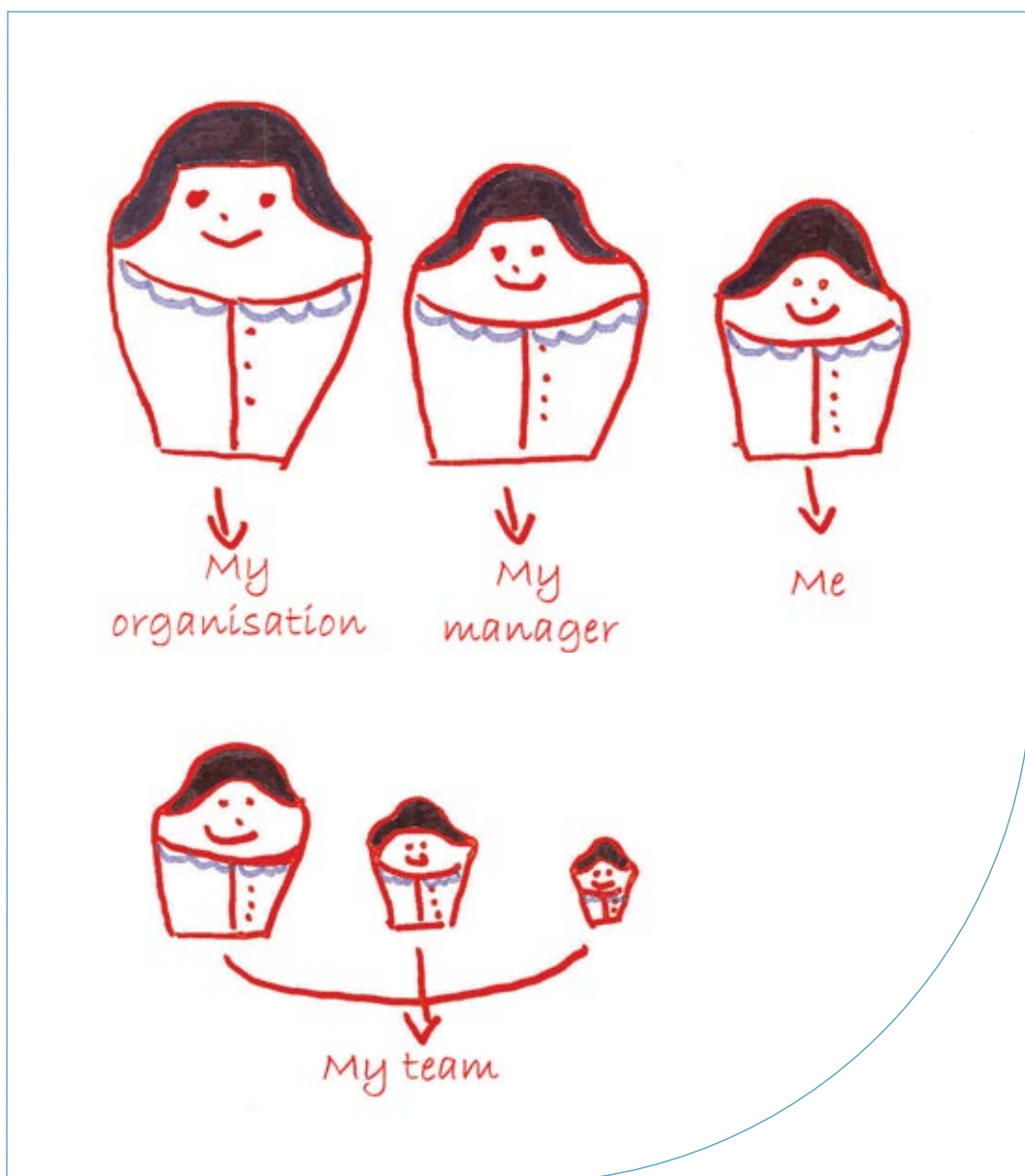

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Teams and the engaging manager

Penny Tamkin, Dilys Robinson



THE ENGAGING MANAGER SERIES

TEAMS AND THE ENGAGING MANAGER

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Teams and the engaging manager

Penny Tamkin
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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 employee¹.’

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.

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 the experiences and views of engaged teams, drawing on the findings from focus groups with these teams.

In our research we found that teams who scored highly on engagement tended to attribute their high score to team spirit, with the line manager an important part of its creation. Line managers improve performance, it seemed, through praise, getting 'stuck in' when needed, and encouraging ideas. A strategic focus helped, letting individuals know the part they could play, and coaching and mentoring people to do better. Engaging managers were not afraid of change and also helped create an atmosphere for innovation by not focusing on blame.

Finding the right balance between autonomy and support was crucial. Teams valued being left to get on with their jobs, but also being supported and developed rather than abandoned.

This short report explores the original findings further through two themes:

1. **The team perspective:** what teams value in a manager and what encourages them to put in greater effort.
2. **Leadership dos and don'ts:** what is effective team management behaviour and what is best avoided?

2 The Experience of Work

2.1 The job

Some teams are off to a flying start almost regardless of their manager. In fact when asked what they liked about their job only one team mentioned their manager unprompted. This is not to say that managers do not make a difference – they clearly do, as later discussions show – but respondents think of the experience of the job in a more focused way.

