

INTRODUCING THE TWO KEY PATHS TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

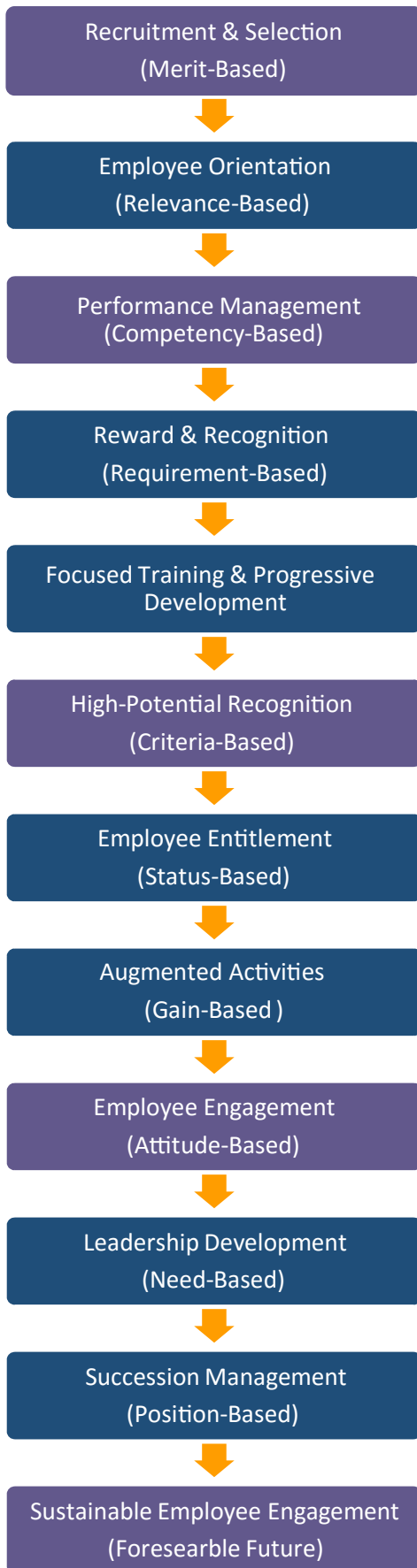
By Murad Salman Miza

The majority of global businesses are going through significant changes in order to stay relevant in a Digital world that thrives on disruptive innovations and is mulishly unwilling to bond with the conventional notions of management. This has profound implications for progressive organizations that are adamantly focused on retaining desired talent. The respective task is made harder by the presence of a diverse and multi-generational workforce with different aspirations and motivations. Generally, in their desperation, majority of corporate entities resort to 'sweetening' the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) by offering a 'one-size-fits-all' package without doing an exhaustive study of the 'ambition' drivers for each major sect of employees.

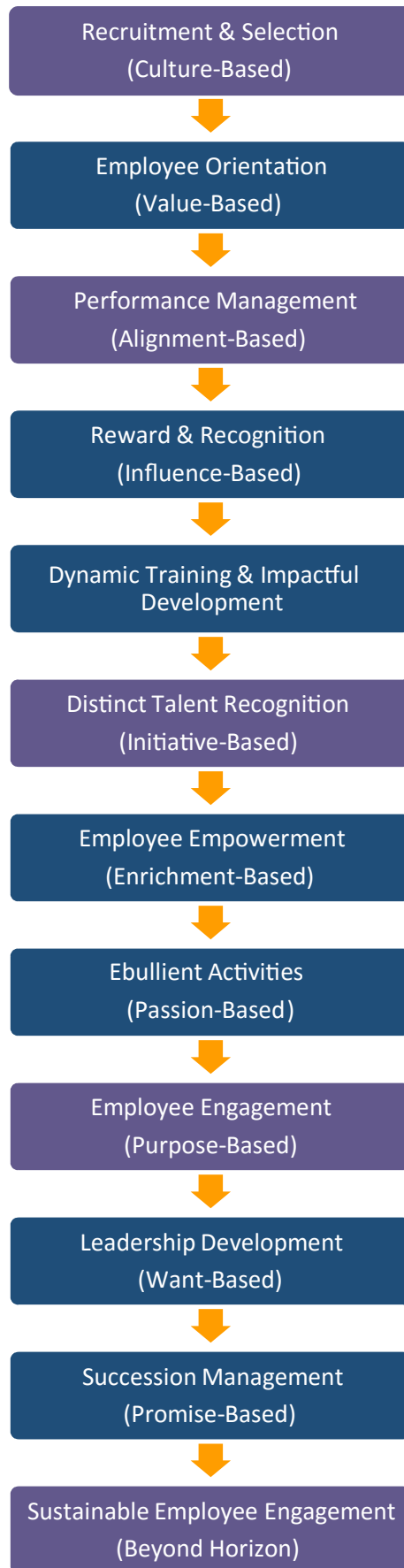
This is exacerbated by the fact that very little 'real' effort is made by the decision-makers to reach out to employees for including their 'voice' in framing the policies/procedures/processes that are more conducive to a healthy working relationship. Interestingly, technology seems to be a key protagonist of such 'isolationism' since it provides a 'relationship buffer' in maintaining the 'mirage' of organizational harmony by ensuring prime focus on efficiency, rather than, delving deeply into the intricacies of sound employee relationships. With the days of 'company loyalty' long gone; the focus is increasingly on a mutually beneficial partnership where both parties, i.e., the Employer and the Employee, align their priorities for a reasonable amount of time under the affirmation of a win-win resolution. This is buoyed by a 'psychological contract' that has also shifted from being blindly based on 'solemn faith' to being watchfully propped up on 'validated trust'. Consequently, Employee Engagement is also gravitating towards a more 'purpose-driven' display of 'altruistic professionalism' from the more recognizable 'affective' manifestation of organizational citizenship behavior.

