

Managing for sustainable employee engagement

By Rachel Lewis and Emma Donaldson-Feilder

Employee engagement has long been believed to be, and is now widely accepted as, a key factor in achieving performance in the workplace. However, if managers focus purely on engagement, without considering employee wellbeing, they risk any engagement created being unsustainable. Our research aims to help managers understand how to build sustainable employee engagement, by developing a framework of manager behaviours required to both build engagement in employees whilst also protecting their wellbeing.

What is employee engagement?

Although the term employee engagement is widely used in management practice and literature, definitions vary widely between academia and practice. Organisational definitions of engagement tend to refer to engagement *with the organisation* and describe it in terms of employee outcome behaviours (such as going the extra mile, demonstrating commitment to the organisational values and objectives). Academic definitions in contrast tend to place more emphasis on engagement *with roles and tasks* and define engagement as a cognitive state (what engagement feels like rather than what it produces).

In our research we aimed to define employee engagement in a way that encompasses the range of definitions across academic research and practice:

'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).'
(Lewis et al, 2011)

Why is employee engagement important?

Employee engagement is important for two reasons – firstly that it is consistently *believed* across business to have powerful effects on productivity (for instance 94% of the world's most admired companies believe engaged employees creates a competitive advantage – cited by Engage for Success, 2012) – and secondly, that *it does* have powerful effects on productivity. The recent publication by the Engage for Success task force entitled 'Nailing the Evidence' (Rayton, Dodge, D'Analeze, 2012) presents a detailed business case for the evidence – showing positive impact of engagement at the organisational level (on operating income, revenue growth, productivity, innovation, profitability, retention, customer service, reduced absenteeism, safety), and at the individual level (job satisfaction, mental and physical wellbeing).

The fragility of engagement in a changing world

Despite its importance, employee engagement may be becoming increasingly fragile and difficult to sustain. Indeed, figures suggest that, in the UK, engagement levels are worryingly low: that only one third of employees in the UK are engaged (Wiley, 2009), that those strongly engaged may be less than 10% (CIPD, 2010) and that two thirds of employees are disengaged, unsupported and detached (Towers Watson, 2012).

Organisational change is perhaps the only constant in today's working life. In the last decade, global competition, harsh economic conditions, continuous innovation and new technology has resulted in organisational restructures, downsizing and changes in the nature and structure of work. This has impacted employees, with many having to cope with higher demands and fewer resources than ever before. In addition, the boundaries between work and non-work life are increasingly blurred, with internet and mobile technologies enabling employees to work around the clock and from any location.

It is likely that both the financial and technological changes in the way we work have meant that employees are enabled, and impelled, to work harder and longer. Recent surveys (e.g. Towers Watson) show that employees are more anxious, and more worried about their futures than in previous years. Employees were found to be working longer hours, taking less time off to recover and experiencing higher levels of stress. They may also be more likely to take sickness absence and intend to leave their organisation.

It is possible that the way engagement tends to be defined within organisations may actually be exacerbating its fragility and the potential negative impact on psychological wellbeing. If engagement is perceived as and measured by employees 'demonstrating additional effort', this could create an unsustainable situation where engaged employees are expected to work ever longer and harder to demonstrate their commitment. Over time, working in this way could negatively impact on an individual's wellbeing.

Of course, just working longer hours isn't necessarily detrimental. Research suggests that it is not the hours worked, but the underlying motivations behind the hours that is key. Therefore, working longer hours isn't a problem if that individual is doing so for enjoyment and vitality – but it can lead to poor psychological health if the individual is working longer for reasons such as they feel they have to, or feel a compulsion to.