Engaged teams tend to like the job they do for a host of reasons. What makes jobs attractive is partly the intrinsic satisfaction they provide. Typical of comments here are that the job is interesting and varied, and days are never the same – this comment is common amongst engaged teams regardless of the skill demands and nature of the work. Varied and interesting work also encourages people to take control of their day-to-day activities, and to believe that they are responsible for the outcome and can make their own decisions. For some jobs there is a distinct buzz from making a contribution, regardless of the organisation and the setting: being able to see the end product, being involved in research and development, meeting the needs of customers, contributing to the community, being able to make things better for people, making a wider contribution to the State, or just feeling that the job is worthwhile. Some high skilled jobs are intrinsically demanding and for professionals can be a major source of satisfaction.

'I enjoy the technical challenges. It's quite an advanced product we manufacture, so I think it's always interesting, and I think you get involved in new and emerging technologies.'

'The pace and the pressure of the work is quite stimulating, as well, so it's not really having a dull day ever.'

'I think a lot of the people within [company name] have got a pride in the company and the product that we make, because you can see the results, can't you?'

'This particular part of the organisation is fantastic, I think is fantastic, because it's so different to all the other parts. It's quite different, to my mind, and as it's linked to disadvantaged people... it's quite a powerful thing, which I hadn't experienced before, because it was never quite those sorts of people that I'd come across, so that's the good bits for me.'

'I still feel like that, I have to say, and I do take a pride in working for the State, because no matter what we had, you're still working for the State and for the people in the country, and that's what I take pride in.'

2.2 The organisation

For some people there is distinctive pride in working for a well-known and highly regarded employer and for these people the power of the brand and the pride they feel in their organisation is very important.

'I think there's also a lot around the value, and the heritage. It's not just any company; it's got the brand and the heritage... it's certainly good when you talk to people, and they are surprised when you say you work for [company name].'

What the organisation offers is also very important with many comments around good terms and conditions, fair pay, a 'people-oriented company', an organisation that listens to people and cares about employees. Opportunities for progression and development are key elements of the mix for engaged teams too. In fact lack of opportunity is one of the key demotivators, even among teams who are on the whole positive about work.

'...(of) all the companies I've ever worked for, I would say that [company name] is probably one of the better employers that I've had. They are a lot more people orientated than a lot of the companies that I've worked for outside. And [company name], as a company, tends to listen more to what we on the ground have got to say. They're a big company and quite forward thinking in many respects as well, particularly with health and safety and engaging people. We try to get everyone involved. That's one of the important things; that people's opinions count.'

'And I don't feel badly paid, so I have quite a comfortable lifestyle. I know we moan about things like that, but I don't personally feel badly paid for what I do. I think I've got a reasonable lifestyle.'

2.3 The team

Great teams are self-sustaining to a degree. They begin to generate an atmosphere that becomes part of the mix that makes a job interesting and fun. The social side

of work is very important here, with teams mentioning many times the pleasure of working with friendly, helpful, co-operative and sharing colleagues. Great teams clearly bind together and become a cohesive and supportive unit, able to help each other when times are difficult, able to provide key emotional support when the job becomes stressful (and some of our teams were involved in very difficult and emotionally demanding roles) and a source of fun and camaraderie.

'...the friendliness of the people, and I think that is genuine here. I think lots of people across most departments, if you look across departments you tend to get people trying to work together as opposed to against each other.'

'We've got a very close-knit department, so when some people are off you have a worse day than when they're working, because you haven't got your chums with you. It's definitely better when your work mates are in.'

The opposite of this social bond was also mentioned when people spoke about what they did not like, and there were several mentions of unfriendly people pulling the team down and making it hard for them to work well in the wider organisation. This was most clearly expressed by two examples: one mentioned the difficulties of having to deal with unfriendly colleagues, and another focused on negativity and cynicism in the wider organisation associated with those with long lengths of service.

'I find it really difficult, when we're supposed to be colleagues. I see anyone at work as a colleague, so I treat them exactly how I'd want to be treated. But, on a daily basis, people are rude and abrupt and everything... and it's quite upsetting, really.'

'...such people tend to have fairly focused views on life and insular views and have been there 30 and 40 years and feel that the company owes them a living. They just turn up and they can do overtime and get lots of extra money that my people can't. It can be quite difficult... demotivating sometimes.'

Being high performing also brings its own rewards of pride and pleasure in a job well done. All the engaged teams in our Engaging Manager research were high performing and able to evidence their success.

'I think it's also that we feel respected by the manager, respected and valued, and the fact that we are being told we are high performing, I mean psychologically it does something to you, doesn't it?'

2.4 The individual

For some people, the job meets their more transactional life needs, with the most common comments being about flexibility (ie provides the ability to work hours that suit or because a job is close to home).

'I think we do have a very good work-life balance here, and I think they try to accommodate flexible working very well, and certainly much better than other organisations that I've worked for. And I think it's a friendly organisation rather than cold, which is great.'

'There's practical reasons, for me, and it's quite easy to get to. And it's pretty handy; that's quite nice. So, you don't have to battle against the elements to get home.'

2.5 The frustrations of work

What inspires people about work is often quite different from what they do not like. It is not just the opposite of the things that people appreciate. The top three frustrations were:

1. The stifling impact of bureaucracy which made it impossibly difficult for teams to be innovative and quickly responsive, and which they felt acted as a dead hand on any kind of progress.
2. Poor kit, processes and resources, with IT systems getting a special and vehement mention.
3. Poor communications: most commonly teams mentioned the absence of communication, or of being overwhelmed by communication, or of finding it difficult to access (for remote teams), or of feeling cut off from the rest of the organisation.

