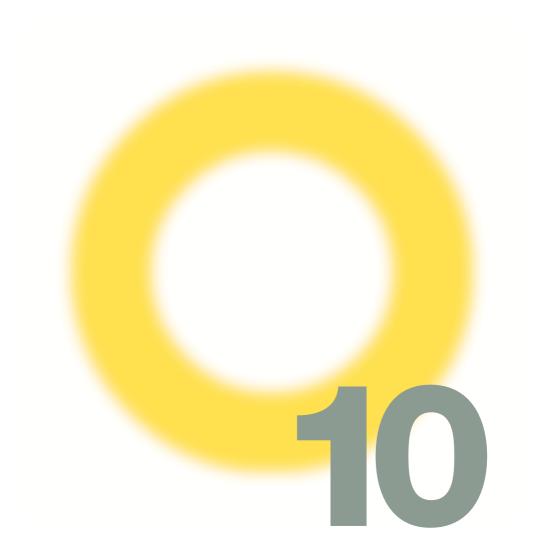**Stanton Marris**
energising the organisation
issue 10: meaningful engagement

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Engage. v (engages, engaging, engaged) **1.** attract or involve someone's interest or attention. **2.** (engage in/with) become involved in. **3.** employ. **4.** enter into a contract to do something. **5.** enter into combat with. **6.** (of a part of a machine or engine) move into position so as to begin to operate.

Pocket Oxford English Dictionary, 10th Edition

So what's new about 'engagement'?

It's a big ask. Chief executives are suddenly recognising that 'effective engagement of our employees' is the key to increased productivity, to profitability, to the successful implementation of strategy, the retention of key talent and thus the key to competitive advantage. They instinctively know it's important to ensure employees want to follow through on delivering the strategic intent, yet there is much confusion about what it is, how you create it, whose job it is to make it happen and how you measure it.

Of course, the topic of employee engagement has been around for a while. There is a vast body of literature exploring the links between engaged employees and leadership effectiveness, between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction, between empowered employees and productivity, between brand ambassadors and customer experiences. Not to mention the popular conferences that share best practice case studies of how organisations have achieved phenomenal increases in employee engagement – as measured by their employee surveys or retention rates. But is something new happening?

How do people define it?

Here are some typical assumptions about 'engagement':

- It's a task or process where the outputs can be tracked and measured

- It's a roll-out or communication cascade of a strategically important message

- It's about getting buy in to the message

- It's getting people aligned as a group, not as individuals

- It's the job of HR or Communications to make it happen.

In reality – and the OED definitions help here – it's about getting people involved and inspired about something important and then contracting with each other **to do something different as a result**. Our conclusion is that employees in today's world recognise they have choices and are not going to blindly follow commands from their leaders; they want to be engaged in a way that is **meaningful to each of them** and only then will they give their discretionary commitment and energy to take action.

To summarise: Meaningful engagement in today's organisations is...

Commitment and action

✓ An interaction that taps into people's discretionary emotional effort

✓ An individual experience that leads to collective impact

✓ (most important) The leaders' responsibility to make it happen.

Why bother?

Let's just look at the evidence that tells us meaningful engagement is worth it.

- In the US, leading opinion poll data reveals that just 29% of employees feel actively engaged and committed at work[1] yet if people are committed to the organisation they work for, they try 57% harder, perform 20% better and are 87% less likely to leave[2]. Companies like BT are now using the Sears Roebuck employee-customer-profit chain model to quantify the link between employee engagement, customer satisfaction and profitability[3].

- Recent research on the association between employee satisfaction and job performance suggests that the single most important contributor to the feelings of employee engagement, empowerment and satisfaction is based on the relationship they have with the leaders of the organisation[4] and in the UK, employees say they would achieve 30% increase in productivity if they were more motivated and better managed[5].

- The Corporate Executive Board surveyed 50,000 employees in 59 organisations worldwide and found that employees with lower engagement are four times more likely to leave their jobs than those who are highly engaged. Southwest Airlines, one of the world's most successful organisations by almost every financial metric available for the industry, maintains its market leading position through what they call 'Front Line Innovation'; employees know that their input matters, and the deep level of engagement of its employees is fuelled by the transparent and consistent incorporation of employee input and innovation into the everyday implementation of Southwest's strategy.

Let's learn how it's done from three stories where efforts to engage employees in a more meaningful way are making a real difference.

Who leads on engagement?

