

Manager's Quick Guide:
Developing Collaborative Relationships
ENGAGING YOUR TEAM



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Introduction

Increasing attention has been paid to the subject of employee engagement over the past decade and since the publication of David MacLeod's 2009 report to UK government, many organisations have actively developed strategies designed to help them get the most from their employees.

But employee engagement is not just about organisational policies and processes - the role of "engaging managers" was identified by the report as one of the four main drivers of employee engagement.

Engagement is not a matter of coercing employees to work harder or do more, but about developing productive working relationships and a working environment where employees are willing and able to make the best use of their skills and abilities for the benefit of their employer and themselves. Team leaders and line managers have a vital part to play here. Their role is to motivate and inspire those they manage, to set direction for the team and provide an environment which enables people to work productively together.

For the employer, the benefits of employees and teams who are actively engaged with the organisation where they work include:

- Enhanced commitment, loyalty and performance
- Higher levels of discretionary effort

- The development of employees' skills and abilities
- Fresh and innovative ideas and suggestions
- Greater synergy and productivity from the team as a whole
- A positive and productive working environment.

For individuals, the benefits of engagement include:

- A sense of personal fulfilment and well-being in their work
- Increased morale and job satisfaction
- The feeling that they are valued and that their efforts are appreciated
- A sense of pride in individual and team achievements
- The realisation of their personal potential
- Enhancement of their promotion and career prospects.

This checklist provides guidance for team leaders and line managers on how to lead and engage their teams.

Definition

There are many different definitions of employee engagement focusing on different aspects of the subject. The definition used in the MacLeod report emphasises the employee's sense of purpose and energy directed towards organisational goals:

"a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being."

An alternative definition, developed by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development focuses on three dimensions of engagement:

- Intellectual engagement – thinking hard about the job and how to do it better
- Affective engagement - feeling positively about doing a good job
- Absorption – concentration and being engrossed in one's work.

Action checklist

1. Get to know your team

It's vital for any manager who wishes to engage their team to start by getting to know them. Don't shut yourself up in your office and keep aloof from your team. Instead practice management by walking about (MBWA). Take an interest in people as individuals and build relationships with them. Talk to people about their work. Ask open questions, for example:

- What issues are you dealing with currently? How do you feel about your work?
- How do you feel things are going? What is going well? What is not going so well?
- What links do you have with other departments? Are they helping you or hindering you?
- What do you need most at this time?

2. Set clear expectations

Have a clear sense of direction for the team. Communicate this clearly and make sure that everyone understands it. Employees need to be clear about what they are responsible for, what deadlines or targets they need to meet and what is expected of them in terms of work performance and personal behaviour. Check for any areas of confusion or overlap between employees or departments. Review workloads and ensure that tasks are allocated fairly and redistributed when necessary.

3. Keep team members in the loop

Good communication will help to build a shared sense of purpose within the team. If employees are to be engaged with their organisation, they need to know what it is trying to accomplish and understand how their own work contributes to this. Make sure that your staff are familiar with the organisation's mission, vision and strategy and discuss how the work of your team or department fits in with this and contributes to the achievement of strategic objectives.

It is also important to keep people up to date on changes in the organisation as they occur, especially those which will affect how they work or what is expected of them. Regular progress reports will provide encouragement and motivation, but it's important to share bad news as well. No one likes to feel that they have been overlooked, or even worse, deliberately kept in the dark when things are not going well.

Although, managers may be reluctant to be explicit about potential difficulties, employees will appreciate open and honest communication and you may find that bad news will act as a positive stimulus, prompting employees to seek improvements, make cost savings, or increase sales for example.

4. Build relationships of trust

Open and honest communication will also help to develop employees' trust in their managers and their organisation, but recognise that it takes time and effort to build trust in relationships. Managers must lead by example and set standards of ethical and professional behaviour. Don't ever make promises which you may be unable to keep and don't betray confidences. Treat all colleagues with respect, even when you disagree with them or find them irritating or annoying. Always act with fairness and don't allow yourself to show favouritism towards employees you find sympathetic or see eye to eye with. Learn to exercise patience and self-control and be prepared to admit it when you make mistakes – apologise and do what you can to make amends when necessary. Our checklist on developing trust gives more information on this topic. (See Additional resources below.)

5. Encourage open discussion and debate

Recognise that one-way communication, however transparent, is insufficient to engage people – you must listen to your employees as well. Regular team meetings are a good way to keep people informed but should also be times for interactive two-way communication. Encourage all team members to participate actively. Promote debate and discussion on work issues and matters affecting the team and work with them to find positive solutions. Demonstrate that you are open to suggestions for improvements and ideas for fresh initiatives. Take all suggestions seriously and if it is not feasible to take them up, remember to explain the reasons to the team. Employees need to understand that they can speak openly and honestly to their manager without fearing recrimination or criticism. Make it clear you would prefer employees to express their frustrations and problems, rather than allow resentment and disillusionment to build up. As trust develops they will do start to do so. Make yourself available to them and give them your undivided attention. Practice active listening and look for the issues underlying any complaints. This will give you insights into barriers to engagement and give you the opportunity to find ways to address them in the future. While allowing the open expression of views and opinions, don't allow these to dominate and encourage employees to take a positive approach to resolving issues.

6. Empower your team

Engaging managers empower employees rather than trying to control or micro-manage them. Providing opportunities for employees to be involved in decision making can help employees feel that they and their contribution are valued and appreciated and can be a powerful way to increase engagement.

