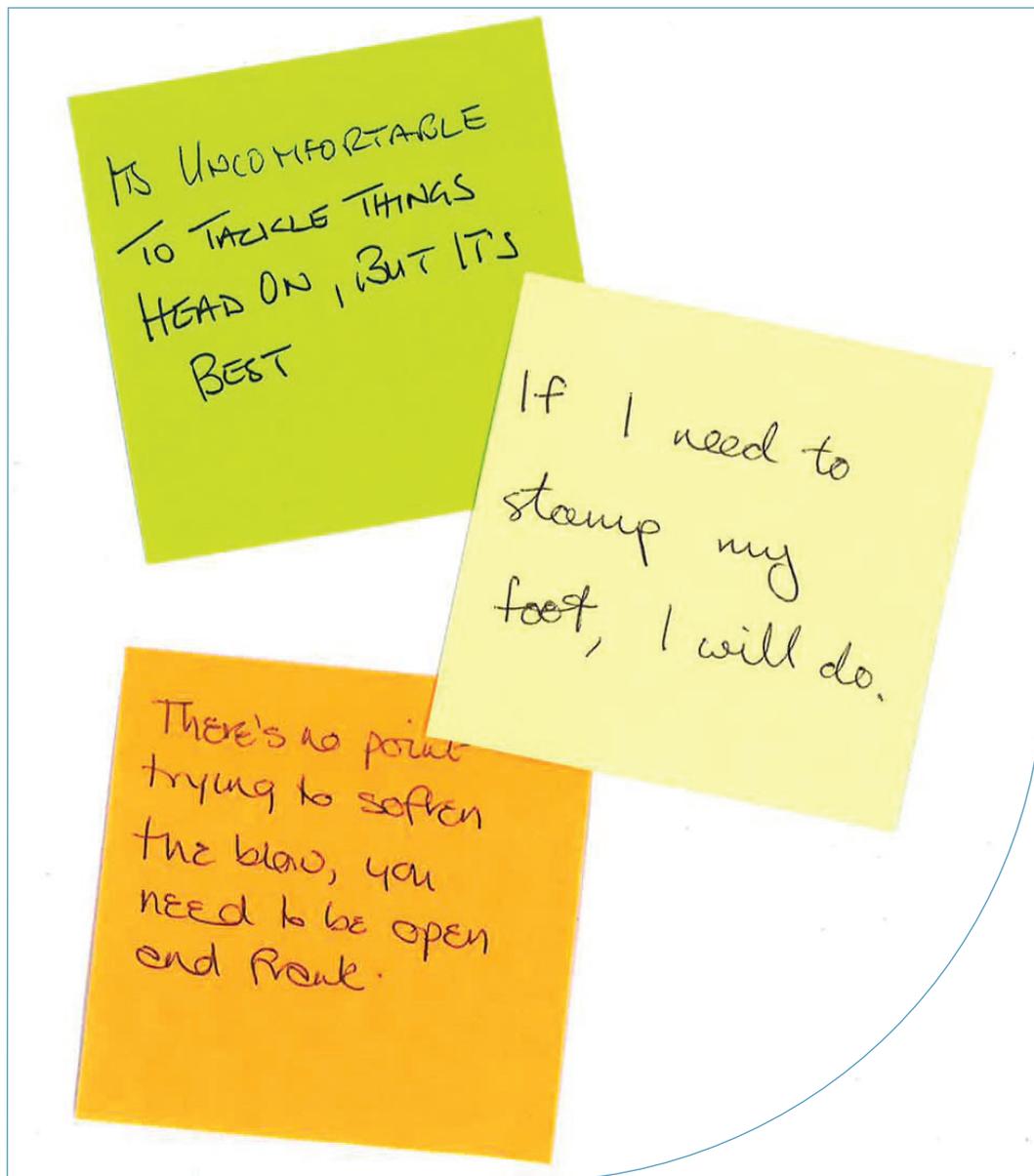# The engaging manager and sticky situations

Dilys Robinson

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The engaging manager and sticky situations

Dilys Robinson

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Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) began exploring the concept of employee engagement in 2002, initially working with 46 organisations to define 'engagement' (see definition below), then moving on to develop an engagement measure for use within attitude surveys, and a diagnostic tool to identify engagement drivers.

> **Engagement definition**
>
> *Engagement is a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation. The organisation must work to nurture, maintain and grow engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee[1].*

Throughout our early research into employee engagement, we were consistently finding that the employee–line manager relationship is crucial, regardless of organisation, sector or employee group. The strength and consistency of the influence of the line manager on engagement levels led us to undertake our latest research, on 'The Engaging Manager'. Our aim was to understand how 'engaging managers' – people who inspire and motivate their teams to perform well – behave in their dealings with people, especially their own teams.

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[1]   Robinson D, Perryman S, Hayday S (2004), *The Drivers of Employee Engagement*, Institute for Employment Studies, Report number 408

1.2 This report

The extensive material we collected during our Engaging Manager research is being used to create a series of short reports, exploring different aspects of the findings in more detail. This report explores how engaging managers tackle the 'difficult stuff': people whose performance is below par, team members whose behaviour is disruptive or whose attitude is inappropriate, and the delivery of bad news to individuals or teams. These are issues that most managers dread, and that typically lead to procrastinating behaviour. Managers often avoid confronting such problems in the hope that they will go away, or resolve themselves – which of course they rarely do, more often becoming worse and sometimes even turning into major crises.

In our research we found that engaging managers are no different from anyone else, in that they did not relish difficult situations and often had to steel themselves to deal with issues they found uncomfortable. However, what set them apart was their willingness to face up to problems and tackle them straight away, no matter how hard they found this to do.

This short report explores the original findings further by looking at difficult problems through the eyes of the engaging managers, their own managers, and their teams, and drawing conclusions about the best behaviours to adopt in sticky situations.

2 Managing Performance

Our engaging managers all had high-performing teams. This was not a condition of taking part in the research; when we approached organisations to ask if they would like to participate, we requested only that the managers should have received high scores from their teams in the most recently conducted employee attitude survey. When we interviewed the 25 managers, however, it was clear that all of them had a strong performance focus and wanted – indeed expected – their teams to perform well. This chapter uses the words of the managers themselves, their teams, and their own managers, to describe their approach to performance management overall. The next two chapters go on to describe the engaging managers' approach to the management of under-performance and poor behaviour.

2.1 How do engaging managers approach performance management?

Although our engaging managers were all very different in terms of background, personality and experience, they adopted very similar approaches to performance management.

■ All were able to quote evidence of team success, in the shape of activity metrics, team or individual awards, customer satisfaction data, external recognition, and praise from elsewhere in the organisation. They were focused on their contribution to organisational goals, and proud of their teams' success.

