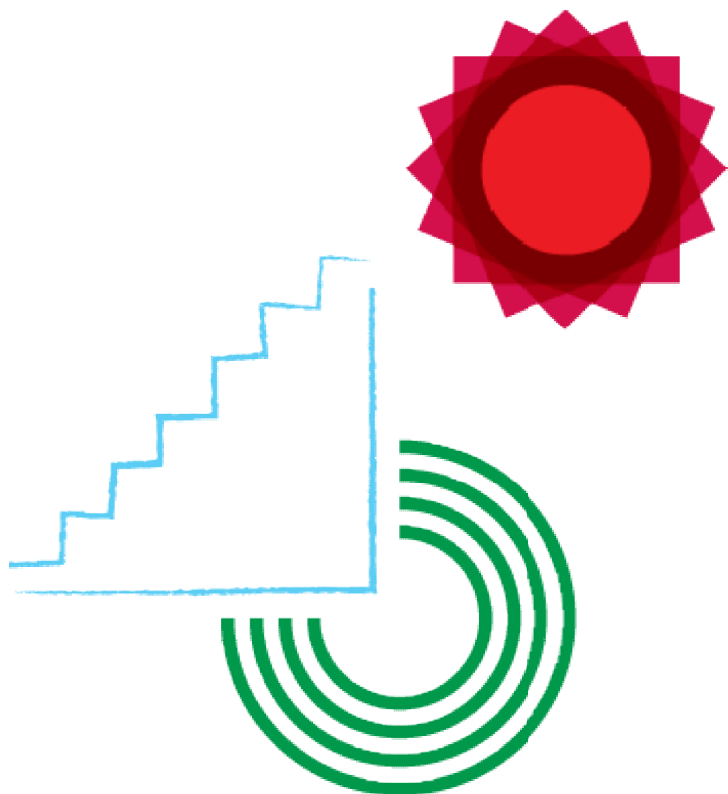




EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: SOME THOUGHTS ON IMPLEMENTATION

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Preamble

The benefits of employee engagement in the public sector can be just as spectacular as those evidenced in many private sector organisations. However there would appear to be fewer examples about of such institutions going down this rewarding path. Here we draw on four successful examples of public sector organisations which have managed to implement employee engagement, alongside a few that have fallen by the wayside. The latter will not be named for obvious reasons.

Runshaw College and Blackpool Fylde and Wyre NHS trust both figure in the original “Macleod report”. South Ribble Borough Council had a productive dalliance with the concept in the nineties and Lancashire County Council is two years into an ambitious scheme to use the principles of employee engagement to solve some of the challenges set by the Critical Spending Review. The common denominator for the last two organisations is Phil Halsall who acted as CEO for both.

The Challenge

The basic tenets of employee engagement articulated in the Macleod report are equally applicable to both public and private companies. However implementation is not quite the same. The challenge is in some ways more difficult for the former. There are fewer readily quantifiable metrics to describe the journey and to plot progress. Management can be more difficult due to the close scrutiny and influence of elected officials, intrusive governance and local media. Small mistakes can have disproportionate consequences. Managers have to exercise a level of political judgement which would be rare in their private sector counterparts. This has a profound impact on the decision making process and on the qualities needed to be a successful manager in the sector.

Employee engagement in most forms entails a degree of delegated decision making. This may fall short of pure “empowerment” and is better termed “structured engagement”. It will vary from place to place. Not every company will for example feature the radical autonomous working groups as seen at Leyland Trucks (also featured in the “Macleod Report”) but moving decision making further down the managerial echelon is probably a common characteristic of successful implementations.

In large public sector organisations, however, decisions have a habit of migrating upwards. In interviews middle management will complain about the consequences but show little inclination to do anything proactively about it. Likewise senior management will grumble about the reluctance of middle management to take ownership and accountability (occasionally

referred to as *mid-management permafrost*), but rarely show any willingness to radically change the situation.

There is little merit in blaming either party here: it is such a dominant characteristic of the sector in general that it would be surprising if there were any easy solutions. I would suggest that there are four key areas which contribute to the problem:

1: an overt or unconscious reluctance by senior leaders to delegate decision making

2: a reluctance or incapability of middle management to accept real ownership and accountability

3: a legacy of past practices (often many years old) which permeate the leadership/management culture

4: the very nature of business in public sector organisations, including as noted before the influence of elected officials or equivalents alongside a marked absence of metrics with which to measure performance and develop true accountability and ownership.

Addressing the Challenge

All four factors will probably exist in most public sector businesses but the proportions will differ. Senior and middle managers will frequently hold strong convictions that it is the other to blame. The workforce will blame management in general and the senior decision makers in particular.

