

The Future of Engagement: Thought Piece Collection

The past, present and future role of engagement in modern society: A public service perspective

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In this thought piece, Richard looks at the challenges the public sector currently faces – reduced budgets, smaller workforces and increasing demand – and the need for a new approach to people management and leadership. He argues that an employee engagement lens brings much to this, starting with the notion of meaningful, purposeful work, and developing into a more strongly community-based model of public services in which employees and HR widen their remits in line with customer needs.

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If we were to wind the clock back to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, there probably was not much mention back then of the need to 'engage' with the burgeoning workforce to improve its industrial output. Labour of the 19th century was motivated purely by the fact that work, and the wage it delivered, permitted the bare necessities to the working classes – which was food and water on the table and a home to live in rather than anything more intrinsic – and that in itself was motivational enough. In the early 19th century, the motivation of labour (as it was called then) was more along the lines of work as a means to survive and not much else. This was bolstered by there being no real social welfare system to fall on if times were hard, apart from the dreaded Work House, which incentivised people to work harder to avoid being one of its inhabitants! In our early industrial history, there was no need to 'engage' as the balance of labour and work was such that the supply of labour was more than the demand placed upon it and work itself was motivational enough. This worsening social situation of supply and demand was fuelled further later in the 19th century with the onset of mechanisation when, in spite of continued industrial growth, the dependence on labour started to recede and competition for work increased. This, you might think, simply led to the labour at the time being so incentivised by finding work that no other motivational dependencies were required – but of course something happened...

What happened was human nature taking hold which, unlike that of the rest of the animal kingdom, has an inherent desire to do more than simply survive, but to grow and prosper as well. The 19th century was an important period in that the benefits of work and output were there for all to see, with companies making profits and industrialists becoming wealthy. The developing view of the labour force was that its contribution to wealth was falling into the hands of the minority and this was de-motivating for it. They wanted more. Enlightened industrialists at the time recognised this and for the first time put in measures to counteract growing workforce unrest and some of the best known are the social welfare programmes put in place by the likes of Rowntree. Such schemes were of course linked to the social consciousness being felt by industrialists and their wish to give something back to their hard working workforces but, nevertheless, it does show a turning point in the need to motivate and 'engage' with the labour of the time.

Moving on to the present day, there are interesting analogies with our 19th century past in terms of engagement and motivation. For one, we know that in spite of an appalling level of unemployment in the younger population, work alone is not enough for many of them. Although supply far outstrips demand, many employers still find they have to work to do their best to attract young talent and incentivise them to get them to work. In short, for many people, work nowadays has to offer far more than work itself.

For many people, work is not just about money, but being motivated by such things as the working environment, the people within it, the product or service delivered and even the brand. One of our best known industrial successes in the UK is probably Jaguar Landrover who, not that long ago, went to the market place for an additional thousand plus employees to work on their new Range Rover and received applicants many, many time over. The reason for this was not predominately due to there being hundreds of out-of-work car manufacturing people looking for work, but more the attraction of the company and its products which are seen to be some of the best in the world. The example provided by Jaguar Landrover, and other well respected brands like it, demonstrates that one of the most powerful engagement agents is one where employees can derive most meaning from work.

Turning to the public sector, 'Meaning at Work' forms one of the most significant engagement agents in the sector, which relies on it heavily both to motivate employees and to provide the best services possible. The public sector delivers services for people, by people, and many employees consider their reward to be linked to helping and supporting people in their communities who might find themselves disadvantaged in some shape or form. Employees involved in delivering children and adult social care services are particularly motivated by their customer bases and see work more as a vocation than simply employment.

There is no doubt at all that the economic recession and the Government's public sector comprehensive spending reviews and reductions have hit the public sector very hard. Demand for services continues to increase and, to balance the budgets, employee numbers have sharply decreased. Whilst efficiencies have been made, the levels of cuts are such that employees are feeling the strain and this is impacting on the level of engagement generally in the public sector. To counteract that, health and wellbeing is beginning to be seen to be a useful engagement tool for the public sector workforce with the belief that employees who are looked after by their employer will be better positioned to look after their service users. If the current long range forecast of the economy is to be believed, there is no doubt that engagement needs to be seen as the 'new normal' and not some fleeting, woolly initiative just for the enlightened few.

It is therefore, pleasing that the very successful Engage for Success movement is now shifting its thoughts from what it refers to as 'transactional' engagement to one which is more 'transformational'. By this it means that engagement should be more whole organisational and elevated to be on a firm and integral strategic footing. This has to be the right way to go, and doing so will no doubt generate a further head of steam to generate even more traction in helping to get the best out of the employee for the benefit of the service user.

However, even the move to a more transformational form of engagement, as it is presently interpreted, has its limitations in relation to public services. The direction of travel in the delivery of public services is now moving along the lines of being community focused and community driven, rather than organisationally led. This concept is not new, as public sector reform has been on the political agenda since Margaret Thatcher's government and it is only now, under the Coalition and driven by austerity, that things are beginning to take hold.

The new way forward in the delivery of public services will not be so much about services being delivered by the public sector *per se*, but by all sectors in our communities, which will also include the voluntary and private sectors as well as individuals and groups within the communities themselves. This calls on a different approach in terms of engagement, as fundamentally the model of employment is likely to change from being one which has been hitherto organisationally centred to one that will be more community centred. As such, roles are likely to become far broader than they are now and employee engagement, in the future model of public service delivery, will not be just about employees delivering a specific link in the supply chain, but maybe the supply chain itself!

The public service employee of the future is likely to continue to be wedded to the core beliefs currently upheld in the public sector and these are likely to develop still further as the social model of employment takes a stronger hold. The coalescing of the public system (and its budgets), and employees becoming more integrated with communities, is likely to change employees' employment perspective, their common purpose and their motivations. For example, it may well be that one of the key motivators in the future will not be so much on service delivery *per se*, but instead, a social belief of there needing to be work for all rather than work for a few, based on this perhaps having a greater benefit, financial and otherwise, in the social system – a phenomenon perhaps we might recognise from the previous century? Such a social model of work has the benefit of providing a far more resilient workforce and, with that, more resilient communities which will be stronger and thriving to support economic prosperity.

This future model of public service employment will require support from a very different type of HR function. HR will need to put itself in the spotlight to develop community led employment solutions, a new community led employment infrastructure and transition away from organisationally engineered workforce models. It will need to change its mind-set of maximising the productivity of the individual to one of maximising the productivity of the working community. HR will also need to maximise the opportunity of current reforms so that they support the wider workforce: the local Government Pension Scheme reform being one example.

The public service workforce needs to be re-modelled to ensure its makeup mirrors that of the local economic community. HR needs to act as a role model to achieve this, and to achieve its working as one across public services.

For HR, this is a vital opportunity to lead the way and overcome the myth that HR does not practise what it preaches. HR will need to engage with the rest of the organisation to encourage it to follow its example. Most importantly, HR will need to re-position itself, away from the aspiration of being on the so called 'top table', to one which is centred on the customer, and in public services that means the community.

What is very clear is that public service HR must recognise and understand such changes and that engagement will play a more important front line, community led role in the future. The big question is, *'is HR up for it'?*

This paper forms one in a collection of thought pieces by the Engage for Success special interest group on 'The future of employee engagement'. A white paper on the same theme is being published separately. The full collection is available (as will be the white paper) at: www.engageforsuccess.org/futures