



Every Employee Counts: Fostering Employee Engagement on a Shoestring Budget

By Dr. Jaffus Hardrick and Trudy Fernandez

Employee engagement is a critical element of organizational success. As defined by leadership at Florida International University (FIU), employee engagement is fostered through passion, connection and enthusiasm. Over the past four years, the division of human resources at FIU has led a university-wide transformation that has empowered employees to understand their value and contributions to the greater goals of FIU as engaged members of the community. FIU's transformation was accomplished not by spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, but simply by doing the little things that matter the most. Embracing the power of collaboration, recognition, respect and professional development, the university's transformation is rooted in the belief that every employee counts.

The FIU Story and Perspective on Employee Engagement

FIU opened in 1972 with a collegiate record-breaking enrollment of 5,667 students. Today, FIU has evolved into

one of the nation's 25 largest research universities, with a student body exceeding 47,000 and a workforce of 8,000 faculty and staff. From 1986 to 2009, under the leadership of FIU's fourth president, Modesto A. "Mitch" Maidique, the university experienced unprecedented growth. During the 23 years of Maidique's leadership, the student body grew from 16,000 to more than 34,000. FIU implemented nearly 200 degree programs and built 19 colleges and schools.

Beginning in the 2007-08 fiscal year, the university began to feel the impact of a crumbling economy, which resulted in serious budget constraints. As a state-supported university, FIU was severely impacted by Florida's enormous budget shortfalls resulting from the deteriorating housing market. Following the inauguration of Dr. Mark B. Rosenberg as FIU's fifth president in August 2009, FIU began a trajectory to transition the university out of the turbulent waters. Although the university continues to face economic challenges, FIU

remains a solvent and resilient institution. At the core of this resiliency is the strategic priority placed on employee engagement.

Creating a Compelling Case for Engagement

FIU defines employee engagement as “engaging the hearts and minds of employees.” Employees must know how much they are valued as a critical factor in the continued success of the university. In support of this philosophy, HR leadership developed and implemented a comprehensive evaluation of engagement challenges and opportunities.

The evaluation revealed that supervisors were often the greatest impediment to increasing morale. Consequently, HR began a process of working with leaders across the university to increase awareness of the critical nature of their roles in helping to create a culture of engagement.

Seeking to better understand the factors impeding engagement, HR implemented the following:

Data Collection and Analysis

HR collected and analyzed data from various internal surveys and exit interviews to identify critical feedback related to work environments. The data revealed that immediate focus should be given to improving institutional communications, strengthening shared governance, enhancing teaching environments, improving relations, changing the perceptions of administration, hiring the right talent, developing skills of supervisors and managers, enhancing professional development opportunities and improving compensation.

University Forums and Individual Conversations

HR hosted focus groups and held individual conversations with employees. These events provided critical insights about employee challenges.

Identify Best Practices and Design Plan

HR researched engagement models and determined that the Hay Model (Figure 1) best aligned with the university’s strategic goals and vision.

Present Plan to Administration

HR shared with FIU administration feedback from

the data collected and the plan to create a culture of engagement. One of the prevailing and recurring themes was that supervisors and managers did not have sufficient skills to be effective leaders. HR determined that leadership development had to be a strategic priority.

Creating a Culture of Engagement

Based on the data collected, HR led the charge to galvanize the university community to create an environment where people are engaged, supported and inspired to build a culture of engagement and service excellence. With limited resources, the

following initiatives were implemented. While many of these efforts do not necessarily represent ground-breaking innovation, they were nonetheless critical to our success. The following six themes encapsulate the efforts to improve employee engagement.

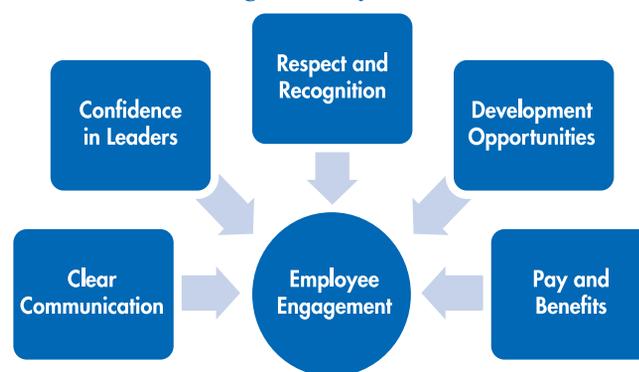
Focus on Service Excellence

As part of the efforts to strengthen infrastructure, the division took immediate steps to improve customer service across the university. HR developed a Service Excellence Task Force to assist with the design of a customer service program. Professional development seminars for employees and managers emphasized the importance of consistently providing quality customer service to both internal and external constituents, especially students.