Enhancing productivity in AstraZeneca Global Research and Development

As part of a strategic initiative to improve speed and quality in the drug development pipeline, an internal cross-functional team was set up involving people from across AstraZeneca's global R&D organisation to identify the issues that get in the way of accelerating the delivery of medicines to patients. In a series of workshops, a number of common issues quickly emerged and people worked together to identify the solutions that would help overcome the blockages to reduce timelines. The team arrived at a final list of 22 recommended solutions that, if implemented successfully across project teams and functions, will all have a significant impact on improving drug delivery.

However, the team recognised that their real challenge was how to engage the whole of the R&D organisation, so that people not only saw the value of adopting these new, consistent ways of working to enhance product delivery, but were also committed to a culture of ongoing improvement. The original aim was simply to try and make everyone aware of the 22 'generic' solutions, but the team soon recognised that a different approach was needed if the changes were to be adopted and made to stick.

Their first pilot of a new engagement approach was in Japan, helping the senior leader and his team to explore how they could benefit from the thinking and solutions developed through the workshops. First, they connected with a team of key directors in Japan and made them aware of a selection of the ideas, based on the project team's best guess about what would be of particular relevance in the Japanese market context. Yet rather than 'impose' these on the Japan team, they listened to the 'internal customer' who wanted to talk about their own current project needs and priorities.

The teams worked together to prioritise the top five solutions that would have the biggest impact on their timelines. The senior leader in Japan gave his active and visible support, reinforced the business priority to improve speed and quality, and encouraged one drug project team in particular to apply the new ways of working as an early demonstration project. After the teams had worked on the issues together, designed the process using the solutions and identified the benefits, (no less than a gain of four months by speeding up the process using a new, leaner process) there is now a new energy and commitment in the team to implement new ways of working to deliver ahead of time. In addition, there is now a group of advocates who, having seen the potential benefits of the new ways of working, will spread their learning and experience. With the active support of their leadership team this will help to sustain the learning and embed the improved process for the benefit of future products.

The initiative is quickly gathering momentum – and other leaders are now following the five simple rules of engagement developed by the AstraZeneca team and illustrated in this story ('Connect, Design, Implement, Sustain, Improve'). As a result there is a renewed commitment to improve productivity spreading throughout the whole organisation.

"Well, you know, I was a human being before I became a businessman."
George Soros

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How do you engage and empower the frontline?

Innovation and improvement in the NHS through 'NHS Live'

NHS Live started back in 2004 as a creative idea for a communications event to engage frontline staff and evolved into a free, national learning network supporting patients, staff and their communities to realise their ideas for creating a better patient experience.

Sponsored by the UK Department of Health (DH), the programme is co-funded by a group of private sector companies, such as AstraZeneca, Boots, BT, GE Healthcare and Oracle, who are keen to exchange learning about the shift towards a more personalised healthcare service. A highly committed 'blended' team of DH, NHS staff and external consultants worked together to co-design and deliver a national network to support local project teams who wanted to implement a more innovative approach to patient care. Over 200 NHS organisations signed up with their local projects, all of which involved patients and other healthcare partners. On a national basis, teams were supported through national workshops, where they had opportunities to meet with leading healthcare professionals, regional learning networks, learning partnerships with the corporate partners and an interactive website – all designed to foster and share ideas for improvement that have the potential to be transferred to other parts of the NHS.

The programme now continues into its fourth year under the leadership of the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement. It owes its sustained success to the way the programme has engaged with frontline staff, senior healthcare leaders and the private sector – all around a common, shared goal: improved quality of the patient experience.

There is now a three-year plan to increase the impact of the programme; as well as recruiting more projects, there is a focus on supporting the adoption and spreading of learning from the original local projects so it can be transferred into other environments nationally. Regular evaluation by key stakeholders of the programme's impact and outcomes provides evidence of the measurable benefits – for both patients and staff – as these comments from frontline team leaders shows:

"NHS Live gave us permission to think big and bold."

"NHS Live has been a great motivator to improve services for patients and involve staff in the planning of new services. It has enabled front line staff to have the direct backing of leaders in our organisation."

"This NHS Live project has been the catalyst to inspire other projects."

"The NHS Live events have been particularly rewarding for staff. The opportunity to meet with the Secretary of State and the NHS Chief Executive has been very motivating. It has been seen as a reward for the hard work that frontline staff put into improving standards."

"Research indicates that workers have three prime needs: Interesting work, recognition for doing a good job, and being let in on things that are going on in the company."
Zig Ziglar

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How do you turn emotional commitment into focused action?

