

Managing for sustainable employee engagement

Guidance for employers and managers



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What is engagement and why is it important?

Employee engagement is now widely accepted as an important factor in achieving performance in the workplace. However, if employers focus purely on engagement, without considering employee wellbeing, they risk any engagement created being unsustainable. This guidance leaflet is designed to provide employers and managers with a tool that can help build sustainable employee engagement, using a framework of manager behaviours based on thorough research evidence.

For the purposes of this guide, employee engagement is defined as follows:

'Being focused in what you do (thinking), feeling good about yourself in your role and the organisation (feeling), and acting in a way that demonstrates commitment to the organisational values and objectives (acting).'

Evidence suggests that employee engagement has a positive and significant effect on organisations: for example, research has shown that organisations with high employee engagement show higher operating income, growth in earnings per share and revenue growth than those with lower scores. Employee engagement has also been found to impact positively on productivity, profitability and safety.

At the individual level, engaged employees are likely to have lower intention to leave and absence rates than their non-engaged peers and to experience higher job (and life) satisfaction. However, employee engagement can be undermined if people's well-being is not also taken into consideration.

In the last decade, global competition and harsh economic conditions have resulted in organisational restructures and downsizing, leading to employees having to cope with higher demands and fewer resources. In addition, Internet and mobile technology enables employees to work around the clock and from any location. These recent changes can both enable and impel employees to work harder and longer, which risks potential negative impacts on well-being.

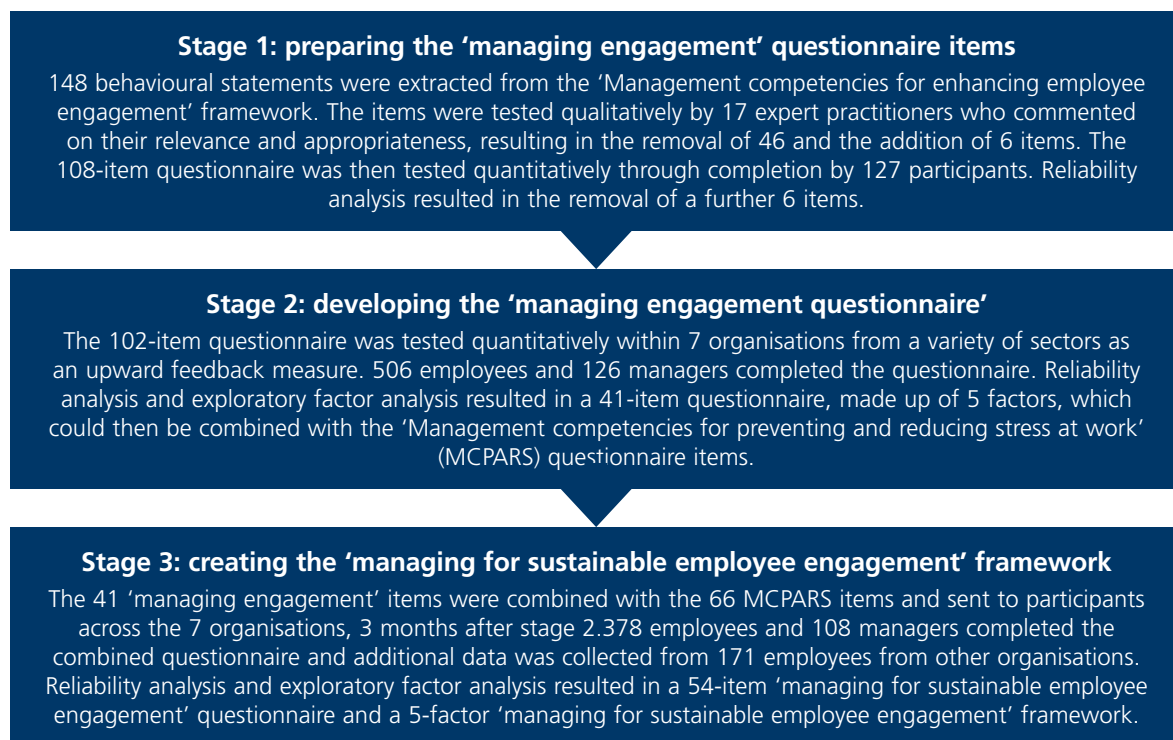
For example, employees who are exposed to excessive pressure for prolonged periods are prone to stress and are more likely to suffer from conditions such as anxiety and depression, as well as heart disease.