> *I do give them a bigger picture, a brief overview of the company line and how it affects them, and what their impact on it is. This is why we do it, this is what we want to achieve, this is why we want to achieve it and this is what the result will be if we get to the goal that we want to get to.*
>
> *[We have] regular reviews to ensure that we all have integrity with the vision.*

- The managers talked about keeping a close eye on performance, so that they could understand what their teams were doing and intervene quickly if anything started to go wrong.

> *Managing performance is a daily activity.*
>
> *I'm on the phone every day of the week reviewing what we've done and just looking at it, challenging, looking for new ideas.*
>
> *Managing performance is huge in the contact centre, because we've got so many targets, key performance indicators…it's important that from day one, that they know exactly what's expected of them, so they know what they need to deliver.*

- The importance of frequent communications, team meetings and one-to-one sessions was emphasised by all the engaging managers.

> *So, the key for me is just one-to-one time, and they know what they're aiming for, and we talk about it regularly.*
>
> *So it never really gets to the situation where there's like a really great big formal sit-down to say let's review everything you've done.*
>
> *I think it's regular dialogue…at least once a fortnight for an extended period of time, just one to one and just about them and the work they're doing and what's going on…just so that I understand what they're doing and so I can give a bit of a steer or give them a bit of coaching if they need some coaching; help them if they want some help and support.*
>
> *Every week I have a one-to-one session with people who work for me. And it's half and hour, it's the opportunity to talk things over with people. I say to people it's your time with me. But, to be honest, it's not just that; it's me getting to talk to them.*
>
> *Just to keep the team generally motivated and performance levels up, I will make sure I'm speaking to people, praising them when they do a good job, finding out what their problems are, helping them with whatever needs to be done, rather than just coming to the end of a six-month review and saying, well, you've not delivered that.*

- The importance of having a developing, coaching style of performance management was mentioned by many of the managers, some of whom contrasted this with approaches they had seen elsewhere.

> *I take a supportive, coaching approach…I think about future development for the organisation and individual.*

> *I think you've got to appreciate that not everybody learns the same. To find out which is the best way for them to learn; some people take longer than others. Just to be patient and be supportive.*
>
> *There'll be managers that, if you didn't achieve a certain target, it'd be bollocking sessions all around. But my way of looking at them is, well, we've not achieved that target, you ask the question why, and you develop an action plan to bring the target back into place. I mean, you can see that around this board; effectively these are all the targets, and these little green, red arrows that are saying whether we haven't or we have, and then you convert it into an action plan over there.*
>
> *I've developed over the years, the last couple of years, more of a coaching style to performance management. Very much discussion, very much gathering information, gathering the ideas, looking at how realistic those sorts of ideas are going to be, throwing out a few scenarios and a few what ifs with people and generally encouraging people to set their own targets and their own objectives…I'm on the phone every day of the week reviewing what we've done and just looking at it, challenging, looking for new ideas.*

■ Perhaps above all else, our engaging managers were emphatic about the need to be clear about expectations and goals.

> *I treat people the way I want them to treat me. If I want them to achieve X, Y or Z they need to know what it is that I want from them to start off with. I like to talk to them about what the goals are and then how we are going to get there…And through regular one to ones and coaching and observations and feedback, that's where I highlight any gaps and identify, okay, you're not performing in this area, so what are you going to do?*
>
> *I ensure that people understand what is expected of them. I try to encourage people to think of the wider objectives of [the organisation] and how they fit in.*

■ Recognising the individual was perceived as an important role of management, in terms of both understanding individual differences, and giving people credit for good performance.

> *Be focused, be realistic, explain, and sell the benefits of performance and what it means to the individual as opposed to the organisation, because I think people are more focused about themselves than a big organisation.*
>
> *I take account of individuals – some get the job done by themselves, others need constant visits. I recognise individual differences.*

> *I do like to encourage people and give people praise when they do a good piece of work. I don't do it to excess, but I make sure that if someone does something and they've done a good job and they've done it within a tight timescale I make a point of going and saying well done, thanks very much for that.*

■ The engaging managers also tried to ensure that there was a good atmosphere at the workplace, by building up the team spirit and sometimes even organising social events to help the team to bond.

> *I'll go and buy some cakes on a Friday, little token bits which basically staff receive very well, and there is kind of a very team orientated attitude. We all work very hard, we work for each other and we support each other. What is quite nice is that…we get a lot of comments…about what a nice atmosphere it is in the office…generally it's a fun place to work, we work hard, but we break that up with elements of fun. We go out together, trips…and it is quite nice that people want to participate.*
>
> *…to keep the team generally motivated and performance levels up, I will make sure I'm speaking to people, praising them when they do a good job, finding out what their problems are, helping them with whatever needs to be done…*
>
> *It's difficult, because if things aren't going right you can get under tremendous pressure…but we try and build on successes rather than reflection on disasters.*

■ When things go wrong, our engaging managers typically did not let a problem fester, but instead would take immediate action to rectify it. This issue is explored in more depth in the next two chapters.

> *…basically if I need to stamp my foot, I will do.*
>
> *I am incremental, as in trying to deal with things as they come up…rather than saving something until it becomes a problem. So, saying when things are good, saying when things aren't quite so good, or asking what the issues are around it, and hopefully trying to do it in a sort of coaching way, so getting people to explain themselves how they think things have gone and what issues have come up.*
>
> *And I don't claim to be the best at assessing people. I think one of the first ones I did, I learnt a huge lesson. I said to this guy, you do this. 'Okay, how do I improve?' he said to me. I was like…so, there's no point giving people a problem without committing to work towards a solution.*
>
> *[This organisation] has a very structured performance management framework, as you would imagine from a big company. I try and avoid using it unless I have to, I would rather try and develop the personal relationship with someone, to understand their issue and try and improve their performance by working with them, rather than going through procedural ways of managing performance.*

2.2 How do teams receive their managers' approach?

2.2.1 Clarity

Perhaps the most important contributor to the teams' success, in their view, was that their managers were very clear in their expectations, which gave a focus and a sense of purpose to their teams. For the teams, this clarity had several strands which are described below.

■ Firstly, the engaging managers were able to describe effectively how their teams contributed to the organisation's overall purpose and direction. This made the team feel valued and enabled them to articulate clearly how they, as individuals and as a team, helped the organisation to achieve its objectives.

