

Brief

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Employee Engagement – the “great hoax” or a great idea that is misunderstood?

The world seems to be full of ‘engagement’ experts - all focused on the types of things we can put in place in the organisation, from better surveys, or how to use yammer, to the art of story-telling. A Forbes article this summer - *The engagement racket: a hoax of immense proportions* – challenges that engagement is little more than a “check a box, once a year”, feedback exercise allowing a tone-deaf HR leader say to her leadership team, “Look how high our engagement scores are this year! Surely I’m doing my job!”.

Much of what is sold as engagement seems very traditional in approach – in being top-down and focused on the business benefit of high performance and “discretionary effort”. All of this ignores that this is as much about the individual, and their day to day human needs, desires and experience as it is about organisational initiatives and systems.

It is worth stepping back to look at the compelling evidence of truly engaging organisations and academic research this points to engagement as a psychological state where individuals are dedicated to the organisation and their work, absorbed in their day to day activity, and have emotional, physical and mental vigour, or energy to apply to their work. This leads to happier, healthier employees, improved job performance and in turn to a direct impact on business goals and performance.

The father of employee engagement, William Kahn, identified the three psychological needs that must be met to help employees to feel more engaged:

- 1. Psychological meaningfulness:** Employees often seek meaning or purpose in their work, from doing something that meets their own values, through to making a difference to others or society. Organisations need to provide roles that are clearly aligned to a productive purpose so that individuals can see to what they are contributing. When people are treated with dignity, respect and valued for their contributions, they get a greater sense of meaningfulness – when done well, investment in team building and culture is invaluable.
- 2. Psychological safety:** Employees need to trust they can show their true self and thoughts without fear of negative consequences and organisations need to foster this trust and collaboration between employees and their colleagues, line manager and the wider leadership of the company. This is most influenced by group dynamics, leadership styles and colleague behaviour, and highlights the importance of creating the right culture and leadership capabilities in a business.

This issue of physiological safety is also key to creating social capital in an organisation – where collaboration replaces destructive competition for the benefit of all, and of the business.

- 3. Psychological availability:** Employees need to feel they have the physical, emotional and mental resources available to commit themselves to work. Employees who are over-worked, run down, tired physically and mentally, and who are continually experiencing challenging emotional situations without resources or coping mechanism to deal with them, will be far from engaged. At best, health and wellbeing at work is treated as part of safety, but often treated as a tick box exercise or “HR initiative”. But a healthy, fully available employee is also vital for engagement and performance.

Engagement is a meaningful and important goal for organisations, in terms of both human, and business impact. But it will take a more substantial shift of behaviour in most businesses than the tinkering with surveys and digital technology that often goes by the name of engagement.