

Qualification: CIPD Diploma in Applied Human Resources

Module Name:

Understanding Employee Engagement

On the Job Research

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By signing below, I confirm that the work/evidence presented is my own, unaided work. I understand the regulations pertaining to candidate malpractice and the action that may be taken as a result.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Duncan Hook', is written over a light grey rectangular background.

Date: 07/02/2022

1. Meeting with my line manager to understand Pembrokeshire County Council (PCC)'s approach to employee engagement

I met with both my line manager and the Learning and Development (L&D) manager to understand what has been planned for the future alongside what we are seeing with engagement currently.

For my manager and me, we have assessed engagement through the perspectives of attendance and retention. Over the course of 2020 we had a large number of long term absence cases attributed to burnout. This was explained in many cases as due to the increased commitment/higher engagement they felt to both doing a good job in difficult times and showing how hard they were working from home. Over time, this form of sickness absence has lessened and we are now seeing an increase in short term absence for minor ailments. Both of these results indicated that employee's engagement has lessened over time. We have also felt the pinch with problems retaining staff such as experienced social workers, at the same time as struggling to fill vacancies. Leavers are telling us at exit interview that they have not felt supported and communication has been poor (CIPD, 2020). Due to the impact felt from absence, and increased issues retaining staff across the authority (Magdani, 2022), the ongoing focus for engagement has been on supporting performance and wellbeing (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 93). With HR, we have been consistently training managers on our flexible working request process and helping them to identify staff who could benefit with a flexible solution to help their work/life balance (Guest, 2019).

Soft launching in 2021 and mandatory from April 2022, the new 'Performance & Wellbeing Plan' attempts to address shortfalls in employee contact that have occurred as a result of homeworking through the pandemic (CIPD, 2020). Rather than the old system of annual performance reviews, equal emphasis is now put on the wellness of employees. This plan aims to ensure that every employee has regular consistent contact and can track their progress through an online platform that both employee and line manager have access to. Along with consistent absence management process, it is hoped that issues arising with mental and physical wellbeing will be recognized and supported early with this approach. The emphasis on performance is hoped to address issues with staff feeling like they are not listened to or understood by their manager (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009).

The L&D manager explained the difficulty with finding solutions that work across all the directorates and services within the council. All services have tended to approach engagement in different ways, with some managers desperately finding different ways to improve morale and involvement. Some of these approaches have been misguided, such as one manager who kicked off a meeting with a 'guess the baby' competition for a team of accountants over video call and had complaints that they were being treated like children – which has been proven not to work (Sparrow, 2018). Our teams are sharing that the things they want from work are to have good work/life balance, recognition and development. It is hoped that some of this need will be catered for by the introduction of coaching skills for our management teams. A group of managers have been through coaching training and others have had experiences of being coached themselves. These skills will be used in conjunction with the Performance and Wellbeing plan to help our employees connect with their managers and drive their own development (MacLeod, 2015).

The new Chief Executive (starting September 2021) has also been a driving force to address engagement issues. He is also an advocate of coaching style management having previously

seen the benefits of increasing autonomy while also showing a direct interest in the motivations and development of employees. He has also introduced a quarterly 'Q&A Cuppa' in which all 6000+ staff are invited to attend and hear updates from him and other senior leaders as well as an opportunity to ask questions direct to the people who can provide answers (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 83). This has proven fairly popular with around 5% attendance to the live stream and with a further 15% watching a recording at a later time. Employees have appreciated the opportunity to not only hear updates but have their say as well and the hope is that with advocates of the stream, attendance will improve over time. PCC have run two surveys specifically intended to gauge the feeling of staff towards hybrid working and will be running a third in early 2022 (CIPD, 2020). 48% of staff in the last survey have said they would like to work from home and not return to the office at all although 90% have agreed that they would prefer to come back on a hybrid basis if purely home working was not an option. The new CEO feels strongly that our future engagement of staff is linked to the face-to-face presence in the office, with shared learning and morale being obvious benefits; and so HR will be working with managers to encourage this approach while balancing with the benefits home working has brought to wellbeing (CIPD, 2021).

