sustainable organisation performance

A collection of Next Generation HR thought pieces
Part 1 – August 2012

Lens on engagement

building HR capability

Spinning plates and juggling hats: engagement in an era of austerity

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It is regrettably all too easy for discussions of engagement to be of the 'motherhood and apple pie' variety. I was thinking about this when I was watching the film *Sister Act* recently, where Whoopi Goldberg's character Sister Mary Clarence takes a motley, uninspired and fairly tuneless choir of nuns and, through some chutzpah, inspirational leadership, and a judicious reminder of the importance of rehearsal, turns them in next to no time into an all-singing, all-dancing disco-choir, fit to entertain a foot-tapping Pontiff. Sometimes, it seems as though we're being persuaded all we need is a little Mary Clarence magic to turn our humdrum staff into high-flying, fully engaged stars. Try telling that to the managers in one firm I heard about this week who recently spent a six-figure sum on employee engagement consultants who swept in, introduced 13 different engagement initiatives and swept out again, leaving a trail of confused and distinctly disengaged staff behind them.

The one thing I have learned through talking to many professionals in the engagement field, and reading the latest research, is that there is no easy, quick-fix solution guaranteed to work at all times and in all circumstances. I've also learned that much of the received wisdom about raising engagement levels simply addresses things that effective managers are doing already, like communicating clearly with staff, having an inspiring vision, aligning individual and organisational goals, and listening to staff concerns. All of these are important, but they are unlikely of themselves to create a highly engaged workforce. Moving beyond the generality of good management practice into more nuanced and context-specific approaches to engagement that draw on rigorous research combined with the kind of savvy HR practice that the CIPD has been advocating in its Next Generation HR project, or that is being developed within the Engage for Success movement, will be essential. Through observing organisations which have been successful in raising and sustaining engagement levels, I have noticed six things that seem to matter, but which have not to date been given as much air time as perhaps they warrant.

Authentic engagement: we need to distinguish between deep and surface-level engagement, or between authentic, experienced engagement and mere lip-service. I was talking with a consultant a few months ago who had been working with a number of companies in Ireland, which has been badly affected by recession. He explained that employees there are currently very engaged; in fact, they were often falling over themselves to demonstrate to their employers exactly how strongly engaged they were. The problem, he said, was that behind the scenes, they were plotting their escape once the economy showed signs of picking up. If you were to conduct an engagement survey in one of these firms, you would no doubt find very high levels of reported engagement. Whether this is in fact associated with the typical behaviours you would find in an engaged worker is another matter. Savvy employers are therefore doing more than just issuing a standard engagement survey to ascertain levels of authentic engagement, and are designing more 'engaging' ways of involving workers in the process such as World Café-style round-table events that create a buzz and enable a deeper and more authentic exploration of organisational climate, introducing initiatives such as *Dragons' Den*-style competitions for employees to bid for funding to pilot new initiatives, or holding innovation days where employees can work on whatever they want, so long as they report back on what they have achieved to the rest of the group.

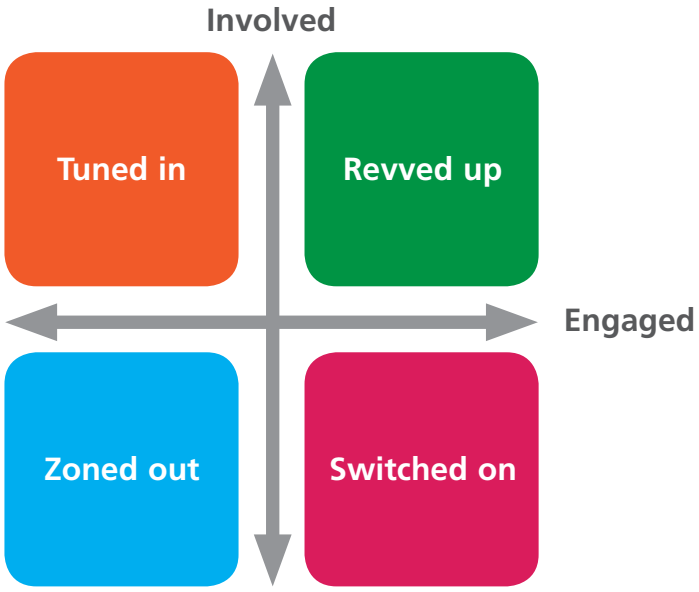
Distributed engagement: engagement needs to be distributed; it is not something imposed 'from on high' on the willing or, even worse, the unwilling, workers. Successful organisations share the responsibility for engagement widely, and not just amongst managers, but often via a network of 'engagement champions' drawn from all areas and levels. Engagement is not 'done to', but 'done with'. To do this well requires a significant level of trust and empowerment on the part of both line managers and HR staff. Linked with this point is the critical importance of creating effective alliances with other functional areas. We hear a lot about the need for HR managers to work effectively with chief executives, and the importance of aligning HR strategies with corporate strategies (Truss et al 2012). We hear a lot less about the need to work well with the other functions such as marketing, finance or operations, and yet if engagement is to be embedded throughout the organisation, HR has to collaborate very closely with professionals in these areas and demonstrate a thorough understanding of their aims and needs. As an aside, when I speak at conferences about engagement, I find myself talking with marketing, customer service or internal communications professionals just as often as with HR managers. Other professionals are taking a very keen interest in engagement, and it is vital that HR retains its place at the engagement table in order to bring to bear its expertise in aligning people and strategy and to avoid being sidelined.

