Part 1: Employee Engagement: Passing Fad Or Must Have Performance Factor?

The Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence is proud to feature John Smythe, a global thought leader in internal and change communication, master facilitator and authority on leader and employee engagement in a two-part article looking at the future of employee engagement.

Command and control has been the dominant leadership role model since the first industrial revolution and has been impervious to much change beyond the superficial, such as the disappearance of visible status symbols, the use of first names and more casual attire. Behind these concessions the few continue to command power over the many. Will the current vogue of engagement be another passing fad or will it fundamentally change the top down DNA of leadership?

There are three factors which may presage a fundamental change to command and control styles of leadership. These are:

1. The demise of the 'loyalty for security contract' and the levelling brought about by the digital age
2. Velvet revolutions in the former Soviet Union
3. Unfinished business of the Arab Spring

While the "my loyalty in exchange for security" deal held good, workers put up with command and control. As there is now precious little security, workers at every level are looking for more say in decisions that affect them, and which they can constructively affect so that they can exert some influence over their work. The Y Generation (Millennials) never experienced the
loyalty for security’ deal and owe the old order nothing.

Digital innovation cuts across bureaucratic hierarchies emasculating managers once used to being information brokers. The parallels between social upheavals at the national level and the clamour by workers for more say are intriguing and may be coincidental, but it is possible that the former may well become an engine for the latter.

These three factors were not present in the 1990s or earlier and command and control maintained its hegemony. Time will tell if the three factors are the Trojan horse of a more inclusive work place.

There are many definitions of employee engagement, but most describe desirable outcomes or benefits rather than identify enablers. Take these two UK examples of outcomes presented as enablers:

“Employee engagement is a process by which an organization increases the intellectual and emotional commitment and contribution of its employees to achieve superior performance.” (National School of Government).

“Engagement is a concept that places flexibility, change and continuous improvement at the heart of what it means to be an employee and an employer in a twenty-first-century workplace.” (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development).

Engage for Success, the UK government’s inquiry into employee engagement and performance cites four enablers – strong strategic narrative, engaging managers, employee voice and organisational integrity.

In my own pursuit to identify the enablers of employee engagement I spent ten months in 2004 as a visiting fellow with McKinsey doing one of the first inquiries into employee engagement called Boot Camp or Commune. Based on our globally-sourced evidence we determined that it was the appetite and capability of leaders at any level to enfranchise their people much more extensively in both operational and big ticket decision making - distributed leadership.

This hypothesis challenges the doctrine of command and control where the few decide and instruct the many.

To enjoy employee engagement’s benefits means rewiring the way leaders make small and large decisions, shifting from decide and tell to well governed inclusion and co-creation. It cannot be bolted onto command and control leadership styles. This explains why so much rhetoric about the topic in companies fails to take root. Top leadership has, for the most part, failed to note that you cannot have high levels of productive employee engagement without a fundamental change to their own leadership style.

To be engaged, people must be invited to influence the goal – the what – rather than just its realization – the how. Organizations should take note as they often dictate goals and only invite some involvement in delivery – the how – and assume that people will engage. People are far less likely to engage themselves unless they have been involved in both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’.

Self-organization is a key indicator of being engaged – self-organized people need little or no external stimulus or instruction. Yet instruction and coercion are the staple diet for many at work. Leaders, managers and supervisors still think that strong leadership means knowing all the answers. It does not – it means bosses who make rational judgments about who will add value to a decision or initiative and being clear about what is and, as important, what is not open to others to challenge and contribute.

Local leadership and supervision is the cipher for the relationship between the employee and the organization, and this relationship is the key determinant of employees’ advocacy, retention and performance. The provision of a safe environment where employees can challenge and contribute is largely in the gift of these local leaders, managers and supervisors. Through their behaviour, they can create the conditions in which people feel safe to challenge and contribute. Rewards for challenging and contributing also rely on managers seeking and acknowledging the challenges and contributions and then providing constructive feedback.

In practical terms, leaders, managers and supervisors need to hit the personal pause button when their instincts are driving them to take a quick decision and align people with it. The momentary pause should be used by leaders to ask themselves: ‘Will the outcome of
this decision (strategy, programme etc) be better if I (or a select insider group) decide alone or if I first consider who else will add value to the decision if they are involved at the front end?

Hitting the pause button at decision time is counter-cultural to many people brought up in command and control. And there will always be times when instant action is right in operational settings and sometimes in strategic situations when the leader has assessed that those around have nothing to offer except self-interested delay.

But in most situations, the leader will be rewarded if he or she pauses to consider who else will add value before they make the call or at least to rationalize why the engagement of others will add nothing except perilous delay.

Read Part 2 of John’s article

John Smythe

John is the author of two best-selling books on employee engagement and change. He is an international communication thought leader, and since 2004 a partner at Engage for Change, advising on engaging leaders and everyone at work to drive change and strategy, transform organizations and raise day to day business performance. He is heavily involved in the UK government’s inquiry into the relationship between performance and engagement called ‘Engage for Success’ and chairs its More Social than Media special interest group. He is currently leading research into the impact of technology at work on behaviour, working relationships and individual & collective performance. He is currently working on another business book and a children’s novel.