



RESEARCH REPORT

THE ENGAGING LEADER

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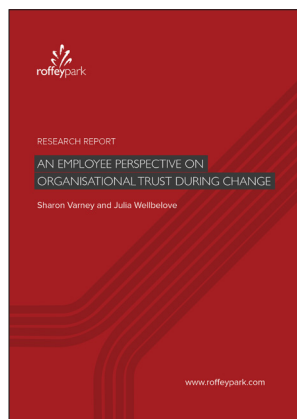
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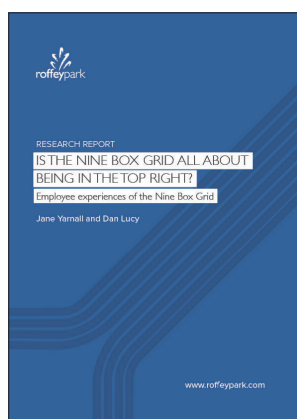
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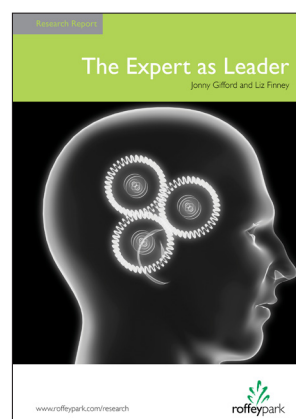
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Executive Summary

Singapore's economy has experienced impressive growth rates over the past few decades. In recent years however, there has been a decline in performance, albeit a decline to still impressive growth rates. The current issues of concern in particular, are Singapore's stagnating workforce productivity and innovation capacity. The quality of work and leadership are central to solving these issues. Effectively engaging employees is central to improving productivity and innovation at work. Employee engagement, defined as a psychological state in this paper, has been linked to positive organisational and individual outcomes. In spite of the importance of employee engagement to organisational success, our research and that of others suggests that Singapore's leadership population may have work to do to really engage those they lead. Leaders play an important role in workplace engagement by shaping the organisation's vision, values and culture, to positively effect the development of engagement.

In this year's Roffey Park's Singapore Management Agenda (SMA), roughly one-third (32%) identified maintaining staff morale and engagement as a key challenge. The same survey identified that both employees and HR professionals have doubts about the ability of leaders in Singapore to meet that challenge. For example:

- 53 per cent of employees' reported that they thought their leaders lacked the ability to articulate and engage them with a clear strategic vision.
- 43 per cent felt that their leaders were not effective in 'listening well and communicating clearly'.
- 50 per cent of employees reported working in 'low support' organisations with a lack of direction and support from managers
- Of those employees indicating an intention to leave their organisation in the near future, 44 per cent cited 'poor management' and 39 per cent 'a lack of appreciation'.

In this paper, we outline what in-depth research with employees in both Singapore and the UK has told us about the qualities of engaging leadership. We offer six key qualities for engaging leadership:



Three key messages stand out for us when it comes to improving the quality of engaging leadership in Singapore. We offer these with some questions for reflection below.

Focus on the people as well as the task

Time and again we hear about leaders focussing almost exclusively on the task, not taking the time to get to know their staff, how they think and what they value. People matter, and most likely the quickest and surest way to improve productivity is simply through valuing the contribution they make, often in quite simple ways such as a thank you for a job well done. Ask yourself:

- Do I make time to get to know the people I work with?
- Do I ever make conversation about things outside of work?
- Am I always quick to say thank you for a job well done?
- Do I always recognise the contributions of staff?

Trust in others

Fear of failure and risk aversion lead too often to micro-management, diminishing the sense of ownership and investment employees' have in their work. Giving employees the chance to master new skills and 'stretch' themselves is essential for their sense of purpose and sense of achievement. Ask yourself:

- Do you tend to jump in and 'fix' the work of others?
- Do you tend to provide all the answers? Or do you allow the opportunity for people you work with to work things out for themselves?
- Do you expect others to complete work themselves and be accountable for that, or do you step in?

