



Cast in a new light

A leadership style that switches on engagement can make staff radiate productivity, research from *Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe* and *Margaret Bradley* shows

A major preoccupation of organisations in the 21st century is how to increase employee engagement. Studies increasingly reveal that organisations with cultures with high levels of engagement outperform their competitors, so the search is on for hard evidence about whether engagement really does predict outstanding performance. Also, what form of

leadership is required to create engagement and a culture that sustains it? We believe we have some of the answers.

For much of the past 10 years, we have carried out research and consultancy to identify the precise nature of engaging leadership, analysing 360-degree feedback data for thousands of managers, and assessing the impact on their staff's motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, and well-being. It

was not until recently, however, when we completed a three-year longitudinal study of 46 mental health teams that we were able to provide evidence that engaging leadership does, in fact, predict productivity. We also found that this style of leadership increases employees' motivation, job satisfaction and commitment, while reducing job-related stress. Leadership skills alone do not have such a transformational effect.

Funded by the NHS, and carried out by ourselves and researchers at King's College London and the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, the study looked at the impact of leadership on the successful implementation of change in multi-professional teams (*see*



Further reading). Each of these teams, set up to provide home-based support to people experiencing mental health crises, had a designated team leader. But with the teams operating around the clock, 365 days a year, they were in practice led by different individuals at different times of the day. This meant that our focus was on assessing the quality of leadership in the team, rather than on any single individual within it.

We began by distributing a questionnaire to members of all 46 teams, asking them, for instance, how far the leadership of their team was characterised by empowering others, trusting them to take decisions, being active in developing staff strengths, and maintaining a balance between the need for change and the need for stability. These questions were based on the engaging leadership behaviours we had identified in the course of our previous research through a 360-feedback tool known as the (Engaging) Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ). But whereas this earlier research had produced a list of behaviours that had a positive impact on employee engagement in general, on this occasion we focused only on those affecting team performance. We then conducted one-to-one interviews with members of eight of

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ENGAGING LEADERSHIP IN HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

The model of engaging leadership emerging from our study closely resembles Robert Greenleaf’s notion of “servant leadership” with its emphasis on service to others and shared decision-making. Such leadership is not confined to people in senior roles, but is distributed throughout the organisation. Among the NHS teams we studied, those that had succeeded in developing an engaging leadership style displayed the following characteristics.

- Engaging stakeholders from the outset to shape the nature of the service. This formed the basis of continuing strong relationships necessary for the teams to succeed.

- Collective vision of good-quality service: team leaders ensured that the vision of the team and the operational policies were shaped by team members to create a sense of “ownership” of their work and of belonging to something they valued. Regular meetings and informal communication, such as office banter, kept the vision alive.

- Non-hierarchical teams: while there was an appointed leader in every team, a culture of devolved leadership encouraged people to take the lead where it was appropriate for them to do so.

- Supportive culture: informal support from colleagues and the team lead, and formal

support in the form of regular individual and group clinical supervision, ensured that people felt comfortable in seeking advice and sharing work-related problems. This created a culture of joint problem-solving, which empowered team members to take the risks necessary to be innovative.

- Successful change management: team leads ensured team members were consulted on impending changes and their response taken into consideration. The result was a collective team response to top-down changes and the formulation of a joint action-plan for addressing such changes.

the teams – a total of over 60 people – asking for their perceptions of the way the teams were led. Comments such as “We aren’t a group of individuals – we are a collective group working together” and “All team members are given the opportunity to put their point of view across” gave us valuable qualitative data to put alongside the quantitative data that came out of responses to the questionnaire. We also talked to senior health and social care professionals about the behaviours they saw as important.

Our analysis of this qualitative data and of responses to the 731 completed questionnaires we received enabled us to identify three dimensions of leadership culture: “engaging with others”, “visionary leadership” and “leadership capabilities” (see panel, below). We found that all three dimensions positively and significantly affected several aspects of staff’s attitudes to work and their well-being at work.

As the table on the facing page shows, the degree to which members see their team as competent in leadership positively affects motivation, job satisfaction and a strong sense of team effectiveness, though not the



other aspects of commitment and well-being. The extent to which the team is seen as displaying “visionary leadership” also has a significantly positive effect on motivation, and most of the aspects of well-being, including a sense of fulfillment. Importantly, we found that visionary leadership also helps to reduce job-related stress and exhaustion. However, only “engaging with others” significantly affects all aspects of positive attitudes to work, and all aspects of well-being, including a strong sense of team spirit, which neither of the other two leadership dimensions predicts.

Next, we examined whether any of these three dimensions assessed in 2005 significantly predicted the productivity of the teams 12 months later. Again, we found that of the three, only “engaging with others” was a significant predictor of performance, defined in terms of meeting the government target of reducing in-patient bed occupancy by treating patients in their own homes. This was the case

even when we allowed for contextual factors. As far as we are aware, this is the first study to have provided evidence of a cause-and-effect relationship between leadership behaviour and organisational performance, when the effect of the context has been taken into account.

Our work with a wide range of public- and private-sector organisations leads us to believe that the validity of these findings is not limited to the health and social care arena. For example, we used the TLQ in a leadership and culture change intervention involving 120 senior managers over an 18-month period in Bradford Council. Following this intervention, not only did the authority increase its CPA rating, and receive a national award in service areas in which it had been perceived as unsatisfactory, but it also became the first public-sector organisation to appear in the top 20 of *The Sunday Times* Best Big Companies to Work For list.

