

Where authentic engagement wins the hearts and minds of faculty and staff

IN THE FAR NORTH REACHES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA – IN LOCATIONS COVERING MORE THAN 324,000 SQUARE KILOMETERS (201,324 MILES) – FIVE CAMPUSES AND THREE ACCESS CENTERS MAKE UP ONE OF CANADA’S LEADING ENERGY-SPECIALIZED COLLEGES.

Founded in 1975, Northern Lights College (NLC) is the go-to training and recruiting hub for mining, oil and gas industries. Over the last five years, international students have discovered NLC too. Record numbers are enrolling in its conventional business and social service programs.

Jessie Drew, who now serves as Associate Vice President of People & Institutional Strategy at NLC, shifted from the healthcare sector to the post-secondary field in 2015. New to her role, she wanted engagement benchmark data for the incoming CEO and executive team to get the lay of the land.

Internal benchmark hurdles

The college realized it had problems. In partnership with TalentMap, an employee survey was launched in 2012 and revealed an overall engagement score of 52% among its 300 faculty and staff.

TalentMap was asked to step in again for the 2015 initiative. Survey results indicated NLC employees were cautiously optimistic. Engagement was up 6%.

Faculty and staff were eager to be consulted and heard. They wanted to be included. They wanted to be invested. They wanted to see themselves in the decisions being made. They needed to see their senior leadership as real people, connected and communicative.

With guidance and facilitation from TalentMap, a visioning world café was held with board members, executives, and staff. Anyone who wanted to come was welcome. Over 100 people participated – a third of NLC’s staff.

It was the beginning of building the college’s new way forward. “We did some dreaming that day,” Drew says, “and from that place we started to have more concentrated talks to narrow the focus. We finally got to a place where we were able to identify where we needed to go.”

138%

Northern Lights College saw a 138% increase in employee engagement since its first survey in 2012.



Leadership engagement shifts culture

It was a huge exercise in change management that required a shift in NLC's focus and culture.

- An outcome from the 2015 survey revealed Senior Leadership was one of NLC's key drivers. HR began to work with leadership to build out their goals and priorities and cascade them across their own teams. Some had "ah-ha" moments during this journey. As a brand-new team, says Drew, they put a lot of work into developing themselves. "We wanted to do that deep dive into ourselves in terms of who we were as leaders and individuals so that we could gel as a team and bring our organization forward." Leadership development started with the executive team receiving coaching and reviewing the college's mission, vision, and values. That led to a recognized need for visible integrity and transparency, the need to get it right and then cascade those cultural sentiments throughout the organization.
- A lot of effort went into recognition with the introduction of an annual gala to honor personal and professional achievements of staff and faculty.
- In the three years following the 2015 survey, nearly \$250,000 was spent on training and development across all departments with a focus on leadership training, culture and awareness training, and mental health and wellness guidance.
- The issue of mental health took precedence with an "I'm not myself today" campaign stressing that it's ok to not be ok and providing support to help the college's family of employees through dark or difficult times.

The game changer, as Drew describes it, was an "I ♥ NLC" campaign complete with stickers.

Faculty and staff were asked to reflect and share their thoughts on three questions:

- What do you love most about working here?
- Why do you stay?
- What would you tell another person considering coming to work here?

Every Friday an email was sent out across the whole organization to share what colleagues had to say. Moved by what they read, people responded with impressions of their own. It became a conversation.

Window stickers made for the campaign started showing up everywhere. Employees really got involved, taking them and giving them out.

"You'd drive through your local Tim Hortons and see an 'I ♥ NLC' sticker," says Drew. "They started popping up all over the community. So I started reporting sightings on social media one after another after another. It was really organic."





The third time's a charm

Judging from NLC's third employee engagement survey, conducted by TalentMap in March 2018, this compendium of initiatives hit the mark.

Across the higher-education sector, faculty response rates and engagement scores are notoriously low.

NLC, however, achieved a 76% response rate, impressive compared to the 62% post-secondary institution norm. Strikingly, NLC also saw engagement scores for the academic and professional functional groups leap 23%. Overall employee engagement climbed from 58% to 72%, an impressive 14% gain.