Stress is the number one cause of long-term absence, with average absences due to stress lasting 21 days according to CIPD research. Research by the Health and Safety Executive also links stress to higher risk of accidents.

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To support managers and organisations in achieving sustainable employee engagement, CIPD-funded research has brought together two existing frameworks – enhancing employee engagement on the one hand and preventing and reducing stress at work on the other hand – to produce a combined 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework. This work involved the stages outlined in Figure 1 on page 3.

Figure 1: Flow diagram summarising the processes involved in creating the 'Managing for sustainable engagement' framework



The research results revealed a 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework made up of five behavioural themes/competencies, as shown in Table 1 below.

All factor names are worded positively to reflect the aspiration of the 'managing for sustainable engagement' framework and questionnaire.

Underlying these five behavioural themes are 54 behavioural indicators providing details of what each behavioural theme/competency means. These also form a 54-item questionnaire that is a measure

of whether a particular manager is 'managing for sustainable employee engagement'.

Of the 54 items in the final 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' questionnaire, 29 items were originally from the 'management competencies for enhancing employee engagement' framework and 25 from the 'management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work' framework. Table 2 shows the full set of 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' items, with colour-coding to show from which framework the item originated.

Table 1: Managing for sustainable engagement framework

Competency	Brief description
Open, fair and consistent	Managing with integrity and consistency, managing emotions/ personal issues and taking a positive approach in interpersonal interactions
Handling conflict and problems	Dealing with employee conflicts (including bullying and abuse) and using appropriate organisational resources
Knowledge, clarity and guidance	Clear communication, advice and guidance, demonstrating understanding of roles and responsible decision-making
Building and sustaining relationships	Personal interaction with employees involving empathy and consideration
Supporting development	Supporting and arranging employee career progression and development

Table 2: The full 'Managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework/questionnaire showing the origins of the items

Open, fair and consistent	
1	Is overly critical of me and other team members
2	Blames me and other team members for decisions taken
3	Focuses on mistakes
4	Demonstrates a lack of faith in my capability
5	Tells me what to do rather than consulting me
6	Doesn't allow decisions to be challenged
7	Uses humour and sarcasm inappropriately
8	Shows favouritism
9	Talks about team members behind their backs
10	Criticises me and other team members in front of others
11	Treats me with respect
12	Is unpredictable in mood
13	Acts calmly in pressured situations
14	Passes on his/her stress to me
15	Is consistent in his/her approach to managing
16	Panics about deadlines
17	Seems to give more negative feedback than positive feedback
18	Imposes 'my way is the only way'
Handling conflict and problems	
19	Acts as a mediator in conflict situations
20	Deals with squabbles before they turn into arguments
21	Deals objectively with employee conflicts
22	Deals with employee conflicts head on
23	Uses HR as a resource to help deal with problems
24	Seeks help from occupational health when necessary
25	Follows up conflicts after resolution
26	Supports employees through incidents of abuse
27	Doesn't address bullying
28	Makes it clear he/she will take ultimate responsibility if things go wrong
Knowledge, clarity and guidance	
29	Does not give advice when required
30	Deflects responsibility for problem-solving to senior management
31	Gives vague rather than specific advice
32	Does not clarify role requirements and expectations
33	Is not clear of their own role requirements
34	Demonstrates a lack of understanding of the role I do
35	Does not communicate whether I am on track or not
36	Does not give adequate time for planning
37	Demonstrates a lack of understanding of processes and procedures
38	Does not follow up on action points
39	Is too busy to give me time
40	Is indecisive at decision-making

Table 2: Management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work (continued)

Building and sustaining relationships	
41	Shows interest in my personal life
42	Checks I am feeling okay
43	Shows understanding of the pressures I am under
44	Provides regular opportunities to speak one-to-one
45	Brings in treats
46	Socialises with the team
47	Is willing to have a laugh at work
48	Takes an interest in my life outside work
49	Regularly asks 'How are you?'
Supporting development	
50	Takes time to discuss my career development
51	Actively supports my career development
52	Offers opportunities for career progression
53	Plans/arranges time off from day-to-day tasks for development opportunities
54	Arranges development activities



MCPARS questionnaire items



'Managing engagement' questionnaire items

What can employers do?

