

# Employee engagement - lessons on loyalty from the non-profit sector

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Last week, Dr. Harvey Schipper spoke with me about managing volunteer workforces in the non-profit world. A Director on and advisor to many non-profit boards, Dr. Schipper was highlighting one of the most significant differences between these particular organizations and corporate, for-profit businesses.

“We run on volunteer power. Private and public sector organizations do not tend to have volunteers staffing ‘mission-critical’ roles,” he said. “We do.”

It’s obvious that a predominantly volunteer-based workforce needs a clear mission and supporting engagement strategy to make every team member feel valued and rewarded. Otherwise, nonprofits may one day find themselves in a situation where they no longer have the people needed to complete the work they’ve set out to do.

Seems logical. But it doesn't only apply to nonprofits. Public and private sector organizations need to work for that same level of engagement, and are in trouble if they believe their employees will stick with them strictly because of salaries.

It all comes down to loyalty. The non-profit organization retains its volunteers because they believe in a cause and are loyal to their coworkers. In study after study, this pattern is also demonstrated in corporations. The single greatest predictor of an employee's engagement and retention is the strength and quality – in other words, the loyalty – of the relationship they have with their direct manager.

Employees need to do the job that they are being paid to do. But they also have options, even in this economy. Entrepreneurship is on the rise. The employment rate is improving. More staff qualify for retirement each and every week and are seeking new, more meaningful opportunities.

Employers would be wise to learn from the non-profit sector and ask themselves, “what would keep our staff in place if they were volunteers?”

If this is a hard question to answer, there is work to be done.