Autonomy, within set boundaries, gives employees the opportunity to develop their capabilities and show what they can do. Successfully carrying out new responsibilities or completing challenging projects will give team members a sense of achievement and increase their job satisfaction. Set realistic but stretching objectives, but make it clear that employees can seek advice and support if necessary, without fear of criticism or blame. Provide coaching and mentoring support as needed.

7. Give feedback

Make a habit of expressing thanks and appreciation, on an on-going basis, even for small achievements. Don't delay this until the annual performance appraisal or the end of a project - understanding that their efforts are recognised and valued will help employees to maintain motivation and spur them on to further success.

Many managers tend to shy away from giving feedback that may be perceived as critical or provoke defensive reactions, but this is a key part of the manager's role and is vital if you are to develop the skills and abilities of team members and help them to improve their performance. Feedback of this kind should always be viewed as developmental – about finding ways to improve rather than looking for someone to blame when things go wrong. It should, of course, be handled with sensitivity – don't publicly criticise individuals in front of the whole team, for example.

Take a problem-solving approach to any difficulties and don't allow a blame culture to develop.

8. Take the aspirations of team members seriously

Many employees come into an organisation with aspirations for their job role and future career and expectations of how the organisation will support them in achieving their development goals. Engagement is increased when employees feel that managers recognise these aspirations and are responsive towards them. Consider the potential of those who report to you and think about what you can do to meet their aspirations. This could be done in a variety of ways: by allocating new tasks and responsibilities, assigning them to project teams, asking them to train or support others, offering mentoring or coaching, providing more formal learning and development opportunities or by recommending them for promotion, either within your department or elsewhere in the organisation.

9. Deal promptly with performance issues

Managers and team leaders often find it difficult to address poor performance, but they have a responsibility to do so, for the sake of the individual, the team and the organisation. Think carefully about how to raise issues with employees and give them the chance to give their view of the situation or explain the reasons behind it, and to work with you in identifying potential solutions.

10. Tackle conflicts at an early stage

As the manager or team leader, it's vital that you keep an eye on how working relationships are developing within your team. A certain degree of conflict and debate can be expected and is often seen as a normal stage in team development. In such circumstances, the manager's role is to support the team through coaching.

But as soon as there is evidence of more serious conflicts or personality clashes, prompt action needs to be taken to resolve the matter, or the situation is likely to deteriorate with damaging effects on morale, job satisfaction and ultimately, performance. Our checklist on dealing with conflict situations provides further guidance. (See Additional resources below.)

Potential pitfalls

Managers should avoid:

- Being controlling or dictatorial
- Succumbing to the temptation to micro-manage
- Underestimating the potential of team members
- Making commitments they cannot fulfil or failing to keep promises they do make
- Ignoring performance problems
- Allowing frustrations and conflicts to fester.
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Additional resources

Books

Nine minutes on Monday: the quick and easy way to go from manager to leader, James Robbins, New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 2013

Engaged: unleashing your organization's potential through employee engagement, Linda Holbeche and Geoffrey Matthews (especially Chapter 9 Engaging Managers. John Wiley: Chichester, 2012 This book is also available as an e-book

The happy manifesto: make your organisation a great workplace, Henry Stewart, London: Kogan Page, 2012 This book is also available as an e-book

Beyond the call: why some of your team go the extra mile and others don't show, Marc Woods and Steve Coomber, Chichester: John Wiley, 2012 This book is also available as an e-book

John Adair's 100 greatest ideas for effective leadership, John Adair Chichester: Capstone, 2011 This book is also available as an e-book

The art of engagement: bridging the gap between people and possibilities, Jim Haudan New York NY: McGrawHill, 2008 This book is also available as an e-book

Journal Articles

Managing for sustainable employee engagement, Rachel Lewis and Emma Donaldson-Feilder London: CMI Management Articles of the Year, 2013

Leading engagement, Sarah Cook Training Journal, Feb 2015, pp 33-36

The power of small wins, Teresa A Amabile and Steven J Kramer Harvard Business Review, vol 89 no 5, 2011 pp 71-77, 79-80

Internet resources

ACAS Employee Engagement www.acas.org.uk Guidance on employee engagement is available within the a-z listing and includes access to the ACAS guide The People Factor.

Engage for Success <http://www.engageforsuccess.org/> A movement committed to employee engagement which offers a range of information and tools.

This is one of many checklists available to all CMI members. For more information please contact
t: 01536 204222
e: enquiries@managers.org.uk
w: www.managers.org.uk

Chartered Management Institute Management House, Cottingham Road, Corby NN17 1TT.

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t: 0330 058 3100

e: hello@ucq.ac.uk

or visit our website

w: www.ucq.ac.uk



Newcastle

i-4 Albion Row,
Newcastle upon Tyne,
NE6 1LL

newcastle@ucq.ac.uk
0191 275 5015

Leeds

Platform,
New Station Street, Leeds,
LS1 4JB

leeds@ucq.ac.uk
0113 426 6660

Manchester

111 Piccadilly,
Ducie Street, Manchester,
M1 2HY

manchester@ucq.ac.uk
0161 638 0990

Liverpool

The Plaza, Old Hall Street,
Liverpool,
L3 9QJ

liverpool@ucq.ac.uk
0151 600 5000

Birmingham

Cornwall Buildings,
45 Newhall Street,
Birmingham, B3 3QR

birmingham@ucq.ac.uk
0121 222 4299

London

88 Kingsway, Holborn,
London,
WC2B 6SR

london@ucq.ac.uk
020 7841 2717