Be clear about your purpose

Providing a clear direction and communicating it are essential to engaging the efforts of others. Co-creating that vision with employees encourages ownership and investment of energy. Ultimately, if you do not know what you stand for and where you want to go, it is unlikely anyone will 'follow you' or know how they can contribute. Ask yourself:

- Do you have a clear sense of purpose at work?
- Do you have a clear sense of your own values and act in a way consistent with those values?

Introduction

Background to research

Employee engagement is one of the most pressing concerns in Singapore today. In Roffey Park's 2015 Singapore Management Agenda (SMA)¹, more than two-thirds of HR managers (67%) identified it as one of the top three people challenges faced by their organisations. In the same survey, 32 per cent of leaders considered employee engagement as the most immediate challenge they were facing. Research has shown that employee engagement is key in driving organisational outcomes like productivity and innovation, as well as individual outcomes like job performance and satisfaction. With workforce productivity lower in Singapore compared with many other developed countries, in this research paper we look at how leaders can better engage their workforce and drive productivity improvements.

Research approach

This research paper is based on a review of literature on employee engagement, including work conducted by Roffey Park². The literature review is supplemented by in-depth interviews with Roffey Park consultants and leaders from successful Singaporean and UK organisations from a variety of industrial sectors.



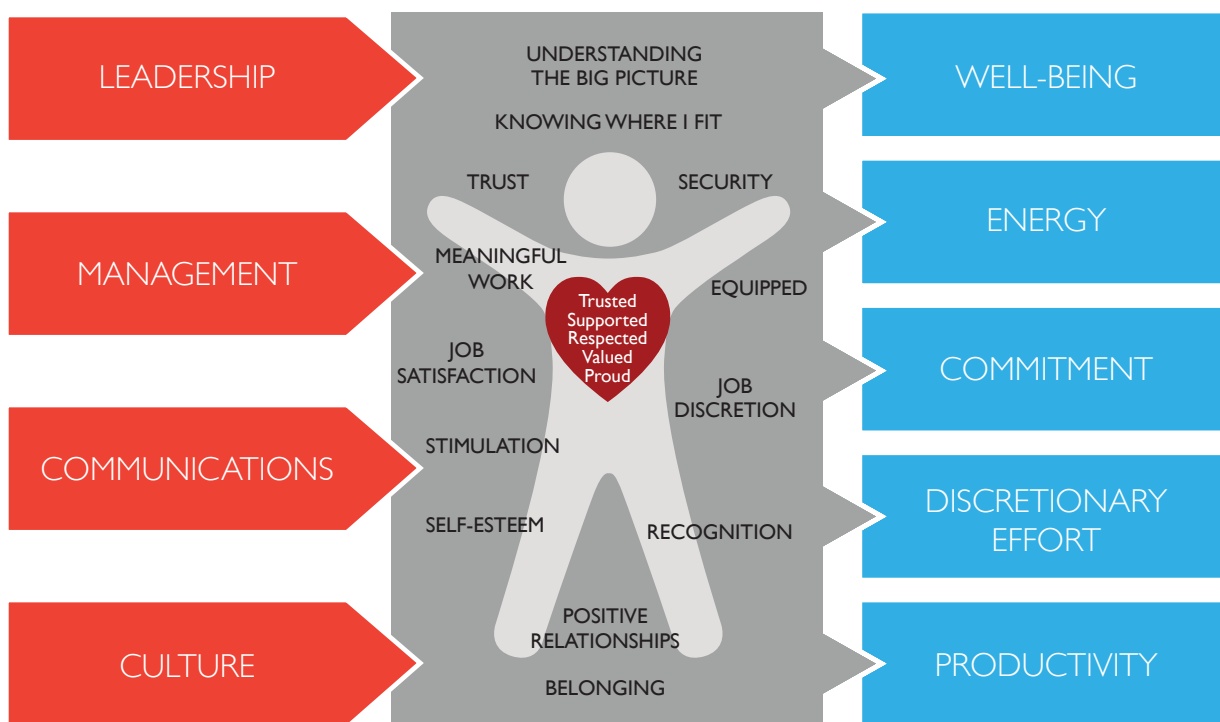
1 Roffey Park's research report: The Singapore Management Agenda 2015 by Dan Lucy and Saradevi Gopal, can be downloaded at <http://www.roffeypark.com/research-insights/free-research-and-insight-report-downloads/?pg=2>
2 Roffey Park's research report: The Human Voice of Employee Engagement: Understanding what lies beneath the surveys by Jonny Gifford, Liz Finney, Jo Hennessy and Sharon Varney can be downloaded at <http://www.roffeypark.com/research-insights/research-insight-reports/>