Interestingly, most progressive organizations tend to start 'requiring' Employee Engagement, rather than, 'expecting' it as a natural offshoot of an enterprising culture based upon robust values. This has the downside of becoming a job specification which brings 'shrewd actors' into play who are enticed by the external motivation of gaining associated Rewards & Recognition. Consequently, the 'glamorization' of Employee Engagement often eclipses the 'voluntary initiatives' of the 'truly engaged' employees who are driven by the primary intrinsic motivation of 'doing good' as an affirmation of their exemplary professionalism. It is the resilience and character of the 'truly engaged' employees that is the best hope for an organization to survive business upheavals in precarious economic conditions. This requires the presence of a conducive work environment that ensures 'Sustainable Employee Engagement' instead of just achieving 'Employee Engagement' since it is not a resolutely fixed destination, rather, an undulating enchanting journey taken to imbue new experiences under a higher calling. There are two main paths to achieving sustainable employee engagement in the digital economy. They are:

Path I (Aspiration-Focused)



Path II (Inspiration-Focused)



PATH I (EFFICIENCY-FOCUSED)

This is dutifully adopted by corporate entities that feel 'burdened' with the expectations of the key stakeholders and want to ensure smooth running of all operations to assure the 'going concern' status of their organization. Performance expectations are clearly defined and KRAs/KPIs are extravagantly used to monitor and improve any lagging parameters from desired standards. Reward and Recognition elements are astutely used to mask any simmering signs of discontent. Policies/procedures/processes/systems are designed for resource optimization and workplace harmony. Informal/formal feedback is taken periodically to proactively deal with any aspects that may disrupt the 'disciplined' stride towards achieving targeted goals. Employees are considered valuable assets; however, their usefulness is contingent upon the rate of associated depreciation, especially, in view of technological advances. Consequently, High-Potentials are assiduously sorted out of the talent pool and given prime attention with the expectation that they will also be the role models for employee engagement initiatives. Let's take a brief look at each of the constituent steps to gain a better appreciation for going down the respective path.

Recruitment & Selection (Merit-Based)

This refers to the normative practice of hiring desired talent according to clearly defined criteria that are designed to preclude any form of exclusion/discrimination and meet applicable legal regulations and corporate mandates. Primarily led by the HR/Talent Management function with necessary inputs/facilitation from all the other key stakeholders.

Employee Orientation (Relevance-Based)

This refers to all the activities that are undertaken to ensure that the inducted employees are fully cognizant of key policies/procedures/processes applicable to them. It also sets the foundation for the relevant functional heads to guide their assigned staff in becoming valuable members of the team with clear understanding of the job expectations.

Performance Management (Competency-Based)

This type of performance management is rooted in identifying, monitoring, improving and sustaining the

desired competencies within the workforce. It ensures that the organization is never starved of the necessary behaviors, skills and knowledge needed to compete in an unforgiving market.

Reward & Recognition (Requirement-Based)

This type of Reward & Recognition is derived from the fulfillment of certain requirements that are laid out in advance to all the key stakeholders. This can range from a conventional salary package to the integrated application of 'total rewards' that runs concurrently with the employee lifecycle. It can also be astutely used as 'golden handcuffs' to retain desired talent.

