

Why engage?

What's in it for the employer in a time of change and uncertainty? Steve Turner explores the leadership challenge of employee engagement

Introduction

Staff engagement is a good thing. All managers would probably agree that consulting and involving staff in generating new ideas and options is a valuable activity. The culture of the civil service has changed significantly over recent years with an emphasis on soft skills as well as a drive on delivery. The meeting place of these two drivers has been performance. Managers have developed both the mindset and the skills to get the best performance from individuals and teams by attending to processes of engaging them. The outcome of applying these processes has been both an enhancement of intellectual capital and a sense of ownership of the idea and options generated. So, the case is made, attitudes have changed, we see good engagement processes in action in the workplace and the culture has changed permanently. We're there! No more work to be done on staff engagement.

Of course the picture is not so rosy and the staff survey results to be published in a few weeks time might well indicate that the experience of staff is that engagement is sporadic, unpredictable and inconsistent. Engaging staff depends on the style of the leader who is rarely appraised on either the application of engagement tools and processes or their outcomes. There is probably agreement that we are on the right trajectory, but staff and employers might disagree on the pace and extent of the change which is needed to be able to describe the civil service as possessing an engagement culture or consistently using engagement as a tool of change.

Challenges

This is a time of change and uncertainty in the civil service, which faces the challenge of Smarter Government, cuts in staffing and possibly a new

Government with attendant machinery of government changes. Why should civil service leaders focus on engagement when the priority should be on survival? The answer is that this is not an 'either/or' option. We need 'both/and' thinking at this time.

Civil service leaders espouse the virtues of innovation and I have been involved recently in discussing with new SCS how to enable their Department to become more 'agile.' What does this mean? An agile Department could be characterised as one where staff are brought together for specific tasks for a defined period of time, where they are expected to be more flexible in their approach to undertaking their work and collaborating with colleagues. There will be a greater expectation that staff share their knowledge and skills across a broader range of policy areas. They may have membership of more than one team at a time. They may have multiple managers. They will be expected to form new teams quickly, be self starters and take on more responsibilities and accountabilities.

Why Engagement?

What place does engagement have in this context and what's in it for the employer? What is the return on investment (ROI) for the employer in using valuable resource to engage with staff? First the employer needs to recognise how these changes might be experienced by their staff and to empathise with them. There is a fine line between challenge and threat. How can employers ensure that staff experience the changes as a challenge rather than a threat? The literature on change gives a very clear steer. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's research shows that staff anxiety and drop in performance is related to the *loss of control* or the ratio of 'done to me' to 'done by me' which they experience during change. Also the removal of familiar activities, colleagues and physical environment, together with a fear of being 'found out' can have a profound impact on performance at the very time when the workforce needs to be more productive.

The employer can reduce the negative effects of change and even enhance its positive effects by involving the staff in *creating the new world*. Warren Bennis asserts that 'the future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found, but



made, and the activity of making them changes both maker and destination.’ It takes a confident leader to delegate authority to staff to determine the processes and ways of working, but the returns can be worth that level of investment. Engagement provides staff with the experience of taking some control over their lives. Control is the antidote to stress. Engagement helps to generate a sense of self-efficacy which is vital to performance. Change can be *de-skilling*. Engagement is a way of enabling staff to feel that they possess skills, are resourceful and add value to the new business.

The Impact of Change

William Bridges (1991) seems to have touched a nerve by describing the challenge of leading staff through change as a journey where we need to end the old world, navigate through a neutral zone and then start the new world. Engaging staff in appreciating the value and strengths of the past and determining they can be applied in the new world will work is a simple and effective way of getting through the neutral zone quickly. The key challenge to the leader at this time is to help staff make sense of the changes. Ancona et al (2007) propose that one of the fundamental roles of the leader is *sensemaking*. Not only do they have to make sense themselves of what is happening but they have to engage with staff, with repeated communication in different media and fora to help them to construct a new reality which is positive, affords opportunity and connects with key truths which they hold dear. For example showing how the public sector ethos is preserved or enhanced in the change would be a simple and effective message but one which is often overlooked. Weick, in his seminal work on sensemaking, articulates the role of engagement in the form of conversations with staff – not a one-off presentation - which assist them in understanding the implications of change at individual, team and organisational levels. The civil service has been blighted by initiatives despite the good motives behind them. A more rigorous approach to enabling staff to recognise beginnings and ends would be helpful.

