

Fabio Capello

Engagement leads to success

Chris Brady MARCH 22 2010

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David MacLeod, author of “Engaging for Success”, a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills review, asked participants at a recent meeting not to spend too much time trying to define the term “employee - engagement”.

However, the problem for proponents of employee engagement is that its - acceptance as intrinsically valuable is an impediment to its take-up. While everybody accepts that employee engagement is a good thing, they will not engage with it. Why not? Possibly because it is viewed as a management fad, separate from the reality of business imperatives.

Although Mr MacLeod’s review states employee engagement’s role in “enhancing performance”, employers still do not get it. They suspect that concentrating on employee engagement disconnects the manner in which employees are treated from the reason a business exists, which is to succeed, or to win.

When Fabio Capello was asked about his preparations for what is to be his first World Cup as manager of the England football team, he mentioned the first thing he did: “I spoke to Lippi, Scolari and Aragonés.” He went to managers who had won the World Cup.

While there is a chicken-and-egg debate about whether winning or engagement comes first, there is no debate that there is a symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship between the two. The key to winning is to have engaged employees aligned to a performance culture where the team is dominant. Most of the recent problems in the banking sector arose from a highly engaged but completely misaligned workforce. Workers were incentivised to act individually, not for the long-term health of the business. It is for this reason that great leaders clearly enunciate the predominance of the team in achieving success.

Speaking to me shortly before England's recent football game against Egypt, Mr Capello emphasised the need to "recreate the spirit of the group". He was concerned that the spirit he had worked so hard to create since his arrival had been compromised.

Mr Capello reasons that players will only submit to the dominance of the team if they can understand its importance to winning and to themselves. He believes that if the group spirit can be created, the rewards will follow, which will enrich the spirit.

For example, Mr Capello explained how, when he became manager of Real Madrid in 2006, he found three factions: "the South Americans, the Spanish and the others". He spent almost half the season creating a single group from those factions. It is a process he has followed throughout his managerial career.

Employee engagement for Mr Capello is not about the worker but about the team. You look after employees because of what they can add to the team, and employees play for the team because of what it adds to them.

There is equally dramatic evidence of the effect of a loss of the spirit of the group in the decline of the French national football team since its triumphs of the late 1990s. When asked what was wrong with the team, star player Thierry Henry said: "We are still a team in search of its identity."

Similarly, companies without an identity – a brand – cannot have a vision with which employees can align. They may be engaged, but the winning will be elusive.

At the heart of any successful organisation is a winning culture, to which individuals willingly submit. The leader, manager or coach will communicate the need for the dominance of the group, and then work to create the group spirit. If this effort succeeds, so will the team.

But what if leaders leave? Does the team spirit go with them? The answer seems to be probably, but not necessarily.

Great leaders are successful at creating a winning culture – in football, think Arsène Wenger at Arsenal or Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United. But these cultures may be specific to the leader rather than the team. Mr Capello was removed from Real Madrid after winning La Liga, Spain's premier league, because it was thought that the manner in which the team won was not "the Madrid way".

The leader must match the desired culture. If a culture is successful, hire someone to perpetuate it; if a culture is unsuccessful, hire someone to change it.

To enable employees to be simultaneously engaged and aligned, the leadership must provide clarity of identity (what we stand for), direction (how we are going to win) and role (the individual's job within the group). It must also guarantee absolute equality of treatment. Members of a team will accept differentials of pay but not of treatment.

If you ask successful leaders to explain employee engagement, they may well not understand the question because having an engaged workforce is so integral to success that it is axiomatic. The MacLeod review quite rightly states that engagement without alignment, or vice versa, is not the way to enhance performance, but the conversation must start with the reason for both engagement and alignment – winning.

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