the communicators' NETWORK

It's not the first time this topic has kicked off a heated debate, but a recent question on the definition of employee engagement still sparked a flurry of responses from the network. Members swapped views and opinions and spoke frankly about the reality of trying to engage employees with less than engaging jobs. Other discussions focused on taking a candid approach to communicating change, and how to get involved early on in strategic business plans.

Q&A

Q How do you define the term employee engagement and what attributes can we associate with an engaged employee?

Seren Macleod
Royal Bank of Scotland Group

In my experience, engaged employees are those that find meaning and satisfaction in the work they do, they feel emotionally connected with the organization and intellectually challenged to a level they're satisfied with. They get the support they need to achieve the goals they're set and feel that they're treated with respect and valued as an employee. But work isn't their life, and the business respects their need for a rich life outside of the office/factory and caters for those needs through its HR policies and processes.

While definitions of engagement are well and good, it's the next step that's important: how to implement strategies to increase and maintain engagement. Too often, management teams talk about wanting to improve engagement levels and miss the point that most of the stuff that engages people is fundamental to running a good business.

Graeme Ginsberg
Melcrum

I'd say that the lion's share of employees' unhappiness stems from the nature of their work and their (perceived) inability to escape it. When I had a string of unsatisfying jobs, the organizations had "engagement" programs, involving well-perceived "symbols"; they were generous with breaks, had plenty of biscuits in the kitchen and there was a radio that everyone wanted to listen to. But ultimately, the work was the work and no one wanted to be there.

Organizations can do very little to change the actual nature of the work that they need their employees to get done. They can enhance the working environment – helping them feel better about their colleagues, how they're being treated and so on. This might make employees feel more loyal to the organization for making an effort to do something about the fact that they're real, emotional people with environmental needs doing unsatisfying things. But ultimately, these organizations want the diamonds mined, clothes made, tea picked and so on.

The vast majority of the time, people don't go to work, to work, they go because they have to. They may have pockets of work satisfaction, but this is at best, and the regularity will depend on the nature of the work they do. For example, a miner is unlikely to feel much job satisfaction, while an engineer working on a ground-breaking project might feel more. The latter employee might actually skip to work sometimes and not think at all on occasion about the pay-cheque. But even that very stimulated engineer will not *always* be happy with the nature of their work. Even company directors daydream about not having to go to work.

This might all be a bit facetious, but I think it makes an important point about engagement. I've heard communicators often say that their engagement programs are aimed at "making their employees' jobs better". But I don't think this is actually possible to achieve, the job is the job and these programs can only really succeed in making the environment and context better – an important distinction that may have implications as to how communicators should plan, position and deliver their engagement programs.

Hilary Scarlett
Scarlett Associates

I agree that for many a job is just a means of earning enough money to live, but given that work takes up so many hours of most people's days, I'm a strong believer in trying to make it as enjoyable for people as possible.

I was once told a story by some women who worked in a factory. The management consultants had come in and decided that the women would find their work more interesting if they broke up their routine and had different work each day, in different parts of the building. The women hated the new arrangement – what made work interesting for them was being with their friends and being able to chat together as they worked. They went back to their old routine.

What causes people to feel engaged varies between types of organizations and among different groups of employees. Each organization needs to work out what will make their employees feel more interested, committed and positive. One definition of employee engagement that I like was drafted by the UK Cabinet Office: "A process by which an organization increases the intellectual and emotional commitment and contribution of its employees to achieve superior performance". It touches on the points that engagement is emotional as much as rational, and that the outcome is important.

Q How can communication managers get involved early on in confidential stages of strategic planning?

Angela Sinickas
Sinickas Communications Inc.

When you see an emerging business issue, anticipate its impact on your organization and think through a communication strategy. Then

make an appointment with the business leader who would be most affected by the negative impact of the emerging issue. Discuss the situation you see developing with them, its impact on the business and him/her specifically if nothing is done to address it, and what you recommend from a communication perspective to avoid or ameliorate the emerging issue. Do this over and over and you'll start building a reputation as a strategic thinker who understands the business and makes executives' jobs easier. They will then be more likely to consult with you when they see an emerging issue that you don't yet know about.

Carry out soft research among colleagues
Another tip is to conduct some soft research about a project or initiative the company is embarking on. This could be lunchtime focus groups around a free pizza or one-on-one conversations with employees as you do your regular job; waiting in line at the cafeteria or going up an elevator. Then, put your findings together in a crisp, brief and preferably visual way. Bring these findings to the attention of one or more of the people involved in planning the initiative, again with your recommended strategic communication approach.

I've also seen several communicators offer to play a communication "scribe" role in those meetings. The communicator doesn't participate in the discussions (unless specifically asked for an opinion, of course). Instead, the communicator's role is to summarize at the end of the meeting his/her understanding of which topics are ready for communication and which are to be kept confidential. The communicator then follows up with a bulleted list of talking points for the executives in the meeting to use in sharing information with their staff – which would be approved in advance by the CEO. This way the communicator is able to hear all the discussion, which eventually makes mass communication more effective. Also, this person is more and more often consulted for opinions during the discussions and outside the meeting room as well.

Q How can I build a case for candid change communication instead of glitz?

Stacey Heath
Allstate Insurance Company
When communicating the recent outsourcing of a certain portion of our business, we went with the straight-forward, candid conversation. The open-dialogue, fact-based informational approach received resounding feedback that our communication strategy was solid, well-thought out and most importantly, appreciated by those that were directly impacted by the change.

One of the employees who worked in a position that would eventually be outsourced said she was thankful for the straight-story approach we took in communicating what was going on with the outsourcing project. She said she felt informed each step of the way, there were never any surprises and she never felt anyone was trying to "spin" a message rather than respecting the impacted people by just telling it like it was.

I fear that the glitz approach will do just that – be perceived as spin and potentially be considered disrespectful. These are professionals we're talking about. They should be treated as such. A branded mouse pad isn't going to disguise the real issues at hand. Better to be forthright and respectful of employees capacity to understand business decisions and why they need to be made.

John Clifford
Pitney Bowes
The important thing is that change is presented as a positive opportunity for everyone. A little branding, a few incentives and the odd event need not be seen as glitz. Cheerfulness throughout is what people need to help them through. It depends on specific audiences too. Our call center has been through a lot of change recently, and nobody knows more about motivating teenagers (who might prefer to work at McDonald's) than call-center managers. They "sell" everything to the staff using cakes, chocolates and other treats; and they love competitions, even just to win the use of the manager's car park space for a week. Is this glitz and bribery? No, it's just being realistic about what it takes to grab the attention of certain kinds of employee.