'I think everybody is frustrated beyond belief by our abhorrent IT... how ridiculous the system is, to the point where often it stops you from being able to do your job. It's that awful, and a lot of us are based regionally, which gives us all sorts of extra problems with IT, and the help is screamingly poor.'

'I sometimes get frustrated by how long it can take to get things done here, and it is a personal bugbear of mine that we spend far too much time in meetings in this organisation, and it is something that frustrates me enormously. I think that that has happened in the last five or six years, the layers of bureaucracy have certainly increased. Sometimes it takes a huge amount of time to get things done, and it shouldn't, and it never used to.'

'I'd say communication needs to be improved, because we're out most of the time, and all those emails, and in the two days you're in the office, you haven't got time to read all those emails... we have to go into offices to get that, and we also find we lose touch with stuff to do with new rules, stuff that appears on the intranet, that we can normally keep up to date with if you were in the office and you do it daily, but we don't have time to do that.'

Change can frustrate people, especially when it makes work harder or removes from them some benefits that they used to enjoy. This might mean training or terms and conditions or pay.

'Well they used to do a Christmas bonus, people used to get, that was all stopped... although they have brought this other one in, the bonus, but you have to work to all the targets, and it's not always your fault if you don't achieve that target. So sometimes it makes it a bit, not unfair, but you work harder and harder all the year, and you work toward the target and then sometimes some people let you down.'

'I think the team building days, the team building side has gone down. When I first came here, I used to do at least a couple of things a year either the company paid for or even just going out and that has definitely tailed off. It was good going on these things. I used to chat to people like I didn't necessarily speak to all the time and got to understand what they were doing.'

'A couple of years ago we had more staff and more managers and I felt then that we were better at doing things like one to ones. They were much more regular, and now we're squeezing them in. And, really, to get the best out of those sort of activities they've got to be a bit more meaningful, I think.'

2.6 What people feel is different about their team

When asked if there was anything about their team which stood them apart from others in the organisation and which might explain their generally higher engagement scores we heard about two quite separate things: first there were intrinsic aspects of the teams themselves which stood them apart from their colleagues and second there were differences in how they were treated.

2.6.1 Intrinsic qualities

When it came to the teams themselves, they tended to feel their engagement edge was due to some unique qualities: they were more creative or competitive, they had greater clarity, they were more collaborative/closer/more helpful/more likely to help each other out, they had more respect for each other, they worked around their strengths and weaknesses, they were less competitive than other teams, etc.

This suggests the team climate in engaged teams is warmer with higher levels of social capital.

'You can walk through the building and see the differences between teams. You can almost see a visual difference between teams. I think we're one of the brighter or chirpier places.'

'It's quite a close team, to be fair, because recently in the last year, I've been in all the different areas of the business and this team gets on very well together all the way through. It makes a huge difference, and everybody wants to work together to achieve the best outcome. There's value and respect, I think, and that makes a big difference from all the different areas of the business that just want to achieve their target objectives and they don't care how they achieve that.'

'I wouldn't say there was something special about [manager's name] and this team that is totally unique, but to my mind it's a positive feeling, and it's good for me. I've worked in other teams that are dysfunctional and don't do a lot of the things that we're doing, but I wouldn't think we were unique. I think we've started to come together and do a pretty good job, and I quite like it.... I do, I really like being on the team.'

2.6.2 Extrinsic factors

When talking about differences outside of themselves, highly engaged teams spoke of being given more autonomy, being more trusted, being more involved and better informed about the organisation, or being given better support. This suggests the teams believe they are given greater opportunity compared to others.

'I know that our team is probably the best... informed out of the three. Because we get all of our figures emailed to us each day and each week and we're always kept informed of that, but I transferred from a different team and we definitely weren't as well informed with regards to those figures. So that's helpful.'

3 The Role of Managers

Engaged teams appreciate their managers. Even if managers are not perfect, the teams will acknowledge their good points and their contribution to the team and its success. There are particular comments about the importance of managers in team engagement which crop up again and again. These cluster into some key themes:

- setting team climate
- setting direction
- managing performance
- developing the team
- establishing the managers' credibility

3.1 Setting team climate

Engaging managers attend to the emotional climate of the team, creating an environment that people can thrive in. Teams reflect on these behaviours very positively, and they underpin a sense of belonging that typifies highly engaged teams.

3.1.1 Relationship forming

Many leadership behaviours appear to build relationships across the team. Teams frequently comment on their managers being approachable and visible. These behaviours ensure that teams can discuss issues with their managers and can seek help when needed.

'I think more than anything else he's really approachable. You could get a lot of guidance from him; you can even email him whenever you want or you can go and see him at his desk, he has got a very approachable personality in the shop; he's always willing to give his perspective and he's always there to advise and so. I have personally seen him quite a few times. I go to him quite a bit. So he'll give his advice, but he also believes that we have the initiative to think for ourselves as well. So we won't suddenly rely on him to tell us what to do; we'll find the solutions ourselves.'

'He's quite good at listening and giving encouragement and then, to a degree, I think he lets us get on with doing the job. He's there when you need him, which is good. But on the other hand, he's not standing over you all the time dictating what needs to happen. There is a presence. He's always in our office... when you need him; if you say [manager's name], what do you think about this, or [manager's name] we've got to do that, or is it okay if we do this?, you get the feedback when you need it. And he'll give you advice when you want it. And if he can't, he'll take it up with someone else.'

The opposite is also true and teams identified a lack of approachability as being detrimental to their performance and their well-being.