The messages for employers from evidence on engagement and well-being are clear: a) employee engagement is important for performance, but is likely to be unsustainable unless it goes hand in hand with employee well-being; and b) manager behaviour is pivotal to both engagement and well-being. Managers therefore represent a vital lever for creating a workforce that is both engaged and well. For employers who want to create sustainable employee engagement in their workplaces, the 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework offers a great opportunity to 'pull' this lever.

To achieve sustainable employee engagement, you need managers to make the behaviours set out in the 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework part of their management approach. You can support this through many of your people management processes, for example:

- Learning and development:** Using the 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework to design or integrate into learning and development programmes could help managers adopt the behaviours it details. Previous research suggests that providing managers with upward feedback can help in the process of behaviour change, so it would be worth considering using the 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' questionnaire in an upward or 360-degree feedback process as part of the learning and development programme.
- Performance management and appraisal:** To reinforce the importance of showing the behaviours for 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' on an ongoing basis, they could be integrated into your performance management or appraisal system, so that managers consider and are measured on the extent to which they integrate these behaviours into their management repertoire.

- **Selection, assessment and promotion:** In order to recruit and promote managers who either already show the behaviours set out in the 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework or have the potential to develop these skills, the framework and questionnaire could be used as part of the selection or promotion process. For example, it could be integrated into structured interview questions or assessment centre exercises.

Employers also need to beware of defining engagement in purely behavioural terms (such as going the extra mile). When engagement is conceptualised and measured in terms of how employees act and does not capture the 'thinking' and 'feeling' elements of emotional engagement, it may unintentionally engender a less desirable, purely transactional form of engagement, which is linked to negative well-being outcomes and is likely to be unsustainable. For instance, an individual may act in an engaged way because that is the organisational expectation and they will be rewarded for doing so (and potentially punished for not doing so), but not in reality feel motivated by or committed to their role or their employer organisation. If this 'façade' of engagement is mistaken for 'real' engagement, it presents risks to employees' well-being and to the sustainability of their engagement and performance.

What can managers do?

For managers, the evidence suggests that your behaviour is an important factor in achieving both employee engagement and well-being for those you manage. The 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework provides you with specific indications of what you can do to create sustainable employee engagement in your team. You can use the framework to help you by:

- **Identifying which behaviours you already use and which ones you could change:** When you look at the 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework, you will probably find that some of the behavioural

indicators are things that you already do (or avoid doing in the case of the negative behaviours), whereas others are not part of your current approach. It might be helpful to get feedback on whether others, particularly those who work directly for you, see you doing these things or not. If your employer provides an opportunity for upward or 360-degree feedback, this is an ideal way to find out others' views in a systematic and confidential way.

- **Changing behaviour where appropriate:** Where there are elements of the 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' framework that are not part of your current management repertoire, you can use the specific behavioural indicators underlying the framework to help you make changes to your behaviour. You might find coaching or other learning and development activities helpful in making and sustaining these changes.

Managers also need to focus on ensuring they engender real, emotional engagement in their employees. This means you need to beware of rewarding or encouraging a 'façade' of engagement in which individuals are acting engaged, perhaps by working long and hard, but not really thinking or feeling engaged, in terms of their underlying motivations. Bear in mind that it is emotional engagement that links to well-being and sustainability, whereas purely behavioural or transactional engagement is linked to poorer well-being and is unlikely to be sustained over time.

Further details and acknowledgements

See the full research report, *Managing for Sustainable Employee Engagement: Developing a behavioural framework*, which includes a reference list and more information on methodology, result and implications. This research was conducted by Rachel Lewis, Emma Donaldson-Feilder and Taslim Tharani of Affinity Health at Work, a specialist consultancy offering research and consultancy solutions to improve workplace health and well-being (Rachel Lewis is also a lecturer at Kingston Business School).

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