levels of the organization, not just sales? It is no wonder that this client has won five years in a row the JD Powers Customer Service Excellence Award and is one of the most preferred companies to work for in North America.

### **Employee Individual Performance Charts**

Employers and employees dread yearly reviews and very few are inspirational or can effectively motivate the employee to grow or align their performance to the EVP program. In most cases, performance reviews are driven strictly by the financial and performance needs of organizations.

However, great organizations that effectively support their EVP program clearly align the performance of the individual to the employee needs for empowerment and growth. The real opportunity is to deliver these via highly visual metrics such as career dashboards that indicate graphically the performance of the individual. Why do we not use the same graphical interface people have been accustomed to when driving to their career, and how difficult would it be to take this same visual language to employment performance? We all know what running on empty means, when we are driving beyond our limits or when the engine needs a tune-up. What would be so difficult to apply this same daily logic to business? Most organizations have spent millions of dollars on company performance dashboards, but where is the employee dashboard in the whole equation? I believe that smart organizations will realize that what helps guide a person to drive to work could be the same visual language to guide their career.

## Conclusion

Most leading organizations have well-established EVP programs that are based on both employee and management insights. However, the opportunity to fully leverage the power of visuals to help the organization's vision come to life is truly underdeveloped by a great percentage of organizations we have worked with or been exposed to.

I would like to leave you with this quote that best exemplifies employee branding.

“Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”

- Melody Beattie, journalist, author, teleplay

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