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Engaging Staff in the Workplace

Abstract
{Excerpt} Social exchange theory sheds light on the reciprocal relationship between perceptions of an organization's enabling environment, capacity, and organizational motivation and staff willingness to maximize individual and collective performance. Yet, until recently, human resource specialists introduced cleaner, whiter, or more "colory" practices by administrative circular or order, typically after a modicum of consultation. Top-, middle-, and first-level managers would enforce adherence to the line.

Organizations are communities, the members of which want worthwhile jobs that inspire them. Naturally, a committed and willing workforce brings substantial benefits. Some time ago, we recognized that formal relationships cannot by themselves be expected to conduce these entirely: implicit employer–employee exchanges matter. Belatedly, we concede that perceptions of an organization's rules, ethos, and capabilities, not just the experience staff have of human resource practices, drive levels of effort and associated degrees of job satisfaction. More and more, organizations say they are looking for win–win solutions that match their needs with those of personnel: they examine the question of motivation with a fresh sense of purpose and conviction. Better still, high-performance organizations marshal and direct substantial resources to build effective behaviors and relationships, often in concert with human resource divisions. Engaging staff has come of age: in the 21st century, the concept affirms the importance of flexibility, change, and unremitting improvement in the workplace.

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Comments
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Engaging Staff in the Workplace

By Olivier Serrat

Surveys present clear and mounting evidence that staff engagement correlates closely with individual, collective, and corporate performance. It denotes the extent to which organizations gain commitment from personnel.

Coming of Age

Social exchange theory[1] sheds light on the reciprocal relationship between perceptions of an organization's enabling environment, capacity, and organizational motivation and staff willingness to maximize individual and collective performance.[2] Yet, until recently, human resource specialists introduced cleaner, whiter, or more "colory" practices by administrative circular or order, typically after a modicum of consultation. Top-, middle-, and first-level managers would enforce adherence to the line.

Organizations are communities, the members of which want worthwhile jobs that inspire them. Naturally, a committed and willing workforce brings substantial benefits. Some time ago, we recognized that formal relationships cannot by themselves be expected to conduce these entirely: implicit employer–employee exchanges matter.[3] Belatedly, we concede that perceptions of an organization's rules, ethos, and capabilities, not just the experience staff have of human resource practices,

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1 Social exchange theory posits that human relationships—hence, social stability and change—are shaped by negotiated give-and-take. Expressly, they are driven by direct reward, expected gains in influence, anticipated reciprocity, and perceptions of efficacy. (In biology, altruism is explained as an act that may harm an individual but hopefully advances the species or social group. Shockingly, perhaps, to some, social exchange theory suggests that altruism too springs from self-serving motivation—in the sense that it carries psychological rewards.) Everywhere, the theory holds, decisions are made based on the kinds of relationships people think they deserve, the balance between what they put in and what they get out, and the prospects of securing better deals with other parties.

2 Organizations do not exist in a vacuum: they are open systems. Manifestly, their external environment is of vital consequence. Rules, ethos, and capabilities condition performance within that. Typically, the enabling environment (rules) each builds to operate draws from political, sociocultural, economic, stakeholder, and administrative ingredients. Its organizational motivation (ethos) is conditioned by history, mission, culture, and incentives and rewards. Its organizational capacity (capabilities) is a function of strategic leadership, human resources, structure, financial management, infrastructure, program management, process management, and intra-organizational linkages. Basically, however, an organization is only as good as the people in it.

3 Contracts of employment set out responsibilities, duties, and rights in generalized form. As early as 1960, but with little discernible uptake, Chris Argyris mooted the notion that a "psychological contract" representing unwritten, mutual expectations might set the dynamics of relationships between parties. See Chris Argyris. 1960. *Understanding Organizational Behavior*. The Dorsey Press.

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drive levels of effort and associated degrees of job satisfaction. More and more, organizations say they are looking for win–win solutions that match their needs with those of personnel: they examine the question of motivation with a fresh sense of purpose and conviction. Better still, high-performance organizations marshal and direct substantial resources to build effective behaviors and relationships, often in concert with human resource divisions.[4] Engaging staff has come of age: in the 21st century, the concept affirms the importance of flexibility, change, and unremitting improvement in the workplace.