> *…he's very focused on [how] everything that we do fits in with the higher strategic initiatives … so we all pretty much know what we're supposed to be doing and where it fits in, and why.*
>
> *…I feel like I can see anything that we do does fit with the strategy…I've never sat there and gone, why are we doing this?*
>
> *He strongly encourages all members of the team to participate in the business reviews…there probably aren't many individuals that have not been involved in a business review this year.*

■ Our engaging managers were also all very good at giving directions, which meant that team members knew what they were supposed to be doing. This does not mean that the managers prescribed activities, went into great detail, or 'micro managed' in any way. Rather, they explained the task, its intended outcome and why the team was being asked to do it, and then allowed people to get on with it.

> *[Manager's name] gives direction. He shows interest and gives advice when needed.*
>
> *You really know where you are and what your goals are.*
>
> *…I think it's just the way she approaches things, as if she has confidence in your ability. She'll tell you if you're not on track…so she doesn't let you go gaily down the road, off on the wrong track.*
>
> *He gives a steer. If you need help he gives it; otherwise, he trusts you to get on with it.*
>
> *There's a lot of sitting down, explaining direction, defining roles and responsibilities.*

■ Finally, they set clear quality and behavioural standards, so their teams knew the level at which they should be operating. The teams appreciated the way in which the managers acted as role models by following these standards themselves.

> *…he does have very high standards. In that way you know there is a certain fairly high level of performance that you have to achieve to be doing well in your job.*
>
> *…he actually works effectively using the right behaviour sets…that's what I picked up on straight away; definitely a set of behaviours to be emulated.*

2.2.2 Feeding back and monitoring

For the teams, a very important contributor to successful team performance was the way in which managers were aware of how individuals and the team as a whole were doing, and gave frequent feedback (both positive and, when things were not going so well, remedial). Team members appreciated the timely and frequent feedback they received, sometimes contrasting it with unsatisfactory situations they had experienced in the past, or with the way in which things were done elsewhere in the organisations.

> *…it's that there's constant feedback as well…you don't have to wait until the end of that year to be told what your failings are or what your good points are.*
>
> 'Team member 1: *[Manager's name] invites everyone to a meeting, to find out about the [location]'s performance and everyone turns up.* Team member 2: *Yeah, and, having come from a different [location], it was quite a refreshing change to have something like that.* Team member 3: *Yeah, if you've had a good day the previous day, you can see that in the figures. And you think, oh, yeah, we had a good day and how that equates to the week and everything.*
>
> *She keeps us informed all the time how well we're all doing separately and then as a team together. All the time, each week she says, we're doing well or we're not doing well or what we need to do to improve.*

■ However, engaging managers have a strong performance focus, and soon spot when things are going wrong. When they raise issues with their teams, they do so quickly and often balance concerns by stressing positives.

> *…if there is anything wrong with it he'll be the first person to come back.*
>
> Team member 1: *When you've been meeting targets, he says, well done.* Team member 2: *He always says, well done, doesn't he?* Team member 3: *He does feed back and congratulate us when we achieve those targets.* Team member 4: *Tells us when we don't achieve, as well.*

> *That's all the positive stuff. If we're not doing as well as we should, we need to be shown that, which is then told. We get told it and everyone gets told at the meeting then where we lost marks on.*
>
> Team member 1: *You get a lot of feedback if you've done something specific, or just as a team you get feedback saying that that was a good week, or something like that.* Team member 2: *You also get feedback the other way, so it's not just the soft touch.*

■ Much appreciated by their teams was that engaging managers typically encouraged an open culture in which employees felt free to admit mistakes and ask for help. This, in turn, meant that team members were receptive to suggestions and new ways of working.

> *As soon as she came in, she had a plan of action saying: well I want to sit in when you're doing reviews, your team talks. I want to see how you address your agents, I want to see how you facilitate a meeting for example…she's given us hints and tips, a way we can move forward, what we're doing well, what we can continue, what we can do differently the next time.*
>
> *He would say, look, this went wrong, and you wouldn't feel worried. You could easily say I've made a mistake, and I think generally he'd work through why it went wrong and how to solve it.*
>
> *…she can identify my weak spots, and weak values…and she just wanted to see more…asking me to hold meetings, and do little projects and things like that, and then she'd give me feedback on it.*
>
> *She'll sit down with you and go over where you've gone wrong…and then help you…give you instruction and direction.*

■ The positive way in which engaging managers expressed any criticism, or suggestions for improvement, was crucial. The issue was less what the managers said, but the way they said it. Typically, team members felt that this made them amenable to advice and willing to 'have a go', rather than being defensive.

> *…where you're slipping a bit, he'll reassure you that, actually, what you're saying is right but manage to get you to say it the right way.*

…she says things like, I was speaking to so and so the other day and are you sure you explained that to them, or have you thought about doing this? So…it's not, you know, there's a big gap here I want you to address, but it's that sort of hint…or it's more, sort of remedial. She doesn't say, this is what I want to change, but she might say, I was a bit concerned that that happened. Then you know that that's something to deal with … but it's never done in that sort of way, this is bad and sort it!

It's not a putdown; it's to address the issue.

I think she's really good at letting you know if you should be doing something that you're not, or something a bit more in some area or another, without making you feel as if you've had a lecture from the headmaster. You just suddenly think, mmm, yes, I'd better go and think about that, and get on with it, or sometimes in my case, well, I knew that anyway, so perhaps I'd better go and do whatever it was I've been putting off, or whatever. And it's not meant, or it doesn't come out in a, come and see me or anything, it just comes up in the conversation.

He's never really critical about what's happening. He's very gentle or very subtle about what he's trying to tell you, so you're getting the message but you don't feel as if you've been shot down.

2.3 The senior view of how the managers do it

The people who managed our engaging managers were all able to describe how these managers approached performance management overall, and it was clear that they valued their performance focus and (unsurprisingly) their excellent results. Recurring themes were the setting of clear objectives and standards, monitoring performance, involving the team, being fair and equitable, having frequent contact with the team, and explaining the big picture to the team while also attending to deal and method.

She expects high standards from her people, I think it's fair to say, and she's absolutely keen on, from a customer's point of view, what it is that their expectation will be of that service. And she makes that very real for the individual and she will help give different scenarios to try and improve their understanding about, if something's lacking in a certain area, the impact to the customer and the impact to the business.

She has very high expectations. She is very good at celebrating people who are doing well, but managing performance for those people who are not doing well. She is quite a stickler for consistency and when it does not happen she gets quite cross.

Performance is at the forefront. He is driven through the line on performance. Objective setting is important…his attention to performance is very high and core to his role. Safety management is the number one priority.

Fairly rigorous, I think, quite insistent, and insistent being a positive word, in my opinion…he's got three split sites and he does get himself around, and I think that's why he's earned a great deal of respect from people. Again, whilst he's sensitive to the grade structure…he wants people to contribute and he expects people to contribute.