2. Examine the employee handbook and any internal staff bulletins within your organisation and make some notes as to whether you think the content engages employees on topics that matter to them

The most consistent source for employee information is the intranet. This is where HR policies, employee benefits and other news and services live. The overwhelming feedback from staff is that this an overwhelming source of information that is not easily accessible. One of the biggest challenges we have as an organization in engagement through the intranet is that all these resources have to be able to cater for such a large group of employees which invariably means that information is lost. In terms of engagement, it is hard for staff to know the wellbeing resources and benefits available to them without being informed by word of mouth or by their manager (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 93). While everyone uses the intranet regularly, this is not a destination for engagement through casual browsing as it will only be used when you need something.

I also wanted to look at how PCC attempt to engage staff from the moment they start. With the perspective on providing a public service, an historical approach to engaging staff has been to pull on the feelings of responsibility we should have to the taxpayer and the focus on our customers.

The 'Corporate Welcome Booklet' is a 66 page book designed to give an overview of everything new staff would need; including an overview of what the council's values and our obligation to the community. While the values approach was successful in the past and some of our more tenured employees have a strong sense of public duty, newer staff are not engaged by the same methods. For this reason, the booklet also outlines the 'Behaviour Standards' which are expected by Senior Leader, Managers, Employees and the Elected Members (Johns & Ellis, 2016, pp. 94-95). This set of standards are echoes through learning and development comms and make it clear that there is an expectation for engagement to be promoted by everyone.

Already mentioned was the 'Q&A Cuppa' session with the CEO that has attracted around 20% of the total workforce which represents a good majority of corporate staff. While this interactive approach is helping the new CEO gain trust and improving his visibility (Sanders, 2012), demonstrating values and enabling employee voice, it has to be quite broad to cater

for all services. There are 6000+ employees invited and questions asked are often whole organization focused so would not engage staff and are at risk of feeling irrelevant. For staff working in the Social Care and Housing directorate, for example, it would be far more engaging for staff to learn from the director of developments within the sector and have an opportunity to actually impact their specific service (Gallup, 2003). This is not catered for at present in any format.

Regular operational communication is fed through via email. Currently, wellness communication is presented in the same format as alerts from IT about system downtime so are at risk of being missed or at worst, ignored. The regularity of this communication is also ineffective as it becomes more of a nuisance. The communities team have recently introduced a monthly formatted email 'Pembrokeshire Focus' which packages all email comms that would have been sent individually in the past into an engaging publication which reminds us of why we love where we live. A similar approach to recognizing employees and promoting initiatives for staff could be a great way to engage our employees (Johns & Ellis, 2016, p. 93).

3. Discuss your development needs with your line manager as a result of the above activities, using the CIPD Profession Map as a basis for your discussion. Consider whether or not your skills in this area require improvement

A large focus on my CPD over the past year has been based on the 'Skilled Influencer' behavior from the 2013 CIPD profession map. The work I have already been putting in place with managers regarding coaching and performance management practice I feel has already improved the management promotion of engagement. This is something I will continue to monitor over the next year as good habits are still forming with managers, particularly regarding coaching which has seen good results and would be a shame to lose.

I have started to work on training for groups of managers and recently arranged to deliver training to the finance management team on a range of HR topics including Flexible working. I feel strongly that we owe it to staff to encourage a healthy work-life balance and I would like to give managers the confidence to use flexible working as a potential solution for staff who are feeling stressed or burnout.

Looking at the 'Employee Experience' section of the new CIPD profession map has given me some useful areas of focus to help managers assess their effectiveness at engaging their teams (CIPD, 2013). Achieving trust will be a focus for me as I believe this has been the biggest challenge for managers during the pandemic when communication and team contact has been poor. I would like to work with managers to share information when they can and to work on building relationships with their teams.

Conducting exit interviews is a responsibility of my role but these are predominantly used for workforce planning purposes. There is an opportunity to use this data to gauge engagement within our employee base, asking questions based on the Gallup Q12 and learning of weaknesses and opportunities. Promoting evidence-based solutions has been difficult in PCC as access has been limited but is another focus of my CPD. Exit interviews could be a useful source of data to make a case for change.

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