Another significant sign was that the percentage of people looking for work elsewhere dropped from 31% to below the standard 23% benchmark.

Something good was clearly happening. Drew credits it to being authentic and real, approachable and vulnerable, about being organic and not orchestrated.

"I'm really proud of what we've done to this point. I'm really proud of this team. I'm really proud of where we're going. We've shifted the needle. We know we're on to something. But we've only just begun."

2012

Overall Employee Engagement Rates: 52%

2015

Overall Employee Engagement Rates: 58%

2018

Overall Employee Engagement Rates: 72%

The survey process

Before the survey questionnaire was deployed, NLC sent communiqués to all staff. They highlighted different initiatives that had been done over the previous three years as a result of the last survey. The intent was to make sure people knew the college's executive team were listening and responding. The whole point, Drew relates, was to say "We heard you. We want to hear more. Keep talking. Keep talking to us."

With access to TalentMap's online reporting dashboard, Drew checked live response rates daily and reported progress to the leadership team. Faculty and staff were kept apprised of response rates too. A weekly draw was held – drawing winners from people who responded (TalentMap compiled names as completed questionnaires were received). For an added personal touch, faculty and staff received emails expressing gratitude as response rates climbed.

The tools and services TalentMap provided were really good, Drew says, noting how she felt supported throughout the survey process. "The biggest help to me was TalentMap staff, they were great. In terms of the launch. The level of cooperation. Everybody had the same goal in mind. TalentMap nailed it down for us in 2015 in terms of really helping us to understand what the data was telling us, what the reports were saying. We leaned on their post-survey consulting for our world café. The senior consultant we worked with came with a wealth of information, was a master in the field, yet we could easily relate. TalentMap did an amazing job."

"Our domestic enrolment is up. Our short and long-term disability statistics are down. Our engagement is up. And we've only started. Just imagine what Northern Lights College is going to look like in five years."



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IF I WAS TO TELL SOMEONE ELSE THAT WAS LOOKING AT THIS AS AN OPTION, I'D SAY REALLY LEAN ON TALENTMAP. IT'S NOT JUST THE SURVEY, THE SURVEY'S JUST THE START. TO UNDERSTAND WHAT RESULTS ARE TELLING YOU IS SOMETHING ELSE. I HAD NUMEROUS CONVERSATIONS WITH TALENTMAP'S PEOPLE, AS DID OUR CEO. THEY BECAME A PARTNER IN OUR SUCCESS.”

What NLC employees say

“I just flat out love my job here... that I can help make a difference for somebody... and I'm always learning new things! No two days are ever alike!!”

“The people I work with and for are really down to earth great people that help support me to do the best I can for the college. I feel I am trusted to do good work and I try to honor that trust every day.”

“I love the idea that I can be “myself” here at work.... In a diverse workplace full of amazing people, it just feels comfortable to show up with integrity and authenticity.”

“The work/life balance. NLC realizes that we all have family/responsibilities outside of work and sometimes we need to drop and go, and that is OK.”

“The people. Staff, executive, instructors, students all contribute daily to an environment of positivity and growth.”

About TalentMap

A thought leader focused exclusively on workplace engagement measurements and research, TalentMap is passionate about understanding the people behind organizational success: Employees.

Since its start in 1998, TalentMap has conducted thousands of employee engagement survey projects and surveyed more than one million employees. Working in partnership with public and private sector organizations of all sizes across North America, TalentMap's deep understanding of methodologies and assumptions unique to different sectors alongside volumes of benchmark data accrued over the years have become valued resources for organizations that value their people.

TalentMap employee engagement survey tools – readily customized from hire to retire – are based on years of research, field experience, and scientific measurement. The company also offers expert consulting services, deployment, data collection, analysis reporting, and post-survey action planning. It's a proprietary workplace intelligence process – developed and delivered by people-oriented people consumed with helping leadership teams and HR professionals create positive organizational change.

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