*[Manager's name] has a tremendous amount of contact with his staff, but he doesn't **see** them very often. And there's a skill in it, obviously to motivate and to get engagement, contact with them is more of a challenge…he's a very hands on manager, so he likes to get out there. He's someone who leads by example, rather than by theory.*

Overall, he's competitive but not over the top. He has an inbuilt need to achieve so sets an example to others. He's very clear about targets and what's needed, and is focused on achieving these.

Very very focused…because he sees the results of the business as being his main driver.

…he sets his objectives very, very high, often higher than the corporate objective — or the defined objective — so he will set a level higher than that. He's extremely knowledgeable, very detailed; he understands the levers and the things that he needs to deliver, and then he sets about enacting them, basically, so he's a great example of where someone has a simple and clear objective in mind and goes about it in a very focused and determined way to make that happen.

3 Tackling Performance Problems

Tackling employees who are performing below standard is something most managers find really difficult; there is a temptation to 'ostrich' in the hope that the problem will go away. When, inevitably, it gets worse instead of disappearing, managers tend to fall into two camps: either they call in HR and try to pass on the problem, or they weigh in suddenly and heavily, maybe giving the employee grounds for a grievance. Our engaging managers – even the inexperienced ones, who sometimes needed reassurance from more senior managers that they were on the right track – all behaved very differently from these norms when tackling poor performance.

3.1 Tackling performance problems: the managers' approach

■ None of the engaging managers relished having to manage poor performance, and having to have what are often described as 'difficult conversations'. However, they all recognised the need to tackle issues immediately, rather than letting them build up into major crises.

> *At one time I wasn't ready to face up to a difficult situation and to handle it immediately…I don't do that any more; that's something I've learnt over the years, that it doesn't help. You've got to address a challenge or a problem with an individual as soon as it happens, and resolve it…so, if there is something that needs to be done, you do it.*
>
> *…it's easy to not do things; it's easy to shy away from things. But it doesn't really help you in the long run.*
>
> *…it's important to highlight things at the time and nip things in the bud straight away.*

■ Most of the managers in our sample described their initial approach as having an informal discussion with the individual, to find out if there was an explanation for the under-performance – problems at home, or workplace relationships, or barriers put in the way by the organisation, for example. What they did *not* do is assume that it must be the fault of the employee.

> *I would try and informally do it as the first port of call. So maybe an informal meeting, a chat with somebody, there could be underlying problems, what have you…there are often other things underlying the performance issue or the attendance issue.*
>
> *…you've got to look back and think, actually, okay, the person not performing, is that because of him or is that because of a decision we've made?*
>
> *We engage first, to try and get the view of the individual, to see whether we've misjudged it. I'm a big believer in Jo Frost and Supernanny, so a 30-minute programme, five minutes on these nasty children, 25 minutes on correcting behaviour in the parents, so we engage to make sure we're not doing something that is generating this behaviour.*
>
> *…they need to be given the opportunity to do something about that and support them in doing something about that. Because you can bet your bottom dollar that this probably counts for 1% of what they're doing out of their entire career. The 99%, we really don't want to chuck that down the pan…*
>
> *Is it an organisational reason why they've slipped up? Don't jump to the obvious conclusion that it's them that's causing the dip…*

■ Coaching was something that most of our managers said they used to improve performance. They were willing to share their knowledge and work with individuals on a one-to-one basis or, if it was an area they did not know so much about, nominate the employee for more formal training.

> *…in the early days, I used to pretty much be in a tell mode, and now I feel that I've switched to a coaching mode…I'm coaching them and encouraging them to think for themselves.*
>
> *I've developed over the years, the last couple of years, more of a coaching style to performance management.*
>
> *…through regular one to ones and coaching and observations and feedback, that's where I highlight any gaps…*
>
> *We pick the good things out that the rest of the team do and incorporate that into a coaching plan for these guys who are not doing so well.*

- The managers stressed the need for setting clear goals for the underperforming individual, and monitoring progress closely without turning it into too much of an issue. Several managers quoted instances of turning people around in this way before needing to resort to formal procedures.

> *…set some clear standards as to what they are going to do, and don't panic. Don't panic, because if you do, it will just panic them.*
>
> *I have more regular meetings, setting clear timeframes. I break things down into small steps and monitor very closely. If this still doesn't work, I might try them out in different work areas and tailor work to them. I have gone through procedures but not all the way; I've been able to turn things around to a large extent.*
>
> *We give them four weekly targets, but behaviour as well as specific result targets.*
>
> *…this is my tenth [location] I've managed, I've only ever issued a warning to one manager in ten [locations].*

- Where necessary, however, our managers did move onto the formal stages of their organisation's procedure and, when they did this, they made sure that they followed the rules carefully and involved HR, or their own managers, at the appropriate stages. Some regarded having to resort to formal processes as a failure on their part, and would work very hard to resolve the situation if they possibly could.

> *When it didn't improve, then I took him through the procedure, after identifying several gates we needed to go through to improve his performance.*
>
> *And the procedures we use within the company are very rigid and I felt very confident that it was done correctly. And, as long as it's done correctly, I'm happy.*
>
> *…we then checked our legal position with HR.*
>
> *If there are not any improvements then obviously you just have to go through the usual HR procedures. But that, I think for me, would be the slippery slope to other things. That relationship would have broken down at that point, I think.*

- Almost all the managers in our sample have, at some stage of their careers, managed people out of the organisation, or transferred them out of their area. While not enjoying this, and sometimes feeling a degree of personal failure, they regarded is as something they had to do for the benefit of the organisation. They also did not want the team as a whole to be brought down, as this would impact on other members of the team who were performing well.

…we do have no hopers, and where we've tried everything, coaching and every other tool that's available to us and we don't get the response we want, then, at the end of the day, we are a business like any other business and we'll pick the organisation.

Ultimately, poor performers would have to go, after going through all the processes.

I've probably, had, in my time, three people that worked for me that I couldn't improve, I couldn't do anything with; not for the want of trying…you're not going to win every one; if you can win the majority of them, great.

I spent some time initially just walking with him…desperately leading by example and showing him what I wanted…and talking with him about this is what I want. But it just wasn't happening. So I sat down, had a conversation with him, explained that I felt that really, he was a square peg in a round hole but that he did have talents. And then we spent some time focusing on the talents that he did have and talking about where do those get made best use of, how are you going to apply those to make you happy and to benefit the organisation? And then I worked with him to find an alternative post…he's doing terribly well there…

I think actually tackling those issues got me a lot of support…within the team.