Service expectations were developed, and every member of the institution was expected to model these standards. Furthermore, HR implemented mechanisms (e.g. website) where students, faculty, staff and external constituents could provide feedback regarding services they received while on campus or doing business by telephone or via other media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or e-mail).

Currently, each department head is expected to ensure that quality service is consistently provided. Through the Presidential Salute program, employees are recognized university-wide for providing outstanding customer service. Service excellence is also one of the core competencies that became part of the university-wide annual performance evaluation.

Figure 1. Hay Model



Development of Leaders and Managers

As a result of FIU's tremendous growth, many individuals were elevated to managerial roles without having had an opportunity to develop skills for successful leadership. Thus, FIU's Leadership Development Institute (LDI) was created to provide ongoing professional training for leaders at all levels. Since the LDI was established in 2011, significant improvements in leadership have been observed

across the university. Additionally, HR implemented core competencies for managers and administrators to govern leadership. These competencies are also part of the standards by which managers are evaluated.

Professional Development Opportunities for Staff

Professional developmental opportunities are regularly offered at FIU. In fact, each staff member is required to complete 20 hours of professional development as part of his or her annual evaluation. So we were surprised to discover that most staff members were not attending professional development programs. Why? Because their supervisors prohibited them from doing so. Ultimately, supervisors had to be reminded of their responsibility to help their staff sharpen their skills and meet their annual professional development goals.

As a result of survey responses, additional professional development topics were incorporated in the hope of attracting a larger percentage of staff members and supervisors. HR implemented additional educational enrichment programs, including STEPP (Striving to Enhance Personal Performance) webinars and workshops. The STEPP program now attracts 300-500 participants who receive credit toward their 20-hour professional development requirement.

Enhanced Communication and Shared Governance

Despite the amount of communication that is disseminated daily and weekly by the university, some employees felt communication was still inadequate. In addition to written communications and a weekly electronic HR News & Notes, HR continues to implement workshops and forums to enhance efforts to better reach HR liaisons and the university community at large. In order to increase shared governance, HR made additional efforts to obtain feedback from students, faculty and staff regarding important decisions impacting the university.



Recognition and Reward Programs

HR has begun to place more emphasis on helping leaders understand the importance of their roles in motivating and inspiring employees to excel. In addition to various seminars, the FIU Service and Recognition Awards Ceremony recognizes faculty and staff for their successes. The ceremony attracts more than 500 colleagues, who are recognized for their years of

service and/or contributions to the institution. The Student Employee of the Year Awards Ceremony was launched in 2009 with overwhelming support from students, faculty, staff and administrators. The week-long activities conclude with an awards ceremony to honor the contributions of student employees. The Presidential Salute is another method by which the FIU president publicly recognizes faculty and staff for outstanding service.

Engagement and Appreciation Efforts to Unify the Community

In order to strengthen relations and bring faculty and staff together, HR began to host a variety of social events that allowed people to focus on commonalities and celebrate successes. Many of these events were instrumental in galvanizing employees in ways that fostered improved relations. The following are just a few of

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YouTube videos feature some of Florida International University's events and celebrations designed to recognize employee contributions and foster a sense of community on campus:

Faculty/Staff Talent Show
<http://bit.ly/GRGxV6>

Holiday Celebration 2009
<http://bit.ly/GMt0lo>

Service and Recognition Awards 2010
<http://bit.ly/GMt3hd>

Employee Appreciation Event 2011
<http://bit.ly/GJnNvR>

Faculty and Staff Spring Picnic 2010
<http://bit.ly/GJOZvz>

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the events hosted by HR on a limited budget:

President's Holiday Celebration – Although this event had been held for several years, it was not until 2009 that it garnered significant interest, a direct result of HR's efforts to increase morale and engage employees in giving back to the community through the annual Holiday Toy Drive.