Defining Engagement (and its Benefits)

Engagement is a multifaceted construct that has been variously defined.[5] Even so, on the whole, personnel engage when they feel appreciated and involved. In such instances, they are likely to hold a positive attitude vis-à-vis the organization and its corporate values (assuming the latter are enacted, not just espoused). This translates into correct focus and enthusiasm about work as well as mindful proactivity and persistence in the conduct of it.[6] The earlier reference to organizational branding suggests that identity and authenticity are pivots of that.[7]

> *I do not try to dance better than anyone else.*
> *I only try to dance better than myself.*
> —Mikhail Baryshnikov

Engagement is something everyone can offer: but it cannot be forced by terms of reference; hence, early interest in psychological contracts. There are four dimensions to it: (i) cognitive (or intellectual)—thinking hard about one's profession and how one might perform it better; (ii) emotional (or affective)—feeling good about doing a good job; (iii) social—taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others; and, even if literature rarely mentions it, (iv) physical—mustering the stamina to "go the extra mile".

Engagement and enablement through optimized roles and a supportive environment energize people. They develop a stronger sense of personal well-being. They understand the business context and the "bigger picture". They have a desire to work to make things better. They are clear about the desired outcomes of their role. They display consistently superior levels of performance. They behave in ways that support their organization's corporate values. They have a positive impact on services to clients, audiences, and partners. They become willing advocates. They demonstrate higher levels of innovation and drive for efficiency. They keep up to date with developments in their field. They never run out of things to do and create positive things to act on. They intentionally build supportive relationships and are respectful of, and helpful to, colleagues. They are much more likely to have a productive relationship with their supervisor. They can deal with changes and challenges. They manage stress and enjoy better health and well-being as a result. They have lower rates of sickness or

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4 Staff engagement is the responsibility of both senior and junior managers. However, human resource divisions have a unique role to play in planning, acting out, reflecting on, and learning from engagement initiatives. This will generally include designing and carrying out surveys, testing findings through focus groups, and advising senior management on their significance. Human resource specialists should also be tasked with helping first-level managers raise their game, and perhaps even select for engagement. (It is often remarked that people join organizations but leave individual managers.) Toward this, they may need to incorporate the findings of surveys in performance management processes, hire managers and other employees who have more potential to drive engagement in the workplace, or liaise with marketing to develop the organization's brand. [From a limited focus on the 4Ps of product (or service), place, price, and promotion, the idea of organizational branding has developed with implications for behavior and behavioral change.]

5 Most often, it is seen as emotional and intellectual commitment to an organization or the volume of discretionary effort deployed by staff in their work.

6 Staff engagement goes beyond job satisfaction or even commitment: personnel may be satisfied, yet contribute little; committed people may be fixed on the wrong objectives. Accordingly, a satisfied and committed workforce is a necessary but insufficient precondition to organizational performance.

7 One of three courses that the Knowledge Management Center in the Asian Development Bank delivered twice in ADB's headquarters in June and September 2010 had to do with Learning in Teams. (The others were connected with Reflective Practice and Learning from Evaluation.) In particular, the course advertised and explored elements of radical collaboration, borne of an intentional attitude that James Tamm and Ronald Luyet have described as being in the Green Zone. Interestingly, four groups of participants in eight ranked identity first in a Green Zone diamond ranking of nine preferred attributes including also hospitality, participation, mindfulness, humility, reciprocity, deliberation, appreciation, and authenticity. Three groups of participants ranked authenticity second. See James Tamm and Ronald Luyet. 2005. *Radical Collaboration: Five Essential Skills to Overcome Defensiveness and Build Successful Relationships*. HarperCollins Publishers.

absenteeism. They are less likely to leave. Overall, they derive greater satisfaction in their lives.[8]

Not surprisingly, high levels of engagement and enablement benefit organizations. (Engaged and enabled people generate more revenue.) As expected, the outcome of staff engagement covers a broad range, including increased profitability, higher productivity, contributions to innovation, and lower staff turnover.

Box 1: Barriers to Staff Engagement

Here and there, common barriers hamper the focus, integration, presence, and energy that staff can leverage toward their organization's success. The most frequent relate to

- low perceptions of organizational advocacy by senior management, which weaken or shatter trust and respect;
- inconsistent management styles on account of the attitudes of individual managers, which lead to perceptions of unfairness;
- reactive decision making, which does not pick up problems until it is too late;
- lack of consistency, clarity, timeliness, and fluidity in messages, which stems from rigid communication channels or cultural norms;
- unimaginative human resource practices, which fail to recognize that certain positions are difficult to fill or have high turnover rates: staff in these areas are likely to disengage if no consideration is given to the need to involve them; and
- poor work–life balance caused by a culture of long working hours.