'I think it's more about communication, a manager being approachable, because with a few managers, some of them are not very approachable and if you have an issue, or if you feel uncomfortable, or if you feel that you can't approach them, it's not going to really have a good effect on your job because you're going to feel that you can't really do it as well as you could if you had the support.'

'I do feel that people, because they don't see her very much, are frightened to go to her because her bark's worse than her bite, I think. But I do feel that people should be... it should be known to them when she's available. If you've got a problem, you need to know when your immediate manager is available to speak to, and it doesn't happen.'

Additionally managers encourage relationship building often through their own behaviour of being interested in others. Genuinely caring about and valuing their teams, getting to know staff well, revealing their own humanity are all attributes that help create an open accessible environment. Teams like managers who ask after them, who check that people are emotionally OK, who recognise that they are struggling when times are hard. Helping lighten the atmosphere can also create humour and team bonding and ensuring there is a social side to work was mentioned by many teams.

'He gives a steer. If you need help he gives it; otherwise, he trusts you to get on with it. I feel he trusts me. He's very perceptive if I'm having a rocky time or I'm in the firing line. The support is there. If you're having a bad day there'll be a call on your mobile; it'll be [manager's name] saying "It's ok". It makes you feel valued because he's thinking about you.'

'We just have a laugh and joke about it, but it just brings that fun element, and wow factor to our teams, because it engages the team, and it's not work anymore, it's more fun. So what they do in their job, they try and out-beat somebody else, and we'll have a laugh and joke, where do we join into the banter? We're sort of, moving around, we're sort of shouting stuff between our teams, with what we're doing, who's doing good, who's doing bad, and it just helps set up the whole environment for our teams, and it's something that we have... been noticed on.'

Teams frequently describe engaging managers as those who listen and who find ways of gathering thoughts and ideas from their teams. Inevitably this means giving time – another characteristic of engaging managers which was frequently mentioned.

'He does take time out to talk to everybody; go round and take a bit of interest in what they're doing outside of here. Not to any great, prying degree, but if you put him in a corner he could probably tell you what most of the team's outside main interests are and their driving motivators, whether it be work-life balance, money. I think he's taken time out to understand that.'

3.1.2 Trust

A key element of forming relationships is for leaders to create a climate of trust. Teams appreciate managers and leaders who build trust both directly, by not letting individuals or teams down, and indirectly, by adopting styles and approaches which are more likely to create positive and trusting environments.

'You've also got to have confidence in them that if you speak to them in confidence, it will be remain in confidence. Because there are times when you want to talk to your managers and you don't really want it to go any further up. You've got to have that confidence that your manager will keep it under his hat because an awful lot of managers don't.'

'I think the main starting point for that was her being visible to, not just all the staff but all the staff in all their places, which is from the top of Aberdeen, or Inverness, right the way down to Penzance. She made sure that she'd seen all the teams, and therefore they all are equal, and I think that that really kick-started it, regardless of what we have under the banner of staff engagement under the change programme, or anything like that. That kick-started it, and of course, you do follow

the example of your leader, and I think that it kick-started in all of the senior managers a more openly listening approach.'

Issues of trust were also common when teams were talking about managers and leaders about whom they felt less positive. So trust is important in terms of team engagement, and even more critical when it comes to behaviours that are potentially damaging to the engagement of individuals and teams.

'I've seen poor examples where people have changed their attitude or response, depending on who the audience is, seniors or team members, and you don't really know where you stand with them then. Equally bad are managers who play little political games with members of their own team and you can see it happening from the sidelines; it's not very motivating, not very morale boosting.'

'I had one manager who tried to play people off each other and that just was horrendous. And I think he liked conflict because he seemed to think that it meant that new ideas developed and stuff. But it actually just meant that the whole atmosphere was horrible. There was no trust within the team, people ended up keeping their projects to themselves and not sharing, certain things like that. And it wasn't a good atmosphere to work in.'

3.1.3 Flattening hierarchy

As well as being open and approachable, engaging managers are valued for their willingness to reduce or eradicate a sense of hierarchy. This can be about ensuring that there are no unnecessary barriers to open exchange between the leader and the team; several teams mentioned the ways in which their leader minimised any hierarchical divide and any trappings of status, for example locating themselves with their team, or wearing the same uniform. It could also be about relationships within or between teams, encouraging them to be hierarchy-free for the benefit of working relationships, and to respect the contribution of colleagues.

'He's an easy, logical person. You could ask him anything. We've had other managers and you wouldn't dare ask them. It doesn't matter what you say to him, he won't take offence.'

'I always get the impression in our department there's not that much of a hierarchy compared to others. We're a much smaller department than many other departments, but we've all got access and there's lots of open doors to just go in and ask questions.'

'They're still not afraid to do the menial tasks. They don't go: "I'm not doing that cleaning, you go and do it". They will get stuck in and do some cleaning or the basic input; admin. So, they could sit there and do a bit of typing, or whatever; typing up minutes which is quite a menial task for a manager, but she still does it.'

A very simple symbolic activity very much appreciated is the tendency of the manager to 'get stuck in' when teams or individuals are under pressure. This willingness to help the team out as an equal is very important in some roles and appears to be particularly impactful in relatively mundane jobs where employees can feel very pressured by peaks of work. Teams also appreciate being 'treated as adults' ie not being managed too tightly, being respected, having views listened to, being trusted and being allowed some flexibility when needed to deal with situations at home.