Our research has significant implications for the way organisations build leadership

CIPD RESEARCH

The research reported here forms the backdrop to a major new research project being launched by the CIPD in the spring.

The “Sustainable High-Performance Organisation” is a three-year action-research based programme exploring how HR leaders and their colleagues can design and implement working practices that deliver sustainably superior performance and strategic resilience.

The CIPD will be working with 15 organisations from different sectors, helping them identify key strategic initiatives that can drive sustainable performance. These could include projects aimed at building leadership and management capacity and capability, an engaged and talented workforce and culture change resulting in greater innovation, customer focus, performance and corporate agility.

A large number of HR professionals will be involved in events designed to learn from and influence the research. The aim is to create a dynamic community of interested parties keen to advance the theory and practice of people management and development and contribute to sustainable success for their organisations.

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DIMENSIONS OF LEADERSHIP

Analysis of the data gathered in the course of our study of mental health teams revealed that team members perceived quality of leadership along three dimensions: engaging with others, visionary leadership, and leadership capabilities and competencies.

The 14 leadership capabilities or competencies we identified included: understanding and using overall strategy to achieve goals and objectives; ensuring clarity of roles, the goals and/or targets and criteria for success; establishing, maintaining, and

being committed to high standards of service delivery and quality outcomes; and having well-thought-out systems and procedures that support the effective use of resources. These might be best understood as the “what” of leadership.

The two other dimensions related to the way leadership competencies were used – to the “how” of leadership. Visionary leadership included having a clear vision of what the team was aiming for, being sensitive to the agenda of a wide range of stakeholders, and

inspiring them with the team’s passion and determination.

Engaging with others was made up of items such as concern for the needs of staff; empowering them by trusting them to take decisions; listening to others’ ideas and being willing to accommodate them; finding time to discuss problems and issues despite being very busy; supporting others by coaching and mentoring; inspiring all staff to contribute fully to the work of the team; and actively promoting the achievements of the team to the outside world.



“It is crucial to embed the leadership behaviours that promote engagement”

capacity. Many still base their leadership development activities on competency frameworks, despite increasing criticism of this approach both in the UK and the US, and growing evidence that some of the most competent people in organisations are also the worst to work with in terms of their impact on the morale, well-being, and commitment of others. Our research takes this debate further since competencies did not predict productivity, whereas engagement did.

However, for the effects of engagement to be sustained, it is crucial to embed the

leadership behaviours that promote it in the culture of the organisation. To be effective, therefore, any interventions designed to create such a culture must start with the CEO and the top team. Indeed, focusing interventions only at lower levels, may well create more problems than it alleviates. Our experience of working with organisations overwhelmingly shows that people find the model of engaging leadership instantly appealing. We have witnessed extraordinary changes to the behaviour and attitudes of individuals towards colleagues and others with whom they work, and to their approach

to their job. But it is also our consistent experience that one of the greatest frustrations for staff is when this form of leadership is not reflected in the style of those at the top of the organisation, and is consequently at variance with the dominant culture – so much so that we now believe that not involving top managers in such interventions might be ethically questionable.

But fortunately, the converse is also true. Our experience of working with organisations in which the CEO and the top team accept that creating an engaging culture must start with them is that the effects can be extraordinary, and do not require substantial intervention; in fact, that would defeat the purpose.

It is largely up to HR professionals to exploit the exciting prospects opened up by these findings. Their role is critical in influencing top managers, not only by arguing the business case for engagement, but also by ensuring that the culture of engagement permeates all parts of the organisation and all people processes, including recruitment, promotion, appraisal, reward and performance management systems, talent management and succession planning efforts. ■

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WHICH LEADERSHIP DIMENSIONS HAVE MOST IMPACT ON STAFF?

	LEADERSHIP DIMENSION		
	ENGAGING WITH OTHERS	VISIONARY LEADERSHIP	LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES
ATTITUDES TO WORK			
A high level of job satisfaction	●		●
A high level of motivation to achieve	●	●	●
A strong sense of job commitment	●		
A strong sense of organisational commitment	●		
WELL-BEING AT WORK			
A high sense of fulfilment	●	●	
A high level of self-esteem	●	●	
A high level of self-confidence	●		●
A low level of job-related stress	●	●	
A low level of job-related emotional exhaustion	●	●	
A strong sense of team spirit	●		
A strong sense of team effectiveness	●	●	●

FURTHER READING

- A summary of the research discussed here can be downloaded at www.sdo.lshtm.ac.uk/sdo222002.html (B Alimo-Metcalfe, J Alban-Metcalfe, C Samele, M Bradley and J Mariathan, 2007, "The impact of leadership factors in implementing change in complex health and social care environments: NHS Plan clinical priority for mental health crisis resolution teams", Department of Health NHS NIHR SDO, Project 22/2002)
- B Alimo-Metcalfe and J Alban-Metcalfe, "Under the influence", *PM*, 6 March 2003
- B Alimo-Metcalfe and J Alban-Metcalfe, "Leadership: Time for a new direction?" *Leadership*, 1, 1, 51-71, 2005
- For a discussion of the concept of servant leadership, see A Arkin, "Serve the servants", *PM*, 23 December 2004

① FURTHER INFO

The CIPD's certificate in managing people has been developed for line managers and focuses on the people aspects of their role. training.hotline@cipd.co.uk
www.cipd.co.uk/training/cmpc 020 8612 6202

Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe is speaking at the CIPD's HRD 2008, Europe's largest learning and development event, held on 14-17 April at ExCeL in London. 020 8612 6248
www.cipd.co.uk/hrd



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