Taking a new direction in the Environment Agency

The Environment Agency is an organisation which employs over 12,000 employees, all highly committed to delivering ambitious outcomes for the environment. When they developed their first corporate strategy over five years ago, they set out to engage staff and stakeholders and the public in an extensive consultation to ensure it met the aspirations of everyone involved in delivering it successfully. Five years on and the strategic direction has been redefined using a similar highly involving process to ensure it rises to the challenges of increased public and political focus on environmental concerns. As a result, the Environment Agency has earned the highest scores in employee awareness of the vision and strategy in a recent UK Investors in Industry evaluation survey.

What worked? What did we learn about managing the engagement successfully with so many different types of stakeholders, all with slightly different motivations and agendas? First, we helped the team leading the strategy development process to clarify the simple core story. Showing how the key strands of the strategy all connected with inspirational outcomes was key, as we knew from staff surveys that people working in the Environment Agency are proud of their commitment to the environment.

Second, we designed a series of workshops that enabled people through active dialogue to articulate what those outcomes would mean for them at a local level. By training the leaders of those events to share best practice and champion the outcomes, they developed the confidence to follow a consistent approach yet tailored for their particular audiences. The Environment Agency's strategic direction and plans are thus based on the reality of what can be delivered in the local areas and regions.

In the process of developing the new strategy, people talked passionately about what can get in the way of delivery. This data has been captured and used subsequently to frame the organisational development, cultural and behavioural changes required to deliver the outcomes successfully – both locally and nationally. Articulating the changes in language that people can relate to, constantly making the links between achieving the vision and the daily frustrations they can experience in 'getting the job done' is now being used as a powerful motivator for organisation change.

Whose job is it anyway?

'Engagement' is one of the most critical processes in a high performing organisation, yet it is often one that falls between the cracks in the organisation chart. Which team or function should pick this up? Chief executives know it is important but who do they turn to for advice on how to make it work in their organisations?

Traditionally, engagement is seen to belong in the Communications or HR function, yet if ownership rests there, traction with the leaders and the rest of the organisation is difficult to achieve. From our experience it is the task of leaders at all levels to engage successfully with their teams – with the active support of the Communications professionals who can help shape the core story and design the simple approaches and tools. HR also has an important role to play in reinforcing employees' motivations to engage fully. Reward structures, informal recognition, providing skills development to build leaders' capability and confidence to engage – they all play their part in creating the fertile ground for sustained engagement.

HR is usually responsible for measuring engagement through staff surveys. Standard surveys nearly always focus on questions that measure levels of staff understanding of the strategy and commitment to deliver it as the key indicators of employee engagement. The trick is to identify additional questions that are 'leading' rather than 'lagging' indicators of engagement (such as levels of pride, advocacy, loyalty, support from managers, perceptions of leaders) which help to evaluate progress and will tell you more clearly whether you are on track in creating the climate that will allow meaningful engagement to flourish and spread in your organisation.

In summary

What have we learned? We summarise below the key learnings that we think help achieve meaningful engagement:

1. Start with the business case for engagement – what are you trying to engage people with? What will the benefits be?

2. Define engagement in language that is meaningful in your particular organisation context and to your key audiences (avoid the off-the shelf frameworks)

3. Convince your colleagues that engagement is more than a one-step process – it is a planned series of linked actions and supporting activities – for which leaders need new skills and confidence to use them

4. Clarify who's responsible for making engagement work – CEO, top team, leaders, Communications and HR (all of them)

5. Use internal stories of successful engagement that have lead to measurable benefits and outcomes to illustrate what you mean by engagement – and to draw out the lessons of what works and what doesn't

6. Use the power and influence of people who have been involved in those successes to convince others of the benefits of a more thoughtful and planned approach

7. Introduce regular 'leading' indicators of engagement so that you can use the data to prioritise the right activity that will deliver the results you want – before it is too late.

Get these ingredients in place and the results will follow. We look forward to engaging with you!

References

1   Gallup Study: Engaged Employees Inspire Company Innovation, 2002

2   Corporate Leadership Council, Employee Engagement Survey, 2004

3   BT White Paper Customer Experience: "Hype or Help?" 2006

4   Ribelin, 2003, Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, Ivan & Rhoades, 2002

5   Beyond Employee Engagement, Hay Group, October 2006.

Energising the organisation

A series of think pieces from Stanton Marris:

Issue 01: the sources of energy

Issue 02: managing energy

Issue 03: leading with energy

Issue 04: managing the energy in M&As

Issue 05: decluttering

Issue 06: de-fogging

Issue 07: holding on and letting go

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To find out more, please visit our website www.stantonmarris.com or call Cathie Clearwater at +44 (0) 20 7637 0290.

Stanton Marris Ltd
9 Percy Street
London W1T 1DL
United Kingdom