

# From 'Whatever' to 'My pleasure': how can employers increase engagement?

by Charles Woodruffe

So what are employers to do to increase engagement? The survey report includes a chapter on management implications. In offering these 'reflections', I want to step beyond the immediate findings of the survey and give employers some additional perspectives on the results.

## Engagement drivers

The report itself can be used by employers to start a list of initiatives to increase people's engagement. The top priority seems to be communication. The report singles out having the opportunity to feed their views and opinions upwards as the most important driver of people's engagement. The report also identifies the importance of being kept informed about what's going on in the organisation. These are interesting findings and can be taken to emphasise that people want a sense of involvement – of being to some extent in a partnership with their employer. In turn, employers can generalise from this to increase people's engagement. They can go beyond communication to ensuring that, in every possible way, people are treated not as a 'mere employee' but as a valued individual. An aspect of this is illustrated by the survey finding that engagement is related to a person's satisfaction with their work–life balance and being on a flexible contract.

Engagement was also found to be related to people's opinions of their manager. Specifically, it was related to people thinking that their manager was committed to the organisation. In addition, engagement was related to how positive a view the person had of their managers and senior managers. Some of the particular aspects of management that were asked about in the survey again centre on communication (examples are: 'keeps the person in touch with what

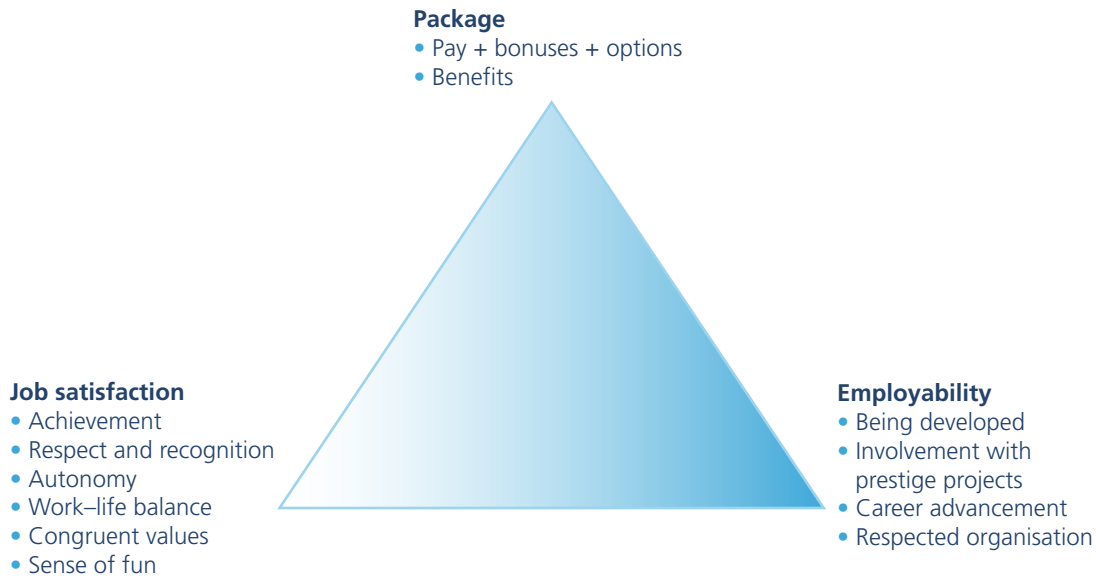
is going on'; 'listening to suggestions'). The survey also asked about the clarity of the vision that senior management conveys. The report describes a group of people who receive a clear vision, are inclined to support the organisation's objectives, and who are also highly engaged.

Broadly, the results confirm the assumption that people will be more engaged to the extent that their needs are met by their employer (Woodruffe 1999). For simplicity, I think these needs can be grouped under the headings of the package, employability and satisfaction:

- The package covers all the financial and non-financial benefits offered by the employer.
- Employability encapsulates people's need to secure a package in the future as well as today. They want to feel they're being developed and that their employability is being increased in other ways – for example, by them being associated with successful assignments that they can put on their CVs.
- Finally, people would surely prefer to spend their time at a place of work that lifts them up rather than casts them down. Under 'satisfaction' might be entered all the detail of being managed in a way that creates a feeling of being respected as well as of not being worked to death.

The entire triangle must be considered if organisations are to engage people (see Figure 2). However, as noted already, it is of overriding importance that people are treated as individuals. For example, some people want to sacrifice pay for more holidays in their package; for others, it's the other way round. Likewise, what gives one person job satisfaction is not the same as for another.