3.2 The view from the top

The people who managed our engaging managers were confident in their managers' ability to cope with team members who were underperforming, although some of them helped out when necessary (with less experienced managers) or described situations in the past when the manager had been less confident. Willingness to, and competence in, tackling performance issues was one of the things that senior managers valued most highly – perhaps because this is such a rare commodity, and also because they had all experienced less effective managers 'dumping' their more difficult performance management issues onto them. Senior people also welcomed the systematic approach taken by the engaging managers, which made their life easier and also was essential if there was a chance of disciplinary action/dismissal.

[Managers' names] have grown up and now tackle poor performance more systematically…all have kept poor performers on too long; they all want to be liked too much. But they've all recognised this and moved on.

…she has been very clear; she always gives them the opportunity to give their side of the story. But, ultimately, they will leave that conversation knowing exactly what they needed to do, how they needed to improve, what depth needed to put in place, there'll be documentation to support the discussion…

He's got more patience than I have. He will work with that individual to try and sort it out and understand and go through a performance improvement plan and sit down and do it all methodically. He's very systematic in that and very organised. And he keeps excellent records of all those sorts of things…

Both are adept at managing problems such as poor performance. They face it and have difficult conversations, in a supportive way. They evidence failure, get people to face up to it, coach to improve, but will get them out if they have to. They are both good coaches…

…he's very good at sitting down with people and being clear, articulating in a clear way that maybe that person isn't performing to the level required…

I think a lot of the problem about people management is when things fester and they're not addressed, and one thing he does that is different from a number of his peers, he'll get on with it. He'll spot a problem and he'll be addressing it before he tells me about it…and he will do that fairly and do it very determinedly…to me it's the thing that a lot of colleagues find difficult, but he doesn't find it difficult.

…even when he was a very new manager…he still did all this. Now, some of our managers longer in the tooth haven't done this and should do.

He is very unhappy when he has to explain to me that performance has dropped, which is a very rare occasion, he takes it very personally. He will invariably have a plan to put it right.

4 Tackling Poor Behaviour

Tackling poor behaviour can be even harder than addressing under-performance, because there is often clearer evidence for the latter. Some organisations have behavioural competences or guidelines, but even with these, there can be scope for interpretation and accusations of subjectivity. Examples of 'tricky' individuals and poor behaviour given by our engaging managers and their own managers were:

■ 'outspoken' people who challenged the manager's authority

■ 'headstrong' behaviour, which could become aggressive or even violent

■ those who had an exaggerated sense of their own ability

■ 'awkward' and 'obstructive' employees, who did not agree with the organisation's decisions or the manager's approach

■ conflicts within the team

■ mavericks who bend the rules too far.

One major issue for managers (and more widely for organisations) is that people who do not display the expected behaviours are not necessarily poor performers; in fact, they can often be immensely successful at many aspects of their job, but disruptive of the team's dynamics.

4.1 What the managers do

Our engaging managers used a variety of approaches when dealing with people who might be performing adequately – or even well – but whose behaviours and attitudes left a lot to be desired. Some of their tactics were similar to those adopted for managing poor performance, although the managers tended to put more stress on understanding people and what might motivate them.

- One notable finding was that engaging managers typically act quite quickly in response to displays of undesirable behaviour, partly to nip it in the bud, but also because they did not want the rest of the team – particularly newer members of staff – to be influenced.

> *I've learnt to tackle issues quickly, not prevaricate. It's uncomfortable to tackle things head on but its best. I need to trust my own style and judgement. I've learnt not to try to bury things and hope they'll go away.*
>
> *Like poor performance, I tackle it immediately.*
>
> *Yes, I just deal with it head on; I don't shy away from it, and I just get on with it.*
>
> *Where we have a really good performer who is difficult, who is not behaving and whose values are not where we want them to be, my view is…that we make that same early intervention and have an improvement plan to get that person to where we want to get them. I like mavericks. I think there is a place in any organisation for mavericks, as long as they are properly managed. But inappropriate behaviours can be very disruptive to other groups of people. And I've learnt, particularly here, that an influential and corrosive personality, who's performing well, can have a very demoralising effect on quite a significant group of people.*
>
> *They're the people that are the most vocal; they're the people that could cause the most damage, and also could cause the most good.*
>
> *…every [location]'s got them, every [location] is going to have two, three, up to five, real, what I would call characters. The danger is allowing the characters to infiltrate everyone else, that's it.*

- When tackling behavioural issues, our engaging managers were keenly aware that people were not all the same and might be motivated by different things, so would require more subtle approaches than the 'one size fits all'.

> *Everyone is very different and requires a different approach because they're individuals…*
>
> *And sometimes with difficult people, of course, it depends on the person, how you deal with it…it goes back to that understanding how people are going to react.*
>
> *I have a lot of those — lots of strong characters —the job attracts these! It's about embracing diversity, understanding those individuals, giving them appropriate tasks…it's about understanding strengths, spending time with people to understand strengths.*

I just try and find common ground with people. Once you build a rapport with them you can start to understand what makes them tick…it's very rare people come to work to do a bad job…just making time for someone and showing people that you're, actually, a human being; you'll get far more out of people by building relationships.

I've got lots of people like that, I've got engineers working for me, they're all like that. No, I've got people, and that comes back to knowing what motivates them, what it is that interests them and trying to get them to understand that, or tell me what their problem is so I can share their viewpoints, and it's trying to get them to realise then that no, I'm not out for something completely different, we're all trying to do the same thing, yes, I need to understand your motivation of why you don't like him or whatever.

Yes, I have one in particular. I try to work with that person, to understand the situation. She's very sensitive — it's personality and religion. I'm gradually building up her confidence and winning her over. I give lots of encouragement. I try to integrate her within the team and also talk to the rest of the team about differences. I try to understand the family situation and where people are coming from. However, it's unfair if people are being carried. That person has progressed and has gone up a grade.

■ One important point made by some of the engaging managers was that 'difficult' people often have real potential and, sometimes, a wide sphere of influence, which means that it is worth putting in a lot of effort to understand them and bring them on board.

So, what I've said to him, is you just can't be like that in the workplace, because people might not want to approach you, and because he's got so much to offer, and he's very good at what he does and how he delivers and certain aspects of his performance, he needs to share that amongst his colleagues…he's really improved in the past nine months in everything that I've spoken to him about, and he's taken the feedback on board, and he's done it.

Certain individuals like that, I try and use to lever the rest of the team. So I will make sure that I say hello to them if they're by the coffee machine and have a bit of a chat with them, and try and break down that barrier, so they don't see me as the enemy, they don't see me as the manager who's always asking for more, and normally, because I've found that normally the more difficult ones are also the more focal ones, which are normally the ones who are more influential within the team, so if you can get them on your side, you can also then turn the performance of the team or the view of the team. And in one case, that actually meant me reorganising the office so that person ended up sitting next to me, so then he engaged with me across the desk, he felt like he was more involved in what was going on, and he's no longer a difficult employee, well, relatively.