Source: Adapted from Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. 2009. *Employee Engagement in Context*. Available : www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/general/_empengctxt.htm

However, surveys reveal also that each organization has distinctive issues. Different groups of staff are influenced by different combinations of factors, and organizations need to consider carefully what is most important to them. Hence, there can be no template for deciding which specific policies and practices will have most impact on performance: engagement must be seen in context, which opens rich seams for research.[9] (For instance, research on the predictors[10] of engagement is scant. It is also not known whether or not interventions, such as training managers on how to communicate effectively, actually serve to boost engagement. It might also be necessary to examine individual differences and whether variables, such as personality, impact engagement.)[11] Surveys also need to be followed by effective action to address issues identified or they will negatively impact on attitudes. Fundamental to managing engagement as a process is ensuring that action is taken on the findings of employee attitude surveys. Failure to follow through generally has a damaging effect on attitudes and on the rate of response to subsequent surveys. Sadly, taking survey data to the next level into something that might—with actionable recommendations and metrics—ultimately renovate business processes and operations remains, unacceptably, largely unexplored territory.[12] The survey event cannot provide all the answers and is still too often isolated from the strategy of the organization.

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[8] In truth, however, actively disengaged people proliferate across occupations, industries, and sectors. They do not care about their organizations and probably do not like their jobs: they are blasé, indifferent, or consistently against virtually everything. They curtail efforts to match the limited opportunities they have to succeed. They are busy acting out their unhappiness and have a negative influence on colleagues. They can also drive clients, audiences, and partners away. Some "milk" their host at every opportunity. Still, one is not born disengaged: it is a process that hardens over time as the connectedness of individual and collective expectations breaks. It may also be the product of ingrained barriers to successful staff engagement. Where organizations strain to do more with less, none should reach a situation where it must re-engage deeply frustrated personnel and build back pride and commitment.

[9] However, there is widespread agreement that surveys should measure a number of factors, including staff commitment, organizational citizenship, satisfaction, attitudes to management, teamwork, opportunity to excel, personal and professional growth, rewards and recognition, work–life balance, and intention to leave. Responses can be disaggregated by gender, age, tenure, and staff level.

[10] The spectrum is broad. Predictors can be attitudinal, dispositional, demographic, task-related, leadership-style, or organizational, among others.

[11] In the United Kingdom, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development conducts much useful work on management and development of people, including staff engagement. See Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. 2010. Available: www.cipd.co.uk/default.cipd

[12] A useful perspective on this is to appreciate the need for distinct approaches. Senior management should address engagement from a systemic perspective; middle- and first-level managers should tackle it from a one-on-one perspective. Moreover, no single skill or element will suffice.

Driving Engagement

Differences notwithstanding, the key drivers of staff engagement against which actions can be taken are the following:[13]

- feeling valued and well informed about what is happening in the organization,[14]
- having opportunities to feed views upwards, and
- thinking that the immediate supervisor is committed to the organization.

Since groups of employees are influenced by different combinations of factors across occupations, industries, and sectors, managers will need to consider carefully what steps are most relevant to their organization. There is much scope for thoughtful reflection. A possible model, put forward by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development,[15] recommends that employers should strengthen links between engagement, performance, and intention to stay through measures that promote

- opportunities for upward feedback,
- feeling informed about what is going on,
- managerial commitment to the organization,
- managerial fairness in dealing with problems, and
- respectful treatment of employees.

> *You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.*
>
> —Rabindranath Tagore

That said, embarking on a drive to increase engagement levels should not be taken lightly, bearing in mind the ease with which engagement (much as trust and respect) can be shattered. The Institute for Employment Studies,[16] for one, cautions that attempts to raise engagement levels are likely to founder if all the following building blocks are not in place and working well:

- good quality first-level management;
- two-way communications;
- effective internal cooperation;
- a development focus;
- commitment to staff well-being; and
- clear, accessible human resource policies and practices, to which managers at all levels are committed.

Table: Reflections on Staff Engagement

	Implications for Managers
Building Better Organizations	• Management style and leadership are critical to high-performance working. • Staff engagement translates into willingness to "go the extra mile", including learning new or better ways of working. • Managers should pay more attention to job design, creating more "elbow room for people to do their jobs. • Staff need to be able to express their opinions upwards to their manager and beyond. • Staff engagement is not simply about the relationship between manager and team members; it is also about organizational culture. • The challenge for human resource specialists is to facilitate the building of better organizations.

