

BUSINESS ACTION GUIDE

Leading at the Intersection of People & Profits

GET TO HIGH PERFORMANCE

Cultivating a High Involvement Workplace: New Belgium Brewing

The global marketplace is more competitive than ever, and a sometimes underutilized resource is the ingenuity of employees who make the product or interface with customers every day. Employees who are just getting by will not achieve high levels of product quality or customer care, whereas highly involved employees who understand and participate in company strategy are empowered to make good decisions. They take personal responsibility in finding new and better ways to achieve the company's mission.



JENNY BRIGGS, HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR

To learn more about how to create a successful culture of employee involvement and participation, we spoke to Jenny Briggs, Human Resource Director at New Belgium Brewing. A 23-year-old craft brewing company based in Fort Collins, CO, New Belgium is well-known for its highly participatory workforce of 560 engaged employee owners.



From the beginning, New Belgium was set up to be a high involvement workplace driven more by core values and beliefs than by excessive mandates and rules. A lot of this came from our CEO and co-founder Kim Jordan. She had previously been a social worker, and had an intuitive sense that the business would benefit by leveraging everyone's collective intelligence.

As the years have gone by, we've learned how to systematize our approach to employee participation and decision-making. It's about empowering and encouraging each other to assume greater influence and responsibility for decisions and, when called for, to participate or influence decisions regarding strategic direction. We want informed input, feedback, and suggestions on ways to improve any aspect of our business. These are some of the key steps we've taken in developing and cultivating our high involvement workplace:

1. Be transparent

If you want people to participate in decision making, they need to understand the core logic of the business. For a long time we've practiced financial transparency, or open-book management, so that employees could understand how and why decisions were made. We train new hires to read a profit and loss statement and understand the financials, along with understanding New Belgium's sustainability practices, values, and culture.

2. Train people to communicate and participate effectively

We also train all employees in the art of Crucial Conversations within their first year. The goal of this is to make sure that we have a shared language and set of experiences to draw upon for all communication issues. This goes well beyond typical conflict management strategies and instead gives us a way to avoid conflicts in the first place.

NEW BELGIUM'S FORMULA FOR CULTIVATING A HIGH IMPROVEMENT WORKPLACE

1. Be transparent
2. Train people to communicate and participate effectively
3. Choose the right process for different decision types
4. Make committees meaningful
5. Humanize technology to facilitate participation

3. Choose the right process for different decision types

Participatory decision-making does not mean that every decision is made by democratic vote. We differentiate between four types of decisions: a unilateral decision (made by one person without input), a unilateral decision with input, a group decision (consensus, majority rules, other), and a group decision with input. The most important thing is to make sure co-workers are clear on what type of decision is being made.

For example, employees were given the chance to simply vote on when the company's ten paid holidays would be taken. But when competition demanded that the Liquid Center (bar) needed to stay open on Sundays, employees did not have a choice about that – the company must be responsive to the marketplace. However, employees were highly involved in deciding on the shifts and the structure of how the new schedule would work.



4. **Make committees meaningful**

New Belgium employees actively participate in company execution and strategy via 15-20 cross-functional committees. These range from Wellness to Philanthropy to Natural Resources Management to Innovation. Some are formal and long-standing, some are ad-hoc, but all are focused on solving well-defined challenges for the company.

A standing committee is our ESOP committee, nicknamed POSSE (ESOP misspelled backwards). This is a more formal committee, whose members are nominated by their peers and are elected democratically to two year terms. Each generation of POSSE takes on a major project. The current POSSE is working to deepen the understanding of what it means for us to be a B corporation.

5. **Humanize technology to facilitate participation**

As our company has grown, we've had to figure out ways to foster collaboration across great distances. Fifty percent of our employees work outside of Colorado, so we've invested carefully in technology to maintain our participatory culture. We use many of the same collaboration technologies that others do – an intranet,

MicroSoft SharePoint, discussion boards, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) – but what we do differently is humanize the technology.

For example, we make sure employees working together can see one another's faces whenever possible, even if it's just a photo. We've found that this simple adaptation is important for helping people make real connections as the company expands geographically. We also make sure any collaboration technology we use is simple, because computer literacy does vary from one employee to the next.

Because strategy and financials are shared during the monthly all-staff meeting, we broadcast it to remote employees, who can participate through the chat function, and we make MP3 recordings available for sales staff to listen to while driving. We also have a discussion board to solicit employee suggestions that we call Ideas Brewing. Co-workers rate the ideas submitted so it's easy to see which have the most support. Soon we will launch an internal version of Twitter, which we are hoping will allow us to see what is trending in the minds of the teams.

FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

When it comes to employee participation, everything the company does should support your company's established culture, vision and beliefs. When considering a change to your workplace and/or your processes, always ask "Does this fit in well with the systems we already have in place?" It is possible to intentionally develop a high-involvement culture, but you need to know where you're coming from first. Raising your level of participation and involvement takes time and careful intent, but it is worth it.

HOW DO WE LEARN MORE?

WorldBlu (www.worldblu.com)

Ideas are Free and The Idea-Driven Organization by Alan G. Robinson and Dean M. Schroeder

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High, by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler

Great Game of Business – [High Involvement Planning Workshop](#)

Other companies that excel at participatory decision making include Namaste and W.L. Gore

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