So, when you go into a new [location], you have to identify who these people are...the biggest moaners and the biggest dangers could also become your biggest advantage...all that takes is listening to them, it's about listening, because nine times out of ten it's just they've been at the company a long time, they're frustrated, annoyed, they've seen the same things going wrong day in and day out for 20 years. It's just about listening, just a few quick wins putting it right, and then they end up talking about the stuff I want them to talk about, rather than the stuff that's on their agenda...they're the people that are the most vocal; they're the people that could cause the most damage, and also could cause the most good.

■ Doing the homework was a recommendation made by several engaging managers, who emphasised the need to gather evidence and get the facts straight before tackling people.

With some difficult people, it is about...letting them know when they're being difficult and sitting down and talking them through...and making sure that I've got all the evidence up my sleeve to be able to have that conversation in a very robust way...

...just reflecting some of the comments that I've heard back to that person and just saying, actually, I've been walking through your department and one or two people have said one or two things about...what's your take on it? But if I just went in and said, oh, your team doesn't think very much of you and didn't have anything to back it up, I think that would be difficult. If you can get the facts and you can get some evidence to back things up...the evidence of somebody has told me this and I'll repeat it verbatim.

■ The managers stressed the need to be open and direct with people, rather than prevaricating; they felt that this honesty was usually appreciated, even if it made for some uncomfortable situations in the short term.

We had some awful conversations, because they already thought that they were up here, but in actual fact they were not...having those types of conversations when they already thought they were up the game, when they were not, was quite difficult, because people do not want to hear.

We have a lot of stroppy conversations with hunchback shoulders and arms crossed, because they do not believe it is really happening to them. But in order to move it forward one has to have that open and honest conversation to start off with to be able to then move it forward. I have to say that these [team members] have got their head around the fact that in order to get where they want to be they are going to have to get off their backsides and do something, and they both have.

- Our engaging managers were prepared to work very hard to bring people round, but if necessary were prepared to take formal action for the good of the team and the organisation.

> *With really difficult people, I'd give them every opportunity but would recognise they'd need to go if necessary.*
>
> *I put a huge store by the team. I try to get people to be part of the team. I reinforce good behaviour. Ultimately, if people won't play, I will go to dismissal.*
>
> *I have got one individual here that I think is going to go to dismissal stage, so I can't get him. I can't…there comes a point.*

4.2 What have senior managers observed?

The senior managers had all noted that the engaging managers were willing to tackle poor behaviour as well as under-performance, although the tactics they used were not necessarily the same. They appreciated these managers' ability to spot problems and follow them up in ways that often benefited the 'difficult' individual as well as the team and the organisation. Most of the senior managers were able to come up with specific examples of positive handling of potentially sticky situations, as well as the general approach taken by the engaging managers.

> *She's had a couple, certainly; behavioural challenges I would say, more than their ability. The ability, I think, with much of her guys is there quite often; it's the behaviours that don't add up. So, yes, she's had to have some quite detailed conversations; not just as a one off but follow something up over a period of time where she's had to go and revisit certain things. And, actually, she's had some really positive outcomes both for the team and the individuals, as well, in terms of their own personal development and the aspiration of where they want to be. I think she tackles those things really well because she backs it up with a lot of comparisons and tries to put things into their language for them and simplify it, but being very clear on what her expectations are as a result of that, as well.*
>
> *I wouldn't say she does, but that is down to the fact that she has instilled the right behaviours in them…she has been given a team that has been the same as everyone, but due to her management style and her expectations, and what she accepts as behaviours has meant that she doesn't have any awkward team members.*
>
> *…there have been instances and occasions even with the excellent people. There was one instance a few months ago when we had one person, who was good, but he had all sorts of issues…and when [manager's name] tried to address [these] with him he absolutely lost the plot and started screaming and shouting in the middle of the office…she let him calm down, and then took him aside, telling him that this was completely unacceptable and she was not prepared to be spoken to like that.*

That was basically a case of disciplinary action. He got a warning for it, but from that his behaviour improved and that was because [manager's name] addressed the issues that he had…she made it quite clear that she was not prepared to accept someone acting in a violent and aggressive manner, and neither was the company, but she got to the bottom of the issues and they were resolved. So, now he is a shining star…

Like all departments, we've got one or two awkward sorts…quite often they're only awkward because they've got a different slant on achieving the same end as you have…how to talk to those people to get their view and yet ensure that they don't influence others too strongly in the wrong direction is often a feature of the debate…you worry about how much they influence new trainees and new starters…there's [an] individual who's a union representative, who had been quite awkward…and because of the approach [manager's name]'s taking with him and involving him to an extent that he never believed would have happened from what he'd been told…we turned him round. He works positively and constructively with us whilst still representing his people very well, even though he's really only quite new at it. So, I think that is a big success that we credit [manager's name] largely for.

I think, probably with a sort of personal engagement…there are a couple of individuals who are a bit outspoken, and I suppose sometimes he does it with empathy, or using examples from his own experiences…like, yes, I know what you're trying to say, but there's a different way of saying it, or do you not think you might be more effective if you address it in this way?

He's had two of his team members come to him complaining about another. What he's done is hold separate little meetings, if you like, tease out the issues from the members that have come to complain. Then he's explored with other team members as to whether anybody else has noticed it, are these issues true, are they affecting anybody else.

He has moved somebody. It was a BO problem. He did move somebody but I'm pleased to say he moved them but didn't move them off the team. The individual also started showering, obviously using deodorant, did change, has slipped back but then has had another word. Quite a difficult one but he did manage to get through to this individual.

…he has a woman who…has far too high expectations. He's managing her well that she is re-phasing and realigning her expectations…she will be a good manager.

He is relatively robust so he has no fear to use the right language or the same language as his counterpart is using and be relatively direct. He is able to choose the right kind of buttons from friendly to angry.

5 Delivering Bad News

5.1 'Bad news' examples

All the engaging managers in our sample felt that they had – at least once, and for most on several occasions – been in the position of having to break bad news. Sometimes, the news had to be imparted to individuals, at other times to the whole team, and sometimes more widely. The following examples illustrate the uncomfortable situations some of the managers have had to deal with:

■ Telling individuals that they would not be getting an expected promotion.

■ Telling individuals (or sometimes the entire team) that they would not be getting a bonus.

■ Explaining, to the rest of the team, why two (well-liked) team members had been dismissed.