However what has to be recognised from the outset is that you have to start at the top. You have to understand in some detail how senior management is perceived by the organisation and set about addressing any (probably many) weaknesses identified in the process. Once the senior stratum is cleansed you can move on to the next level, but only after accepting that this scrutiny is an ongoing process. Perceptions are complex and frequently change, not always predictably.

This concept of starting from the top has been a common theme in the four examples of good practice above. At Runshaw for example it was the principal and vice principal, Sir Bernard O'Connell and Mike Sheehan, who very publicly accepted their deficiencies and did something about them. At BFWH NHS Trust both the CEO and the Operations director did likewise, sending out a strong signal that this was a serious and permanent change in operating philosophy rather than yet another initiative. Here the absolute conviction of both Julian Hartley and Aidan Kehoe convinced the organisation that this was a route worth following.

It is not simply a question of eliminating a few faults in some high profile individuals. In the public sector the opportunity should be taken to understand the prevailing leadership/management paradigm. The

immediate task is to at least create a direction of travel as the absolute destination might not become clear for some time.

At this point the training and developmental requirements of management at all levels need to be assessed. One impressive aspect of the approach at LCC has been the speed and enthusiasm with which they have realigned all their training provision to reflect this new world. Management development now for example is closely aligned to motivational and influencing skills.

I suspect this will be an almost generic requirement. Due to the complexity and profile of many managers in the public sector, appointments historically have reflected this “need for a safe pair of hands” with the successful applicants being very much the technical experts. Such managers can therefore be transactional and somewhat impersonal in style leading to de-motivation in their charges. However one should not be overly quick to condemn. They are fulfilling a role which they thought met the requirements of the institution. The solution is to help them change and most, but not all, will do so fairly readily.

All the foregoing is challenging and the task sizeable. One must not further complicate the situation by making the process unnecessarily complex. Keeping it simple and transparent is vital if the change is not going to go the way of so many management initiatives. We would recommend the following five simple constructs to guide the philosophy. Interestingly although both Leyland Trucks and Runshaw College have been masters of employee engagement for nearly two decades now, all these constructs are still firmly in place and are immediately visible to the interested visitor:

1-Communication: realign communications towards **what the workforce wants to hear and how they want to hear it**. Too often the agenda is more about communicating what management wants the workforce to know and how they feel comfortable about delivering it. LCC have done some exemplary work here.

2-Recognition: developing simple tools to ensure that the workforce collectively and individually acquires a high level of self- esteem. Here a simple approach which focuses on sincerity and avoids confusion with financial or pseudo-financial reward systems is vital.

3-Behaviours: the Runshaw model of expressing the desired values/behaviours of the Runshaw person and the Runshaw manager into simple one word descriptors is highly recommended for its transparency and efficacy. The key points here are firstly to have the codes developed by junior personnel to reinforce credibility and secondly to almost *drip feed* into the consciousness of the workforce without either sanction or a big drum. BFWH NHS Trust managed this process very effectively, quickly

engendering informal discussion and hence awareness throughout the workplace.

4: Understanding each manager's shadow of influence: the driving force in the new management paradigm is motivation and hopefully a bit of inspiration. Each manager has his/her own "shadow of influence" created by the combination of both conscious and unconscious behaviours. The approach here is to progressively understand this shadow by introducing a series of simple Management Style Questionnaires and Peer Reviews. By progressing analysing these six monthly measures of subordinate perception, managers can improve through self-development.

5: Continuous Improvement: employee engagement here is expressed best through frequent involvement in continuous improvement techniques. Unless the organisation has a history of employee led CI, then the techniques involved should be quite basic. As confidence is built up, then more sophisticated models can be used, if desired.

Is this a Universal Panacea?

Unfortunately no technique or new philosophy can guarantee success. This approach is entirely dependent on the senior players accepting that they may well unknowingly be the cause of much of the organisational dysfunctionality and accept the need for changing themselves first and foremost. It also requires the development of a completely new management /leadership paradigm. This will be based on motivation, delegation and engagement. Those of a natural autocratic bent more used to command and control will find this hard. Those who tend towards control freakery and find the idea of letting go and trusting people too difficult to stomach should look away now. It is not for them.

There are many who support the idea of focussing primarily on employee involvement as the key to engagement and its spoils. Given a benign management culture already in place, this may be entirely possible. However my personal experience is that this is rare. Engagement simply won't happen without mutual respect and trust between the management and the managed. If you have it, you probably won't be reading this paper anyway!

I make no apologies for focussing so much on senior management behaviour and attitudes. Get them in the right place and you'll have more than a fair chance of success. And that success will not just be measured in terms of attitude and morale. It will come through loud and clear in performance.

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Recommended Reading:

Creating an Outstanding College- Sir Bernard O'Connell (nelson thornes)

Growing Your Own Heroes- J J Oliver and C J Memmott (Oak Tree Press)