What is Employee Engagement?

There are many different definitions of engagement in the literature. In this paper, we define it as a psychological state, where people are “psychologically present”^{(x), (xi), (xx)}. They are in a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by focus, intensity, dedication, and absorption”^(xxii). There is a great sense of purpose and positive, focused energy. This is “evident to others in the display of personal initiative, adaptability, effort and persistence directed toward organisational goals”.

Based on research undertaken by Roffey Park, the figure below shows the antecedents and outcomes of the psychological state of engagement.

Figure 1: The psychological state of employee engagement





Why is Engaging Leadership relevant to Singapore?

Studies⁽ⁱ⁾ have shown that employee engagement leads to many positive individual and organisational outcomes, including greater innovation and productivity.

Individual outcomes:

- Positive emotions and experiences^(xxv)
- Feelings of “work effectiveness”⁽ⁱⁱ⁾
- Work productivity^(viii)
- Job satisfaction
- Better job performance
- Organisational commitment^(xvi).

Engaged employees are more accepting of challenging tasks and are willing to work hard. They enjoy what they do and have a “personal commitment to accomplish these goals^(xxii)”

Organisational outcomes:

- Lower absenteeism and turnover^(xxi). Organisations with higher levels of employee engagement were reported to have turnover rates that are 40 percent lower than organisations that report low levels of engagement⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾.
- Higher productivity.

- Greater innovation. Engaged employees are more inclined to solve problems, connect with people, create their own resources and “develop innovative services”⁽ⁱⁱ⁾
- “Higher levels of profit, overall revenue generation, and growth”^(xxvii)

However, engagement levels in Singapore seem to be rather low, when compared with other developed nations. 76 per cent^(xii) of staff in Singapore report not being engaged compared to 63 per cent globally. In a separate study^(xiii), 52 per cent are ‘completely disengaged’ compared to 41 per cent globally.

Singapore is facing innovation and workforce productivity issues, and these need to be addressed to aid growth. However in Roffey Park’s Singapore Management Agenda, less than one-third of HR managers reported that leaders in their organisation were able to create a climate supportive of innovation. In the same survey, only one in five managers thought their workforce outperforms industry average productivity

Studies^(xxvi) have found that leadership is one of the main drivers of employee engagement. The next two sections look at what we know about the quality of leadership in Singapore and at six key behaviours that underpin engaging leadership. These six behaviours are underpinned by research conducted by Roffey Park in both the UK and Singapore.

What do we know about the quality of Engaging Leadership in Singapore

Leaders in Singapore are aware that engaging their staff is important and they recognise that challenge. However, both HR managers and employees feel that there are gaps in the ability of leaders to engage their teams.

Managers recognise challenges in communicating and engaging with employees

In this year's Singapore Management Agenda, one-third (32%) of leaders identified 'maintaining staff morale and engagement' as the key challenge they face. At the same time, only 36 per cent of HR managers reported thinking their leaders are capable of improving employee engagement. A majority (53%) of employees' reported that they thought their leaders lacked the ability to articulate and engage them with a clear strategic vision. 43 per cent felt that they also were not effective in 'listening well and communicating clearly'.