'I look back to some place I worked, reasonably comparable to here, but because they don't chip in, they don't do some of the work. But if a manager's willing to be part of the team, as well as being the leader, I always think that's much more positive. They don't delegate for delegating's sake; if they can do something, they just do it.... I worked in [company name], no manager would get their hands dirty but they would stand there and watch you do it. I give a bit more respect to managers who get on and do that themselves.'

'...he will also pull up his sleeves and get involved in the frontline and I've always felt that all the staff appreciate that. And it's something I try to do myself because in our line of work we get a lot of people that are aggressive and difficult and that frontline role is extremely stressful for staff. And it's very easy to sit up in an ivory tower, pointing fingers, saying you go and tell them this. It's a bit different when you're sitting in front of them. Yeah, he's prepared to do whatever he tells us to do himself.'

'And I think the good thing with the managers is they're hands-on, they're all hands-on. If we're under pressure or something, you'll see the managers filling up the shelves, or doing this, or doing.... Do you know what I mean? They wouldn't expect us to do something... that they wouldn't do themselves.'

3.1.4 Setting emotional tone

Several teams mentioned the role of their manager in ensuring the team stayed upbeat even when times were difficult. How managers do that varies but includes efforts to cheer the team up if things have not gone well through reward or thanks (small gestures that show appreciation); ensuring that the team is protected from negative emotions elsewhere in the organisation; and understanding that their own mood is infectious. Further, some managers were described as stressing the positives, energetic and enthusiastic, inspirational, and go-getting. The passion some managers displayed for the job was also visible to staff and helped bring out considerable effort from teams.

'...recently when we presented a £1,000 cheque to (a charity). Because we had had a year without any lost time injury, our department gets £1,000. [Manager's name]'s idea was that as well as a management presence there, there would be the team members as well so that they can be part of the presentation.'

'He always has a smile on his face. It's very rare that you will find [manager's name] without a smile on his face. It's got to be a really glum day when [manager's name] isn't smiling.'

'When we had all the flooding across the country, she took time to find out from all the staff whether anybody was actually involved, whether anybody had homes that were damaged. She made sure that she wrote to everybody, and so just things like that, personal things, really, and that meant a lot to the people involved at the time. I think we had a meeting, and then there was flooding and people couldn't get home, and had to leave their cars overnight. She made sure she found out who that was, and she wrote to them all and apologised.'

'He is inspirational, enthusiastic and go-getting, and it works, because I've known managers that just come in and go, morning, another day, and I think, oh goodness sake, I don't want to be here. It's quite clear from him that he loves the job himself, so it filters through. If you've got a manager who's negative, it's going to filter through, but [manager's name] is very enthusiastic about doing the job himself, so that obviously comes down to us.'

3.2 Setting direction

Engaging managers go to some lengths to ensure that their teams are fully aware of what they need to do and how they need to do it, but perhaps more importantly, they also explain why it needs to be done. Teams mention their managers providing clear vision, giving direction, explaining direction, and making the vision come alive for people. Engaging managers are sometimes described as being brighter than most and therefore able to see things clearly with sufficient knowledge of the organisation to be credible and trustworthy. They are also appreciated for their ability to answer questions, and for their reliability in taking away those they cannot answer and gathering responses to them.

'She's really good at coming back to you as well, isn't she, if you ask? She doesn't always tell us, she'll go out and find out, and she'll make that one of the main priorities.'

'I think it's important for a manager to be able to set a vision for the team and to that team to try and achieve and make the links between the different strands of the team to work to present a coherent picture of what we're trying to do, where we're trying to get to.'

A lack of clarity was also mentioned as being characteristic of poor managers.

'I think not being able to set specific objectives and having a vague idea of what they want but not really telling you when they want it or what the specific outcome is. And then giving you some fairly useless feedback at the end of it and saying it's not what they wanted. I think that's a fairly bad behaviour I've come across before.'

3.3 Managing performance

With engaging managers, maximising the performance of teams is mostly a carrot approach as teams appreciate the manager who praises people and creates positive conditions for success. But teams also appreciate a manager who deals with difficult situations or underperforming colleagues quickly and professionally.

3.3.1 Praise and recognition

A manager who recognises hard work and achievement has considerable impact on a team. This was one of the most frequently mentioned attributes of good managers, and was appreciated as a key means for managers and leaders to contribute to engagement. This can be personal or team praise, but also more public celebrations of success.

'...she's also very good at publicly praising people through the intranet, and saying, look how well X did in getting his policy agreed, or such and such a body has done. Or we've got these celebration days, and things like that, and having individuals' names up in lights, and again, regardless of the grade, but down to what job they're doing. I think that that's always quite a nice thing for people to see that she's willing to say, it's not what I've done it's what they've done, and let's all celebrate that, in a public way, rather than just a very quiet, oh, well done.'

Closely aligned to praise is a willingness to give feedback to people and make sure they were aware of how they are doing. In fact several teams specifically mentioned the value of working for a manager who not only praises but also lets them know if something was not very good – although doing so in a positive and gentle way was much appreciated. Two teams specifically mentioned their managers' ability firstly to protect them from negative or tactless comments from senior leaders who failed to appreciate the full circumstances, and secondly to pass on criticism in a very constructive manner so that the team does not take offence.

'When you've got issues that are causing quite senior level emotion, a good manager is able to absorb some of that negativity and turn that into [something] constructive. We've seen this in the past that a good manager can absorb some of that, and then the people who are doing the work get on with doing the work.'

