

EXECUTIVE EDGE

“A” Player Human Capital Leadership by
HUNT EXECUTIVE SEARCH

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For twenty-seven years, the Executive Edge has been a value added service to support our employers and candidates in their Personal & Professional Development.



How Great Leaders Ignite Passion and Performance

by Joe Hunt

Look at today's top-performing companies, and you'll inevitably find a high degree of employee engagement.

In the work I do with organizations, I see many workers who are motivated to give their best and often go beyond what's required. That's a prevalent attribute of an "A" player.

While these "A" players exist, a significant issue for countless organizations is that only 20% of employees say they're excited about work. Most employees show up to earn a paycheck, and are more motivated by personal gain than the success of their team.

With management struggling to realize performance goals, the impetus for positive change lies in leaderships' ability to ignite passion.

Passion Principles

While most leaders are highly experienced in financial planning, capital budgeting, and organizational structure and strategies, most receive no formal training in building, leveraging or measuring employee passion.

Engagement surveys are a reasonable way to gauge passion levels, but they cannot capture what it looks like or how to increase it. When I ask, most executives say, "they know it when they see it," but have no firm ideas about how to improve passion among their people.



Simon Sinek explains how to ignite passion during his TED Talk:
How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action.

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We see successful startups filled with hordes of passionate people, yet we view them as anomalies—unique because of their youthful culture or trendy products. We seldom imagine older, more traditional companies as hotbeds of passion and energy.

Stagnant leadership thinking plagues executives who fail to see purpose beyond making profits.



Passion Starts with Purpose

If you haven't clearly articulated the “why” of your business, people will struggle to be engaged in the “what” their job requires.

In his brilliant TED Talk and book, Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action, Simon Sinek emphasizes there has to be a reason—a purpose—for today's workers to commit and give their best efforts to an organization:

“If you hire people just because they can do a job, they'll work for your money. If you hire people who believe what you believe, they'll work for you with blood and sweat and tears.”

Employees who don't know how their job contributes to the organization's purpose—and who cannot clearly articulate this purpose—are unable to give their wholehearted participation.

Igniting passion starts with defining your personal and company purpose: your beliefs, values, passions, principles and connection to the company's mission. Purpose isn't what a group does, but why it performs. Leaders must activate people's emotions and desires.

Hire for Passion

Smart leaders infuse passion into their workplaces by hiring for it right from the start. How do you find people who believe in the same values you and your company represent?

You probably won't unearth them using boring, conventional interview questions. You need to do more than determine someone's skills, education and experience. You must ascertain whether

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candidates are a cultural fit.

It's difficult to determine if a candidate is excited because he/she desperately wants a job at your company versus any job period. The best people to gauge true passion, interest, and fit already work for you, so let them participate in candidate interviews.

Future peers are more likely to learn valuable information about potential new hires in situations where the candidate's guard is down. Evaluate how candidates interact with prospective team members.

How important is collaboration to them? Assess for curiosity in others, big-picture vs. little-picture vision, outside interests, and values.

Recognize and Reinforce Passion

In the context of work, passion refers to strong emotions that drive energy and engagement. To foster passion, leaders must set the stage by openly sharing their own desires and emotional interests. When leaders are unafraid to show their own excitement, others will follow suit. Great leaders recognize and reward people whose passion drives them beyond basic job requirements.

When employees openly express passion for their work, you must recognize and honor it; otherwise, you risk losing it. In a truly engaged workplace, everyone relies on peers for praise and acknowledgment. A leader must encourage this. When an employee goes above and beyond expectations, make sure others hear about it. A company intranet or bulletin board is a great way to spread and share kudos.

Company Culture, Events and Team Projects

You can reinforce your company's culture and brand in many ways, but the most important may be trumpeting grass-roots ideas. When people offer their ideas, make sure they're heard and responded to within a reasonable time frame. Emails should never be ignored or delayed. If you want people to be creative and innovative, you must listen to their contributions and give them freedom to take action.

Reinforce company values and purpose, and let the team organize themselves to explore projects. Provide a platform to celebrate events and achievements. Let the team plan celebrations to acknowledge hard work, success and initiative.



If your company sponsors charities or donates to a cause, let employees choose which ones to support and how they wish to participate. Even when there's executive involvement in setting budgets, let associates run the program.

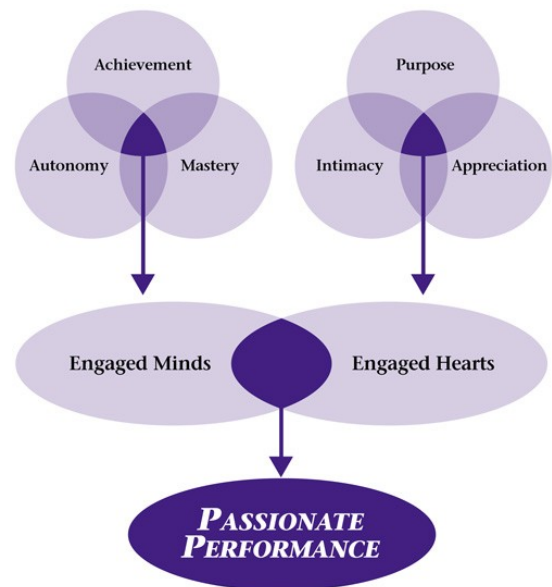
Connecting personal interests to company purpose can be tricky. It won't happen without frequent discussions among the team and leaders. Some experts say a message must be received five times before people actually hear it and incorporate it into memory.

Linking Passion to Performance

When I go into companies and I see leaders encourage a culture in which employees take psychological ownership, even the average employees begin to perform at high levels.

Purpose and passion create meaning and excitement at work.

I advise leaders to be more communicative about strategy, and let every employee know what's going on with the business, including financials. Managers must ensure their direct reports understand how individual performance contributes to overall long-term success.



Graphic Courtesy of Skip Prichard from an article written by Lee J. Colan, Ph.D. [Click Here to read more.](#)

Passion abounds when people believe their daily tasks have meaning. You energize your workplace when people see their accomplishments have a direct impact on team members, customers, the community and the business.

How does your organization enlist and ignite the passion of your people? What do you personally do in this realm for your team and colleagues? Don't sit idle wishing your company will change, or wishing you worked for a different company. Start by being the change agent in your department or business unit and watch the performance and results skyrocket.

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