Management style is not well-received

In the Singapore Management Agenda, 'poor management' (44%) was one of the top three reasons for employees considering a move. 56 per cent of respondents indicated that 'management style' was a major stressor in their lives.

Managers are too focussed on results at the expense of people relations

Leaders tend to focus too much on short-term goals and this creates friction with employees. It might eventually lead to a lack of trust, as employees feel that leaders are more focussed on themselves and profits than building good relations with and developing their employees.

"I think we are very short term. We tend to focus on results, and the leaders are measured based on results. They often chase after results at the expense of the people. When you care for your employees, they will go the extra mile for you, right? But unfortunately, a lot of us only want to get things done

now, and neglect human relations." (Senior manager, Communications industry)

"Leaders are just focused on getting a job done, they are not here to focus on the strengths [of others] and the areas of development. They all go for the jugular and give you feedback on where you went wrong instead. That is when people get demoralised, then only do they wonder why people feel this way." (Mid-level manager, Health industry)

Managers do not give their staff adequate support

50 per cent of employees responding to this year's Singapore Management Agenda reported working in a 'low support' culture. Employees in these cultures had a higher tendency to report intending to leave their organisations in the near future. They also appeared less engaged with their work, team and organisation.

"There is limited support. My management is not always available to provide me with the support that I need. It's a management attention issue. The organisation expects me to know how things work, and I don't always know that. What is difficult is also the volume of work. I don't find it all very engaging." (First-level manager, Transport industry)

"The culture was openly aggressive, which was challenging. They were very, very focussed on results and on getting what they wanted whenever they wanted it, but when it came to supporting people, to coach them, to help them deliver, frankly, I didn't see much of that going on. So there was an expectation of very long hours and very hard work to do... to do things whenever the boss told you to. That's not a support culture, I mean, that's just about pleasing the boss, right?" (Senior manager, Finance industry)

What does Engaging Leadership look like?

Figure 2 below summarises what Roffey Park has found to be the main behaviours that make up engaging leadership.

Figure 2: Management behaviours which support employee engagement



The following section is based on research conducted by researchers from Roffey Park in the UK and Singapore. The section draws on Roffey Park's previous UK research on employee engagement, 'The Human Voice of Employee Engagement', and supplements this with interviews conducted with employees in Singapore and evidence from this year's Roffey Park Singapore Management Agenda.

Showing appreciation and valuing employees

Line managers' play an important role in making employees feel valued and appreciated. In the Singapore Management Agenda, of the total percentage of employees intending to leave their organisations, 39 per cent indicated that it was due to a 'lack of appreciation'. Appreciation which is regular, immediate, face-to-face and specific is the most effective. A simple 'thank you' is usually sufficient. Besides direct comments, passing on positive comments from other sources is also very effective. Public forms of recognition like putting up a board with a list of employees' achievements is also effective. Managers need to put in more effort to show their appreciation for employees who work in roles where recognition and praise from others are less forthcoming.

Developing people and managing performance

Managers can manage underperformance by setting targets that are challenging and fair but achievable. Standards that are too high and unrealistic can result in staff feeling demoralised when they are not met. Managers also need to give staff the space to make mistakes and learn from them. Employees in general want to improve and to learn more. Thus, they enjoy conversations centred on their strengths and areas of development. This is particularly important when it comes to engaging younger generations of workers. They respond well to regular feedback, performance reviews and coaching from their managers.

Managers can also create and facilitate opportunities for personal development through coaching and allowing staff to take on projects outside of their usual job-scope. .

“An engaging leader is one who encourages staff to constantly find areas at work to improve on. They would also be willing to take calculated risks to implement or test employees’ ideas.” (First-level manager, Events industry).

Empowering employees

A study^(vi) conducted in Singapore found that “feelings of psychological empowerment amongst employees may intensify organisational commitment”. Employees liked the feeling of being trusted to get the work done, but without being over-managed by their managers. Some senior managers we interviewed attest to that. After allowing staff to make their own decisions and alter work processes, they noticed an increase in job engagement and satisfaction. Work also became more meaningful.