Faculty and Staff Picnic – Prior to 2009, this event was sporadically attended by approximately 200 guests. After HR partnered with the staff senate, participation increased to nearly 1,100 faculty, staff, retirees and family members.

Diversity Week: "FIU: Where Worlds Unite" – Launched in 2011, this week-long initiative was designed to celebrate the diversity and myriad cultures that enrich the university community. Faculty, staff, students and our external communities are engaged in public forums, discussions and activities that heighten awareness of diversity.

FIU's Got Talent – Implemented in 2009, this exciting event showcases the talents of faculty and staff as they wow an audience of over 300 FIU employees. One of the highlights is the performance by the president and vice presidents.

Panther Pride Fridays – This program allows faculty and staff to showcase their FIU pride by wearing school colors and apparel while enjoying a casual dress day.

Homecoming Decoration Competition – Interest in the departmental competition exploded after the first year in 2009. Winners are recognized at halftime during the football game and featured in university-wide communications.

Homecoming Retiree Luncheon – This event, held during homecoming week, serves to reconnect FIU retirees to the university community and to recognize them for their contributions to the institution.

Tender Loving Care Brigade – The FIU Tender Loving Care Brigade is comprised of faculty and staff members who serve as a support system to members of the university community in times of need.

Wellness Programs – Various wellness programs have been implemented and promoted in partnership with various campus units to foster faculty and staff's focus on health. This also contributes to work-life balance,

as programs are conveniently offered on campus to accommodate busy schedules.

FIU Commencement – Staff are invited to participate in commencement ceremonies by assisting with event logistics and hospitality. This is a simple way to connect with students in a celebratory occasion that helps staff visualize the tangible impact of their day-to-day roles at the university.

American Heart Association Heart Walk, Relay for Life, Mercedes Benz Run – These events provide faculty, staff and students a venue in which they can join forces to help support various South Florida communities.

Departmental Free Throw Competition – Departments across the university compete in a free-throw competition during halftime at women's basketball games.

FIU Miami Heat Takeover – Nearly 2,000 faculty, staff and students attend a Miami Heat game with their families and friends at a discounted rate with special perks in honor of FIU.

FIU Family and Friends Night at Miami Marlins Baseball Games – Each year HR secures the support of sponsors who underwrite the expense for hundreds of faculty, staff, students and families to attend Miami Marlins baseball games.

Lessons Learned

Although much has been accomplished, much still remains to be done in order to transform the FIU employee culture into one that is fully engaged. This continued evolution will be guided by the lessons learned by HR over the past four years of the engagement journey.

Lesson 1 – Everyone has a role to play in creating a culture of engagement and appreciation. Therefore, it is important for everyone to minimize organizational negativity and promote collaboration to achieve goals.

Lesson 2 – Sometimes it's the little things that matter most. Most employees realize the significance of economic challenges; however, they want to know that their organizations genuinely appreciate their contributions. Management is critical to cultivating an environment of respect, appreciation, inclusion and trust. A simple act of recognition or "thank you" goes a long way, and rewards for employees who are truly doing outstanding work are imperative for the retention of top talent.

Lesson 3 – Employee engagement happens only when organizations remove barriers impeding work and empower employees to excel. Organizations should emphasize the notion that the supervisor/employee relationship is built on trust, respect, flexibility and mutual accountability.

Lesson 4 – Institutions must invest resources to provide professional development opportunities for employees, especially leaders.

Lesson 5 – Institutions must create opportunities to bring members of the organization together to celebrate large and small successes. They must show employees how their work is aligned with the greater goals of the institution.

Looking Ahead

FIU is an exciting place to work. The environment is energetic and filled with contagious enthusiasm. Regardless of where people go on campus or to whom they speak, they find that FIU staff members are full of pride and enjoy being part of this vibrant university community.

FIU has set ambitious goals for the next 10 years as the university continues to experience tremendous growth. By 2020, the university will increase enrollment to 62,000 students and fill hundreds of new faculty and staff positions. As this dynamic growth continues, building a sense of pride, appreciation and engagement can, as detailed above, be done with limited resources.

Fueled by the enthusiastic commitment of staff to realize FIU's 21st century vision, the division of human resources will continue to explore means of fostering employee engagement and will ensure that collaboration, recognition, empowerment, growth and community are at the heart of its plan to ensure that every employee counts. 

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