Focused Training & Progressive Development

This refers to readying and grooming of the budding talent through a targeted regimen of skills and knowledge that are deemed necessary as a result of shortcomings realized after performance appraisals or in management reviews due to any changes in the organizational functionality. The associated developmental process is incremented in accordance with the level of skill achieved.

High-Potential Recognition (Criteria-Based)

This refers to identifying the talent who have excelled in their current roles in accordance with explicitly defined parameters and are deemed suitable for leadership positions in future. They are considered the 'prized assets' and garner prime attention of the senior management. It remains a matter of debate whether such status should be kept confidential or conveyed openly.

Employee Entitlement (Status-Based)

This refers to the psychological mindset of High-Potentials as they are made aware formally or pick up hints from their supervisor/functional head of their 'special status' within the workforce. On one hand, it can engender positive feelings of accomplishment, gratitude, motivation, etc., while on the other, increase narcissism, class warfare with peers, privilege claims, etc.

Augmented Activities (Gain-Based)

This refers to the type of extrinsic motivation tools that are deployed by the senior management to

tighten the 'golden handcuffs' on High-Potentials in order to ensure retention while negating any attempts by opportunistic competitors to wrestle them away. These can include; higher bonuses, surprise holiday privileges, free memberships, socialization with senior leaders, etc.

Employee Engagement (Attitude-Based)

This type of employee engagement is driven by intrinsic motivation and hard to paint as an organizational norm. Generally, it is a reflection of an individual's inherent attributes and, quite possibly, a result of his/her own success in overcoming serious challenges and achieving significant success, e.g., becoming a High-Potential, that incentivizes them to 'pay it forward'.

Leadership Development (Need-Based)

This type of leadership development is initiated in accordance to the apparent demand for capable leaders to take the mantle from those exiting the organization. It is reactive in nature since the number of leaders leaving is largely known and within predictable limits. Necessary arrangements are made to ensure a smooth transition with minimal disturbance to operations.

Succession Management (Position-Based)

This type of succession management is done by focusing on critical leadership positions within the organizational hierarchy. Care is taken to ensure that there are no ambiguities in qualifications that need to be met to ensure a timely and suitable successor for the departing leaders. Vacancies are sometimes split into two to avoid talent loss and facilitate closer focus.

Sustainable Employee Engagement (Foreseeable Future)

This refers to ensuring sustainable employee engagement within the predictable business cycle by keeping the High-Potentials motivated through timely and relevant leadership development and succession management initiatives. It involves keeping a close watch over their wellbeing and being reasonably accommodative to any fluctuation in professional expectations.

PATH II (EFFECTIVENESS-FOCUSED)

This is gladly embraced by corporate entities that are 'invigorated' with the expectations of the key stakeholders and strive to excel innovatively in producing the 'delight factors' as a distinguishing feature of their organization's effectiveness in being a formidable competitor. A cohesive culture that strengthens a diverse multi-generational bond is the gel that glues all individual, team, functional and organizational aspirations for achieving congruent goals. Priority is given to organizational alignment in gauging performance with KRAs/KPIs being facilitative, but not, drowning the actual definition of success which focuses on building a closely knit professional community that is universally geared towards achieving desired objectives through responsible corporate governance. This balances the conventional coveting of Rewards and Recognition with the enterprising munificence of inter-human connectivity based upon shared values. Consequently, the 'for-profit' architecture of a progressive organization takes on a soulful garb to buffer against any unforeseen disruptions. Let's take a brief look at each of the constituent steps to gain a better appreciation for going down the respective path.

Recruitment & Selection (Culture-Based)

This refers to the unconventional practice of giving top priority to hiring desired talent for being a good 'cultural fit' with the organization, rather than, prowess in a particular function. Such an approach is contingent upon the organization's ability to provide high quality of necessary training and development. It is primarily led by the HR/Talent Management function with necessary inputs/facilitation from all the other key stakeholders.

Employee Orientation (Value-Based)

This refers to exposing the inducted employees to all the core aspects that are not only relevant to them, but also, deemed to be of value for future career possibilities, cultural assimilation and professional interactions within the organization, e.g., insightful learning about aligned functional areas, meeting distinguished previous employees, socializing with influential power brokers within the organization, etc. It requires keen participation from all the key stakeholders.

Performance Management (Alignment-Based)

This type of performance management is focused on the congruence between the employee, the assigned role(s) and the work environment. It delves into the psychological makeup of the respective individual while polishing the desired competencies. It is concerned with the

'underlying' personality in addition to the 'observable' person. Consequently, this requires close collaboration of the relevant supervisor(s) with the HR/Talent Management function and an in-house/retained psychologist.

