

Rethinking Engagement

What communicators can learn from the latest Work Foundation report

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The publication of 'Understanding the Deal', the fourth report in the Work Foundation's 'Future of HR' series appears to have passed with little comment in the HR and Communication media. Yet, this is a piece of work that deserves much more air time, discussion and scrutiny than, say the McLeod report on employee engagement. In its scope, methodological rigour and significance of its findings for practice, the Work Foundation study is by far the superior.

The research is of course aimed primarily at HR practitioners who can draw many significant lessons about understanding and managing the 'psychological contract' between organisations and employees. But communicators can also learn from this study, which provides extremely important insights into the nature, process and levers of employee engagement and challenges many popular assumptions behind 'employee engagement programmes'

For one, the report challenges the idea that organisations can plan to 'engage' their employees through some kind of programmatic effort, i.e. set out to create employee commitment to the organisation and its goals and to generate extra discretionary effort to deliver these goals. This is because it is not the organisation that can engage the employee, but the employee who engages with the organisation through the meaning they attach to their 'employment deal'. This employee meaning-making is very dynamic, however, and does not only change in time (as the employee moves from new recruit to 'old hand') but, also, is constantly viewed and evaluated through a number of different lenses - both transactional and relational. So it is quite possible, for example, that an employee who at any time is unhappy with the 'exchange' aspect of their deal, for example their pay or promotion, will continue to deliver because the relationship with their manager and/or their co-workers allows them to 're-balance' the deal. The opposite can of course also be true. A breach in any one aspect of the deal can create an imbalance and affect commitment and productivity. This will be different for each

employee at different points in time, making it very difficult to design a blanket 'engagement' programme that will have any kind of significant impact.

Having said that, the report shows that there are clearly three areas where communicators (and HR professionals too) can add real value and these are the areas where communication for engagement efforts must be redirected

1. Support for line managers. The contribution of line managers to employee engagement is frequently talked about, but the report shows that line managers themselves are neither aware of their impact, nor equipped to manage the relationship with their direct reports in a way that maintains and enhances engagement. Educating, coaching and supporting line managers to fulfil this role should, therefore, become a priority.
2. Creating team communication effectiveness. The influence of work team relationships has been largely ignored in the engagement literature. Yet how people are supported by and relate to their co-workers can influence their organisational commitment and willingness to work harder, even where other elements of the 'deal' are challenged. Supporting the building of effective, well communicating teams, must, therefore, become part of any engagement strategy.
3. Ensuring cultural values provide a clear and coherent framework for action. At organisational level, the report shows that one of the things that make a difference to engagement are coherent, congruent organisational values and how employees see these reflecting what is important to them at different points in time. When organisational values conflict with the values that are fundamental to employee identity (itself a dynamic process) then engagement may also suffer, but the opposite is also true. Many employees will work hard to align themselves with the core values of the organisation, in order to 'fit in'. The significant point here is this. The values that employees will align themselves with will not be the 'espoused' ones (what the organisation says is important) but the enacted values (what employees experience to be important). Thus the job for communicators is clear - they must show that the two are congruent, and if they are not, they must help the organisation work towards creating that congruence. The alternative is confusion, cynicism and disengagement.