The language of engagement

We examine the secret ingredient for moving beyond compliance to commitment.

Social psychologist William Kahn provided the first formal definition of personal engagement as “the harnessing of organisational members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance.”

A secret ingredient of moving beyond compliance to commitment is engagement. Engagement is a two-way process that establishes mutual respect by valuing an organisation’s employees as carefully as it does its customers. Individual employees, mutually engaged in common, clearly understood enterprise, work as the organisation’s companies of people, its “companions.” Think of it as engaging the minds, bodies and enthusiasm of the workforce so that they get pleasure from going to work.

How many times have your employees attended a health and safety training course and, in some cases, taken some sort of assessment, only to find days or weeks later that they are undertaking the relevant tasks in the same pre-training way because they lack engagement or buy-in to the process?

Many senior level staff would help this process of engagement by simply being visible – even just going out to meet and greet the staff. We wouldn’t think twice if it was a customer, so why should it be any different with staff?

What is the answer to good engagement?
Studies have found a highly engaged workforce means the difference between a company that thrives and one that struggles. When employees are engaged they are more passionate, resourceful and entrepreneurial. These employees are emotionally connected to the mission and purpose of their work. Engagement, in the industrial sense, denotes the focus, trust and energetic enthusiasm of all employees to work together to achieve the short-term, medium-term and long-term objectives of their organisation, for example the organisation in which they share, both individually and collectively, emotional connections of personal identification, competitive pride, co-operative care and team fellowship.

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What gets in the way?
The hierarchy can be a stumbling block – managers and leaders may have been in the organisation for many years, may have grown up there, done the job themselves and worked hard to move up to management. While they will explain that they already engage with the staff day to day to work safely, just how well are they engaging? For some supervisors, senior managers and leaders, it’s very much seen as beyond their remit to engage because “all of the staff know what they are doing and they don’t need me interfering.”

Other unfortunately common states of mind with regard to engaging the workforce which we have witnessed on sites include:

Despair: “It won’t make any difference to safety; it’s always been this way.”
Disorganisation: “I do not have the time even to get out my office!”
Disinterest: “I have a morning meeting with them and that is enough.”
Superciliousness: “The attitude to safety is not good here, and they don’t listen.”
Dismissiveness: “I am not good at engaging with the staff, I am not a people person.”
How to engage Engaged organisations, based on mutual respect for all concerned in the enterprise, communicate strong, authentic values backed up by clear evidence of trustworthiness and impartial fairness. As a result, clear two-way promises and commitments between employers and staff, the rationales and necessities of those commitments being fully understood, are fulfilled.

Engagement therefore requires awareness, focus, and listening attentively to the views and concerns of staff and peers. Engagement can only work when you are absolutely present to what is really going on in a given situation so that you are able to respond engagingly.

The elements of the language of engagement

Engagement is something more easily understood as ‘engagement in decision-making’, also known as ‘problem-solving’. The basic engagement task for leaders is to determine how much of a ‘problem’ is ‘problem-solving’ for the persons with whom they must engage, for example what decisions and their actions, if taken with a given person, will tend to optimise or tend to minimise the organisational need that they are meant to address.

Similarly, what assumptions, conjectures, disinformation, misinformation, personal agenda, shoplifting, machismo, class, race, age and gender do you both bring to the engagement? All such potentially explosive barriers to communicative engagement must be recognised, observed and defused in the early stages of the conversation. The language is known as the language of engagement.

The acquisition of language is traditionally considered to be the attainment of a working facility in reading and writing (literacy); speaking (communicability); and listening to that language. The acquisition of the language of engagement is no different from that of any other language and, just like them, simply requires a little personal application.

Reading for engagement: how physically literate are you and your senior management? How well do you read other people’s body language, verbal scope and tone of delivery? How do you draw them into engagement in the communication event?

Writing for engagement: how physically communicative are you? How do you engage your body language, verbal scope and tone of delivery to match others without appearing patronising or shifty?

Speaking for engagement: how do you, as the leader, ‘tune’ the engagement of the communication event to achieve its optimal outcome?

Listening for engagement: listening to the physical, verbal and tonal totality of the engagement event is a bit like fishing for trout. It means focused listening to the flow of the communication event for that perfect moment when you can hook engagement out of the flow.

The important point: the objective of all engagement tactics, is that all parties and persons in every communication event leave those events having increased in confidence, secure support and commitment to the fellowship of engaging in the next dynamic stage of their organisation’s success.

Some self-monitoring questions

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Writing for engagement: how physically communicative are you? How do you engage your body language, verbal scope and tone of delivery to match others?

How well do you know your staff and directors – their names, hobbies, work ethics and attitudes to safety?

1. What do you have in common with the staff, apart from the work?
2. Do you take the time to listen, even though you are busy?
3. Do you help with organising and sorting their work issues with them?
4. Are you loyal and show concern?
5. Are there some members of staff you try to avoid in case of conflict?
6. Are you a leader or a manager?
7. Are you generally a positive or negative person when it comes to dealing with people?

The proactive way forward

We can all measure something that is reactive – many organisations spend a lot of time measuring health and safety incident frequency rates, accident investigations, RIDDOR reports, etc. However, few organisations engage in a proactive manner and measure that. Used wisely and in a proactive way engagement is an extremely powerful tool. But many managers and senior managers still think they are all above this as staff are trained to work in a safe manner at all times.

Go out onto the shop floor or site and ask how things are going. Then listen, show a little care and concern, show some interest and curiosity for the work with staff or contractors. Start to measure:

- How many positive conversations you have had in the last week or month?
- What actions were agreed with staff and yourself?
- How did you show care and concern? What empowerment or recognition took place?
- What have you learned about this process?

Treat it like a ‘back to the floor’ process, where senior people engage with the business go out and question, show curiosity and listen. This can have a profound effect on both parties.

The business case for engagement

A Watson Wyatt study of 115 companies suggested that a company with highly engaged employees achieves a financial performance four times greater than companies with poor engagement.

A staggering 87% of employees worldwide are not engaged at work; engaged employees in the US take an average of 2.69 sick days per year; the disengaged take 6.19.

The risk management consultancy also reported in 2008/09 that the highly engaged workplace is twice as likely to be top performers; almost 60% of them exceed or far exceed expectations for performance. Moreover, the highly engaged missed 43% fewer days of work due to illness.

According to Gallup, a staggering 87% of employees worldwide are not engaged at work. With many not engaging the language at all – or worse, outright hating not only their work but also their supervisors, team leaders and organisations may potentially devastate a whole department or shift.

The Institute of Employment Studies describes engagement as "a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its fulfilment. An engaged employee is aware of the business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisational goal. The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employee and employer.”

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Thanks to Dan Terry and John McKay for supplying this article.

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