Reward & Recognition (Influence-Based)

This type of Reward & Recognition is focused on the level of positive influence that an employee exercises on all the determinants relating to his/her career progression, e.g., peer relationships, supervisor interactions, customer interfaces, networking prowess, etc. It goes beyond the visible confines of the KPIs and can be ascertained by using suitable analytical tools, e.g., 360 feedback, critical incident reports, activity logs, etc.

Dynamic Training & Impactful Development

This refers to modeling the training & development according to the individual needs and moving beyond the 'mass model' application of a yearly schedule. It also liberates the training & development function to explore viable options that are outside the classroom, galvanize personal ownership, easily accessible to the trainee and/or more informal in nature, e.g., eLearning, virtual reality, mentor-guided projects, free-time for innovative experimentation, etc.

Distinct Talent Recognition (Initiative-Based)

This refers to appreciating the distinguishing value that each employee enterprisingly demonstrates and creating an overall unrestricted 'Knowledge, Skill, Behavior & Competency Map' for the whole organization. It requires astute discernment from the supervisor(s) and is geared towards alleviating the simmering resentments that may arise among peers who see 'identified' High-Potentials as a 'privileged class' and resort to 'differential' politics for undermining their status.

Employee Empowerment (Enrichment-Based)

This refers to licensing the employees in taking more real-time decisions that are in congruence with the organizational values. It elevates employees from being 'loyal abiders' to 'model citizens' in the execution of their job responsibilities and creates a rich hybrid of confidence and humility while learning from successes and failures. Such 'ownership' also increases the pool of potential successors to key leadership

positions and strengthens the employer brand.

Ebullient Activities (Passion-Based)

This refers to finding the drivers for intrinsic motivation that can provide the 'jovial anchor' for employees to align their interests with the organization and dismiss any lurking thoughts of attrition. It requires lucid communication and insightful understanding of what galvanizes employees into productive actions, e.g., office-time allocation for personal projects, participating in social entrepreneurship, adventure retreats with senior management, etc.

Employee Engagement (Purpose-Based)

This type of employee engagement is a hybrid of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and unites the employees under a core set of organizational values. It is both expected and nurtured as a key trait of being a team member. It is characterized by an unflinching focus on providing superior service with a healthy dose of 'delight' factors. Consequently, it is quite common to see grateful customers adding a powerful voice, especially, through social media, to marketing initiatives.

Leadership Development (Want-Based)

This type of leadership development focuses on preparing current/future leaders with the qualities that go beyond the requirements of the foreseeable future and have a high probability of being in demand in the long term with respect to the changing business landscape, e.g., ability to leverage big data to make critical business decisions, ability to integrate different mediums of technology to stay ahead of disruptive innovations, ability to interface with artificial intelligence as part of the diverse workforce, etc.

Succession Management (Promise-Based)

This type of succession management goes beyond the present hierarchical setup within the organization and focuses on anticipating what kind of organization needs to exist beyond the foreseeable future. Such a measure ensures that the potential successors are prepared to take on not only the conventional leadership positions, but also, embrace roles that are either nonexistent or in their infancy at the present moment with high probability of becoming the norm in the long term, e.g., Chief Innovation Officer, Chief Futurist, Chief Data Officer, Chief Momentum Officer, Chief Integration Officer, Chief Interface Officer, Chief Virtual Reality Officer, Chief Human & Artificial Intelligence Workforce Officer, Chief Internet of Things (IoT) Officer, etc.

Sustainable Employee Engagement (Beyond Horizon)

This refers to ensuring sustainable employee engagement beyond the foreseeable future by institutionalizing insightful leadership development and succession management practices that focus on retaining the commitment of desired talent by soliciting their unquenchable zeal and unflinching imagination in achieving seamless and ceaseless innovation. Such an undertaking requires that the humanistic elements are irrevocably combined with the judicious use of technology to ensure 'peaceful' coexistence in order to meet unforeseen challenges without trepidation/misgivings regarding the respective alliance.

Both of the aforementioned paths lead to sustainable employee engagement, however, the second path is generally preferable as the more enduring approach for progressive organizations since it provides a stronger impetus for maintaining their competitive edge through a more refined and durable way of leveraging the synergies between luminous foresight, astute decisiveness, coalescing culture, invigorating work environment, unambiguous empowerment, seamless compliance, timely execution, impartial self-reflection and the undeterred resilience to ensure effective remedial measures.