Engagement architecture: organisations need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to engagement and, instead, develop a holistic engagement architecture that enables them to flex their approach to fit the needs of different constituencies. Not everyone needs or wants to know everything or be involved in everything; making sound judgements about how to construct a coherent, inclusive yet well-targeted strategic approach is essential to the repertoire of the successful engagement professional. Allied to this is the rarely discussed point that engagement strategies may well need to extend beyond the boundaries of the organisation. While the push for public and third sector employers to work in collaborative networks is being increasingly embedded within UK legislation (Truss 2012), firms in all sectors work in a wide range of value chains, partnerships and joint ventures as well as with suppliers and customers. The performance of any individual organisation is therefore dependent on that of others, and so any engagement strategy needs to consider how employees within partner organisations can also be engaged.

Designing engaging jobs: job design has for many years been the poor relation within the HRM family and is rarely considered amongst the repertoire of HR professional roles. Yet, countless research studies have shown that it is the work we do on a daily basis that is the source of our engagement (Kahn 1990, Shantz et al 2012). Dan Pink's fascinating book on motivation, *Drive*, reminds us that human beings are motivated by three things: autonomy, mastery and purpose. Ensuring that we maximise these three dimensions within the work we offer will give us more opportunity to engage our staff.

Engagement vs involvement: we need a lot more clarity about what we mean by 'engagement'. Too often, the word 'engagement' is used as a catch-all that simply means 'good management'. This is apparent if you look through the items in many engagement surveys which bundle together constructs such as management style, communication, vision and involvement as a single measure of engagement levels. As Professor David Guest has noted, this enhances the risk of engagement being dismissed as a management fad, rather than embraced as a distinctive approach in its own right.

One way of addressing this point is to differentiate between engagement on the one hand, and involvement on the other. While engagement refers to the individual's orientation towards their job, involvement concerns their relationship with the employer as a whole. 'Zoned out' staff are those neither engaged nor involved, while the 'revved up' employees score highly on both engagement and involvement. The 'switched on' are highly engaged but not involved, and the 'tuned in' are highly involved but not engaged. The dangers of having too many 'zoned out' staff are probably fairly clear, but having too many 'tuned in' staff means that although lots of people are having a say in what is going on, they are not necessarily engaged in their work. This can lead to having a lot of staff with a lot to talk about, but not necessarily increasing their work-related effort. Equally, having a lot of 'switched on' staff is good because levels of work-related engagement are high, but the risk is that not enough people are involved in wider organisational issues which will ultimately have a bearing on corporate performance and overall engagement levels. Employers can therefore consider engagement and involvement as separate but related areas



where strength in one will have mutually beneficial spillover effects, but whose enhancement is likely to require different strategies and approaches.

Engagement and risk: I was fascinated to read Oliver Burkeman's (2012) homage to the Museum of Failed Products. Engagement is born of the positive psychology movement with its emphasis on all that is good and upbeat. Burkeman issues a timely reminder of the role that negative experiences, failure and unpleasant emotions can play in our personal development and in organisational learning. Those people who rather annoyingly comment that 'whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger' may well have a point after all. Within our quest for the highly engaged workforce, we need to find a little room for experimentation. As Burkeman notes, the failure rate for new products can be as high as 90%. It is likely that, along the way, our engaged workers will develop a new toothpaste destined for the Museum of Failed Products, or a new service that no one wants to buy. Yet, if we create a climate of fear within our organisations where people are too afraid to suggest new ideas or take a risk because of the likely consequences, we will be letting down our engaged employees. Finding creative and imaginative ways of balancing risk and engagement will be essential for our future success. Philosopher AC Grayling reminds us of former Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev's favourite maxim, 'if you cannot take a bird of paradise, better take a wet hen'. We are likely to encounter a lot of wet hens over the coming years, but if we manage to create authentically engaging workplaces, our employees are likely to pick out some of those rare birds of paradise as well.

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A collection of Next Generation HR thought pieces

The CIPD has produced this collection of thought pieces to build on the themes introduced in the Next Generation HR research (2009). Specifically we have asked a number of leading academics and experts to write a provocative thought piece that applies a 'Next Generation HR' lens to a specific HR discipline. This thought piece, *Lens on engagement*, is written by Professor Katie Truss. Others in the series include:

Lens on talent, by Professor Graeme Martin. Can we overrate talent as a source of innovation? Another example of the 'too-much-of-a-good-thing effect'.

Lens on reward, by Vicky Wright. Insight-led reward management.

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Building HR capability is one of the three themes in our Sustainable Organisation Performance research programme. The other two themes are future-fit organisations and stewardship, leadership and governance. Within each of these themes we will research a range of topics and draw on a variety of perspectives to enable us to provide insight-led thought leadership that can be used to drive organisation performance for the long term.

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