

Engagement: what's missing?

Bella Mehta examines the difference facilitation can make to people's relationships with their organisations

References

- 1 Gallup's Q12 workplace evaluations 1993-98 <http://businessjournal.gallup.com/content/787/collective-advantage.aspx>
- 2 <http://www.cedar-tm.com/news-events/news.php>

Employee engagement is not just about 'comms' or 'hearts and minds'. Engagement happens, or fails to happen, at many levels of organisational life, but often the day-to-day team experience is undervalued. Most employees experience working life through being part of a team. For a group of individuals to become a high-performing team, they need healthy habits, good communication and positive group dynamics. Most groups need to learn how to create a high-performing environment, but few are taught. This is a training gap that leaves a huge untapped source of potential within our organisations.

Managers and leaders who develop good facilitation skills report that these are a central part of their toolkit from which they, their teams and the organisation all benefit.

If the question is *how do we create more engaged organisations?*, we know the answers are complex.

When organisational messages jar with the day-to-day experience, temporary or permanent disengagement is understandably the result

Some people are highly engaged in their roles. For these fortunate individuals, problems and issues do still arise but these are balanced against more positive aspects of the job. Following the analysis of the annual employee engagement survey results, such individuals are happily assigned to the 'engaged' column – usually green on the report dashboard. From the 'ambers and reds', we identify and launch curative projects for the top three disengagement factors revealed by the data. In organisations that I have worked with over the last 20 years, I have seen many initiatives launched in this way, from a warehouse clear-up project to flexible working initiatives and pay reviews.

In progressive organisations, effort is applied not only to the types of task-based projects that I have mentioned above but also 'the people side'. For the last decade or more, business schools and management courses have presented new models of leadership that emphasise the importance of people, values and authenticity. What managers and leaders often lack, however, is concrete understanding and practical skills that enable them to create, and participate in, high-functioning teams.

All individuals perform their work as part of a group or team, in a web of relationships with peers and leaders within the boundary of that group, and other colleagues, customers and partners outside it. Effective facilitation of groups and teams can bring huge benefits in terms of healthy participation and engagement.

I read with interest the well-publicised findings from Gallup and other polls that having a best friend at work, or activities that have personal meaning, are consistently present where there are high levels of engagement, retention and organisational loyalty¹. Rather than feeling empowered by these findings, they concern me



because the received wisdom is that we have no control over these things – they are to do with ‘culture’ or ‘the marketplace’. And even if there is a ring of truth to these findings (and I’d quite like a best friend at work myself), I imagine the ridicule I would face if I presented a Best Friend At Work or Meaningful Work proposal to the project funding board.

On the ground and where it matters

A recent survey of more than 2,000 UK employees reported that 33 per cent of them have regularly dreaded coming into work as the result of a bad team environment and 54 per cent said that correcting sloppy work delivered by colleagues was their biggest timewaster². Forty two per cent of respondents indicated that “having a team leader who does not assist in resolving conflicts” damaged performance.

The aim of all managers and leaders is (or should be) to support groups and teams to achieve a task but 47 per cent of the survey’s participants said their organisation does not help them develop good team working practices.

Leaders and managers are often overwhelmed by their own tasks, which are often unrelated to managing people. Appraisals and team meetings become a distraction, and too often feel unrelated to the mountain of ‘real work’ piling up. Employees adopt an ‘every man for himself’ mentality; 39 per

cent of the survey respondents reported that their team mates had failed to share information that could have helped them.

Within teams, there are conflicting needs. Some people are hugely engaged by the possibility of working from home, and others are deflated because the office is so empty on Fridays. Someone who we think of as disengaged may have withdrawn their best efforts because the role they are doing is not what they were employed to do.

When organisational messages (‘people are our greatest asset’) jar with the day-to-day experience (‘I’ve had seven different managers in two years’), temporary or permanent disengagement is understandably the result. And at work, as in society, there seem to be a few who are permanently disengaged and we never really understand why.

Managers and leaders need to be good facilitators

Managers and leaders navigate this difficult terrain often with no specialist training in the inner workings of groups and teams, such as a trained group facilitator may have. As part of his training, a facilitator will learn to engage groups in meaningful dialogue, healthy decision-making and to work effectively with the prevailing group dynamics. Dealing with difficult issues, enabling learning, removing blockages, enhancing performance and engagement are the essence of



3 Bion W R
*Experiences
in Groups
and Other
Papers*
Routledge
(1961)

4 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/598b7780-798a-11e1-8fad-00144fea-b49a.html#axzz2N-VtzmCde>

5 MIT's
Human
Dynamics
Laboratory
research
<http://hbr.org/2012/04/the-new-science-of-building-great-teams/ar/1>

life as a professional facilitator.