Bridges describes a common fault in leaders. He says that they tend to think that they just have to explain the reason for the change and then staff will go along with it. I have often fed back to leaders that staff are unclear

about why something was changed, or what the new vision is, only to get the reply – ‘but I’ve told them twice already.’ Leaders don’t get it! Staff need to be engaged repeatedly about change – what it is all about, how it affects them or their teams and the end user/customer/citizen – so that they can generate an internal logic for themselves. There is no simple model for describing how people make sense of change, but Kolb has used Piagetian theory to offer one model. He describes some people as making an *accommodation* to change. This means that they adapt their concepts to fit the facts of their new reality. Leaders who offer a more conceptual or visionary way of engaging staff will find this an effective approach. Other staff will fit their observations of the new world into their existing frames of reference – a process of *assimilation*. In this context, using the language of the past and giving concrete examples of using past success or process will be essential. Leaders need a very different script and approach to engage staff with this type of thinking. Hence engagement requires real skill, care, persistence and intelligence.

Making Sense of Change

Where sensemaking and thinking styles come together is in the arena of the *psychological contract*. This has become a recognised phenomenon of the employer-employee relationship. It is the unwritten set of assumptions and expectations formed by the employee when appointed to their current job. It covers areas about possibilities for promotion, career development, job enrichment, travel, influence etc.. When the employer causes a significant change, that psychological contract can be broken with deleterious effects on performance. Each individual employee needs the opportunity to re-contract with their employer at the individual level. The new contract helps them to make sense of the change, identifies their worth and re-sets their personal compass, aligned to the direction of the business.

The value of engagement to the employer should now be clear. As Bridges says external change is easy, but leading people through the *transition* to a new organisation requires the delivery of an engagement strategy which provides each individual with the opportunity to go through an internal psychological



process. The language of engagement is crucial. Arie de Gues describes leaders who think about their business as though it were a machine and use mechanistic words in their language. They will address staff by saying that 'we need to change gear,' or 'crank it up,' or 'oil the wheels.' It betrays an assumption that all the leader needs to do is press some buttons in the business and the machine will respond as directed. Of course, the machine is a composite of humans. Hence Arie de Gues writes about the value of using organic metaphors – 'growth,' 'nurture,' 'health,' 'vitality' etc. A constructivist view of the world holds that the *language* we use creates our reality. Leaders must plan carefully how they talk about change, formally and informally. Staff are not cogs; they have diverse reasons for coming to work. They need to be engaged in a way that touches them personally and inspires them by the possibilities of human endeavour.

The Public Leadership Challenge

Employers want their staff to be professional, responsive, resilient, innovative and enthusiastic – just like them! A role playing exercise I run in change workshops splits participants randomly into 3 groups – leaders, middle management and workers. I ask them to say what they expect from the other two groups. They all fit into the stereotypes within seconds. Leaders expect everyone to see it the way they do and to comply/follow enthusiastically and imaginatively. Middle managers feel that they are sandwiched and the workers feel patronised and undervalued – all in 30 minutes. Of course the wish of the employer for staff to be positive about change is quite valid, but it doesn't come just by wishing it so. Engagement is not the only tool but it is essential to a successful change process. It is possible to go into some parts of the civil service where staff still have an allegiance and identity with Agencies or Departments which were merged or taken over ten or fifteen years ago. It is difficult to quantify the cost in terms of productivity which has resulted from such failure to engage with staff in building the new businesses.

A different perspective on engagement is offered by the work undertaken on the Public Leadership Challenge (Brookes 2008). A key finding was that the 'focus of leadership and its outcomes should be more on the

purpose of leadership and its outcomes as measured by public value.' Emerging from this work is the idea of collective leadership. This represents both horizontal leadership, which is shared leadership between organisations and vertical leadership which is distributed within an organisation. What employers need to grasp is that the greater the fit between its vertical leadership as expressed through engagement, and the processes and products experienced by the citizen, the greater the performance of staff will be. In other words if public value is to be achieved by connecting with the public in designing and delivering effective and personalised services, then staff also need to be communicated with and engaged using similar processes and tools. Collective leadership also provides the opportunity to go beyond the evaluation of individual performance towards collective performance and the identification of the leadership behaviours which facilitate it.

Conclusion

It should be evident that there is a real return on investment (ROI) on the part of the employer by attending with rigour to staff engagement. Engagement connects with people at intellectual and affective levels, gives them a sense of control and efficacy, and an experience of a process underpinned by the same principle applied to engagement with the citizen. At a time of significant change for the public sector, its leaders need to grasp the public leadership challenge and, through engagement with their staff, develop a collective leadership which can inspire high performance and the generation of creative solutions in the context of Smarter Government.

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