Figure 2: The engagement triangle



Having attended to people's needs, I believe organisations must offer long-term commitment if they are to expect it in return. Other things being equal, it seems logical that people will prefer to have their needs met in a relatively secure environment rather than one where there's considerable doubt about the continuity of the employment. Offering commitment does not mean offering a guarantee. It means getting across the message that leaders are putting prime importance on the organisation's future and that people will not be the first to be jettisoned if the going gets tough.

Of course, I have generalised slightly from factors that might affect engagement to what is likely to make people feel positive about a place of work. Engagement has become something of a vogue word, eclipsing commitment and motivation in the management literature. The survey focuses on engagement and indeed makes use of a tripartite distinction between emotional, cognitive and physical engagement. For busy managers, one question is how far research and advice on engagement is interchangeable with that on commitment and motivation, as well as on how to attract and retain people in winning the talent war.

Conceptually, there might be a possibility of someone being engaged in their day-to-day work without being motivated or committed or wanting to stay.

However, it seems unlikely that organisations will want to employ the distinction between these imprecisely defined and measured variables, but will instead prefer to operate on what they have in common. For example, I rather doubt that a manager who wishes to increase engagement should worry that the survey showed that treating people with respect operated on people's intention to leave rather than their engagement. Managers would be better advised to offer the package of initiatives that affect the overall reading of people's engagement, commitment and motivation.

#### How far can managers influence engagement?

However, this begs the question of the extent to which managers can increase people's engagement. The report identifies variables that are in the control of employers and are related to engagement. It doesn't give precise details of the extent of the relationships between managerial actions and engagement. The relationship might be statistically significant but still of fairly trivial importance. To this extent, the manager who implements a new policy of giving staff information and taking their views seriously might be disappointed by the effect this has on engagement. Furthermore, of course, we don't even know that being well informed is what causes engagement or the equally plausible line of causality that managers give more information to the people they perceive as being more engaged. Such thoughts shouldn't stop

managers from doing something positive to try to increase engagement. They might, however, act as a check on expectations as to how great an impact such initiatives might have.

This leads to the further issue of the extent to which some people are more open to being engaged than others. The report comes out with some interesting distinctions in terms of people's involvement and enchantment (treated as equivalent to satisfaction). The question we then need to ask is whether people are involved and enchanted because of the relatively immediate actions of their managers or whether their involvement and enchantment is a more deep-seated attitude that makes their engagement hard to influence.

There are good reasons to suppose that a deep-seated attitude is at least part of the answer, and here I'm reminded of the distinction by Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni (1995) between core workers, careerists and jugglers. Core staff are attached to the organisation. By contrast, jugglers don't hold employment as a central life interest, and careerists are short-term insiders who have their advancement within an industry or profession as a priority. While there is certainly not a perfect match between these career attitudes and engagement, it does seem very plausible that engagement is an attitude that isn't easily raised by management actions. Indeed, the report suggests as much both in the opening sentences of the first chapter that describe the engaged employee as the one who stands apart from colleagues and by the findings of demographic differences in engagement.

To increase engagement, then, managers need perhaps to do more than just operate the levers of engagement. They need to identify people with a propensity to be engaged – people without a 'whatever' attitude. They then need to ensure that this propensity is not abused by neglect. There is surely a virtuous circle whereby engaged staff facilitate managers to behave in a way that further bolsters engagement. Managers must ensure that they contribute to the flywheel of this cycle once it's established, but also that they hire the right people in the first place. It seems reasonable to suggest that a considerable part of what we mean by 'talent' is the propensity to demonstrate engagement.

Finally, how are we doing? The report has quite negative findings with respect to employees' views about their managers, senior managers and organisational communication. If this sample is representative, it would appear that many managers are failing to lean positively on the flywheel of engagement. Nonetheless, such overall findings undoubtedly mask pockets of good practice and it's up to each manager to reflect on the extent to which their actions are helping or hindering the engagement of their staff. Perhaps more importantly, it's up to the leaders of organisations and specifically HR directors to consider how well they are doing in facilitating managers to facilitate engagement. Managers who are harried and stressed are not exactly in the best position to spare the time to communicate downwards or to receive the suggestions of staff. Yet it is omitting actions such as these that the report suggests will harm engagement, resulting in managers being more harried and stressed than ever.

#### Implications for managers

- The top priority for managers who want to increase employee engagement is communication.
- People will be engaged to the extent that their employer meets their needs in terms of benefits, employability and satisfaction.
- Managers should offer the package of initiatives that reflects an overall reading of people's engagement and motivation.
- Employees' involvement may reflect deep-seated attitudes that make their engagement harder for managers to influence.
- Managers need to identify people with a propensity to be engaged, and ensure that they hire the right people in the first place.