The more elusive drivers of employee engagement that I identified above – relationships, meaning and congruence with a wider system – are precisely aligned with the way that skilled facilitators are trained to work. While many organisations will consider using an external facilitator for key events or for mediation, not many fully realise the benefit of developing these skills within their own organisation.

As an example, I share two models from the world of facilitation that are equally applicable to employee engagement.

Hamburger Model

The first is the Hamburger Model (see below); its exact source unknown although it resonates with W R Bion's models³.

The task is its 'meat'. This is the content of our work: the steps that we have to undertake in order to get from A to B. Most effort and attention in a typical group is concentrated here and it is often called 'doing the job'. This is easy to understand as it has objectives, boundaries, timescales and deliverables and because culturally, socially and professionally we are used to talking about getting things done.

Generally the task goes well if the processes (the way we get the task done) are smooth and if the relationships (how well we work together) are aligned. And if the task goes well, by extension, we are generally part of a high-performing team and are fully engaged.

Creating alignment between these three elements is easier when a manager (or facilitator) is aware they all need attention, skill and effort focused on them. Generally, technical or specialist expertise enables the task, project management expertise enables the process, and communication expertise enables good relationships. Encompassing all three is facilitation expertise, which provides the fit and balance across tasks, processes and relationships vital to a 'healthy hamburger'. When the group leader actively facilitates this balance, the team is freed up to perform the task unencumbered by distractions, the task runs more smoothly and there is a more direct relationship between the team's effort and the results.

In an average group, the majority of effort and attention, say 60 to 80 per cent, is concentrated on the task and 20 to 30 per cent is given to managing the process (eg allocating roles, agreeing responsibilities, measuring and reviewing progress, matching people to roles, making improvements to the plan). Typically, very little importance, if any, is given to managing relationships. There are only a few environments within which managers and leaders are able to develop essential relationship skills such as listening, asking questions and gaining consensus. There is little feedback to them on how well they do this and how important it is to the team's performance. The engagement of senior managers and leaders is often assumed rather than nurtured and, as a result, the richness of insights can often be missed. The phenomenon of poor-performing teams having a lower combined IQ than that of the lowest scoring individuals is well known⁴, and poor decisions are too often the result of groupthink.

Often, managers and leaders assume either that people in the same team will naturally 'get on' or, if they don't, that there is nothing that can be done about it. As a consequence, whether the group dynamics help or hinder the task is often a case of luck rather than design. In fact, building and maintaining a healthy dynamic within the team is a skill that can be learned and one that data suggests leads to high engagement⁵.

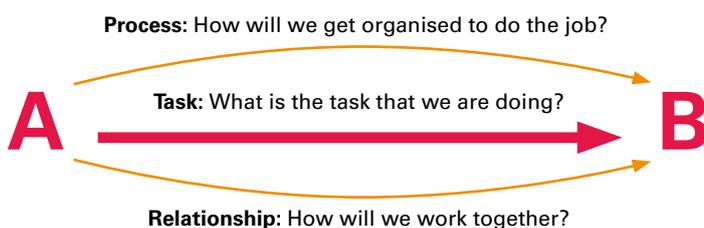
Beyond the team boundaries, out towards the wider organisation, the model still applies. Even redundancy programmes can be run engagingly for those who stay, as well as for those who go, where there is good management of what needs to happen and how, underpinned by meaningful dialogue and good relationships.

A group that is highly concerned with the task might say "the end justifies the means" whereas a team that prioritises process and relationships in pursuit of tasks might say (as Gandhi did) "the end is inherent in the means".

The Hamburger Model in practice

This model is helpful in the way it has been used above – to roughly assign percentages against the effort and attention applied to process, tasks and relationships. As a rule of thumb, in low-performing, disengaged teams, the effort applied to relationships and processes is too low.

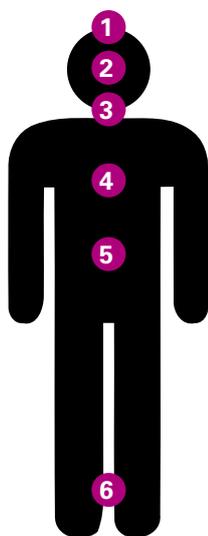
It is useful to remember that, when a task seems difficult, frustrating or inefficient, the answer usually lies with the design of the process and relationships. In one organisation I heard of recently, freelance contractors regularly transition to employed staff members, especially at busy times



in a project. Rather than tick the box on the HR system that changes someone's status from a temporary to a permanent employee (the process disallows this), they have to leave and re-join in a series of events that takes three weeks and involves returning and then re-issuing employee passes, computers and email addresses. At a relationship level, the disruption, seen as unnecessary, fuels resentment between the HR department and other functions.