3.3.2 Attitude to mistakes

Blame-free cultures are often promoted and rarely achieved. Engaging managers, however, appear to come much closer than most, with teams frequently mentioning the role of their manager in ensuring that errors are dealt with constructively. These behaviours are recognised as encouraging risk taking in teams, and encouraging willingness to make decisions and to deal with difficult issues without constantly having to involve the manager. Alongside this is a willingness to support staff when things do go wrong.

'The most telling thing is that before people were doing the job, if we had a complaint lodged against us, there wasn't a feeling that the managers supported us. They would actually, for a quiet life, they would apologise, even though you did everything right. [Manager's name] is completely the opposite. He will fight your corner and he will contact these people directly and defend you to the hilt... in our team I don't feel there's any blame culture at all. And I've worked in horrific places where the second before you've even walked in the door you've done something wrong. That's really nice.'

How leaders respond emotionally is also mentioned, specifically the importance of a manager who stays calm and level headed when the pressure is on or when something has gone wrong. Managers who are more emotional can have very detrimental effects.

'You've got managers who have a temper. When you have the slightest little thing and they start bawling and screaming and shouting regardless of whether it's in a private meeting or in a crowded room. They just lose it. You don't have respect for people like that.'

'When emotion gets involved, a manager who gets emotional, that's just horrible. You don't know whether they're going to be nice to you or ignore you.'

3.3.3 Communication

Engaging managers communicate with individuals and teams well. They keep them up-to-date on issues that concern them, but they also display an openness to communication that is important in terms of generating good relationships and enhancing trust. A particular attribute mentioned by some teams was their

manager's willingness to see things through and follow up on questions or issues of importance to their teams.

'...when I've seen [manager's name] talking to staff, as far as I'm aware she has given them the information that she's got available. You know, it's sharing as much knowledge as she has. Nobody is naïve enough not to think there will always be some elements she might not be able to share with people at that point in time, but certainly that has impressed me, her openness and honesty, and certainly that's something that staff feedback has confirmed from staff at all levels.'

'They generally feel that they know her, and feel that they can engage with her personally. We get lots of personal emails into her about problems, and she takes them all up and she doesn't forget anything. She might have mentioned something three months ago, and you think she's either forgotten about it or it's gone off the radar, and then she's back into it.'

'I think just communicating with all the team, [manager's name] gets his figures, he goes round every hour or something making sure that things are all right. He sits down with everybody and discusses what's gone on throughout the day, he keeps in touch with everyone. The key word's communication, that's what it is, I think more than anything else. Both of them communicate very, very well and again, it's just a case of, like you say, keeping us all well informed.'

'A handful of people went to [a programme]. [Manager's name] was told by one individual that people felt enthused but it didn't come to anything when they got back to work. [Manager's name] got everyone together who'd been to [the programme] to find out what they'd learnt and what went wrong when they got back. It motivated them, lifted them, helped make it better for others who subsequently went.'

3.4 Developing the team

Growing and developing as a team and as an individual is particularly valued. Managers can support the development of staff through helping them access appropriate courses, which tends to be much appreciated by teams, especially those who are less skilled and for whom development can sometimes be hard to secure. Managers can also support individuals through encouraging them to try something new, giving people more responsibility, delegating carefully to build experience, safeguarding the time for regular one to ones and using it to explore development and ambition, and giving people more responsibility whilst providing appropriate support – in short through hands-on coaching and challenging team members.

'I think they realise that the more developed their colleagues are, the easier it is to run the department, so if your colleagues are amazing, then you've got to do less work. So that's what they try and do, they try and upskill us so we've got the skills we need.'

'He's managed to not partition it but give people roles in line with their strengths and to create roles within the teams that suit those strengths.'

'As soon as she came in, she had a plan of action saying..."I want to sit [in] when you're doing reviews, your team talks. I want to see how you address your [staff], I want to see how you facilitate a meeting" for example, and that's been quite key in our development as well, because as managers, you can become a manager, but left to your own devices as long as you're performing, that is it... and it's been very key in our department that she's done that, because 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.'

'I could do it with my eyes closed, which is true. So I wasn't really trying to stretch myself, and that was what came out of the meetings. The outcome was I was to do different things this time round, given extra roles, extra responsibility, look at developing the weak area[s]....I think she was really effective in doing that, and in the follow-up as well each week; "have you done anything with that? Have you moved forward with that?". So it was just a case of obviously, good skills, good questioning, good follow-up, and it was continued, it wasn't stopped. She was always saying, what we'll do next time, and then reviewing it and then going back, seeing how you were getting on as well.'

'I just happened to mention to her that I wanted to improve on some of my communications, and she told me about one of the [books] that she read. So she didn't say, go out and buy it, and read it, she just said, oh, I must admit that this helped me once. I went and bought the book and it's fabulous, and some of the things in there are my total mantra now so it has helped.'

'...he's always there as a support, and I know I can push the boundaries without being silly, but if I have a problem, he'll be there, and he'll support me.'

The developmental focus is frequently mentioned by engaged teams as one means by which their manager has contributed to their engagement. At a more subtle level, engaging managers raise the confidence of their team members and give them the self-belief that they can do better or take on new and challenging things. One of the ways they do so is through the clear demonstration of their own belief in their team, allowing people to get on with something, not correcting the work of others, and not insisting that everything is signed off by them. Such managers are described as being good at nudging people, asking challenging questions, challenging their teams to find the answer to a problem rather than supplying a

solution, having an open door to their team for discussion of problems, and helping their team members find their way through difficult problems.