■ Dismissing people instantly due to serious breaches of procedure, and having to escort them off site.

■ Handling customer complaints and communicating these to the team.

■ Explaining to the team that new (initially unwelcome) systems or processes were to be introduced.

■ Announcing that existing systems or processes (with which employees were happy) were to be changed; the sales commission scheme was given as an example.

■ Announcing budget cuts and explaining the impact of these on the team.

■ Explaining major restructuring and how this would impact significantly on the team.

■ Explaining that work currently based in the UK was to be moved offshore.

- Making people redundant, including valued team members.

- Informing long-standing contractors that their services would no longer be required.

- Closing entire offices (where hundreds of people worked) in several different locations, and telling employees that they would have to move location or be made redundant.

5.2 The engaging managers' approach

- When asked about how they went about breaking bad news, the terms most often used by our engaging managers were those relating to honesty and openness. Integrity was very important to these managers, and they refused to dissemble or lie to their teams.

You have to be as open as possible, and explain the rationale.

They know that they will not get a load of company blurb just because that is the right thing to say. They will get an honest answer.

…part of bad news is about trying to be honest, open and…or as honest as you can possibly be, because there's always stuff you can't really get into.

As straightforwardly as I possibly can. I try to be as honest as I can all the time, so if there's a possibility that bad news might emerge, it's never going to come as a surprise to anyone. So that's point number one.

My experience is to be upfront, to give bad news, to put it in context, clearly…my commitment is to give them the information and context to make that decision for themselves…people would rather have bad news when there's bad news to give, rather than have managers who string them along.

I come straight out with it. There's no point trying to soften the blow, you need to be open and frank. I try to help people though the acceptance stage once the news is delivered, by helping them through the process and increasing their understanding. There's nothing worse than people getting things third or fourth hand or through the grapevine/rumour mill.

…basically what I do is, I just say, right, this is the situation, and this is where we stand on it, and I will be shot down and we will have a full and frank discussion on it. But at the end of the day, I don't see any point in not telling them, or whatever. If I have to deliver a message, I do.

> *I tend to be very honest and upfront. Where I can tell people or give people updates on information I'm very, very keen on them knowing what is going on. Part of the problem here, I think, is that lots of stuff gets kept secret squirrel and people will automatically assume the worst…so, I like to keep them informed and updated where I can.*
>
> *I tell it as it is. Sometimes I get criticised for that. But I was a recipient of somebody who used to be selective about what they communicated to me, when I was a junior. And I thought that was disrespectful of me and disrespectful of what was important and not important to me…so as I was saying, I tend to tell it direct.*
>
> *I think honesty is the only way to do it. There's no point in trying to sugar-coat things. Honesty, factual and try and let people understand the circumstances around any decision that's been made…I often share confidential information with people…and people aren't stupid. People know if you're going to try and sell them a dummy, or something. So, don't treat people as idiots; just tell them how it is.*
>
> *You've just got to be honest and you've just got to be straightforward and you've got to just say.*

■ Many of the managers stressed the need for preparation to ensure they understood fully the issue and its likely impact on employees. Breaking bad news was recognised to be a serious issue that required respect and deserved a significant investment of time and effort.

> *I go in anticipating what they are going to say back to me so that I have got some answers. If I do not know what the answer is, then I will find out what the answer is and come back to them with a proper answer rather than giving them a load of rubbish, because I think that that is right.*
>
> *I think the other thing is to really, really prepare for it. So, if I'm going to deliver bad news, I really will invest the time. It's not something that you walk blind into. I make absolutely certain that I know the full background of whatever news I'm delivering. The biggest office I ever closed down, I knew nothing about before, but by the time I turned up there, I knew all its history, all its background and the kind of people who worked there, the kind of expectations they might have and so forth.*
>
> *…having a packet of tissues in your handbag…*
>
> *I will do a bit of mental preparation, I'll make sure I've got all the facts and all the information before I go into the sessions.*

■ Another theme was the need to adopt the appropriate demeanour and ensure the news was broken in a suitable environment. The engaging managers felt they sometimes had to change their usual informal communication style in order to impart serious news.

> *You have to be very careful, serious, focused.*
>
> *I try not to get emotional but to present the right image.*
>
> *I think you need to be professional when you're going through the stages; explain what's happening.*
>
> *You just have to sit down in a quiet place…a one-to-one conversation, certainly not have one in the middle of the office.*
>
> *I have quite an open, jokey style…so I mentally think, right, I cannot do that, I've got to be dead serious, dead straight down the line…and obviously it's around environment as well, so I wouldn't do it in a corridor, I will make sure it's done in the right place.*

■ The managers explained that they tried to get across the business context of organisational decisions, so that the team would understand the reasons behind the decision – but also that it was important to phrase the messages in a way that was relevant to their teams. This 'big picture' thinking is a recurrent aspect of engaging managers' behaviour.

> *I explained the rationale and why it was right for the business.*
>
> *I try to think about how to communicate to them as well, because sometimes when we get a brief, we've got to brief so many different levels. There's not always the right pitch, so you've got to make sure you pitch it right.*
>
> *We tend to communicate in business context here, so this is not personal, it's the business that's changing. And to be honest people fundamentally just say, what does that mean to me as an individual. So I try and articulate what it means to them as individuals.*
>
> *I said to them it isn't going to change: that's the bottom line; that's what it is…that is reality, the way it stands at the moment.*

■ While they understood the business context, our engaging managers were also very aware that organisational decisions impact significantly on individual employees. They tried very hard to display empathy by putting themselves into the shoes of the people in their teams, in order to respond appropriately to questions and to suggest ways forward.

> *…we delivered the message, went away and then came back a couple of hours later so that people, who had thought of questions that they hadn't thought of at that immediate time, could then express them. So again, it's just allowing the dialogue.*

So before you deliver the news, you have to try and think about what it might mean to that individual…within any situation, there's always going to be a negative and a positive side. So deliver the negative, but then look for the positive, because with any situation, there's some positivity.

In my team at the moment the bad news is more about an opportunity they won't get rather than anything else, so it is discussing what other opportunities they might have…

I try and articulate what it means to them as individuals.

I've got a daughter who works for the company and I just put myself in a position, if I was having a talk to her about it, as long as it was done fairly and with some compassion, I think, I'm happy, in myself, I can carry it out.

The way I've delivered it is probably the way, okay, this is where we are, because it's not worth trying to pretend you're not where you are, this is where you are, but this is what we're going to do about it, or, as a team, this is what we're going to do to get out of it.

