

The Rules of Engagement

Employee engagement is vital to the success of any business. It's a subject that takes up a lot of time when HR professionals get together. It also occupies the minds of a lot of business leaders who want to create a workplace where people contribute their best.

Sometimes, I hear people talking about engagement in a way that seems to suggest it can only be achieved by some kind of organisation-wide programme. Business leaders and HR professionals alike sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that engagement is the result of corporate initiatives.

The reality is - engagement is an individual issue.

Every person in your organisation has their own reasons for being there. Their individual values guide their choice of job, their choice of employer and their choice of how much to engage with the company, the people and the wider opportunities of belonging to an organisation.

What engages one person will leave another cold. What disappoints one person will be ignored by another. What rewards one person will be irrelevant to another.

The person most likely to be able to make a difference to a person's level of engagement is their line manager. The line manager is the person most likely to have some knowledge of what engages an individual. To know why they do the work they do. Why they work for this organisation and not a different one. To

know what will keep them interested even in difficult times.

The line manager, may of course, also be subject to a declining level of engagement. If the line manager is disaffected, it's unlikely his or her team will be fully engaged. Who looks after the line manager's engagement?

Well, in an ideal world, the line manager will monitor their own level of engagement and take steps to re-engage if necessary. But how many line managers really understand their own values? How many know what really engages their whole-hearted participation at work? How many have time to reflect and notice how engaged they really are?

How many know what to do when the level of engagement wanes?

Here are my 'Rules of Engagement' – my personal view on how to approach them if you think your people are less engaged than you'd like.

1. If you want people to be engaged you have to engage with them

People may engage with the company through corporate PR, internal communications and the general popular perception of the organisation and its products. However, when an individual becomes disengaged, these messages cannot be changed to suit the needs of one individual.

If you, as a line manager want your people to be more engaged, you have to engage with them. No excuses.

2. A person's perception of the situation is based on reality as they experience it

If someone is disengaged or disaffected, it's usually because they're unhappy about something related to their work, the people they work with or the company as a whole. What's making them unhappy isn't always an accurate version of events, but if you're going to engage with them it's important to recognise that you also have to engage with their version of events.

In general, when someone is missing a piece of information in a story, they will create something to fill the gap. There's nothing malicious in this, it's just the way our brains work. This is why corporate communication is so important in any organisation – what people don't know, they'll make up.

So, the task of re-engaging your people might include giving more information and discussing past events.

3. Your memory of the past is not the only version of events

Memory is neither fixed nor 100% accurate. That is, your 'episodic memory' – your memory of the events of your life – changes with time. (Other forms of memory such as semantic memory – the storage of facts – are more stable) This is why members of the same family recalling a celebration or holiday rarely agree completely on the details.

Over time, our memories change because every time we revisit them we see them in the light of everything that has happened since.

You might not be dealing with ancient history when you talk to your team, but be prepared for some different versions of events if you discuss past problems and disappointments.

4. Speak their language

I could write a whole book about this one! In NLP terms this is about creating rapport by using similar structures of language to those used by the person you're talking to. If you don't know any NLP, then focus on using the same words as the other person and avoid jargon that they wouldn't use. (And I can recommend a good introductory book to get you started on NLP!)

So there you have some practical tips for re-engaging people who have become disengaged. It may take time, and it may not be possible to completely re-engage someone who has disengaged from the organisation because of something which violates their own personal values.

My own view is that many people can be fully engaged in their own work and with the team they are part of, regardless of their view of the overall organisation. But only if they have a line manager who really engages with them!

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