“I enjoy the work that I do because of the empowerment and authority I’m given to carry out the work that needs to be done to solve the issues. This motivates me to want to find solutions to problems at work.” (First-level manager, Events industry).

The impact of a lack of autonomy or decision-making power is made evident in the following quote from a senior manager.

“So much decision making is retained at the ‘top of the house’, so there was very little genuine empowerment of people at any level other than CEO and his trusted advisors. The way decisions were made felt mysterious and rather lacking in transparency to those who worked in this organisation; this is demotivating even to very senior people who are hired to make decisions and to make things happen but don’t feel this is possible.” (Senior manager, Finance industry).

Managers need to be aware of the thin line between empowering employees and leaving them unsupported. Singapore Management Agenda data shows that 50 per cent of employees reported working in ‘low support’ organisations with a lack of direction and support from managers. Engaging leaders can offer support in a number of ways from ensuring employees have the resources required to undertake their role, to offering time off in lieu in response to periods of high workload, and by representing their team’s interests more widely in the organisation.



Communicating in a clear and honest manner

Open, honest and face-to-face communication was appreciated by staff. Employees like to be well-informed about and involved in organisational issues. When there is little clarity and structure, people will feel confused and disempowered.

Employees like managers who are clear communicators and do not dictate instructions or talk down to them. They also prefer hearing information about organisational matters directly from their managers, rather than from other sources. Making the effort to find answers to questions and adapting information to suit the employees' needs is appreciated by employees.

Being accessible and cultivating meaningful relationships

Employees feel valued when managers ask about their personal lives and interests outside of work, or show sensitivity when they are experiencing personal issues. Regular conversations like these make employees feel like they are individuals and not merely job functions. Leaders may need to pay greater attention to the amount of time spent on tasks versus cultivating relationships and giving support to staff. Given how dynamic organisations are, effective leaders need to be able to determine for themselves to what degree each is needed in different situations.

Research ^{(i), (iii)} describes engaging leaders as “nearby leaders” and “charismatic connectors” ^(xviii). They make themselves accessible to employees, actively seek out conversations with people and attempt to understand their needs. When employees feel they have direct access to their bosses, this makes them more willing to share their thoughts and easier for them to ask questions.

“An engaging leader is someone that really goes and connects with their staff at all levels. A person who does not distance themselves from others...someone who is always approachable, tries to establish a two way conversation with others...is not too formal or hierarchical. Employees feel good when they are able to have an open conversation with their leader any time...that they can speak openly and freely, without feeling the burden of the hierarchy. All this goes beyond giving instructions, tasks and projects. It's really having a nice, flowing communication with employees and making the effort to reach out to staff.” (First-level manager, Transport industry)

It is no surprise that our research suggests that employees prefer to be asked rather than told. Adult to adult relationships are what is desired rather than parent-child.

Showing integrity and fairness

It is important that managers behave with integrity. This means treating employees fairly and not playing favourites. This is particularly important during times of change.

“Fairness is important. There is a need to avoid favouritism. We [managers] also need to reason and explain the rationale of decisions, so as to make the acceptance of them much easier. Constantly ask employees for feedback and then taking the feedback seriously so that they know it is not falling on deaf ears.” (Senior manager, Food manufacturing industry)

Key Messages

In this paper, we have emphasised the importance of engaging leadership for some of the key challenges faced by the Singapore economy, namely productivity and innovation. We have identified through our research six behaviours key to an engaging leadership style, and identified some gaps in approach in Singapore's current leadership population.

Three key messages stand out for us when it comes to improving the quality of engaging leadership in Singapore. We offer these with some questions for reflection below.

Focus on the people as well as the task

Time and again we hear about leaders focussing almost exclusively on the task, not taking the time to get to know their staff, how they think and what they value. People matter, and most likely the quickest and surest way to improve productivity is simply through valuing the contribution they make, often in quite simple ways such as a thank you for a job well done. Ask yourself:

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