5.3 What's valued by senior management

Senior managers were appreciative of the engaging managers' willingness to take on the task of breaking bad news, rather than trying to pass it up the line. They also spoke of these managers' ability to empathise with individuals and with their teams and understand the implications for them, while managing to get across the big picture of why the organisation had taken the decision. Another common theme was that engaging managers would do their homework and ensure they were fully briefed (if necessary, getting advice or involving others), and would allow time for questions and reflection.

They all did lots of planning and ensured they were fully briefed, including getting legal and HR advice.

Because often that piece of news will come from her senior manager first, so I think she's very good at airing what she thinks her concerns will be for her team and putting those into place, putting some responses into place before she goes into a briefing of that nature.

It is trying to manage their expectations that we have still got to stay afloat as a business, etc. Yes, she does communicate things like that. I think she is learning all the time how to deal with these things…even if it might be an unfavourable decision she is quite straight talking in terms of putting our position across.

I think it was just through working harder and taking time and involvement and not trying to rush to a decision…and getting all the right HR and union people involved right from the beginning, right the way through and keeping a pretty open mind as to the outcome…it, basically, is just energy, hard work and keeping a very open mind and thinking through scenarios.

The key thing is to be good at articulating why, at understanding how people will feel. [Manager's name] is adept at this. He will walk away for a while, then come back and tackle questions.

As privately as possible…he took her away from the team, prepared for her to be literally upset, took some tissues, took her to a quiet area, and then suggested that she went for a walk afterwards…

He took a fairly direct approach. He spoke privately to people to broach the subject…he explained why. He empathised, but made it clear that we still had to get on.

He's very straightforward. He doesn't hide anything.

My understanding of what he does is he goes and understands the issue at hand, so he knows it intimately, and then he communicates that to his team and explains the consequences of it, and how we're going to work our way through the issue. So, there are consequences, but this is what we're going to do and this is how we're going to do it. So, he does explain it in very good detail.

I think he's very honest about it and he is always explaining the wider picture.

[Manager's name]'s approach is straightforward; he communicates the facts clearly. He answers the questions he can, refers if he can't. He doesn't try to soften things or pander to people's questions.

6 Top Tips for Sticky Situations

The material we gathered from our engaging managers, their own managers, and their teams, provides a rich source on which to draw. The managers were honest about what they found difficult in managing their teams, and admitted that they had sometimes made mistakes in the past. Top of their lists was usually managing poor performers, tackling tricky behaviour, or breaking bad news. They felt they had learnt a lot by reflecting on their own behaviour and that of other managers, and had developed some 'rules of thumb'. So what does this research tell us about the behaviours to adopt? Most of the advice that follows will seem obvious, but the reality is that many managers do not behave consistently in these positive ways – and even our engaging managers admitted that they had to take stock occasionally and remind themselves of the behaviours to adopt and those to avoid.

6.1 What to do

■ Aim for **clarity** in all your relations with the team, particularly about:

  □ your expectations of their performance

  □ specific tasks, projects, activities, etc you want people in the team to deliver

  □ how the team's activities contribute towards the bigger picture

  □ how success will be measured.

■ Give regular, frequent **feedback**:

  □ know what staff are doing day to day

  □ ensure you timetable regular one to ones with every team member, during which you adopt a listening, supportive role

  □ develop a coaching style in your interactions with the team

- appreciate individual differences.

- **Monitor** performance so that you can:

  - recognise success and celebrate it

  - quote facts and figures to illustrate the team's achievements

  - spot quickly when things are going wrong, and take remedial action.

- Foster a **team approach** to performance:

  - encourage a positive, collaborative working environment

  - support the team in taking ownership of problems and working to find solutions.

- **Tackle performance and behavioural problems quickly**, by:

  - investigating the situation

  - not assuming that the fault must lie with the individual

  - talking to the team member(s)

  - coaching to improve

  - putting an action plan in place, with clear targets

  - monitoring progress

  - if necessary, using formal procedures.

- Think hard and **be careful** when breaking bad news:

  - do your homework beforehand

  - explain the business context clearly, so people can understand the rationale

  - adopt an appropriate demeanour

  - try to understand how the news might be received by different people

  - be as honest and open as you can

  - give people time for the news to sink in

  - listen to people's reactions and respond appropriately

  - be supportive and caring to those adversely affected.

6.2 What to avoid

This short list of behavioural traps to avoid may be helpful. Several of our engaging managers admitted to having occasionally demonstrated such behaviours in the past; they felt they had learnt a lesson from this, and were trying in a very conscious and deliberate way not to do so again.

Do not:

■ assume people know what is expected of them

■ leave feedback until the annual review

■ hope that poor performance will improve without intervention, or that poor behaviour will go away of its own accord

■ go into any sticky situation without preparing first

■ assume you know how people will react, without listening to them first.

Appendix: The Research

Participants in the Engaging Manager research

Seven organisations took part in the research:

1. Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA)

2. Centrica

3. Corus

4. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)

5. London Borough of Merton

6. Rolls-Royce

7. Sainsbury's.

In total 25 'engaging managers', 22 senior managers (those who managed the engaging managers) and 154 team members (in 25 teams) took part in the research. We would like to extend our thanks to them for their co-operation, time and enthusiasm.

Methodology

We asked each organisation to identify a small number of engaging managers on the basis of the engagement scores of their teams in their most recent employee attitude survey. We then carried out interviews with both the engaging managers and their own managers, whom we have termed 'senior managers'. We also facilitated 25 focus groups with the 'engaged teams' (one for each engaging manager), containing 154 people in total. Focus group members completed the standard IES engagement questionnaire and participated in a discussion. The focus groups also included a period of time for team members to consider their

manager and describe them by means of descriptive words, a drawing, or a metaphor.

Further details on the methodology adopted can be found in our first report on the research[1].

Terminology

When designing the questionnaire and discussion guides for this research, and later when planning the report structure, we considered whether to use the term 'manager' or 'leader'. The term 'leader' is now used in many contexts where 'manager' might have been used in the past, and there is a continuing debate about the difference between what a manager is and does, compared to the role of a leader. We decided, however, to opt for the terms 'manager' and 'senior manager' because we found that in the majority of our participating organisations, the term 'leader' was either not used at all, or was used only for very senior positions (such as the Chief Executive). In only one of the seven participating organisations was there routine reference to 'leaders', 'leadership skills', 'leadership training and development', etc.

Research funding

All of our research into employee engagement, including the Engaging Manager research reported here, has been funded by IES's membership HR Network. For more details on IES's HR Network, please visit www.employment-studies.co.uk.

Taking the research further

The Engaging Manager research is being used to develop a 360° assessment tool focusing on engaging/disengaging managerial behaviours.

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[1]   Robinson D, Hayday S (2009), *The Engaging Manager,* Institute for Employment Studies, Report number 470