'He's very good if you support a meeting, so say you've gone along to a senior meeting with him, to give your support, or to give some of the detail behind the subject. He's very good at promoting you within that meeting, which gives you the confidence then to really operate at that level.... He's not defensive, but he's very supportive of the team, so if there's any criticism of the team he's always very strong in supporting the team.'

'He will actually challenge them on the logic of what they're doing and keep probing and pushing them to come up [with] a new answer or a new method themselves rather than hand it to them. So that's a key way of keeping the guys developing themselves; keep them engaged and wanting to fix holes. He won't step in prematurely and say, this is important, I'm going to fix it for you. He'll allow people to work their way through it, which is good.'

'Before the restructure I was a team administrator and once the restructure was in place [manager's name] said to me, "[there is a] new position for you which you can go and take on and grow into and take on as your own"; it showed that she had faith in me in the role I was in, in the role that she saw for me in the future.'

'On our very first meeting she chaired our meeting, when she first came. The management team that we had beforehand, I wouldn't say it was dysfunctional, because we used to get the work done, but we weren't the best people as a team, at all, and even though she wasn't like a headmistress, when she was there people behaved better. And she insisted on chairing that meeting for a while, and she put it, I'd say, not in a 'marmsy' way, but she said "I don't need to chair it any more because I can trust you to actually work together more professionally".'

3.5 Managers as credible people

In addition to the many comments regarding what engaging managers do and how they act, there were several comments which focused more on what engaging managers are like as people.

For many teams their manager had credibility. What this means in practice may be unique to each team, but includes knowing the job well so that they can help respond to questions or queries, or be widely respected in the organisation for their knowledge.

'He's been in the business for a long time and he knows it very, very well, and that's good, I think, to be able to see how he handles situations, and there's quite a lot to be learnt from him.'

'[Manager's name] has been in international development in her 10 or 11 years at [company name]. So, as [it] has grown, [manager's name]'s been there beside it. For me, anyway, there's an enormous amount of trust in there, that she knows what she's talking about; that she's made decisions and choices for 10 years. So, you've got a wise head there and very natural [leader] head, as well, you know you're being pointed in the right direction.'

'I think with [manager's name] as well, his knowledge of all the rules and regulations, so he'll always have an answer for something, and on the rare occasion that he doesn't he'll make sure that he goes out of his way to find it, and so he knows the next time. So his knowledge of the actual job is really good.'

Credibility can also mean that the manager is acknowledged to be hard working and willing to pitch in and do whatever the team is being asked to do. It is worth noting that for some teams this can go too far.

'He's very enthusiastic and he just keeps on going, like a freight train. It never stops, and that's great, but sometimes we can't be all the same, and sometimes you have to say, enough is enough, and he will respond to that.'

The third element of credibility is the profile of the manager within the organisation, with teams appreciating their manager being respected and able to negotiate on their behalf within the organisation. Teams mention their manager being well networked within the organisation, with a good personal reputation.

'He's one of the best networkers that I've come across without any shadow of a doubt. For someone who's been in the business two years, two or three years, whatever it is, he seems to have a vast network and you won't find many people who have got a bad word to say about him either.'

The other personal attribute which teams appreciate is their manager being bright, creative and a clear thinker. Acknowledging that the manager can contribute to a debate and is intellectually able is important to teams and means they can have faith in their manager.

'He has a very energetic personality. He shows a real passion, you believe him. He has a sharp eye; he understands what's going in the business.'

'He has a way of dealing with people that gets the results that he wants. And that's a skill to try and pick up, isn't it? It's just ways of doing things. And he's good at passing that on.'

3.6 In summary

Engaged teams point to many things when trying to explain their engagement. The job itself is important, with strong responses to do with meaning, autonomy, variety and challenge. The support of the organisation for work–life balance, progression and development, and the ways in which an organisation demonstrates its value for its employees through terms, conditions and culture are all much appreciated. The social environment generated by the team itself is also important to people, with engaged teams valuing a sense of community.

Being engaged is to a degree self-sustaining, as the positive climate generates positive outcomes and these in turn feed back in terms of pride in success. However, managers can make a huge difference to team climate and performance. They are not nervous about engaging with people, and understand that forming strong and warm relationships is beneficial. This means they hear what is going on, they open up the opportunity to support people in positive ways and help them perform better, and they can encourage a team atmosphere where people enjoy work. Engaging managers are trustworthy, being emotionally steady, believable and approachable. They also value people for their contribution rather than status, and act to diminish any status differentials between themselves and their team. What they want is an open, creative environment where status does not prevent good communication. This is very different to a lack of discipline or unwillingness to assume the role or responsibilities of leadership.

Engaging managers would seem to take two responsibilities very seriously: setting both the work vision and direction, and understanding their role in influencing the emotional tone of the team. Engaging managers also influence performance through their appreciation of success, their careful response to failure and their focus on making sure employees have the information they need to do their jobs well and feel connected. Finally, engaging managers are constantly developing and growing those they manage – sometimes through more formal skills acquisition, but more often through conversation, coaching, providing stretch opportunities, giving feedback and ensuring that confidence is sustained.

4 Top Tips

4.1 What should leaders do?

Our conversations with the teams of engaging managers reveal a host of ways in which managers and leaders make a real difference to the engagement and performance of their teams. Here are the teams' top tips for making such a difference.