Whether there are valid reasons for this rule or not, the impact on engagement levels for those involved, including HR staff, is easy to extrapolate.

Finally, in practice, the Hamburger is a 'friendly', easy-to-sketch model that many people can relate to without too much explanation, so facilitates discussions about the 'soft and fluffy' message that relationships and process are vital elements of employee engagement.



Six Dimensions of Facilitation

A second model for those interested in creating more engaged teams is John Heron's Six Dimensions of Facilitation⁶. This is a detailed model, originally developed for and within academic institutions, and I describe a highly simplified and slightly adapted model here for organisations.

Heron describes how good facilitators (for which substitute managers or leaders) are working at multiple levels or dimensions. Groups and organisations who are authentically seeking to deepen their engagement with their employees have applied this model to great effect:

- **planning** What do we do? What are the organisation's strategic objectives and initiatives? What is the plan?
- **meaning** Do I understand what is going on? How can the organisation and its employees make sense of the objectives, events and actions?
- **confronting**: What is being avoided or resisted? How can the organisation and its employees raise consciousness to face up to blind spots?
- **feeling** What are we sensitive to? How does the organisation handle feelings (resonance, empathy) and emotions (fulfilment, frustration) and what can be created and driven from this dimension?
- **structuring** How do we work? How do we implement the plan 'at the coal-face'? What are

1. Planning: What do we do?

Our Heads and minds are strategic and outward looking

2. Meaning: Do I understand what is going on?

Our 'third eye' is intuitive and enables us to see beyond the physical

3. Confronting: What is being avoided or resisted?

Speaking enables questioning, listening and learning

4. Feeling: What are we sensitive to?

Feelings and emotions are at the heart of engagement

5. Structuring: How do we work?

How we work is the guts of the organisation

6. Values: What are (genuinely) the values of this organisation?

The organisation rest, stands and walks forward on its values

the realities? How do we learn; how do we act/reflect?

- **values** What are (genuinely) the values of this organisation? What values, beliefs and ethics does the organisation communicate through its actions?

The Six Dimensions Model in practice

The planning and structuring dimensions are generally the ones that receive most attention within organisations. (The latter is broadly equivalent to the processes strand in the Hamburger Model.)

The meaning, feeling and values ('valuing' in the original model) dimensions hold the key to opportunities for both engagement and disengagement. For example, an organisation clearly needs to be able to flex its strategy in response to the external environment, and this has an impact on teams. I was recently working with a team whose main activities were conspicuously omitted during a company-wide meeting about the next year's plan. Their questions were unanswered due to lack of time but they were publicly urged to support the new strategy. Their anger, frustration and disengagement was palpable, as realisation dawned that their work had been 'unceremoniously canned'.

If communicated without meaning or feeling, such a change as this can be highly devaluing of a team's efforts, and results in deep disengagement which is difficult to reverse. Done well, with good understanding of the importance of these dimensions, the team feels fully engaged in the new direction, and able to let go of attachment to previous activities in pursuit of the new strategy.

The confronting dimension often raises the most anxiety within teams, as we generally have negative

6 Heron J *The Complete Facilitator's Handbook* Kogan Page (1999)

7 http://www.involve.co.uk/2013_Comms_Channels/



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experiences and connotations of 'confrontations'. However, since engagement often lies in blind spots and learning through feedback (constructive confronting) raises our awareness, this dimension also offers rich possibilities for engagement.

In the original model, each dimension can be handled in one of three modes of power (hierarchical, co-operative and autonomy) leading to 18 possible facilitator styles, each appropriate to different circumstances. A key part of a facilitator's toolkit is confidence and flexibility in using these styles, alongside a solid framework for understanding group dynamics and deep self-awareness.

The process of learning about this model within a group environment itself deepens engagement as relationship skills, personal presence and charismatic development are central to all dimensions of facilitator style.

Attempts to increase engagement are too often ineffective. Much effort is expended on top-down efforts to 'share' vision and values or bottom-up efforts to search out and address sources of

dissatisfaction. In isolation, company values posters, complimentary fruit bowls or even timely appraisals do not work. When top-down and bottom-up messages are congruent with employees' everyday working experience of being in a team, high levels of engagement and performance result. Facilitation training offers tools, models and awareness-raising that practically support managers and leaders to develop themselves and their teams. High-quality facilitation skills training for managers and leaders is a worthwhile investment of money and time.

Employee engagement agency INVOLVE recently asked 150 communications professionals to identify what they thought would be the most effective channel for employee engagement messages⁷. I would have predicted that this group might suggest a whizzy social media campaign or a company-wide event. In fact, the biggest group by far, 37 per cent, voted for leadership and management development activities ("without this, nothing changes").

If we are going to be investing in training in these cash-strapped times, hadn't we better ensure we build the skills that create real engagement? **TJ**

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