Engagement

What it is, what it isn't, what it costs and how to develop it

Everyone agreed that the morale and team-building session was a roaring success.

Introduction

Seen the Jack Daniels ad: '*How many people work here -about half'!*
The question it raises is '*Are most staff there engaged*?' and if so, is having about half your staff engaged about normal? While the effects of a deep recession, public sector cutback and the economy flat lining make noisy headlines, they mask an enduring cost: that of employee disengagement or the high cost of low trust. And it's getting worse!

The 'Workwell Movement' from Business in the Community (BITC) estimates that only 14% of employees are engaged, at a cost of around £60 billion. The annual cost of employee disengagement

Disengagement's main driver is an out-dated management model. The effect of this is to negate goodwill and create organisational *debt.* Staff effectively force the organisation to pay back through 'creative noncompliance'. A sustained sector legacy can be characterised as 'split ends'. It occurs where teacher aims become separate from those of their organisation. This is a blueprint for sustained underperformance which becomes increasingly harder to tackle.

How we work is determined by our 'psychological contract' with our organisations . There are broadly three types:

- **resentful compliance** with grudging behaviour;

- **instrumental compliance** with 'Is it in my job description?' behaviour (reads it as a 'no' rather than a question); and
- **internalised commitment**, with high trust and autonomous self-managing behaviour.

What is engagement?

Engaged staff simply do different – often better - things. Engagement acts as a multiplier: at an individual level, it turns time into *better* effort, aligns discretionary energy with purpose, and collectively, it enables organisations to move from doing things better, to doing better things, and sustained higher performance. Where staff feel 'my brain –and soul- are on board', they self-organise, so fewer 'managers' are needed. It's not an easy option. Everybody has to think more and be both more challenged and challenging.

How can we generate engagement?

Evidence shows that excellent organisations have developed engagement through cultivating a few heresies, namely:

1. **You can't develop people you don't trust.** Trust and risk should be seen as *twins* (or two sides of the same coin) rather than as opposites, and building trust means recognising that the only way to retain control is to give it away. That's the hard bit, *culturally*. Unfortunately, the heart of the traditional and all too prevalent 'management' model is coercive; control means top-down 'do as I say'. But coercion can't be the corner stone of future organisations. Positive change can only come through mutual trust.

2. **Abandon the 'right to manage'.** In situations where managers use traditional management methods compliance becomes the greatest value. This profoundly under-develops everyone, particularly managers. Building commitment, based on high trust, requires a reinvented management model.

3. **Abandon learned helplessness.** This is where everybody colludes with 'nothing can be done' and those with the least official power create unofficial ways to reclaim it. But internalising resentment and 'professional withdrawing' are a form of arrested development, and won't create the 'Adult-to-Adult' behaviour of high performance

4. **Pursue value.** Move from obedience and diligence to 'value creation' where breakthroughs, innovation and continuous improvement ideas are produced by engaged minds at work because '*they want to'* and *'the organisation moulds the climate for it'* enabling them to do more complex things better year on year. Costs then come down as the cost of disengagement is always greater than that of engagement

If engagement seems remote right now, remember:

- Things can change for the better with a clear and articulated common purpose '*We did not realize how liberating it would be if we were all on the same side'* (senior manager in a previously failing college)

- And seek astonishment: *'Work is a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for astonishment rather than torpor, for a sort of life rather than a Monday to Friday sort of dying…'* (a quote from Studs Terkel, writer and 'oral historian')

Starting points for reflection and discussion:

- In your organisation which psychological contract predominates? Broadly, in terms of critical mass how are staff distributed among the 3 types? What are the implications?
- Is the opposite of a 'learning organisation' a 'non-learning' one? How would we recognise it? What is the first thing you would do on experiencing it?

Overheards

' *I can raise your costs faster than you can cut my wages'.* Think about it!

Donal Carroll