- **Be visible, approachable and encourage people to discuss work issues with you:** This might mean extra effort with remote teams, and it may mean asking lots of questions to begin with, but teams generally like a manager to whom they can take issues and who will listen and offer support.
- **Make sure your reactions mean you remain approachable:** This means you have to be friendly and welcoming no matter how busy you are. You need to find the time to give to people and you have to listen hard and help in a facilitative and coaching way rather than trying to tell people what to do. Mostly what employees value is a sounding board for their own ideas.
- **Make people feel valued:** This is a highly important tip, and is backed up by our previous research², which showed that feeling valued and involved is a key driver of engagement. Engaging managers take time out to get to know their team as individuals and to develop good relationships with them – this effort makes a huge difference. It is also important to recognise and react when people are having a tough time and to do what you can to support people.
- **Do what you say and be consistent:** Always remember that people talk to each other and one of the biggest pitfalls for managers is to say different things to

² Robinson D, Perryman S, Hayday S (2004), *The Drivers of Employee Engagement*, Institute for Employment Studies, Report number 408

different people. Assuming that what you say to an individual can be heard by everyone is a good discipline.

- Treat people with respect and be as open and informative as you can be, and as honest as possible where you cannot tell people everything.
- Encourage your team to show respect for each other and ensure that discord, negativity and unfriendliness are not tolerated; if these occur, tackle the situation quickly.
- Reduce any sense of status differential or hierarchy within teams, encourage open sharing of thoughts and ideas and welcome contributions from everyone. Encourage people to help each other regardless of job role and lead by example.
- Appreciate that you are responsible for the climate of the team as well as the work. Read the team atmosphere and ensure that you behave in ways that have a positive effect. Look for the positive, encourage, praise and celebrate.
- Make sure people understand how they fit into the wider organisation and what is expected of them. People appreciate clarity but they also seek a bigger idea or an emotional commitment to work, and if managers can find a way of bringing a vision and purpose alive for people it has great impact.
- Support and protect the team as well as the individuals in it, but not by hiding negative feedback from them. Instead, pass it on in a diplomatic way. This is much easier if you are doing all the other things eg creating good relationships, praising people and communicating well.
- **Use mistakes as a learning opportunity:** Engaging managers react very carefully to mistakes. They do not rant and rage but rather maintain a steady emotional state and involve the team in ensuring that the mistake does not happen again. This encourages individuals not to hide mistakes.
- Talk to people, and tell them what you can as often as you can – it is rarely enough!
- **Look for opportunities to stretch and develop people:** Engaging managers always start with where the individual is. For some building confidence might be the first task, for others there may be a skills problem that needs addressing.
- **Develop yourself too:** Constantly seek to be better at what you do and to be the best manager you can be. Seeking excellence for yourself and the team will be a huge motivator for others.

4.2 What to avoid

- **Never hope it will go away:** Whatever it is it rarely will, whether it is stifling bureaucracy, challenging behaviour, poor performance or low morale. Jumping in is what engaging managers do. This does not mean being impulsive – engaging managers remain calm and do their homework before tackling knotty issues.
- **Never have a bad day:** Find a way of being a great manager that you are comfortable with. You may not want to be positive and upbeat all the time, but you do need to recognise your role as an emotional leader and set the tone appropriately.
- **Don't be part of the problem:** Make sure you are not a barrier to excellence. Reflect on your own behaviour and on your relationships with the members or your team. Are you acting as a good role model to your team, some of whom will be the managers of the future?
- **Don't encourage discord and don't play games to keep people on their toes or to enhance competitiveness:** Engaging managers will encourage friendly banter and rivalry if it helps make work more fun, but know when to draw the line and always keep it light hearted. Engaged teams like to know where they are with their manager, so they can trust them and feel comfortable and confident – game playing damages trust.
- **Don't manage performance before people:** Don't focus on every target, or monitor every metric, at the expense of losing sight of the bigger picture. Focus on people, their confidence, their capability and their enthusiasm.
- **Don't hide, even if you are naturally shy and retiring:** Engaging managers are networked both within their team and outside it; they interact with people and with the organisation. Their teams understand what they do, and how they fit into the organisation, and as a result are not afraid of being involved.

Appendix: The research

Participants in this 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 questionnaire³ 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 research⁴.

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 organisation 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.

The future of the research

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

³ For more details on the IES Engagement Questionnaire contact Dilys Robinson at dilys.robinson@employment-studies.co.uk

⁴ Robinson D, Hayday S (2009), *The Engaging Manager*, Institute for Employment Studies, Report number 470

THE ENGAGING MANAGER SERIES

Teams and the engaging manager

Penny Tamkin, Dilys Robinson

This report is part of *The Engaging Manager Series*, which is a follow-up to IES report 470, *The Engaging Manager*. The other publications in this series include:

- **Images of Engaging Management**
- **The Engaging Manager in Development Mode**
- **The Engaging Manager and Sticky Situations**

Each short report in the *Engaging Manager Series* explores different aspects of engaging management. This report explores the experiences and views of engaged teams, drawing on the findings from in-depth discussions with team members.

Teams that score highly on engagement attribute their high score to team spirit, with the line manager an important part of its creation. Engaging managers improve performance through praise, getting 'stuck in' when needed, and encouraging ideas. They give their teams a strategic focus, letting individuals know the part they could play, and are good coaches, mentors and developers. They help their teams through change and create an open, blame-free atmosphere. Finding the right balance between autonomy and support is crucial: teams value being left to get on with their jobs, while being supported if required.

This report explores what teams particularly value in a manager, and how engaging managers encourage teams to put in greater effort. It also gives some helpful leadership tips: what is effective team management behaviour, and what is best avoided?

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