[13] Various studies have shown that competitive salary levels and other financial rewards are not among the top drivers of staff engagement. Bonuses may not be the answer either: when bonuses are given, expectations are set for the behavior required to continue receiving them in the future; if further bonuses are not forthcoming, staff will scale back efforts.

[14] This may well be the main driver of engagement. Vital components of this are being involved in decision making; feeling enabled to perform well; having opportunities to develop the job; and believing the organization is concerned for staff health and well-being.

[15] Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. 2006. *How Engaged are British Employees?* Available: www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/general/_hwngdbremp.htm

[16] Dilys Robinson, Sarah Perryman, and Sue Hayday. 2004. *The Drivers of Employee Engagement*. Institute for Employment Studies. Report No. 408.

Taking Happiness Seriously	• Happiness is a serious business issue—feeling good at work is not only a signal of good functioning but will actually enhance the prospect of future resourcefulness. • The survey evidence supports the belief that positive emotions are particularly important in relation to several key performance indicators. • Organizations are likely to get greater impact by fostering positive emotions rather than simply dealing with problems. • Systematically identifying good practice, perhaps through well-being audits, will support organizations to learn from within. • Team leaders, line managers, and staff themselves could all promote positive personal and organizational outcomes.
Increasing Staff Engagement	• The top priority for managers who want to increase staff engagement is communication. • Staff will be engaged to the extent that their employer meets their needs in terms of benefits, employability, and satisfaction. • Managers should offer the package of initiatives that reflects an overall reading of staff engagement and motivation. • Staff involvement may reflect deep-seated attitudes that make engagement harder for managers to influence. • Managers need to identify staff with a propensity to be engaged, and ensure that they hire the right personnel in the first place.
Being Sensitive to Diversity Issues	• One size does not fit all: organizations need to customize their policies and practices to match the needs of different groups in their workforce. • Organizations should recognize that older staff are likely to be more engaged and should value their contribution. • Organizations need to design approaches to employment that are more attractive to younger people. • More needs to be done to make the employment experience of people with disabilities more successful. • Stamping out bullying and harassment must become a priority for management attention. • Flexible working can leverage staff engagement by facilitating personal choice.
Using Staff Attitude Data	• Staff attitude surveys are a fundamental component of sophisticated strategies for managing human capital. • Findings on staff engagement can be used to monitor business performance, alongside those on, for example, communication, diversity, leadership, and work–life balance. • Combining attitude data with other metrics can provide managers with a greater understanding of the relationship between human resource policies and practices and business performance. • Benchmarking detailed results across business units allows managers to compare their results with those of other parts of the organization.

Source: Developed from Greig Aitken, Nic Marks, John Purcell, Charles Woodruffe, and Dianah Worman. 2006. *Reflections on Employee Engagement*. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available: www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/general/_rflempngmt.htm

Sustaining Workplace Excellence

If much in organizations can be explained by networks of transactions, treating people as cogs in a machine will impair the potential contribution they might make and engender unpleasant feedback. Organizations that understand the what, why, and how of staff engagement and take continuous actions to overcome generic and more specific barriers to it will unleash performance and well-being in the workplace. Helpfully, Gallup[17] has defined a practicable number of outcomes the achievement of which would denote that. Stronger from reconciliation, humanized organizations would be able to say they acted on a blindingly obvious but nevertheless often-overlooked rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

> *If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.*
>
> —John Quincy Adama

[17] Rodd Wagner and James Harter. 2006. *12: The Elements of Great Managing*. Gallup Press.

Box 2: 12 Elements of Great Managing

Engagement is a strategic issue that cannot be left to manage itself. Based on more than 30 years of in-depth research involving more than 17 million employees, Gallup has developed and identified 12 core elements that link powerfully to critical business outcomes:

- I know what is expected of me at work.
- I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
- At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
- In the last 7 days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
- My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
- There is someone at work who encourages my development.
- At work, my opinions seem to count.
- The mission or purpose of my organization makes me feel my job is important.
- My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
- I have a best friend at work.
- In the last 6 months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
- This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

Source: Rodd Wagner and James Harter. 2006. *12: The Elements of Great Managing*. Gallup Press.

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Asian Development Bank

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