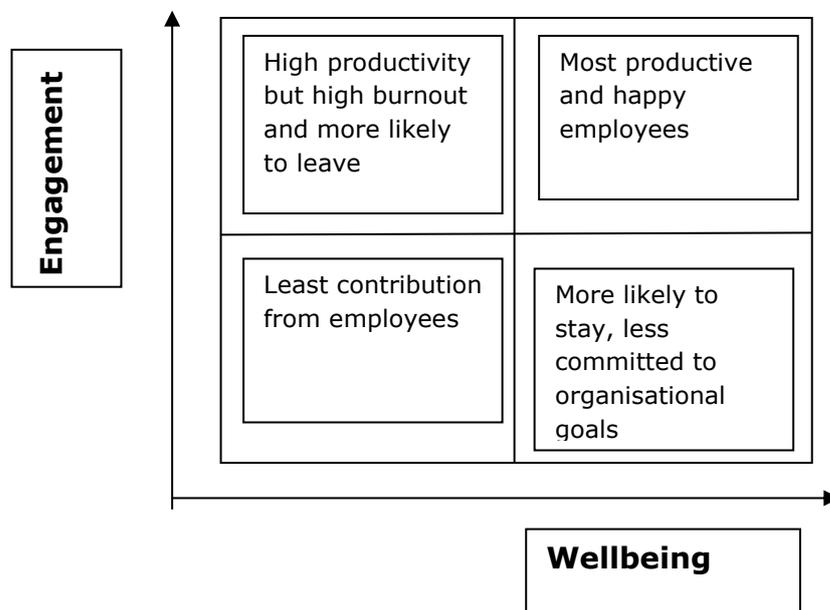
From this perspective, if engagement is measured in terms of working long and hard, it may mean that employees who are seen as, or rewarded for being 'engaged' may not be feeling 'engaged'. Research by CIPD and Kingston Business School (Gourlay et al, 2012) reinforced this, exploring the motivations behind employee engagement. Their work defined two types of engagement. Both may involve similar behaviours from employees such as putting in additional effort at work, but one, termed emotional engagement, was where employees enjoyed work and identified with the work values; and the other, termed transactional engagement, where employees were displaying engaged behaviours because they were interested in reward or were in fear of losing their job/reward if they didn't. Emotional engagement was associated with positive outcomes of increased wellbeing and decreased family conflict and burnout; whereas transactional engagement was associated with increased family conflict

and burnout. Further, research suggested emotionally engaged employees could become transactionally engaged if they were given increasingly high work demands and pressures.

Therefore, measuring engagement by employee outcomes may be both clouding the evidence, and potentially worsening the problem. Instead, employers need to engage employees in a way in which is sustainable and healthy.

Wellbeing ± Engagement = Sustainability

There is evidence to suggest that employee engagement and psychological wellbeing work together in predicting outcomes (Fairhurst & O'Connor, 2010), in that those employees who were highly engaged and had high levels of wellbeing were the most productive and happy; and those disengaged with lower levels of wellbeing were likely to contribute least to the organisation. The relationship can be represented as follows:



Adapted from Lewis et al. (2012)

There is also preliminary evidence (Robertson & Birch, 2010) that employee psychological wellbeing is important for sustaining employee engagement by enhancing the relationship between employee engagement and productivity. This suggests that if organisations only focus on initiatives that target employees' commitment and 'going the extra mile', without nurturing employee psychological wellbeing, the impact will be limited and unsustainable.

How managers can sustain employee engagement

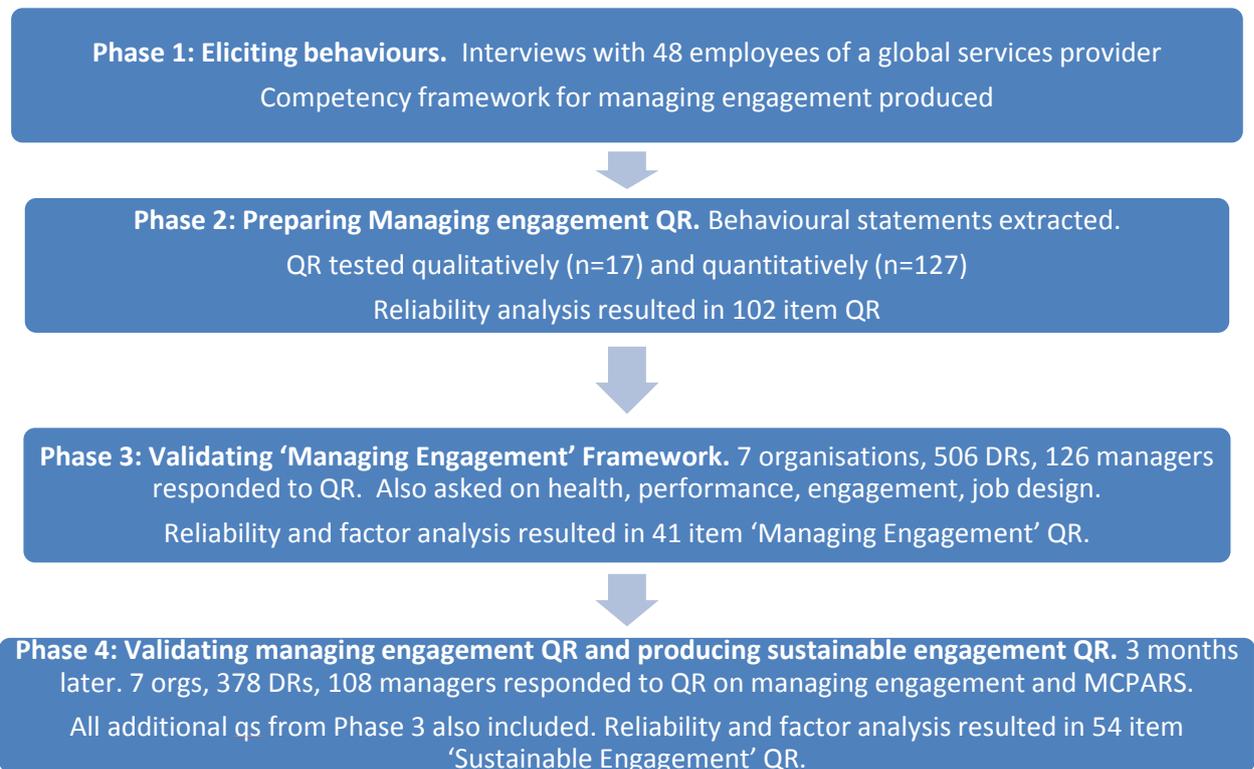
Various reports highlight line managers as one of the most important influences on engagement (e.g. Alfes et al, 2012; McLeod & Clarke, 2008). It has also been consistently shown that that managers are key to the health and wellbeing of employees. For instance, Dame Carol Black's review of the health of Britain's working age population (Black, 2008) stated that 'good line management can lead to good health, wellbeing and improved performance' and a recent review of evidence by Kelloway and Barling (2010) stated 'sufficient data have now

accumulated to allow the unambiguous conclusion that organisational leadership is related to, and predictive of, health and safety relevant outcomes in employees’.

This suggests that one of the key ways to achieve sustainable engagement in employees, will be to focus on improving line manager skills and relationships.

Management behaviour for sustainable employee engagement

Our recent research has brought together two frameworks from our previous work: management behaviour for enhancing employee engagement on the one hand; and management behaviour for preventing and reducing stress at work on the other hand. The methodology taken is shown in the flowchart below. For full methodology for development of the ‘Management behaviour for enhancing employee engagement’ framework, see Lewis et al. (2011), for development of the ‘Management behaviour for preventing and reducing stress framework, see Donaldson-Feilder et al. (2009), and for the development of the management behaviour for sustainable employee engagement framework, see Lewis et al. (2012).



The results revealed a ‘Managing for sustainable employee engagement’ framework made up of five behavioural themes, or competencies, as follows:

‘Managing for sustainable employee 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, demonstrates 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

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'.

'Managing for sustainable employee engagement' questionnaire / behavioural indicators

	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
	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

What can managers do?

The messages from evidence presented here are clear: a) employee engagement is important for performance, but is likely to be unsustainable unless it goes hand-in-hand with employee wellbeing; and b) manager behaviour is pivotal to both engagement and wellbeing. The 'managing for sustainable

employee engagement' framework provides managers with specific indications of what they can do in order to create sustainable employee engagement in their team.

As a manager, 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 in 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 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. Individuals who are just working long and hard, and are not emotionally engaged are likely to have poorer wellbeing and their performance and engagement is unlikely to be sustained over time.

Conclusion

In the current economic and workplace context, employee engagement could potentially help organisations survive by improving productivity and performance. However, the same context that makes engagement desirable also makes it potentially fragile. It is important that managers to behave in ways that engender both engagement and wellbeing in their teams. The newly developed 'managing for sustainable employee engagement' behavioural framework offers opportunities to support this.

Further details

This article is adapted from our research report *Managing for sustainable employee engagement: Developing a behavioural framework*. For the full report, including a reference list and more information on methodology, result and implications, go to <http://www.cipd.co.uk/publicpolicy/policy-reports/engagement-behavioural-framework.aspx>. And for a short guide based on the research, go to <http://www.cipd.co.uk/publicpolicy/policy-reports/engagement-behavioural-framework-guidance.aspx>.

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